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For Daddy, the lightning, who taught me to find the deepest truths possible and shatter the darkness that hides them.

And for Mother, the thunder, who taught me to tell them loudly.

I love you.

1

Why do people kill or persecute for God and consider it a virtue? Why do sane, sincerely religious people do cruel things and consider it good service to God? Why do people wind up with a hymn on their lips and blood on their hands?

The answer is that they've adopted a *combat theology*. A combat theology is a sequence of assertions that together argue that God's will, plan, or people are in jeopardy because of the actions of evil people. A combat theology argues that, as a result, God wants devout heroes to rise up to resist those evil people by persecuting, marginalizing, oppressing, or killing them in order to rescue God's intent for the world. A combat theology can inspire violence whether its makers design it to or not.

To create a combat theology is to weaponize a religion. It is to bastardize and warp and corrupt it. It is to dress up cruelty as virtue.

To weaponize a religion is a sin.

2

This book shows how an evil thing is done and how to stop it when you see it. **This book outlines four major ways people weaponize their religions, and starting places for how you can counter each way.** It is not a full treatment of the causes and counters to religious violence—it is meant as a quick handbook, an in-case-of-emergency-break-glass starting point.

This book is meant to do three things:

- *To provide early warning*, to show how combat theologies are created so you can recognize when one is being created and adopted.
- *To inoculate you against being seduced by a combat theology* by showing you how one is created. Bad people can prey on you. So can bad ideas. More than just being seductive to individuals, combat theologies can seduce a society or simply become contagious. This book also is meant to help keep you from creating your own combat theology as you fight one and thereby creating a holy war in which two sides feed off of each other.
- *To equip "spiritual first responders"*—ministers, journalists, community leaders, commentators, and opinion leaders—to *understand and counter combat theologies*.

3

“Not my religion!” you might say. “My religion is a religion of peace!” you might say. “My religion could never be weaponized!” you might say. **Any religion can be weaponized. No religion is immune.** And no religious believer is completely immune to being seduced by a combat theology. The development and adoption of combat theologies is a recurring human phenomenon, a perennial flaw in the human creature. Beware.

No religion is inherently violent, and no combat theology represents the true heart, core, or default position for that religion. Why is this true? Most religious people make exceptions from their religion’s core teachings to be violent; they don’t make exceptions to their religion’s core teachings to be nonviolent.

4

So, what is religion, and what is it supposed to be?

Religion is the attempt to render into a human language—into writing or art—aspects of God. A religion is a conceptual device created for the limited human creature that conveys or reveals the divine, the true spiritual ‘ground,’ the nature of reality, or The Beyond in our midst. That religions are devices does not mean they are not spiritually valid or are not spiritually true. Religion—or, more specifically, theology—is supposed to ...

- open you to an awareness and awe of the divine or The Beyond,
- explain the nature and character of the divine,
- help you see the divine working in the world around you, and to find joy in it,
- help you find your calling or mission in life or your role in the cosmos and in the growth of those around you,
- help you reckon with the joys and vagaries of life,
- provide moral codes and frameworks for moral and ethical reasoning, and
- inspire you to pursue compassion and benevolence toward others without exception.

5

Any theology—good or bad—spends most of its time “facing” what it cares about most. A healthy theology faces the divine. A combat theology faces its enemy. **A healthy theology needs no Devil, but must have a God. A combat theology needs no God, but must have a Devil.**

6

Why do people create or embrace combat theologies?

It's too easy to dismiss combat theology believers as mentally ill, broken, or simply crazy. Usually their belief is sincere. Why?

A combat theology provides ...

- life meaning by providing a holy crusade in which one is a hero struggling against villains in a conflict in which the fate of their particular world is at stake,
- direction for lost people,
- a way to define one's virtue, worth, or pride through opposition,
- a way to give name to one's floating fears and anxieties, and to channel one's anger,
- something or someone to blame for one's lot in life,
- a way to baptize one's own bigotry and make it God's,
- a way to validate someone's absolutist or purist tendencies by giving him or her a way to demonize and purge from their world what they cannot accept, and/or
- a justification to pursue power in the name of rescuing God's intent for the world or in the pursuit of emotional safety.

Dissuading someone of belief in a combat theology can be difficult because extricating the combat theology from someone may take away their identity, meaning in life, and sense of their own virtue, heroism, and nobility. It can take away their “good war,” and without it they don't know who they are any more.

7

This book is written as a follow-on to my earlier book [The Knight and The Gardener: Worldviews Make Worlds](#). Combat theology mindsets I describe in this book are outgrowths of the “Knight” perspective I outlined there. Readers of this book may benefit from reading *The Knight and The Gardener* as well.

8

There are four ways to weaponize a religion. The more of these ways that are employed—it’s often a cumulative process—the more likely someone is to create a combat theology. These four ways are to ...

- [1] blend or conflate church and state—or a religion with a nation or culture—and/or
- [2] sacralize (assign transcendent or spiritual significance to) people, places, nations, political parties, or theological or policy positions; then
- [3] craft a narrative or argument that depicts one’s religion—or whatever one has sacralized—as facing an existential threat or emergency conditions; and finally, as a means to respond to that perceived threat or emergency,
- [4] interpret one’s religious scriptures that seem to endorse violence literally and as eternal mandates.

The first way to weaponize a religion is to blend church and state or a religion with a nation or culture. More precisely, claim God is the originator of one's nation, government, or culture, and that the nation or culture is the custodian of God's will or the arm of the Lord on Earth. Argue that one's cultural orientation and practices are the perfect fulfillment of God's way. Make a strain of a religion into the state's official faith, and then link the nation's or culture's survival to the survival of that strain, or vice versa—argue that if the nation or culture changes then the correct version of the faith will die.

Once a nation or culture is considered an agent of God, or God is considered the author of the nation or culture:

- [1] threats to the nation's or culture's agenda become threats to God's agenda;
- [2] enemies of the state, nation, or culture become enemies of God;
- [3] criticisms of the nation, government, religion, or culture—or efforts to reform any of them—can be considered subversive, treasonous, heretical, or attacks on God or faith; and
- [4] the faithful, if they judge the government is impious or apostate, may conclude the government must be overthrown to restore the nation or defend the faith.

For example:

- Al-Qaeda leaders argue that failures by Saudi, Pakistani, Egyptian, and other regimes to adopt or hew to pure Salafi

(a particular brand of Sunni fundamentalist) principles has allowed the West to subvert and decimate Islam as a religion, as a holy form of governance, and as a world-class civilization. Al-Qaeda leaders claim violent overthrow of their governments is necessary to restore and ensure their societies' piety, integrity, and strength. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed that only their caliphate could succeed as the launch pad or center to reestablish a strong, pure, devout superpower because it follows only laws of God. Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and those who hold similar beliefs have killed thousands of people over the past several decades—mostly other Muslims they believe are insufficiently devout or are agents of the West, Israel, or Iran.

- Norwegian Christian nationalist terrorist Anders Breivik argued in his manifesto that Christian Europe and Western civilization were founded on Christian principles and intended by God to function as Christian nations, but naïve or malevolent liberals have allowed totalitarian movements such as communism, Nazism, and (his flawed understanding of) Islam to infiltrate and sabotage them from within. He claims only a violent guerilla campaign by holy modern-day knights can rescue Western civilization and restore Christendom. In Norway in July 2011, Breivik killed 77 liberals, mostly teenagers, in a single day.

The second way to weaponize a religion is to sacralize—to assign transcendent significance to—earthly individuals, groups of people, territories, or theological or policy positions. Adherents can then characterize

historical events and present-day circumstances as aspects or manifestations of a conspiracy or cosmic war between good and evil. There are four main forms of sacralization in this regard.

Sacralizing people: The nature of sectarian warfare is the argument that *my people (those who follow my creed) are God's people and other people are not.* Several Middle Eastern and African conflicts, particularly in Iraq and Syria since the American military invasion of the region in 2003, have devolved into widespread sectarian slaughter over longstanding religious, tribal, and ethnic disagreements or competitions.

Sacralizing territories or places: This argument is that *this place was set aside by God for me and my people alone.* Al-Qaeda leaders routinely identify “Muslim lands”—territories held by Muslims at one time or another—as areas Allah gave Muslims and that Allah wants them reclaimed. Osama bin Laden often cited the hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad ordered his followers to expel unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula (*Sahih Bukhari* 2997). Some Israelis and Palestinians both invoke religious claims to some of the same territories as do some Indians and Pakistanis over the Kashmir region.

Sacralizing a political party and/or policy positions: This argument is that *God minted my political party and its political*

positions to be his political agent in my country and disagreement with my party or agreement with another is tantamount to disobedience to God. For example, Christian supporters of the Republican Party in the United States routinely suggest or outright claim that GOP party positions are the truly Christian ones and that disagreement with GOP positions is spiritually and politically suspect.

This is different than arguing the consistency or inconsistency of a human-created policy or political opinion with the compassion or will of God. And it's different than faith-inspired advocacy. For example, the Civil Rights Movement was faith-inspired advocacy. Its leaders argued that segregation, voter suppression, and more were inconsistent with the will of God, especially as embodied in the Golden Rule. The Civil Rights Movement, however, did not declare that either major American political party or platform was God's or suggest that allegiance to a particular one was required by God.

The sacralizing of political positions can lead to political absolutism and violence. For example, an Egyptian Salafi-jihadist assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, and a Jewish extremist assassinated Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin for, in the assassins' views, betraying God's plans for their respective nations by entering into political compromise with people of other faiths. President Sadat helped engineer the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979 and Prime Minister Rabin signed the Oslo Accords in 1993 and 1995—political compromises each assassin concluded were tantamount to betrayals of divine will. The killers

undertook their assassination plots as service to God, and are regarded by others who hold those combat theologies as heroes.

Part of the risk of sacralizing a political party is that if a political party advocates for military action, those who have sacralized that party may interpret that military action as what God wants or as a holy war.

Sacralizing theological positions: This argument is that *my theology or way is a perfect reflection of the mind of God and that rejection of my theology or way is a rejection of God.*

This sometimes happens when someone engages in a theological discernment process, then forgets they did it and concludes that their end result was gifted to them directly by God. Again, theologies are devices that help depict the will of God to limited human minds. They are shadows rather than perfect renditions or revelations of God. Over-admiration of one's own theology—and lack of humility about one's own ability to discern—risks falling into idolatry, in this case a worship of self.

A couple of Buddhist sayings make this point differently: *the raft is not the shore and the finger points toward the moon.* A theology is a worthwhile, but cobbled-together, imperfect raft that helps transport you to God, but it is not God. A theology is merely the finger that points toward glory, it is not the glory.

Those who sacralize their own theology can see disagreements with them and societal changes they don't like as attacks on God, on faith, on the survival of the faith, or even survival of the world.

Fundamentalists idolize the raft. Cults idolize their rafts and sometimes their leaders. And they defend them, sometimes violently, for fear that deviation from their theology or way risks

sacrificing or extinguishing God's will for themselves and for the world. Al-Qaeda's and ISIS's global campaign of violence is partly the result of their having sacralized their own fundamentalist theology.

The third way to weaponize a religion is to craft a narrative of emergency that argues that the people, places, policies, or theological positions that a group has sacralized are now at risk of being destroyed. Any narrative of emergency clearly delineates good guys and bad guys. It warns that today is a historic crisis point and that if an extreme action isn't taken right now against the bad guys, everything that the good guys love will be lost forever.

The fourth way to weaponize a religion—as a method to thwart a perceived emergency or threat to whatever has been sacralized—is to interpret a religion's scriptural passages that countenance violence literally and as eternal mandates.

If read without historical, literary, or spiritual context, or as historical facts rather than spiritual allegory, violent passages can be interpreted as divine commandments to be followed absolutely in all circumstances at all times.

If violent passages are read in this manner, they can be granted more spiritual weight than passages that bar violence. In this manner, combat theology creators can argue that Christians should follow the example of ancient Israelites fighting an enemy more than the example of Jesus' nonviolence and calls for us to love our enemies. Believers can then consider the employment of violence as a heroic form of obedience to God.

Here are a couple of examples:

- Al-Qaeda leaders interpret a few Koranic verses that suggest Muslims should not take unbelievers as friends (*Surah al-Ma`ida* 5:51 and *Surah Ali Imran* 3:28 and 3:118)—which referred to specific non-Muslims that were interacting with Muslims at the specific time those verses were written—mean Muslims should *never* befriend non-Muslims, and that Christians and Jews will *always* be malevolent toward Muslims.

- Al-Qaeda and other violent extremists routinely suggest the West is analogous to evil oppressors referred to in the Koran, and cite verses such as *Surah Tawbah* 9:14 and *Surah an-Nisa* 4:75 that call on Muslims to rise up in defense of the oppressed in response.

If Christians, for example, were to pick and prioritize verses from the Bible in this way, they could conclude that in emergency circumstances, God ...

- *endorses war and warrior culture.* *Exodus* chapter 15 flatly states “The Lord is a man of war.” (15:3)
- *requires or permits genocide against unbelievers.* In *Exodus* chapters 17 and 23, *Numbers* chapter 21, *Deuteronomy* chapters 2, 3, 7, 20, and 25, *Joshua* chapters 6, 8, 10, 11, and *I Samuel* chapter 15, God orders the Israelites to exterminate non-Israelite peoples.
- *requires racial purity.* In *Numbers* chapter 25, God is pleased when the prophet Phinehas slays an interracial or inter-tribal couple.
- *endorses mass casualty suicide attacks.* In *Judges* chapter 16, disgraced Israelite champion Samson—the first suicide operative—redeems himself by pulling down a pagan temple upon himself and a great many Philistines for apostasy.
- *requires absolute moral impeccability and punishing lapses with death.* Many verses in *Leviticus* and *Revelation* convey this theme.

- *endorses political assassination.* *Psalms* 69 and 109 and, to a lesser degree, *Psalms* 5, 6, 11, 12, 35, 37, 40, 52, 54, 56, 58, 69, 79, 83, 137, and 143 feature calls for God to kill, destroy, or send divinely-appointed assassins or champions to kill those who persecute the people of God. *Revelation* features many verses calling for the death of an unjust, corrupt leader.
- *endorses insurgencies against apostate or insufficiently pious leaders.* *I Samuel* chapter 15 through *II Samuel* chapter 5 tell the story of David’s insurgency against King Saul, who lost God’s favor when Saul showed mercy and failed to completely exterminate the Amalekites. In *Matthew* 10:34 Jesus claims he came “not to bring peace but a sword” and in *Luke* 22:35-38 Jesus calls on followers to sell their belongings and buy a sword.

13

But what about just wars and just war theories? A war—or use of lethal force—may be just and necessary. To use force may be the least worst option available, and used to prevent something worse from happening. Participation in a war may be moral, virtuous, even heroic. But wars are not holy. Why not? Because, despite every good reason to engage in a conflict, wars leave children of God dead on the ground.

When a devout person decides to commit a sin—killing—to prevent further loss of life, that’s one thing. But when that person concludes he or she is a warrior for God or that God wants his or her enemies killed, then he or she has probably adopted a combat theology.

Holy wars are not holy. Neither are holy warriors.

14

Even when a combat theology doesn’t yield actual violence it can still produce harm in the forms of persecution, oppression, exclusion, marginalization, bigotry, emotional and spiritual abuse, and more.

15

Now we turn to how to de-weaponize a religion—how to dismantle a combat theology and belief in it.

The following list of actions is not meant to be comprehensive. There are many ways to address and undermine belief in combat theologies; these are merely thought starters. For a fuller treatment, pull together a team of pastors, theologians, activists, journalists, communications specialists, marketers, conflict resolution experts, school teachers, janitors, and others. You'll need everyone. No one is as smart as everyone.

16

Belief precedes behavior. People arm mentally first. They pick up conceptual weapons—combat theologies—with their minds before they pick up physical weapons with their hands.

If you decide to work against a combat theology, understand this: your job is not to defeat combat theology adherents. Your job isn't to eradicate them or marginalize them. Your job is to stop them from doing harm. **Your job is to dismantle the combat theology in their minds without instilling one into your own.**

Do not seek to eradicate them no matter what they do, and no matter how frustrated you become. That frustration—that exasperation—will happen, and in those moments you will conclude that nothing can be done to change them and that combat theology adherents should simply be wiped from the Earth. *That conclusion is what giving up looks like.* Concluding that they are your enemy and that they are irredeemable makes you into a mirror image of what they have become. In fighting the monster, you will become a monster.

Your job is not to win. Your job is to dissuade them. Your job is to take the weapons out of their minds.

Many people who create a combat theology—or the elements that contribute to the creation of one—often **do not know they are doing it.** They may have contributory culpability though they are not necessarily at fault. It is important to discern and distinguish between the two. **If you see someone inadvertently contributing to the creation of a combat theology, warn them.**

The main ways to de-weaponize a religion and kill a combat theology are plainly apparent:

- [1] separate or disaggregate church and state, nation, or culture,
- [2] desacralize the special—or sacralize all. Identify and point out when they are being intermingled, and speak against that conflation,
- [3] deconstruct and dismantle every single aspect of the narrative of emergency, and
- [4] spiritualize texts—Jesus did—and overshadow violent and nationalistic texts with compassionate and universalist ones.

Next are some pieces of advice and wisdom before some starter examples of what might work.

Argue from the gut, not from the head. Combat theologies are fear-and-emergency theologies. They aren't undermined through long intellectual theological arguments; they're countered by meaningful emotional arguments. Intellectual arguments often fail to change a religious extremist's theological or emotional mind.

Extremists argue from the gut. They persuade emotionally by creating fear and panic and appealing to bigotry. They argue from the emotional plane rather than the intellectual plane. They target the heart, not the head. Breaking people away from belief in combat theologies ultimately means engaging combat theologians on emotional ground.

Arguing too much from the intellectual plane while combat theologians argue from the emotional plane doesn't just result in ships passing in the night. It makes the intellectuals seem like they have nothing at all to say about what combat theologians love and fear. It makes the intellectuals appear clueless. If the intellectual plane and intellectual argumentation is all you respect, this endeavor is not for you.

Also, argue from a purer and higher plane. If you're speaking to a Christian, argue from within the Bible and within the Christian tradition rather than from someone else's logic or reasoning. Argue from a place of Deep Bible. Argue from God's Way. Theirs is merely a little combat theology by comparison.

They think their combat theology is the pinnacle of faith. They think they have reached the spiritual mountaintop when instead they have merely reached the top of the carpet.

For example, here's how I've argued with homophobic Christians about homosexuality. Conservative evangelicals sometimes teach that homosexuality strikes at the heart of heterosexual marriage and family and that since, in their view, marriage and family are a cornerstone of America and that America is God's agent on the geopolitical stage, if America accepts homosexuality, American society will collapse and thus God's plans for the world will be put at risk. For them, allowing America to accept homosexuality risks *everything*.

Don't believe conservative Christians use a combat theology against gay people? Ask abandoned, alienated, beaten, and murdered gay people.

I long ago gave up on intellectually arguing the origins and intent of the two or three verses in the entire Bible that reference homosexuality (or don't). I don't try to fight the homophobia itself—that's someone else's fear to fight. Instead, I say *Fine. Believe what you want. Whatever. Let's talk about what God wants. In the Bible homosexuality is mentioned two, maybe three times, but the Bible has two, maybe three thousand verses that call for us to advocate for the poor, the downtrodden, the powerless, and the persecuted. So go ahead and preach against homosexuality, but to be biblical—to be in line with the will of God—for every single sentence you utter against gay people you must say one thousand sentences for the poor and for the powerless, and you must do it from the*

pulpit and from the mountaintop. Now ... I've counted the sentences you said against gayness and gay people in the past hour alone so you have a lot of catching up to do. So get started. We'll wait.

This usually stops a Christian homophobe in their tracks—and stops them cold. Why? It's an emotional argument. Sure, it started as an intellectual point but I used that to make an emotional argument a sentence or so later. It's an argument about fairness that's rooted in the Golden Rule and about the priorities of God—both of which are difficult for even the most fearful Christians to argue against. It's also an argument against the homophobe's unfairness and meanness toward gay people and when that argument is brought with some authority (what the Bible actually says) and some heat (a bit of leaned-in anger), Christian homophobes wind up back on their heels.

Further, the argument is a moral right hook to a combat theology's head. It's an argument that's simple, short, and does not prevaricate. And it instills doubt in the combat theology adherent's mind about their own virtue. *If that's true—that God has a Larger Right than what I'm saying—then what am I really doing here?* And if he actually does dedicate 1,000 sentences to the poor and oppressed for every anti-gay sentence he utters, then by about Sentence #287 for the oppressed it's going to dawn on him that gay people suffer from persecution and oppression, and it's going to dawn on him that he's been guilty of persecuting and oppressing gay people. I stopped one Christian homophobe cold when I said, *All of this you're saying right now... you are not going to believe it in ten years and you will not be able to take it back.*

Some people are going to be dead by then because of what you're preaching. And that will be on you.

A related story: I once visited the home of a police chaplain and he stepped away to take a phone call from a police officer he had been counseling. After 10 minutes, the chaplain, who is Jewish, leaned out his office door and said “I don't know what to do here. This officer is an evangelical Christian and he's in crisis because he's finally having to reckon with the fact that he's gay. He's having a sexuality crisis and a faith crisis at the same time and I don't know Christian theology well enough to know what to tell him. Quick—what do I say?” I said “Tell him that homosexuality was so important to Jesus that Jesus never mentioned it.” The chaplain closed his office door and came back out 20 minutes later, the phone call ended, and said “That did it.”

What I'd said in both cases may have sounded like intellectual arguments, but they were emotional ones instead. Further, those approaches distinguished God's will from that of the culture, sacralized all (makes gay people as sacred in the eyes of God as straight people), deflated the narrative of emergency by making the homophobe's meanness the cause of the emergency, and recontextualized the few anti-homosexuality verses in the larger arc of God's love and intent. And those approaches did all those things on the emotional rather than intellectual plane.

Let's put this all together by looking at American Christian nationalism, the most prominent, mature combat theology in use in the United States today. Many among the insurrectionists at the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021 expressed Christian nationalist beliefs in their words and on their clothing, flags, and signs. Christian nationalism probably will motivate some domestic terrorist attacks in the near future. Christian nationalist perspectives have grown in popularity among conservative evangelicals over the past three decades and while it is usually a nonviolent perspective, it has inspired violence before. Two quick examples:

- In 2009, a Christian nationalist militia group in Michigan called “the Hutaree” planned to kill a Michigan police official and then attack his funeral in an effort to spark a Second American Revolution that would return the country, in their estimation, to its conservative Christian roots. The paramilitary uniforms they had made for themselves included a patch that read “Colonial Christian Republic.” The group was arrested by the FBI before they could carry out their attacks.
- In July 2011, Norwegian Christian nationalist Anders Breivik (who I mentioned earlier) posted a manifesto and video online, truck-bombed Norway’s federal headquarters, and conducted a mass shooting of liberal teenagers and young adults at Norway’s liberal political party’s summer camp facility—killing 77 and wounding scores more—in an

attempt to inspire a terrorist movement he hoped would rescue Western civilization by returning Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to (in his estimation) their conservative Christian roots. Breivik’s attacks were successful but the violent movement he hoped to inspire did not materialize.

Combat theologies are usually very simple—they can be summed up in one to three sentences or so. Sometimes a message like a combat theology is referred to as a “single narrative” that a violent political or religious movement holds in common and rallies around.

The single narrative for American Christian nationalists is that *America was founded as a Christian nation, but liberals and secular people hate God and are trying to steal the country away from God and extinguish Christianity. Christians are called to take back America for God politically, culturally, and—if and when the time comes—in the streets.*

First, let’s ask whether American Christian nationalism is the product of one or more of the four ways to weaponize a religion.

- Does American Christian nationalism conflate religion and nation? Yes.
- Does American Christian nationalism sacralize particular people, places, a political party, policies, and doctrines, and desacralize others? Yes.
- Does the American Christian nationalist narrative contain a narrative of emergency? Yes.
- Does American Christian nationalism interpret violent passages within the Bible literally and as eternal mandates?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Do they often glamorize and sacralize the Revolutionary War, World War II, and other U.S. military actions? Yes.

American Christian nationalism, whether it is violent or not, is a weaponized version of Christianity. It is not the Christianity of Jesus Christ.

So how can we de-fang American Christian nationalist combat theology?

I go back and forth on whether the effort to dismantle any combat theology should use a single master counternarrative and singular, focused strategy or a thousand counternarratives and a thousand smaller strategies to swarm and smother it. Let's look at both ways.

Let's look first at creating a single master counternarrative.

Combat theologies are short, simple, and clear. A master counternarrative—every countermesssage, actually—should also be short, simple, and clear.

Combat theologies are absolutist and blinding. They create certainty. Countermesssages should not come from the usual body of arguments combat theology adherents know how to deflect. They should come in from a new, unexpected vector, they should shock, and they should instill doubt.

Why instill doubt? Absolutists whose certitude is cracked freeze until they can restore it. One's certitude about one's righteousness must be firmly in place in order to do something truly extreme. One cannot kill in the name of ambiguity.

What follows are some approaches I have used that have worked in some contexts. They may not work in other contexts. Come up with your own, but I'll explain how I think through an approach.

Because I think American Christian nationalist combat theology is a fear-based perspective that has drawn some Christians away from the teachings and example of Jesus into a theology that's more apt to produce cruelty and sin than compassion and kindness, the single theme or the master narrative I use is that *Christian nationalists have fallen to the Dark Side of the Force but they do not know it. Satan has tricked them into believing in their heart of hearts that they are doing the Lord's work, and they are down deep in the deception.*

Why do I use this counternarrative?

- It's true.
- It's kind and generous—perhaps overly so—toward Christian nationalists themselves. It separates the sin from the sinner.
- It's a trap narrative. The more they fight you, the more you say *You keep doing it. You keep digging yourself deeper into the deception, deeper into Satan's pocket.*
- Christian nationalists won't expect it because it comes from within the Christian tradition. Christian nationalists expect criticisms of them to come from the standard tropes of secular liberals.
- It's an emotional rather than intellectual assertion. This message will *scare* them. It implies that the spiritual victory they are working toward would result in a spiritual

cataclysm for themselves instead. They will doubt themselves.

- It deflates their perception of themselves as heroes.
- It opens the door for next conversations because after they get over being gobsmacked at the assertion they'll ask *Why on Earth do you think that?*

Here's something I gave pastors who wanted to preach against the Christian nationalist sentiment that spurred the Capitol riot the Sunday after the riot took place. It walks an audience up to the *Christian nationalists have fallen to the Dark Side of the Force and do not know it* theme.

What did Jesus say about terrorism, insurrection, and political violence? While we have no record of him saying anything directly to the terrorists of his day, he taught by example on this and he did it almost first thing in his ministry. It's hidden right at the beginning of his ministry. Or it's hidden to us because we don't live in first century Palestine, but it was crystal clear to God's people of that time what Jesus was doing. In a time of actual, real, severe political oppression and life under the thumb of the greatest political and military power in the world, and when God's oppressed people were screaming out to God for help, Jesus shows up and won't raise a weapon. He won't fight and he won't endorse violent revolt. Instead, he recruits and reforms two terrorists to become his disciples.

You heard that right: two of Jesus' twelve disciples were terrorists before they met Jesus. And when they heard him, they renounced "holy," "patriotic," "righteous" violence to follow him. Who were they? Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot.

The Zealots and Sicarii were Jewish nationalists, fundamentalist-absolutists, and patriotic holy warriors who killed Romans—and even fellow Jews they believed were collaborators with the Romans or were prevaricators or insufficiently devout. The Zealots were armed insurgents who most of the time fought in small groups. (If they sound like al-Qaeda or ISIS to you, they should.) The Zealots have a real place of honor in human history: they are the first recorded terrorist group. So... Simon the Zealot.

The Sicarii were "the Dagger Men." They were assassins who, while carrying concealed knives, would sidle up to Roman officials in crowds, gut them, and disappear back into the crowd. Sicarii is a plural term. The singular? Sicarius or Iscariot. So... Judas Iscariot... Judas "the Dagger Man."

The Zealots and the Sicarii were freedom fighters of their day—or at least they thought they were. They thought they were soldiers for God. They thought they were called to take back their homeland for God.

Jesus shows up and preaches that their violent ways are not God's ways. He says to them—and to us—heroism is not what you think it is. Faithfulness to God is not what you think it is. Service is not what you think it is. Victory is not what you think it is. He says do not follow those who confuse their politics, their fear, their will, and their worldview for God's. Do not praise, do not admire, do not become those who have been deceived by Satan's ways and have had their souls and vision shrunk to the point where they walk around with a hymn on their lips and blood on their hands. Those who believe their politics, their theology, and their violence are the

pinnacle, the mountaintop of faith and service do not understand they have merely climbed up to the top of the carpet.

Simon and Judas thought they were the real patriots and the real men of God, that they were God's champions and noble knights, and that others were the cowards and of lesser faith ... until they met Jesus.

Jesus probably made everyone who wanted God to send a liberator as a savior reeeeeeeally angry. Those people wanted a mighty and holy patriot with a flaming sword rather than this pansy ragamuffin who condemns their freedom fighting. I'm sure a few might have loved to see a Zealot visit Jesus in the night or a sicarius slip up on Jesus in one of his crowds.

So the real question now is whether you follow Jesus or Judas. Are you a Christian or are you a Zealot or a Dagger Man?

The shorter, simpler, and clearer version of this is that *violent Christian nationalists are religious terrorists—the Christian version of al-Qaeda and ISIS or Zealots and sicarii.*

So what if you want to create a thousand countermessages and swarm instead? Deconstruct the combat theology into its component parts and come up with counters for every one. It helps to create a chart with each of the combat theology's assertions and sub-assertions and counters to each. Expand the chart as you need to. The best countermeasures will be ones that counter more than one of the ways the religion was weaponized in the first place. You will need every voice you can enlist and with the ideas and solutions everyone offers. Find other groups and compare charts. None

of us is as smart as all of us. Preach, teach, and write all of the counters everywhere you can. Repeatedly.

One last major point: when it comes to dismantling American Christian nationalist combat theology the liberal-conservative political divide is the completely wrong frame for understanding who your allies and enemies are in this effort. That frame is immaterial. Get it out of your head now. The split is not between liberals and conservatives; it's between Knights and Gardeners. Knights see the world as split between good and evil, always at war. Gardeners see the world as the site of a great, holy construction and growth. Liberals can be Knights and conservatives can be Gardeners. Stop thinking in terms of “liberals” and “conservatives” on this: it doesn't matter.

As I said earlier, your job is to take the weapons out of people's minds. What plowshare should you put in the space where the sword once was? A Gardener form of Christianity. And that's what my previous book, [*The Knight and The Gardener: Worldviews Make Worlds*](#), is about. Read that when you're ready.

Here are some ways to fail.

- *Mistaking those who believe combat theologies as cynical or insincere.* Assume they really believe this stuff. Assuming cynicism and insincerity is a mistake secular political scientists tend to make when they look at violent religious actors.
- *Mistaking combat theology believers' violence as an attempt to gain power.* This isn't always the case. Sometimes they merely seek a world safe enough for them that they don't feel they are being threatened or that they need to fight. This can sometimes translate to a pursuit for supremacy in a society or "first among equals" status such that they no longer have to fear the encroachment of larger society. In the case of American Christian nationalists, some want Christian rule of the United States. Others want "religious liberty," meaning they want to be exempted from having to abide by civil rights laws, and to be allowed to discriminate or violate the Golden Rule without risk of prosecution or criticism by American society or other Christians. (In American legal tradition, one's rights are inviolable until one's practice of them unduly impinges on someone else's free exercise of theirs.)
- *Thinking that combat theology adherents are crazy, irrational, or irretrievable.* They were talked into this; they can be talked out of it. Christians have long practice in this sort of thing—it's called *conversion*.

- *Not dealing with the underlying originating fear or problem.* Combat theologies have two sections—diagnosis of a problem and solution to it. The diagnosis section either fabricates something to fear or explains a problem that may be real. Simply arguing against a combat theology's extreme solution to a problem won't be enough if the original problem or fabrication remains in place. Some combat theologies can be dealt with simply by easing fear or by solving the problem the combat theology was created to solve in the first place.
- *Thinking that people are the leaders of combat theology movements; the combat theology itself is the leader.* The people-leaders are merely effective articulators of the combat theology.
- *Believing that countering a combat theology must happen verbally or in writing.* Actions, behavior, relationships, policies, approaches—even circumstances—carry messages inherently.
- *Believing that shows of strength deter.* For those who hold combat theologies, aggression validates their beliefs that you are malevolent and out to persecute them. Belligerence backfires. Take the wind out of their sails instead.
- *Mistaking religion itself as the problem.* Religion is not the problem; *bad religion* is the problem. The solution isn't less religion, but *better* religion. If you have trouble with this notion, it is a problem in your own head, your own experience, your own assumptions, your own past. Without

good religion we would have never gotten the Civil Rights Movement.

- *Mistaking mere religious patriotism for a combat theology.* It is normal to want your government to be devout and moral enough to be benevolent and not corrupt. It is normal to want your government to follow the Golden Rule. Religious patriotism can devolve into a combat theology or a religious nationalism when an enemy or a scapegoat appears in the narrative. If you hear someone say “My theological narrative doesn’t have an enemy in it; God’s does” or “It’s not my hit list; it’s God’s hit list” or “I don’t hate whomever; I love my country *so much* that I had to sacrifice or persecute or marginalize those people to save God’s Plan for my country and the world”—that’s when a religious patriotism has slid down into a combat theology.
- *Failing to reestablish one’s theological or personal credibility with a combat theology believer enough for them to listen to you.* You will probably have to start over with each new audience because many combat theology believers may assume from the outset that failing to be in their camp means you are in Satan’s. Argue from a purer, higher place—prove your mastery of Scripture and good intent—until they settle down enough to listen. Position authority or credibility means nothing unless you hold standing within their camp already.

- *Leaving too much of the narrative of emergency in place such that they can replace the dismantled pieces the minute after you leave the room.*
- *Failing to argue from the emotional plane and arguing only from the intellectual plane.* Making dry rather than moral arguments.
- *Prevaricating.*
- *Concluding this list prematurely—as I have done here. Keep adding to this list, please.*

22

This is enough to get you started. I've named the thing you're facing—a *combat theology... the weaponization of religion*—and given some starter ideas and advice. You're going to do the rest. You're going to do better. Get started.

23

To weaponize a religion is a sin. Those who are caught in a combat theology are trapped inside a sin. Save them.

Afterword

While there are a great many books about religious violence—the results of the development of a combat theology—there are fewer books that touch on the process by which combat theologies are developed. Here are a few I relied upon for the writing of this volume, and I recommend them for follow-on reading.

Almond, Gabriel, Appleby, R. Scott, and Sivan, Emmanuel (2003). *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Armstrong, Karen (2014). *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Aslan, Reza (2009). *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror*. New York: Random House.

Campolo, Tony (2002). *Which Jesus?: Choosing between Love and Power*. Nashville: W Publishing Group.

Jenkins, Philip (2011). *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses*. New York: HarperOne.

Kimball, Charles (2008). *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*. New York: HarperOne.

Kimball, Charles (2011). *When Religion Becomes Lethal: The Explosive Mix of Politics and Religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kirsch, Jonathan (2007). *A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization*. New York: HarperOne.

Stewart, Katherine (2020). *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Whitehead, Andrew L. and Perry, Samuel L. (2020). *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.