

Du Mez, Kristin. *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020. 336 pp.

Many have asked how Donald Trump, a brash playboy billionaire with questionable ethics, could generate wide-ranging support among white conservative Christians. In *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, Kristin Du Mez attempts to explain this pro-Trump phenomenon. At stake for the author is her own self-professed identity as an evangelical. Du Mez, a professor at a Christian-reformed university in the Midwest, argues that white evangelicals in the twentieth century recast the celebrity of John Wayne into an “icon of Christian masculinity” (10). Evangelicals then deployed masculine Christianity against a variety of perceived cultural threats from communism to growing secularism. Trump’s election represents the culmination of white evangelicals’ adoption of militant masculinity. This patriarchal ideology shifted from evangelicalism’s margin to orthodoxy, leading to serious abuses of power.

Du Mez organizes *Jesus and John Wayne* into an introduction, sixteen chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter characterizes how masculine Christianity functioned over time. Du Mez begins chapter one in the early twentieth century with a brief discussion of fundamentalism. Prior to the rise of mainstream evangelicalism that took place in the mid-twentieth century, fundamentalism operated as a conservative if marginal wing of American Christianity. Fundamentalism’s reputation suffered due to an insistence on embattlement, militancy, and combativeness. In the wake of the horrors of World War One, these traits were seen as backwards and discordant with the rest of American culture. The opening chapter then turns to Billy Graham and follows his attempt to rescue conservative Christianity from cultural obscurity. Continuing through chapter two, Du Mez tracks how Graham rebranded conservative Christianity through an outward focus on cultural and political engagement. Importantly, during Graham’s rise in the 1960s, evangelicals’ involvement with politics went from silent to active. For white evangelicals, much was at stake over fears like communism, non-white foreigners, Catholicism, and the Civil Rights movement. Chapter three moves to a discussion on how two evangelical women, Marabel Morgan and Phyllis Schlafly, challenged feminist notions of equality. Taking advantage of emerging distribution

networks such as Christian publishing houses, these women promoted traditional Christian womanhood by prioritizing male leadership, child-rearing, and domesticity.

In chapters four through seven, Du Mez demonstrates how white evangelicals coalesced into a powerful political force known as the Religious Right. Prominent figures from Jerry Falwell to Oliver North promoted militant patriarchal power. This messaging incorporated issues on morality and foreign policy. At stake were concerns like traditional family values and the Vietnam War. Du Mez states, “In the home, fathers disciplined children and husbands exercised authority over wives. [...] Beyond the home, the power of the patriarch ensures the security of the nation” (88). Here we see how the religious and civic spheres fused into a singular political identity.

Chapters eight through fourteen continue to explain how public-facing evangelicals perpetuated masculine and militant Christianity. Du Mez argues that the once-fringe far right became increasingly bound to the more centrist evangelical position. This link between fringe and center created an “evangelical cult of masculinity” (277) culminating in the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. By the final two chapters, Du Mez arrives at a significant conclusion: blind obedience to patriarchal authority led to egregious abuses of power in public and private spheres. Du Mez explains how “a ‘cultlike culture’ led to a culture of corruption, including ‘pedophilia, violence, defamation of the innocent to protect the guilty... [and] defiance against lawful authority’” (288). The implication is clear: public-facing white evangelicals bear a large share of responsibility to those who have been mistreated and/or abused.

Du Mez’s strongest argument relates to the violent consequences of Christian masculinity. The author uses a historical framework to persuasively show how the fringe and center became linked. This linkage created the condition of possibility, or *probability*, for a cult-like culture of abusive behavior and silence. Du Mez states that this culture, one of “patriarchy and submission, sex and power...promised protection for women but left women without defense, one that worshiped power and turned a blind eye to justice, and one that transformed the Jesus of the Gospels into an image of their own making” (294). With that said, I question why this line of argumentation was not introduced earlier in the book. Not until the final chapters does this assertion emerge.

One method of *Jesus and John Wayne* highlights the who's-who of conservative evangelicalism. Some might critique this approach on two grounds. First, Du Mez opts for breadth, not depth, in her discussion of evangelicalism's so-called leaders. Every few pages or so a new section introduces a public figure and how they contributed to the movement. Second, the book fails to consider how patriarchy plays out among the laity. This method does, however, illuminate how powerful evangelicals have wielded their influence. For example, female victims of assault are habitually blamed and labeled as temptresses while perpetrators are defended and protected. Du Mez states, "Victims are often pressured to forgive abusers and avoid involving law enforcement" (278). Thus, I consider this method a primary strength of the book, one that gives weight to Du Mez's argument.

At times, *Jesus and John Wayne* conceptualizes white evangelicalism through a singular lens: gender. I agree that to discuss culpability for abuse Du Mez needed to demonstrate the consistent characteristic and ramifications of masculine, militant Christianity. I question, however, if mainstream white evangelicalism can be reduced under the *sole* framework of gender. This is not so much a disagreement with Du Mez's conclusions as it is a call for clarity in argumentation. Is gender one facet that the author has chosen to focus on? Or is it the primary fulcrum on which the entire movement operates? Further, the subtitle gives the impression that race will constitute a major theme. Du Mez does acknowledge race and states that "for conservative white evangelicals, the 'good news' of the Christian gospel has become inextricably linked to a staunch patriarchal authority, gender difference, and Christian nationalism, and all of these are intertwined with white racial identity" (6-7). The author, however, does not explain how whiteness connects to patriarchy. Du Mez uses the term "white" merely to differentiate white evangelicals from the roughly twenty-five percent of black Christians who themselves identify as evangelical.

Throughout *Jesus and John Wayne* Du Mez critiques the white evangelical movement for "corrupting the faith" in two important ways. First, she argues that social and political principles ground the movement instead of theology (297-298). This grounding reflects a general lack of engagement with biblical text. Second, the author repeatedly points out the contradiction of serving both Trump and Jesus. Du Mez writes, "For evangelicals who have transformed the Jesus of the Gospels into a

model of militant masculinity, the conflict is not apparent.” Here the author refers to biblical misinterpretation, or what she calls “theological illiteracy” (6).

When considering the above, a couple critiques come to mind. First, I am not convinced that white conservative evangelicals at large are theologically illiterate. For that to be convincing, Du Mez would have needed to demonstrate evangelicals' biblical misunderstanding. Rarely does Du Mez look at scripture or perform exegesis. The existence of militant masculinity does not necessarily correlate with biblical literacy. Second, Du Mez positions herself as the authority on an *un*corrupted faith over and against the claims of others. The subtitle of the book reflects this point. Du Mez's scholarly expertise should be taken into account. But I am left wondering if and to what degree conservative white evangelicals agree with Du Mez's conclusions about corrupting a faith and fracturing a nation. How would evangelicals respond to the contention that their movement is more cultural than theological?

Despite these critiques, *Jesus and John Wayne* deserves serious consideration from those interested in the cultural and political stakes of conservative evangelicalism. Du Mez's discussion of the link between evangelicalism and political power helps to explain the dogmatic allegiance some have to their political identity. She persuasively shows that Trump's presidency was no aberration. Rather, it was an outcome of patriarchal ideology within white evangelicalism. Du Mez's conclusions about the impact of masculine Christianity and the devastating real-world effects of abuse suggest many avenues for further study.

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