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Scott Culpepper

Dordt University, scott.culpepper@dordt.edu

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Abstract

"Du Mez insists that the most significant force shaping the identity of contemporary evangelicals is the network of informal neo-evangelical popular cultural influencers forged throughout the late twentieth century."

Posting about the book *Jesus and John Wayne* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/what-has-jesus-to-do-with-john-wayne-a-review-of-jesus-and-john-wayne/>

Keywords

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Comments

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in things

June 11, 2020

What Has Jesus to do with John Wayne? A Review of *Jesus and John Wayne*

Scott Culpepper

Title: *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*

Author: Kristin Kobes Du Mez

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Kristin Kobes Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted A Faith and Fractured A Nation* begins on sacred ground for all daughters and sons of Dordt University. An alumnus of Dordt College and raised in Sioux County, Du Mez watched with fascinated horror on January 23, 2016 as presidential candidate Donald J. Trump stood on the stage of the B. J. Haan auditorium and bombastically proclaimed, "They say I have the most loyal people—did you ever see that? Where I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters. It's like incredible."¹

Du Mez and other longtime participant observers of American evangelicalism agreed with Trump on one thing: it was—and is—incredible. It is not just that Trump has garnered such support, but the irony of who those supporters are. Du Mez describes how she looked in vain for the hallmarks of the Sioux County she knew in the crowd response to Trump that day. As one of the curious observers of the event myself, I

remember well how much of that crowd was sprinkled with devoted Trump followers from outside of Sioux County and even Iowa. I also remember the reluctant trepidation with which Trump was received by many Dordt constituents, including prominent College Republicans who felt a duty to host the event because Dordt had made a blanket promise of welcome to all presidential candidates that year. Donald Trump came in second to Ted Cruz in the Iowa Caucuses, but once it became clear he was going to be the Republican nominee, Sioux County fell in line and went solidly for Trump in the 2016 general election. *Jesus and John Wayne* was born from Kristin Kobes Du Mez's quest to understand how the "values voters" who influenced her early years became such a reliable base of support for a candidate whose actions and words contradicted their professed ideals in so many ways.

Du Mez identifies a patriarchal masculinity embedded in neo-evangelical popular cultures as a primary catalyst for the appeal of Donald Trump to many American evangelicals. Rather than appearing as an aberrant anomaly sparked by one contemporary political figure, conservative evangelical political alliances in the early twenty-first century continue the logical progression of movements that believed promoting and protecting an idealized version of sanctified white Christian masculinity was key to preserving American culture and international influence. This enculturated respect for idealized masculinity fit well with the emerging conservative political and cultural movements of the Cold War era. The alliance between conservative white evangelicals and conservative political activists was cemented in part by their shared belief in the virtues of the patriarchal nuclear family and the importance of protecting white male authority from movements perceived to subvert it. The struggle for the family was nothing less than a struggle for the survival of American democracy, and the key to preserving the family was preserving the "traditional" structure of the family, a structure Du Mez argues was actually the product of American cultural dynamics in the early post-war period rather than a timeless bedrock. Potential cultural shifts such as the Civil Rights movement, anti-war protests, feminism, the sexual revolution, and federally mandated integration of schools threatened to upend the traditional family and patriarchal authority, sparking an intensification of conservative evangelical political activism. Du Mez argues the irony that toxic neo-evangelical flexing "went hand in hand with a culture of fear, but it wasn't always readily apparent which came first" (12). Enemies and the perception of threats were needed to reinforce the masculine ideal of the noble protector. "Evangelical militancy cannot be seen simply as a response to fearful times; for conservative white evangelicals, a militant faith required an ever-present sense of threat" (13).

Those ideas are the basic foundation of Du Mez's argument, but the real fun of *Jesus and John Wayne* is encountering her specific examples as the reader follows her journey through the worshipful, wild, and often weird world of evangelical popular cultures. Her

account begins with the energetic efforts of young conservative Christians to distinguish their neo-evangelical movement from reactionary forms of fundamentalism by reengaging with broader cultural trends. Youth for Christ evangelist Billy Graham, himself the perfect picture of idealized white male sanctified masculinity, forged significant alliances with prominent Hollywood celebrities through his 1949 Los Angeles crusade. These Hollywood celebrities endorsed Graham's identification of noble Christian virtue with the American myth of the rugged individualist embodied in popular images of the cowboy and the soldier. John Wayne was emerging at the time as the foremost cinematic representative of both the frontier hero and the American warrior ideals. Wayne's image of rugged individualism was celebrated and promoted by neo-evangelical cultural gatekeepers despite the fact that Wayne himself was neither religious nor particularly moral in his personal choices. "In time the two would become difficult to distinguish," Du Mez writes. "As red-blooded American manhood became infused with God-and-country virtues, otherwise secular models would come to exemplify an ideal Christian manhood" (54).

Du Mez traces how these neo-evangelical preoccupations with masculinity and proper gender roles were promoted by the cultural networks they established over the next forty years. Popular evangelical media promoting these ideas included books, Bible study materials, contemporary Christian music, films, and even decorative kitsch produced to adorn the homes of devout evangelicals. Christians influenced by these cultural products began to see powerful allies and protectors in conservative Republican leaders such as Senator Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan. Du Mez relates the fascinating story of how Sun Belt southern immigrants helped engineer the transition of the "Solid South" from a bastion of Democratic support to a Republican stronghold through a combination of cultural advocacy and corporate alliances. Her study at this point builds well on Darren Dochuk's analysis in *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*.[2](#)

Du Mez's unique interpretive contribution involves the degree of her focus on the gender dynamics of these cultural and political movements. She identifies early proponents of traditional gender roles like Marabel Morgan and Phyllis Schlafly whose early advocacy for submissive "Biblical womanhood" inspired later leaders such as Tim and Beverly LaHaye as well as Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell. Du Mez notes how the debate over women's role in ministry became a central battleground in the crusade of Southern Baptist "conservative resurgence" leaders to wrest control of their denomination from moderates. From Anita Bryant to the Green family of Hobby Lobby fame, Du Mez tells a compelling story with a fascinating, and sometimes repellent, cast of characters. The harmful hyper-masculinity of leaders such as Mark Driscoll as well as the unrealistic views of marriage and dating fostered by some evangelical purity movements provide models for how views of sexuality and gender roles could lead to

immense trauma for young evangelicals. Both the sobriety and the folly of our recent political and cultural history spring to life in sharp relief. Her focus on masculinity can sometimes give the impression that gender dominated as a causative factor over other potent cultural and theological forces, but Du Mez balances that thematic focus with numerous examples of how gender considerations linked with those other causative factors. She includes allusions to other studies that highlight the complicated array of factors that amplified and accompanied the impact of idealized white masculinity. In terms of readability and her ability to hold your interest, who doesn't want to read a book with chapter titles like "John Wayne Can Save Your Ass," "Pilgrim's Progress in Camo," and "Spiritual Badasses"?

I was struck by how well Du Mez's book compliments fellow historian Heather Cox Richardson's *How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continuing Fight for the Soul of America*³ having read them close together. I highly recommend people read them both. Richardson traces the broader contours of southern influence through the Sun Belt on contemporary American political cultures while Du Mez highlights the religious and gender aspects of that influence more specifically. Both works provide important reminders that old philosophies never die, they incubate until an opportune time. The durability of racist, sexist, and authoritarian tendencies mistakenly believed extinct raises the question of whether history really does have an ash heap or just a holding cell.

Du Mez's contributions in *Jesus and John Wayne* to the critical debates regarding the nature of evangelical identity are timely and important. She joins other scholars who have produced excellent recent studies in which they approach the question of evangelical identity from the perspective of cultural analysis rather than primarily through the lens of theological typologies or organizational affiliations. Daniel Vaca's *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America*⁴ and Lauren R. Kirby's *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation's Capital and Redeem a Christian America*⁵ serve as only two other examples of this growing body of scholarship. David Bebbington's *Quadrilateral*, long accepted as a standard for scholarly definitions of evangelicalism, identified evangelicals according to particular behavioral characteristics and theological assumptions that recur throughout the movement's long history.⁶ Du Mez insists that the most significant force shaping the identity of contemporary evangelicals is the network of informal neo-evangelical popular cultural influencers forged throughout the late twentieth century.

She is correct and her argument, no matter how troubling it may be for lovers of the evangelical traditions, needs to be taken seriously. Participant observer status often leaves even careful scholars with evangelical sympathies vulnerable to what Du Mez calls "defending the brand." Have we favored theological markers and organizational

identities as preferred measures of evangelical self-identification because that is the actual glue that binds evangelicalisms together or because those characteristics are most convenient for defending the evangelical brand? This question demands to be asked and answered at a time when many people are doubting whether “evangelical” is a category that carries true meaning either now or in the past. *Jesus and John Wayne* delivers an informative and provocative account of how gender dynamics have shaped the religious commitments and political alignments of a significant portion of the American electorate.

FOOTNOTES

1. Katie Reilly, “Donald Trump Says He ‘Could Shoot Somebody’ and Not Lose Voters,” *Time*, January 23, 2016, <https://time.com/4191598/donald-trump-says-he-could-shoot-somebody-and-not-lose-voters/>, Accessed May 16, 2020.
2. Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012.
3. Heather Cox Richardson, *How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continuing Fight for the Soul of America*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020.
4. Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.
5. Lauren R. Kirby, *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation’s Capital and Redeem a Christian America*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
6. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 1989.