

Book review: 'Christian Nation' by Frederic C. Rich

Posted: Thu, 21st Jul 2016 by [Alastair Lichten](#)

Alastair Lichten explores the themes of identity, resilience and redemption in Frederic C. Rich's counterfactual dystopian novel and its defence of secular democracy.

Rich's [debut novel](#) depicts America's evolution into a theocratic state following the political and economic turmoil of a McCain-Palin administration. In a counterfactual 2009 Sarah Palin ascends to the presidency following the unexpected heart attack of the United States' 44th president. Rich plots an all too believable 16 year alternative history from bitter division to Dominionist insurgency, from succession to civil war, and from theocratic victory to an uncertain future. The main characters are Greg, a corporate lawyer, his banking partner Emilie, and their friend new age businessman turned activist and founder of Theocracy Watch, Sanjay.

They did what they said they would

"Where did this come from? I've never heard of such a thing. I mean, why didn't someone do something?"

- Emilie

"This very same law was introduced into Congress in both 2004 and 2005. The 2004 national platform of the Republican Party pledged support for it. It is nothing new."

-Sanjay

The book's premise immediately draws comparison to the [persecution fantasy genre](#) of contemporary American evangelical fiction, and in particular the dystopian subgenre that imagines the United States falling victim to totalitarian forces (gays, liberals, feminists or atheists take your pick, as long as you are a straight, white, Christian male the bookstores of America's mega churches can provide the [persecution porn](#)).

However, those looking for such simple sectarian/partisan politics in *Christian Nation* will be disappointed. Rich does not depict Republicans/Christians as evil or Democrats/atheists as the white knights of secular democracy.

The book's opening section "they did what they said they would" (perhaps mindful of the potential for such a charge) puts great effort into documenting real-life theocratic aspirations of different fringe (and [not so fringe](#)) groups on the American Christian right and weaving them into the story, such that we can imagine how such religio-politics might prosper given the correct circumstances. It explores the role of Dominionist theology and how the iron fist of theocracy might don or discard the velvet glove of ecumenicalism. As a lawyer, Rich considers the legal strategies that have and might be deployed to such ends.

Resilience

Christian Nation's strength lies not in conjuring nefarious alternative structures but in exploring weaknesses in the structure of politics, economics and society, and how these might be exploited.

Christian Nation depicts a world devoid of resilience, a materialistic, individualistic secularised world which is ill-suited to confronting natural crises such as global warming or man-made crises with explicitly religious motivations

However in making his protagonist a Wall Street lawyer from a traditional Christian background, and allowing a diverse range of religious figures to carry the banner for pluralistic secularism, Rich is perhaps telling us that traditional institutions can be redeemed from their failures and reconnected with morality if embedded in a resilient society.

Part of Rich's (rather idealised) view appears to be that a traditional religious culture (with its focus on pastoral needs first, spiritual needs second and temporal politics a distant third) buttresses American secularism. As Turkey and Iran (to pick just two examples) have discovered, when the secularised urbanised elite become out of touch and ignore or mock religious revivalism they create anger and resentment, but when the elites try to appease such concerns they also risk undermining shared values and institutions.

"Blue state people of ordinary intelligence were not inclined to accept the really big lie – that the growth of a secular and tolerant society constituted the tyrannical suppression of Christianity. But they were inclined to accept that those folks out in Oklahoma could live how they wished, including teaching their children whatever crazy nonsense they wanted. After all – this strain of thinking went – no one has to live in Oklahoma, and if they don't like it they can leave. Not my problem."

The book explores, through the idea of New York both as a physical and conceptual location of resistance, how we can find alternative sources of resilience and how practical (rather than elitist, theoretic or dogmatic) experiences of living with diversity can strengthen the shared values of tolerance and human rights. It explores how extremes whether of materialism or identity politics can fetishize, otherize or erase diversity.

Christian Nation also depicts how different people respond to a breakdown in norms of liberal secular democracy. Parallels are drawn between Sanjay's devotion to his ideals over money or love and monastic celibacy. Emilie uses money to insulate herself. Greg assembles a coalition of the establishment's greatest legal and religious experts to fight a rear guard action to defend the constitution. While the Governor of New York knowingly walks the path to unconstitutional nullification and succession. Greg hopes the secular legal system can secure the rights of minorities, but when push comes to shove the Governor sends armed guards to secure the freedom of his gay nephew.

A product of its time?

In winning two presidential elections Barack Obama built an electoral coalition of [ascendant demographic groups](#) that many academics consider to be unassailable. Any theocratic minded presidential candidate would have to rely on a far narrower (and [declining](#)) electoral coalition. These victories allowed two youngish, secular-ish judges to enter the Supreme Court leading to the most important [pro-gay rights decision](#) since *Lawrence v. Texas* and the most important [reproductive rights decision](#) since *Roe vs. Wade* (helped by the death in office of the Court's most theocratic judge). The fear of a theocratic takeover of all three branches of government a la *Christian Nation* seems [sooo 2006](#).

However how resilient will these victories prove to be? Unless Obama or his successor can nominate another secular-ish judge then the Supreme Court will remain a Sword of Damocles

[ready to drop](#) on 50 years of civil rights. America's 45th president may appoint an unprecedented 5 Supreme Court judges. Many heterosexuals may be celebrating gay marriage equality and gentrifying pride parades, but in the wake of marriage equality many gay rights organisations in many countries are facing a sharp drop off in donations. Perversely in many states a gay America can get married on a Sunday and be fired for being gay on a Monday. The middle classes may spend £40 on a t-shirt that proclaims them as a feminist, but are less likely to find the £10 to spare for a feminist organisation. The sexist remarks of a minor celebrity are likely to receive more news time than a [sustained legislative attack](#) on women's reproductive rights across the United States.

Most people are secular-ish to some extent, but Rich shows us and others have said, "the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

In *Christian Nation* it is the theocratic right's ability to capitalise on a major terrorist incident almost as much as their ability to capitalise on economic disaster or their occupation of the White House that truly sets events into motion.

Imagine if on the eve of the 2016 election Islamist terrorists in the United States launched a major attack. Who would be more likely to benefit electorally? Clinton who can talk for 20 minutes while avoiding mentioning the word Islamist, or Trump with his clear and simplistic message of demonising all Muslims?

Like McCain, Trump has a history of being lukewarm on evangelical politics. Like McCain he used the primaries to reinvent himself as a social conservative. Like McCain he felt compelled to add a populist governor with evangelical credentials to bolster his own. And like McCain, Trump's previous flirtations with moderation and liberalism will be forgiven (by the Christian right) if he can get an anti-abortion or anti-gay rights majority onto the Supreme Court.

Gender and sexuality

As ISIS has shown, part of the appeal of theocracy and extremism for disenfranchised young men is the opportunity to [reassert masculinity](#) and this is one of the themes that emerges in *Christian Nation*.

Part of Greg's journey is to come to terms with his (platonic) love for Sanjay. When first rooming with him in college, Greg feels the need to reassert his heterosexuality with a high profile fling, something he grows out of. However when narrating the novel decades later Greg frequently follows up any scenes of intimacy with Sanjay with a reminder to the reader that Emilie exists. By symbolically entering a relationship with Sanjay (joining Theocracy Watch) Greg literally ends his relationship with Ellie. He decides to abandon the traditional American dream of material and matrimonial comfort to defend what he considers to be a deeper American ideal.

In masculine dystopian fiction (e.g. 1984) the protagonist is usually in an externalised struggle between the rational individual and a world gone mad. While feminine dystopian fiction (e.g. the Handmaid's Tale) more commonly explores the effects of the system on the protagonist's sense of self – an inner struggle. By showing Greg's involvement in both struggles, Rich is perhaps saying that such binaries can be rejected, or once again telling us that traditional ideas (in this case masculinity) can be abused by extremists but can ultimately be redeemed if re-embedded in pluralistic values.

Canaries

The event which begins the historical divergence of *Christian Nation's* timeline is the 2008 presidential election. Greg's initial reaction to the election of John McCain is of slight disappointment, but that this won't really affect him in his secure Wall Street bubble. Greg and Emilie when out of their New York bubble are shocked to find there is a large part of the country with very different values and beliefs to them and so largely dismiss this.

Sanjay on the other hand serves as the canary to the audience. As a gay man of colour and a non-Christian he is particularly sensitive to the threat of theocracy and treats it seriously. There's a reason that the secular movements tend to have an over representation of homosexuals, atheists and religious minorities – knowing you'll be the first victim of a threat tends to make it loom larger.

If Sanjay is the canary, Emilie is relegated to the unfortunate role of the (mythical) lobster blissfully unaware that the water around her is slowly boiling. Because she doesn't treat religion (or social conservatism) seriously she is constitutionally incapable of imagining that others do. From her elitist bubble she dismisses the theocratic ambitions of Dominionists as just a bunch of idiots who don't know what's best for them.

Conclusion

A key test when reviewing such a message driven work is to judge whether its value as fiction stands alone separate from the message. *Christian Nation* passes this test (and overall I would highly recommend it) but not always with flying colours.

While the book's many strengths would lead me to recommend it, its weaknesses should be acknowledged. Primarily these lie with the character of the narrator, whose perspective is unfortunately just too limited.

I imagine that *Christian Nation* would make a great film, in which we could follow Greg as a traditional main character while a [misbehaving camera](#) lingers on the background details. Rich's interests cross a huge range of environmental, political, geo-political, and social issues. His narrator unfortunately doesn't seem to have the ability to naturally draw these into the narrative and attempts to do so are at times clunky. The use of contemporary and fictional quotations and sources helps and the addition of (at least) a second narrator may have as well, but we are often left feeling that a deep background is hinted at and left unexplored.

The unreliable narrator is a lot harder to write and perhaps Rich erred by making Greg [too similar to himself](#). This limitation leaves important perspective out. The issue of race which is deeply bound up in the Christian identity politics of Dominionism is left almost completely unexplored. Dominionists along with theocrats of all stripes have always sought to control female sexuality and silence female voices which makes the complete lack of a meaningful female voice particularly problematic.

Rich appears to understand the strategies of Dominionism, but not the underlying role of identity politics. Consequently the actions of the Dominionist movement are cast in terms of theological beliefs and other motivating factors (whether ideological or politically expedient) are left unexplored. *Christian Nation* misses an opportunity to tell cautionary tale to those who think they use theocratic populism for short term goals without opening Pandora's Box.

After my first reading I remember thinking most about the theme of resilience and strongly identifying with Sanjay and his Theocracy Watch.

"What if I am wrong? Most people think I am missing or undervaluing the factors that doom the theocratic project to failure. What if they are correct? What if I have been deeply egotistical in becoming so invested in my own analysis? What if I am just another gay man afraid of a heterosexual world?"

The job of an activist or an organisation such as the National Secular Society is often that of lonely watchman. Failing to see the threats or raising false alarms both have perils. Secularism needs such organisations, if nothing else as a reserve there to mobilise if and when theocracy enters the ascendancy. Secular democracy in both the American and European tradition sought to constrain theocratic majoritarianism, but if it is to survive it can't be embedded just in institutions or legal traditions.

To quote the [author](#) of the next book on my (re)reading list:

"People vote for members of Congress. People run for Congress. People sit on PTA boards. People raise money for social causes. People stand up to Revivalists. Secularism needs people."

[Buy 'Christian Nation: A Novel' by Frederic C. Rich.](#)

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