

BOOK REVIEW AND NOTE
***The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI Aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism.* By Lerone A. Martin.**

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. xii + 340 pp. \$29.95 hardcover.

It was a surprise to me to learn that for many years in the mid-twentieth century, the Federal Bureau of Investigation held annual retreats at Manresa on the Severn, a Jesuit sanctuary across the Severn River from downtown Annapolis, Maryland. These retreats appealed to many in mid-century America. In 1957, nearly five thousand American men – as individuals, in corporate or academic groups, as part of a social club – spent days or weeks in contemplation at Manresa on the Severn itself, and many more went to other Jesuit locations scattered across the county. But these FBI retreats were specially organized by Director J. Edgar Hoover himself. He admired Jesuit rigor and discipline, and hoped that spending a few days in the bucolic Maryland countryside would instill such values in the young white men he thought of as not merely his agents, but in his spiritual care. Lerone A. Martin's new book is filled with surprising stories like this, each one aimed at thoroughly documenting how Hoover worked systematically to first, construct something we can call "white American Christianity," and second, to bind that construction to a set of ideas and policies about how to organize American society around notions of racial hierarchy and national security.

We might read Martin's book in conversation with a number of other works, going all the way back to Robert Wuthnow's 1988 *The Restructuring of American Religion*, that offer the decline of denominationalism as a model for imagining religion in the postwar United States. Instead, Wuthnow posited, religious Americans began to organize themselves around cultural and political debates that transcended older concerns for theological nuance or denominational boundaries. The work of Kevin Schultz and, more recently, Kevin Kruse has shown how Christians from a number of denominations came to see a declaration of faith as a sign of allegiance to free market economics or national identity or rough-and-tumble masculinity, and even, as Kristin Kobes du Mez has recently shown, have often understood the word Christianity itself as a signifier for those positions rather than for anything so prosaic as church attendance or subscription to the Westminster Creed. The meanings of words like "evangelical" or "Protestant" might, to certain of those who claimed those terms, signify acceptance of certain theological propositions. And those people, often educated theologians or scholars careful of doctrinal boundary maintenance, take such ideas seriously indeed. But many others – including, of course, that vast majority of self-identified Christians not terribly interested in studying creeds – the words could primarily mean the adoption of what scholars have recently come to call "white Christian nationalism," a phrase Martin defines as "the impulse to make whiteness and conservative Christianity the foundation and guidepost of American governance and culture." (4)

It is helpful to clarify the meaning of the words "conservative" and "Christianity" in that definition slightly. One of the fascinating threads in Martin's book is how

energetically J. Edgar Hoover pursued cordial alliances with everybody from the Jesuits who ran *Manresa* to enterprising neo-evangelicals like Billy Graham and Carl Henry at the new brash journal *Christianity Today* to the somewhat stuffy establishment Presbyterians at the National Presbyterian Church, where Hoover himself attended and where Dwight Eisenhower was baptized upon his election to the presidency of the United States. The Jesuits sponsored FBI retreats. *Christianity Today* gave Hoover guest columns and applauded his strict anti-communism and insistence that his agents be clean-cut and well dressed. The National Presbyterian Church held special FBI vesper services, where Hoover himself or one of his assistants would provide the readings from the Bible and lead the agents in song before the church's minister would deliver sermons explaining the critical relationship between democracy and faith that agents of the FBI were responsible to guard.

If locked in a room together the Jesuits and evangelicals and Presbyterians might come to blows over any number of theological questions, from transubstantiation to plenary inspiration of the Bible. But insofar as J. Edgar Hoover subscribed to the "conservative Christianity" central to Martin's definition of white Christian nationalism, he didn't mean rigid adherence to the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus or the coming rapture of the faithful. Indeed, it appears Hoover paid little attention to such questions as these. Where all of these Christian groups could come together was support for Hoover's vision of a nation of robust anti-communism, traditional gender roles, white supremacy, and the sober respectability those things connoted.

In this way, then, Martin's book is on the surface a story of the FBI and its director's fusion of this vision of society with the bureaucracy of national security, a feat few Americans accomplished at Hoover's scale. But it is also – if somewhat below the surface – a story about how white American Christians in the twentieth century came to adopt Hoover's vision of what Christianity meant, and why they did so. *Christianity Today* cared little that Hoover said little about fundamentalist Christian theology. More, postwar Roman Catholics were hunting for ways to better integrate themselves into the white Protestant establishment that governed the United States. As Hoover looked to these groups to baptize and lend the legitimacy of their traditions and institutional authority to his own anti-communist crusade, so did they find in Hoover one who could usher them into the circles of power and respectability that the director of the FBI had access to. In that way, then, the gospel of J. Edgar Hoover was not merely the possession of one man or a single government agency. It came to represent the aspirations of many white American Christians who joined in the project of Cold War nation-building.

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