


# Disentangling the American Christian Right: An Interview with Dr. Christopher Douglas<sup>1</sup>

## *Decifrando a direita cristã norte-americana: uma entrevista com o Prof. Dr. Christopher Douglas*

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## Abstract

Christopher Douglas is one of the most prominent scholars who has studied the rise of the conservative Christian Right in the American political arena and the links of this complex movement to American culture. Prof. Douglas taught at the University of Toronto and, for five years, at Furman University, South Carolina before transferring to University of Victoria in 2004. He teaches American literature, particularly contemporary American fiction, religion and literature, multicultural American literature, postmodernism, and the Bible as Literature. In the interview below, Prof. Douglas talks about his research and the idea behind his book "If God Meant to Interfere", published in 2016; the explanatory concepts of Christian Multiculturalism and Christian Postmodernism; the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, and alternative facts among Christian fundamentalists; the American political context. Prof. Douglas also offers interesting comments on the current Brazilian situation. His critical insights provide interesting and new perspectives that give fresh vitality to the debates about Christian fundamentalism. Prof. Douglas is committed to "public-scholar engagement" that is, research-based critical writings for non-academic audiences. Links to his public academic activity are inserted throughout the interview.

**Keywords:** Fundamentalism. American Christian Right. Christian Multiculturalism. Christian Postmodernism.

## Resumo

*Christopher Douglas é um dos mais proeminentes pesquisadores nos estudos relativos à ascensão da direita cristã norte-americana em termos de sua participação na vida política e as ressonâncias desse fenômeno complexo na cultura norte-americana. O Prof. Douglas lecionou na Universidade de Toronto e, por cinco anos, na Universidade Furman na Carolina do Sul antes de se juntar ao Departamento de Inglês da Universidade de Victoria em 2004. Ele ministra cursos sobre literatura norte-americana, especialmente ficção norte-americana contemporânea, religião e literatura, literatura multicultural norte-americana, pós-modernismo, e a Bíblia como Literatura. Na entrevista a seguir, o Pr. Douglas discorre sobre a sua pesquisa e a ideia por trás do seu livro "If God Meant to Interfere" de 2016; os conceitos explicativos "Multiculturalismo Cristão" e "Pós-modernismo Cristão"; a difusão de fake news, teorias da conspiração, e fatos alternativos entre fundamentalistas cristãos; o contexto político norte-americano; além de também oferecer comentários interessantes a respeito da situação brasileira atual. As suas percepções críticas fornecem perspectivas novas e instigantes que revitalizam os debates sobre o fundamentalismo cristão. O Prof. Douglas é comprometido com o "engajamento público na pesquisa acadêmica", ou seja, a produção de textos críticos, academicamente fundamentados, voltados para uma audiência não-especializada. Links para a sua atuação acadêmica pública aparecem ao longo da entrevista.*

**Palavras-chave:** Fundamentalismo. Direita cristã norte-americana. Multiculturalismo cristão. Pós-modernismo cristão.

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Christopher Douglas is one of the most prominent scholars focusing the rise of the conservative Christian Right in the American political arena and the links of this complex movement to the American culture. Prof. Douglas taught at the University of Toronto and, for five years, at Furman University in South Carolina before transferring to the University of Victoria in 2004. Prof. Douglas has been teaching American literature, particularly contemporary American fiction, religion and literature, multicultural American literature, postmodernism, and the Bible as Literature.

Prof. Douglas's primary research interests include the contemporary religious imagination in American literature. His latest book, "If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right" (DOUGLAS, 2016), shows how American writers struggled to understand and respond to the unexpected emergence of the Christian Right in the United States. Literary writers responding to such resurgence were sometimes confused by the Christian Right's strange entanglement with the contemporary paradigms of multiculturalism and postmodernism — leading to complex emergent phenomena that Douglas terms "Christian Multiculturalism" and "Christian Postmodernism". This project was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Prof. Douglas's previous book, "A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism" (DOUGLAS, 2009), demonstrated that the American theory and practice of literary multiculturalism was formed on the basis of social sciences – chiefly anthropology and sociology and their rival notions of culture – and twentieth century authors in the African American, Asian American, Native American, and Mexican American literary traditions. Dr. Douglas received for this project a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship and a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Prof. Douglas current research, also supported by a SSHRC award, examines contemporary American fiction's concern with theodicy and the strange re-emergence of polytheistic ideas. Bringing together novels by conservative evangelical Christians, such as "Left Behind, This Present Darkness", and "The Shack", and novels by serious, 'literary' authors, Prof. Douglas uses contemporary historical-critical Bible scholarship to track the historical developments of theologies that continue to trouble human experience millennia later.

In the interview below, Dr. Douglas talks about his research and the idea behind his book "If God Meant to Interfere" (2016); the explanatory concepts of Christian Multiculturalism and Christian Postmodernism; the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, and alternative facts among Christian fundamentalists; the American political context; he also offers interesting comments on the current Brazilian situation. His critical insights provide interesting and new perspectives that give fresh vitality to the debates about Christian fundamentalism. Douglas is committed to "public scholarship," that is, research-informed, public-facing critical writing for non-academic audiences. Links to his public scholarship are noticeable throughout the interview.

Lucas Lopes: The idea that motivated your writing of the book "[If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right](#)" (2016) – that is, tracing the way American literature reacted to the conservative Christian resurgence – is very innovative and brings together with the same dexterity two different fields (religion studies and literary criticism). How have you arrived at this interesting idea?

Christopher Douglas: I'd been writing a book on multicultural American literature (A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism, 2009), and I'd noticed the way that in some novels, religious identity was being discussed in ways that seemed reminiscent of cultural identity claims. Novels like "The Poisonwood Bible" (KINGSOLVER, 1998)<sup>3</sup> and "Gilead" (ROBINSON, 2004) and "The Plot Against America"

(ROTH, 2005) seemed to be translating – or confusing – religion issues into questions of culture. So I began thinking about what the differences were between religion and culture, or whether religion was a particular kind of cultural tradition, and what it meant to mix such vocabularies.

And as an Americanist working in the contemporary period, I also continued to be struck by the way American writers seemed to not be able to grasp the seismic change in American religion that was happening before their eyes. In my book I talk about Don DeLillo, a great writer, but one who seemed at times to be ‘stuck’ in the secularization narrative, locating religious energy only in the past, or in marginal, esoteric, non-Western, weak, non-doctrinal formations. Meanwhile, as the 1980s and 1990s went on, it should have been becoming obvious to serious observers that the United States was undergoing one of its periodic awakenings of evangelical Christian energy and political purpose. So I began thinking about what intellectual conditions in American literature (and among us in critical literary studies!) would be preventing writers and critics from seeing what was happening before our eyes.

In my book I summarize the Christian Right in these terms: “Conservative Christians reshaped the political and moral landscape of the nation in recent decades by making universal claims within the culture wars, issues like gender roles and sexuality, the Cold War and the War on Terror, science and health education, race and immigration, economic policy and the welfare state, and indeed the meaning of America and America in the world. Conservative Christians in general believed that communism, pornography, abortion, premarital sex, evolution, homosexual acts and homosexual marriage, and anthropogenic climate change were wrong or untrue. Conversely, they argued that school prayer, traditional gender roles, creationism, abstinence-only sex education, and the untold Christian history of the nation were morally right and factually correct. Their universalism entailed the belief that people who believed in evolution or who had abortions or engaged in homosexual sex were not just culturally different, but were in error and were morally wrong. To anticipate, by paraphrase, a character in Barbara Kingsolver’s “The Poisonwood Bible” to whom I will return, what made conservative Christians’ universalism universal was their willingness to assume that what was right or wrong for them was also right or wrong for other Americans – and then to push for legislation and judicial review that would make what they thought was right and true, right and true for all”.

Lucas Lopes: While reading “If God Meant to Interfere” I was taken aback by the notions of Christian Multiculturalism and Christian Postmodernism, both central to your argument. It is, as you mentioned in the book on different occasions, very common to consider multiculturalism and postmodernism as diametrically opposed to Christianity. In this regard, one of the most important contributions of your book is the dismantling of these oppositions. Could you explain those two concepts and tell us a little more about those concepts’ theoretical implications? Were they a result of your reading American literature or were they generated first in the domain of religion studies discussions?

Christopher Douglas: Yes, this is one of the central arguments of my book – trying to demonstrate that although we might simply assume that conservative American Christianity must intrinsically be opposed to progressive multiculturalism and postmodernism, a more complex relationship of confluence and entanglement emerged to produce what I call “Christian Multiculturalism” and “Christian Postmodernism.” What I noticed is that contemporary Christian literature frequently featured the theme of assimilation, in which children of Christian families were becoming secularized as they grew up, losing their faith to mainstream culture. This figuring of assimilation as the loss of one’s true familial culture happens in both serious Christian fiction – it’s one of the key plots in Marilynne Robinson’s “Gilead” – and in popular evangelical fiction, such as Tim LaHaye’s famous “Left Behind” (LAHAYE; JENKINS, 2000) series. The rejection of the idea that individuals from minority cultures should assimilate into the

dominant culture was the hallmark of multicultural literature in the US, and here it was showing up in Christian literature too, as though Christians were imagining themselves as a besieged minority, losing their identity as they were being swallowed up by a larger, indifferent, secular society.

Meanwhile, I think some writers, incompletely understanding the “universalist” energy of the Christian Right, tried to oppose it by translating religious difference into a cultural difference that needed to be respected, thereby proposing a kind of multicultural answer to what looked like the Christian Right’s intolerance about difference. Books like “The Poisonwood Bible” and “The Plot Against America” tried to reframe Christian Right political goals – which aimed to make things like abortion and gay marriage illegal for everyone, not just people in their communities – as disrespect for cultural difference. But it wasn’t. A novel like “The Handmaid’s Tale” (ATWOOD, 1998) better understood this universalist ethos of the US Christian Right, which aims to legislate for everyone, including those outside its group. Its legal strategy can’t be opposed by more respect for difference; it has to be opposed through counter-claims made on universalist, human rights grounds. Doing so has been the basis of actual progressive victories – as with desegregation and reproductive rights, but also with defeating anti-miscegenation laws and allowing gay marriage.

In terms of “Christian Postmodernism,” my argument is not that evangelical Christians started reading postmodern literary theory and putting it into practice. The Christian Right’s attitude vis-à-vis modern knowledge might be described pretty well as “anti-modern” before it was postmodern, refusing to recognize the expertise of science and academic authority. This anti-modernism is what initially triggered the beginning of Christian fundamentalism at the start of the twentieth century, with its rejection of the science of evolution and the scholarship about the authoring, editing, and historical context of the Bible (the so-called “higher criticism”). But this anti-modernism characterizes the present as well, where established scientific consensus about subjects like climate change and the efficacy of sex education are frequently rejected.

What distinguishes this fundamentalist anti-modernism from [what I call “Christian Postmodernism”](#) is the latter’s construction of institutions of counter-expertise to promulgate more theologically agreeable “alternative facts”. What I mean by this is the way that conservative Christians created a network of colleges and universities, publishers and bookstores, newspapers and magazines, radio and then television ministries, museums, websites, and campus ministries, that worked together as a set of institutions that resisted elite, secular expert knowledge. Recognizing the power of expertise’s infrastructure, Christian fundamentalists created this counter-infrastructure to cultivate and curate its alternative forms of knowledge. Though I doubt these conservative Christians were reading postmodern theory, they arrived at an understanding of modern knowledge that looks somewhat like that of Jean-François Lyotard’s in “The Postmodern Condition” (LYOTARD, 1984): one in which the pragmatic questions of audiences and utterances were the key, rather than supposed truth claims grounded in an empirical reality. What they intuited, in other words, is that scientific discourse looks to outsiders like a rhetorical practice with identifiable conventions that might be mimicked. Although political propaganda has always been with us, I believe that this mimicry of expertise exercised by a rival network of institutions [made conservative Christians more vulnerable](#) to the “fake news” and “alternative facts” that characterize the Trump presidency. It wasn’t just academic expertise that came under fire in Christian Postmodernism – it was professional journalism as well, with its traditions of fact checking, neutral reportage, and error correction.

Lucas Lopes: Your work describes how the evangelical fundamentalist movement made its way into politics, culminating in the rise of the Christian Right in the US. This movement became so influential in the political arena that it seems extremely difficult to defeat it, even if we turn to science or to the

tools of postmodernism. As you show very clearly, postmodernist logic was incorporated by conservative Christians to delegitimize science. In this framework, I wonder how to better resist the resurgence. Could you comment on it? I obviously understand there is no easy solution to this configuration of the American public debate...

Christopher Douglas: My claim is not so much that conservative Christians began reading postmodern theory. There is [some evidence](#) that Christian academics realized the potential of academic postmodernism, but not Christian Right leaders and thinkers. My claim rather is that through an institutional mimicry of expert knowledge, conservative Christians sought to 'level the playing field', a playing field in which there could be no neutral knowledge and in which everyone had to make a kind of faith decision based on their subject position about what to believe (The [Creation Museum](#) is the best example of this postmodern mimicry, where the Biblical account of creation is offered in the scientific form of a museum's expert, authoritative curation of dioramas and information). In those circumstances, why not choose the more theologically amenable answer, since they all appear equally valid or truthful?

How to reverse or combat this I am not at all sure. The US is undergoing a linked epistemological and constitutional crisis. A good portion of Republican voters, many of whom are conservative Christians, are now getting most of their information from propaganda outlets such as Fox News, Sinclair News, Breitbart, or even more frightening outlets like Alex Jones' Infowars and other talk radio or Internet sites. Social media is compounding the problem, as older viewers especially tend to share dubious stories that happen to affirm their political views with their circle of friends, almost all of whom happen to share those exact same views. We're in an era of [asymmetrical, group-based epistemology](#). This is a huge problem in the United States – its citizens are not living in a shared public reality.

Humpty Dumpty is broken and I'm not at all sure how he might be put back together again. Americans might start by pleading with their grandparents to take a break from Fox News for a month and read a local newspaper (if one still exists!) instead. Does Brazil have an equivalently fractured media landscape and an analogue to Fox News?

Lucas Lopes: I'd definitely say that Globo Network does this job in the Brazilian media scenario. And there is a cruel component here: while the middle-class can afford pay-TV, which is bad but still offers one or other good options, working-class families are held captive to a few horrible options of free TV channels – which overall only explore sensationalist content or provide very biased stories. It's worth pointing out that this situation has to do with the lack of investment in public media, the monopoly of large communication corporations, and the shortage of cultural activities for the working-class families. In this connection, do you think counter-hegemonic media, despite our era of asymmetrical epistemology, has any potential to counterbalance mainstream media?

Christopher Douglas: I do think public broadcasting has a role to play in offering free, professional journalism that covers important stories in an as much as possible objective way – television stations like the Public Broadcasting Service in the US or the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Canada. The problem is that they need public funding. American conservatives tend to hate the PBS, both because of their preference for market-based alternatives, but also because neutral reporting is often considered biased against them. Conservatives have been "working the ref" for over three decades, complaining that the "liberal media" is intrinsically biased against them. This has been an extremely successful strategy, because it teaches their base to suspect professional journalism, but also because it makes mainstream journalists bend over backwards to try to be "balanced" in their coverage and critique. This is how we got the obsession over "Hilary's e-mails" in the 2016 election.

Lucas Lopes: Your book shows how the Republican Party's alignment with the Christian Right, on one side, and the Democratic Party's embrace of liberal politics, on the other side, created a "God gap" in American politics. You also describe how the Tea Party is dominated by conservative Christians. Within this framework, it is easy to understand what the immediate political gain is for the Republican Party, but on the long-term it seems that Republicans have more to lose than to gain: after all, the desire to bring more God into government is even more intense than the less government guidance, as you have shown. Could the Republican Party have implemented the wrong strategy? It seems that in the long run it will bend more and more to a conservative religious agenda, maybe even in prejudice of their economic ideas... or maybe I am too naïve to believe the Republican Party was at any time "republican".

Christopher Douglas: Commentators have been predicting for a long time that demographics will doom the Republicans. Perhaps. I think this is why there is a sense of urgency among Republican politicians to 'seal in' their victory before their fortunes turn by stacking the courts with very conservative justices. Even if Congress and the Presidency turn Democratic, a conservative judicial system will check progressive legislative ambitions for a generation or more. Beyond the courts, Republicans currently enjoy a constitutional advantage in the way that Senate seats and Electoral College votes are apportioned, which tend to give disproportionate power to less populated states. That's why Republicans have won the Presidency in three out of the last five elections, despite winning the popular vote in only one of them.

I would gently suggest that today's Republican Party doesn't really have any "economic ideas" other than an Ayn Rand's vision of tax cuts tilted in favor of the rich and reducing the role of government to the maintenance of a standing army. Many conservative Christians are happy with this plan, because it teaches us the lesson that we can rely only on God, not government. Overall, though, conservative economic policies like tax cuts and deregulation are not very popular. This is why they have to be attached to xenophobic dog whistles to get more support: to make it seem like underserving brown people are getting government largesse bought by the hard-earned tax dollars of "real Americans".

Lucas Lopes: In your analysis of Thomas Pynchon's "The Crying of Lot 49" (PYNCHON, 2006), you mention that "the paranoid style produces a mode of reading in which there are no accidents or errors involving American leaders." This statement is in connection with your analysis of the Christian Postmodernism. I understand the appropriation of postmodernist logic by the Christian Right leads, in its most degenerated form, to all sorts of conspiracy theories, fake news, and alternative facts. Recently, Frank Schaeffer shared your article "[The Religious Origins of Fake News and 'Alternative Facts'](#)" in the Huffington Post website, in which you argue that alternative facts, and consequently fake news, have roots in Christian fundamentalism's rejection of expert knowledge. Could you please comment on the way the Christian Right is associated with conspiracy theories, fake news, and alternative facts?

Christopher Douglas: I think the fundamentalist anti-modern rejection of expert academic knowledge has nurtured several generations of conservative Christians to be deeply hostile to what are supposed to be "neutral" secular sources of knowledge and facts emerging from universities and professional news outlets. When the Cambridge Institute on Religion & International Studies commissioned me to produce a report on how fake news and religion seemed to be intersecting in Western democratic elections in 2016 and 2017, I found that conservatives seemed to have more fake news targeted at them, and that fake news targeting conservatives seemed to have religious themes more often than fake news targeting liberals. [I hypothesized in the report](#), which expanded on the article in the Huffington Post, that this was because Christian fundamentalists had cognitively trained their members for decades to suspect mainstream knowledge and to seek answers in alternative, more theologically and politically amenable sources of information.

In terms of conspiracy theory, in the book, I drew heavily on Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay "[The Paranoid Style in American Politics](#)" (HOFSTADTER, 2008). It's a brilliant essay that very much speaks to our condition even more than 50 years later. One of Hofstadter's statement indicates that the "higher paranoid scholarship" is "nothing if not coherent – in fact, the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities. It is, if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic." I think this is one of the reasons that paranoia fascinated Thomas Pynchon: it shares with religious intuition the ego's sense that there is a hidden design behind the order of things, an organized intentionality that has me in mind, and that everything is unfolding according to a divine or diabolical plan. But while conspiracy theories have been around for a long time, the internet and social media have made sharing them with like-minded individuals much, much easier. Now you can find all kinds of paranoid conspiracy theories that seem to explain in simple terms complex human histories, emotions, and experiences. Sites like 4chan and 8chan are helping to radicalize white terrorists through conspiracy theories, with online misogyny frequently serving as a kind of 'gateway drug' to white supremacy. Sometimes the conspiracy theorizing can go so far that it comes right around to a kind of Panglossian paranoia in which we live in the best of all possible worlds. This has happened with the conspiracy theory known as QAnon, which foresees – any day now – the imminent dismantling of the Deep State and arrest and shipment to Guantanamo Bay of various Democratic leaders and Hollywood actors, all orchestrated through the masterful machinations of President Trump.

Lucas Lopes: In "If God Meant to Interfere", you argue that "the political apex of the resurgence (so far) was the administration of President George W. Bush (2001–2009); the election and then reelection of President Barack Obama appears to have thrown the resurgence off-balance". Now, after the election of Donald Trump, how do you see the current resurgence balance? Has the conservative Christian resurgence reached a new phase in Trump's administration?

Christopher Douglas: I think so. The white evangelical vote for Donald Trump was larger than it was for the born-again George W. Bush. It is more openly authoritarian, scornful of democracy and compromise, and more outwardly xenophobic and racist. It is hard to disentangle Trump from the Christian Right at this point. White evangelicals have tended to stick with him in terms of support. Public Christians of faith like Sarah Sanders, his recently resigned Press Secretary, [are among the most cynical and deceitful members](#) of his staff. Beside his evangelical Vice President and several cabinet members such as Betsy DeVos and Mike Pompeo, Christian Right leaders like Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell Jr. continue very much to back Trump. So it's difficult to disentangle Trump's antidemocratic authoritarianism, corruption, moral nihilism, and racism from the implicit and sometimes explicit support of the conservative white evangelicals who remain his most stalwart voters.

This is one reason that it is illuminating to consider speculative fiction as a kind of 'map' for what we're going through. Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" is probably the most famous novel written in response to the early rise of the Christian Right. As I describe in my book, she had done her homework in noting that the Christian Right was the descendent, in terms of theology and particular Protestant denominations, of Christian Segregationism, and Christian Slavery before that. In her novel she has the new theocratic dystopia of Gilead reflect this racial history by exiling African Americans to different homelands, creating a white supremacist ethno-state. That was an insightful critique of the Christian Right's racial history and theological heritage. And it's one of the reasons [I thought that Hulu's decision to forgo this part of the novel's plot](#) when adapting it for their TV series was problematic, if understandable. At the very moment when it would have been valuable to recall this racialized history of the Christian Right – when it had become more prominent during the Trump presidency – the TV series abandoned this piece of Atwood's critique.

Lucas Lopes: As we get near a new American presidential election, how do you see the prospects for the Christian Right? Do you think Donald Trump will have a significant support of the conservative Christian resurgence in the next campaign?

Christopher Douglas: All indicators are that his support among white evangelicals – and to a lesser extent, white Catholics – remains strong. Trump realizes they are his core constituency, and he is rewarding them with the conservative judges they seek as a way of overturning the nation's abortion (and maybe gay marriage) laws. I think most Republican politicians see Trump's white evangelical base as sticking by him, which is why, beside their own moral nihilism and cynical authoritarian tendencies, almost none of them challenge his many instances of corruption, deception, cruelty, racism and incompetence, beyond the occasional furrowed eyebrow and gentle shake of the head. To the extent some of them might have a principle beyond bare power, they are scared of being challenged in the Republican primaries if they raise their voice in protest, because white evangelicals reliably vote in the Republican primaries and hold outsized influence in them.

This problem has become apparent with impeachment. The political party that impeached President Bill Clinton for lying about consensual sex will not challenge Trump on his many lies and instances of corruption and self-dealing. It's pointless to try to condemn this as moral hypocrisy, because, as I've written elsewhere, paraphrasing Bruno Latour, [the critique of hypocrisy has run out of steam](#). And again, it's why using literature as a map is illuminating for showing us as much where we are not as where we are. Like Atwood's novel, Philip Roth's "The Plot Against America" was understood by critics to be written in response to the political rise of the Christian Right – in this case, the George W. Bush presidency. It's an excellent piece of speculative fiction on the coming of Christian fascism to America, and remains relevant for our current time. But when the authoritarian crisis comes to a climax, the novel resolves it in a quite unbelievably bi-partisan and fast impeachment trial of the Acting President. It's no longer possible to imagine that eventuality in the current American situation, because a segment of the population, locked in its own epistemological bubble, trained in churches and institutions to be skeptical of professional journalism and academic expertise, is religiously committed to pursuing Christian authoritarian politics no matter the cost, and will punish any Republican politician who votes to investigate, impeach or remove the President. This is why ["The Plot Against America" is a map not of our moment](#) but of another time, another political order. By showing us what should be, it shows how bad the American crisis really is.

Lucas Lopes: Since you mentioned some details about your reading of "The Handmaid's Tale" and "The Plot Against America", I would like to ask you about the literary analysis undertaken in "If God Meant to Interfere". You read the novels paying attention to a dialectic between the logic of their internal elements and the external context which they refer to or that encompasses the time of their production. What is striking is that this method entails powerful arguments based on the internal inconsistencies of the novels or the lapses between the internal logic and the external context. This is reinforced by your interesting choice of concentrating on fiction that addresses the conservative Christian resurgence's public presence and political issues in a more indirect or evasive way, and your decision to mix canonical and popular novels. Could you talk a little bit about your methodological selection and this intriguing dialectics that entices a very solid interpretation by making visible the non-evident through a close look at contradictions and lapses?

Christopher Douglas: The method of the book, and I would say my current research project in general, is historicist and partakes of the "hermeneutics of suspicion". I make the argument that at times literary writers have misapprehended or incompletely understood their historical moment and the religious transformation that was happening around them. Some readers will not be happy with this approach



or argument, because it appears that I am saying that authors are “wrong”. That is a fair complaint. I am saying that authors, like other human beings, including us literary critics, can misunderstand a phenomenon, and incompletely grasp the historical moment or the object of political critique. I am arguing that when American writers have written religiously-interested literature in the last 40 years, one of the most important contexts was the political activation of conservative white evangelicals, as they sought and achieved political power.

For generally liberal/secular/progressive writers working within the secularization thesis, it was sometimes difficult to really or fully comprehend just what was going on. Sometimes, authors obliquely addressed the Christian Right’s ascent. I think you can understand Marilynne Robinson’s “Gilead” trilogy (including “Home” and “Lila”) as a [wishful liberal Christian nostalgia for a different kind of public Christianity](#) than the politically muscular conservative Christians who became influential. I am sympathetic to her project. I argue that she indirectly, somewhat evasively, is addressing the Christian Right’s power in her most famous novel, “Gilead”. But I am also arguing that if we see clearly the religious context of the novel’s composition, its silence about the racialized history of the Christian Right is even more troublesome. I am not trying to perform “gotcha” criticism on Robinson or on other authors by pointing to this frequently invisible or subterranean context. I am trying to historically contextualize their work by illuminating the conditions in which they write.

A good example is a pair of novels that – not coincidentally – were published in 1985. One is a piece of serious literary fiction, Cormac McCarthy’s “Blood Meridian” (McCARTHY, 1992), and the other a popular science fiction novel, “Contact” (SAGAN, 1985), by astronomer and science popularizer Carl Sagan. Intriguingly, the thematic development of both novels seems to turn on the question of the religious implications of the science of evolution and the question of whether our universe has been – to use a contemporary phrase – intelligently designed. I argue in the book, and more simply in a couple of public scholarship pieces, that this is not a coincidence because Sagan and McCarthy were intensely interested in questions of science and religion as they were writing their novels in the early 1980s, when the most pressing, public debate about science and religion was the question of whether schools should teach “creation science” alongside evolution in public school Biology classrooms. Thus, in “Contact”, the [protagonist actually debates a fundamentalist in a Creation Science museum](#), of all places, and in “Blood Meridian”, what we might call the demonic antagonist seems to be [on the cutting edge of biological, zoological, and geological sciences](#) c.1850, digging up fossils and giving lectures on geology. Are these novels ‘really’ about the legal cases of “creation science” working their way through the American court system in the 1980s? Have I illuminated the ‘secret’ meaning of the novels? No and no. But I am arguing that if you want to understand the somewhat strange incorporation of evolution into these two novels, they have to be understood in reference to the theological concerns and anxieties that were being publically aired while the novels were being composed.

Lucas Lopes: Although you make clear that the conservative Christian resurgence is a specific American phenomenon, we have witnessed an increasing participation of conservative evangelicals in the Brazilian political arena since at least the 1980s, namely under the Brazilian echoes of “Moral Majority”. If we consider that the Brazilian evangelical denominations are generally the result of missionary work of American fundamentalist churches, can we infer that the conservative Christian resurgence has extended its tentacles to other domains beyond the American context?

Christopher Douglas: Perhaps, but I won’t pretend to know enough about Brazilian politics to say... really anything. Part of what made the American Christian Right successful is that it could speak back to a powerful national mythology and origin story in the Puritan settlers who were escaping the Old World of Europe in pursuit of religious freedom. As with the Christian Right’s definitions of religious freedom

now, what this meant in practice, of course, was freedom for them but domination and disciplining of heretics and Indigenous peoples with different religious and spiritual ideas and practices. So there was already in America a powerful mythology of Christian origins that the Christian Right was able to activate and speak to when it began organizing in the 1970s and 1980s. Attached to this mythology was an equally powerful fantasy of white supremacy: the supposed superiority of Americans of European descent, and their God-given right to dominate colonized peoples. This white supremacy is part of the reason the United States, I believe, has never properly come to terms with its national sins of African slavery and Indigenous genocides. These things can be acknowledged and discussed only insofar as they don't displace white innocence and white power; there has never been a process of national reconciliation and truth recognition of the kind South Africa and Germany undertook. And these aspects of the American national fantasy – Christian origins, white supremacy – enabled and invigorated the political and social rise to power of white evangelicals in the last half century.

So, my question for you would be, if you were trying to think about the similarities and differences between the US and Brazilian politically-muscular conservative evangelical Christianity, how might differences in the national mythology of Christian origins and white supremacy play out *vis-à-vis* Brazil's different historical and mythological context?

Lucas Lopes: Well, I would say that Brazilian national mythology is much more Catholic than evangelical, or at least it used to be for, since the 1960s, Pentecostal churches have spread and grown exponentially, mainly among working-class people. More than the appeal to an origin story, it seems the emphasis is on rescuing the country for God, with the implicit claim that Brazil should have always been a country devoted to God – maybe here there is a virtual origin story of what should have been. Notwithstanding, it seems the American Christian Right is focused on the rescue of a “paradise lost” while the Brazilian Christian Right is engaged in a crusade to free Brazil of its “sins” and finally inaugurate it as a Christian nation. Obviously, the “sins” in this logic are the African religions, abortion, gender roles and sexuality, “cultural Marxism”, and so on. Also, there is an emphasis on triumphalism theology, spiritual warfare, and prosperity. Isn't it funny how, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter how factual or historically based it is, an origin story will appear – sometimes as a recovery, sometimes as a prospect? It is as if there is always a need for a promise to be collectively accomplished. Maybe this is also a reflex of the social gap resulting from the dismantling of collective engagement in the public and political domains in advanced capitalism. What are your thoughts about this issue?

Christopher Douglas: What you say makes a lot of sense. In America, the creation of a Christian nation is imagined both as recovery and as political prospect, which is why conservative white evangelicals continue to see the President as a kind of defender of their identity.

Lucas Lopes: The last Brazilian election was defined by the crucial participation of Brazilian evangelical fundamentalist churches. It counted with an incredible influx of fake news, alternative facts, communist paranoia, and an overtly support of evangelical churches to right-wing candidates, especially the current president. Have you followed the last Brazilian election? Do you think this decisive engagement of fundamentalists in the Brazilian election is a reflex of the American conservative Christian resurgence? Bearing in mind the current resurgence of all sorts of extremist right-wing movements in the world, would you say the terrain is more than ever favorable to an even greater engagement of the Christian Right in the political arena worldwide?

Christopher Douglas: My hypothesis is that families and communities nurtured in fundamentalist Christian institutions learn a hostility to professional, mainstream journalism and to academic, expert

consensus, and that this is what makes them more vulnerable to fake news and alternative facts. In an article for “The Review of Faith & International Affairs”, I hypothesized that this is one reason why there seems to have been less circulation and reception of fake news in the 2017 French, German, British, and Dutch elections than in the 2016 US election – though there are other plausible explanations as well. So, to the extent that Brazilian evangelicals have constructed a similar set of institutions of counter-expertise – or perhaps share in the American ones for reasons of historical and ongoing missionary influence – it wouldn’t surprise me to learn that Brazilian evangelicals were more vulnerable to the circulation of fake news.

It’s beyond my expertise to say how large a role this might play when compared to other factors that surely strengthen religious conservatives’ appeals to voter fears: economic recession, immigration, the widening gap between the ultra-wealthy and everyone else and consequent decline in social mobility, the climate change crisis that is technologically fixable but seems intransigent politically, religious radicalism elsewhere, fast changing social mores about sexuality and gender, and so on.

Lucas Lopes: Finally and still talking about Brazilian politics, I was wondering about a significant difference in the campaign slogan employed by Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro during their relevant election campaigns. Despite Trump’s alignment to the Christian Right, his slogan “Make America Great Again” focuses on a nationalist resentment and disguises its religious support. On the other hand, Bolsonaro’s slogan is overtly religious: “Brazil above everything, God above everyone” (“*Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos*”). If we assume that the Brazilian current political context inherited the basic traits of the American conservative Christian resurgence, do you think we can affirm that fundamentalist Christian participation in politics has now become clearer than ever? I mean, the Brazilian slogan is openly religious; there is no effort to disguise its religious inclination...

Christopher Douglas: I continue my plea that I’m not an expert on Brazilian politics. But I will observe that to get yourself baptized in the Jordan River, with all the attendant pro-Israel symbolism that suggests, is to be deeply conversant with and responsive to the evangelical imagination. Brazil’s Catholic church has been losing membership, as has been true of white Catholics in the US for decades, and evangelicals’ share of Brazil’s population is measured at 22% of the population, not far from 25.4% measured in the U.S. in 2014 (this latter number includes African American and Hispanic evangelicals). But unlike Brazil, where the evangelical population may still be growing, white American evangelicals are experiencing a population decline, possibly due to their political excesses, as some in the younger generations decline to identify as such or disagree with its nativism or its policies on economic and LGBTQ+ issues.

Is it possible (I don’t know) that evangelicals in Brazil have not hardened into a particular form of culture warfare that make them as a block unwilling to negotiate and compromise, as has happened to their brothers and sisters in the United States? Not all evangelicals are conservative, remember: in the US, about one fifth of white evangelicals did not vote for Trump, and this doesn’t count African American or Hispanic Protestants, who share much of the same theology as white evangelicals but often vote very differently. So, political compromises based on specific policies may be more possible in Brazil if its situation has not yet become asymmetrically polarized, as it is in the US today. Brazilian evangelicals don’t like abortion? Okay, well what about joining with progressive evangelicals and Catholics to fund better prenatal care, or children’s health care, or free or subsidized childcare policies? These are actual policies that would reduce the incidence of abortions because they would make it easier and more appealing for women to bear their pregnancies to term. Perhaps a similar coalition might be in a position to fund women’s access to free Long Acting Reversible Contraceptives (LARCs), which are known to decrease unwanted pregnancies, and hence abortions.

In the Trump presidency, malevolence has been tempered by incompetence. What keeps me up at night is wondering what would happen if you had somebody competent in this kind of position of authority and power – someone who could think ahead, form coherent strategies to execute his will, absorb information and advice, and so on, but who still had this populist/nativist appeal and an authoritarian will to power and disregard for democratic and civil institutions. In the U.S., and elsewhere in the democratic world, our immune systems that have helped us resist these forms of populist authoritarianism seem weakened. I wish I could end on a more hopeful note.

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