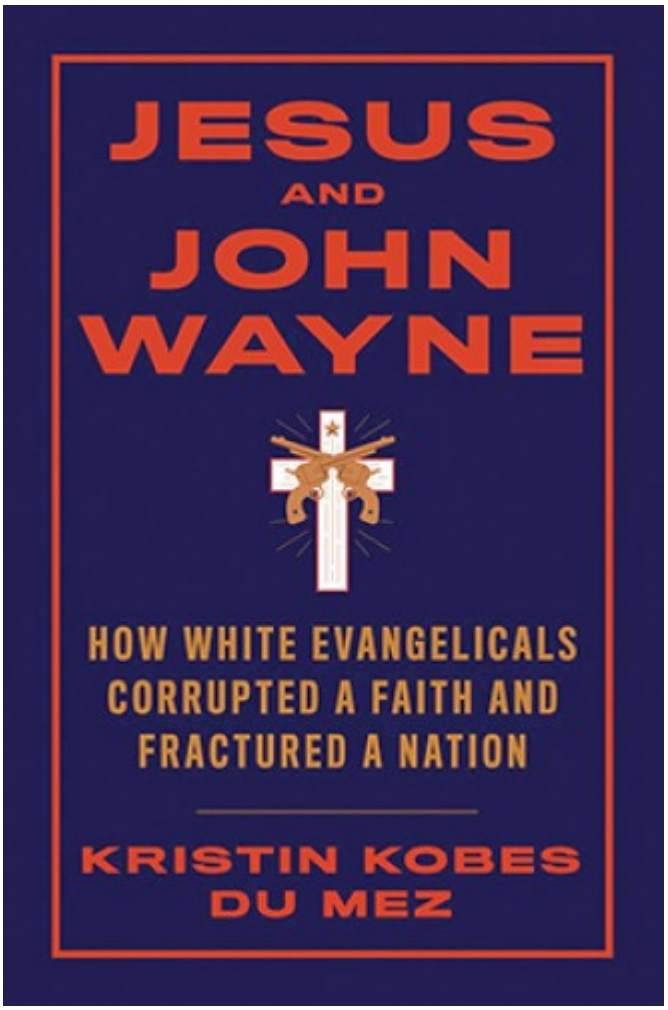
Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s history of the manly godly man

How American evangelicalism baptized male aggression

by Phil Christman in the August 12, 2020 issue

In Review



Jesus and John Wayne

How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation

By Kristin Kobes Du Mez
Liveright

Kristin Kobes Du Mez's book—an intellectual history of the idea of masculinity as theorized and preached by white American evangelical Christians—begins with an incident you may vaguely remember. There was a moment during a 2016 campaign rally when Donald Trump bragged—to his supporters—that his supporters were so stupidly loyal that he could "stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone" without losing their allegiance.

While many people remember these words, few remember where Trump spoke them: in an auditorium at a Calvinist school in Iowa. The setting was jarringly familiar to Du Mez as she watched the speech:

> Every year as a child I'd attended Easter sunrise services in that auditorium, and as a college student I faithfully attended chapel services in that same space. Standing on the stage where Trump now stood, I had led prayers, performed in Christian "praise teams," and, during choir rehearsal, flirted with the man who would become my husband. We married in a church just down the road. . . . But as I watched those in the overflow crowd waving signs, laughing at insults, and shouting back in affirmation, I wondered who these people were. I didn't recognize them.

This personal aside sets up *Jesus and John Wayne* as something more than a book of cultural history. Du Mez is facing a problem that besets many ex-evangelicals and former fundamentalists these days: How did the people who taught us to love Jesus end up braying and hooting for this reality television star? Trump hates losers; Jesus broke metaphysics in order to become one.

How did a movement that, in the 19th century, was synonymous with Methodist feminists and circuit-riding antislavery activists come to be identified with a view of men, America, and history best described as *Confederate*? How did so many evangelical Christians come not only to tolerate but to like the kind of masculinity that Trump performs? No single book can answer these questions, but Du Mez fills a lot of gaps in the story.

She begins in the early 20th century, when both liberal and conservative Protestants offered visions of "muscular Christianity." The liberals lost confidence in this idea

after the pointless carnage of World War I, which many of them had foolishly supported and which one of them—Woodrow Wilson—had led us into. The war fever and nationalism that gripped early 20th-century liberal Protestants on both sides of the Atlantic may have been a sort of object lesson. If so, it's a lesson that conservatives spent the next century failing to heed.

Fundamentalists, marginalized as they were, saw the utility of any ideology that licensed them to be aggressive and combative, even as they sought to organize and rebrand. One of the ways they rebranded was by calling themselves "evangelicals," as when several of them formed the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942. Billy Graham symbolizes this fusion, exemplifying its finest and worst traits. One moment you find him integrating his crusades like a 19th-century Oberlin visionary; the next moment he's maligning Jews on the Nixon White House tapes.

This fused evangelicalism was born into a newly ascendant empire. To win, it had to make room for militarism and nationalism. The empire needed Christian boys for cannon fodder, so aggression itself was redefined as Christian.

Du Mez profiles the thinkers and activists who authored this redefinition. Activists like Phyllis Schlafly, Tim and Beverly LaHaye, and James Dobson promoted a complementarian view of women and men. Meanwhile, Sunbelt segregationists, Vietnam War enthusiasts, and televangelists were encouraging Christian men to cut their hair and spank their children.

Some readers will feel that the texture and diversity of American evangelical experience aren't represented in the story Du Mez is telling, and they aren't wrong. But writing about the many ways of being evangelical simply isn't her project. This is a book about people who sound like caricatures because, for the sake of influence or fame, they became caricatures.

John Wayne is one such figure, and I was surprised to learn how early and persistent his influence on evangelicals proved to be. I tend to think of 1940s fundamentalists as rejecting popular culture, but this hard-drinking, unchurched movie star who avoided military service during World War II shows up repeatedly in the evangelical writers that Du Mez quotes. Indeed, the book convinced me—an ex-fundie who had to beg his parents for permission to listen to rock music—that the early fundamentalists had it right: Christians should steer clear of pop culture. At least, fundamentalists should steer clear of it. They pick the wrong stuff, and they learn

the wrong lessons from it.

By the last chapters of Du Mez's book, fundamentalist masculinity gurus are American and mainstream to the point of syncretism, or well past it. They kiss dating good-bye, are wild at heart, and have smokin' hot wives. They sing hymns to their own testicles and run mixed martial arts–based outreach ministries. Several of them follow the abstinence crusader Elisabeth Elliot into a heretical Christology that eternally subordinates the second person of the Trinity to the first—even Jesus needs a commanding officer. Many of them are openly grifters. To a person, they support the Iraq War, one of the most despicable moments in America's history.

All of this makes for grim and sometimes grueling reading, though Du Mez lightens the gloom with the occasional zinger. So, for example, we learn about Lieutenant General William Boykin. Remember the photos of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, tied up, naked, and sexually humiliated? Those came to us courtesy of Boykin, who ordered officials at the Guantanamo Bay prison complex to "gitmoize" Saddam Hussein's old torture palace. Now Boykin works for the Family Research Council.

One chapter near the end of the book, "Evangelical Mulligans," gives a detailed accounting of all the men covered in earlier chapters who turned out to be wife beaters, rapists, molesters, or accomplices. Bill Gothard, Jim Bakker, Roy Moore, C. J. Mahaney, Doug Phillips, Doug Wilson, Bill Hybels: it's a litany of failure. The men who told us that we had to reclaim our masculinity lest our wives and daughters fall to the rampaging Hun/sneaky Communist/uppity black man/recruiting homosexual/Muslim jihadist—a bunch of them were abusing their own wives or daughters. As with the issue of cultural engagement, it's a fundamentalist failure that invites a fundamentalist reading. I kept thinking as I read this chapter, "Christian men, join with me, we have an enemy to kill!"

Du Mez makes it clear that the real enemy is the Christian man, at least when he is defined in such terms as these.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Manly godly men."