

“He’s the Chosen One to Run America”: Inside the Cult of Trump, His Rallies Are Church and He Is the Gospel

Yusif Jones, standing in front of a long row of porta-potties, slides his plastic Trump mask over his face. “I’m him!” he exclaims. He puts up his chest in his homemade Trump shirt. It’s a short-sleeved American flag pullover, onto which he has ironed black felt letters across vertical red and white stripes: GOT TRUMP? Then he flashes the O.K. sign, a silver ring on his pinky. “I’m him, dude!”

For Trump supporters like Jones, the O.K. sign - thumb meeting index finger, three fingers splayed - is a kind of secret handshake. It began as a joke — a “hoax” meant to trick liberals into believing that the raised fingers actually represent the letters WP: *white power*. The joke worked so well that it became real. Now, in certain circles, O.K. *does* mean white power — unless you say it doesn’t. Jones, a big, vein-popping, occasionally church-going white man burdened with what he calls an “Islamic” name by his hippie mother, revels in this kind of coded message, a sense of possessing knowledge shared only by a select few. It’s Möbius strip politics, *Trumpjism’s* (ed. note: sorry, Mr Sharlet) defining oxymoron: a populist elite, **a mass movement of “free thinkers” all thinking the same thing**. They love Trump because he makes them feel like insiders even as they imagine him their outsider champion. That’s what’s drawn Jones here, to the CenturyLink Center in Bossier City, Louisiana, two weeks before Thanksgiving. Like many of the president’s 14,000 followers waiting for the rally to begin, Jones believes that Trump is on a mission from God to expose (and destroy) the hidden demons of the deep state.

To attend a Trump rally is to engage directly in the ecstasy of knowing what the great man knows, divinity disguised as earthly provocation. Jones tells me about Jesse Lee Peterson, a right-wing pastor and talk show host who calls Trump “the Great White Hope.” He doubles over and slaps his knee, signaling to me that it’s another joke. “He’s black!, says Jones, meaning Jesse Lee Peterson. “I love that dude,” he says. He considers Peterson, like the White Hope himself, awesomely witty. Jones straightens up. “But it’s true!” he adds. Which is how racism works at a Trump rally, just like the president’s own trolling — signal, disavowal, repeat; the ugly words followed by the claim that it was just a joke followed by the claim that it was just a joke followed by the repetition of the ugly words. Joking! Not joking. Play it again, until the ironic becomes the real.

Later, I listen to Peterson’s show. He calls Trump the Great White Hope because, he says, “Number one, he is white. Number two, he is of God.” Peterson does **not** mean this metaphorically. Trump is the chosen one, his words gospel.

Peterson is hardly fringe in this belief. Many followers deploy a familiar Christian-right formula for justifying abuses of power, declaring Trump a modern King David, a sinner nonetheless anointed, while others compare him to Queen Esther, destined to save Israel — or at least the evangelical imagination of it - from Iran. Still others draw parallels to Cyrus, the Old Testament Persian king who became a tool for God’s will. “A vessel for God,” says former congressman Zach Wamp, now a member of The Family, the evangelical organization that hosts Trump every year at the National Prayer Breakfast. Lance Wallnau, a founding member of Trump’s evangelical coalition, dubs him “God’s chaos candidate”: “the self-made man who can ‘get it done,’ enters the arena, and through the pressure of circumstance becomes the God-shaped man God enables to do what he could never do in his own strength.”

In Trump’s case, divine backing is more about smiting than healing. When Rep. Elijah Cummings died last October shortly after sparring with Trump about Baltimore, Peterson declared on his radio show, “He dead” - like True enemies John McCain and Charles Krauthammer, Peterson noted. “That’s what happens when you mess with God’s children.”

Jones only recently became one of those children. “I’ve been on the side of evolution my whole life,” he confesses. Not so much the science end, he wanted me to understand. His had been the partying wing of agnosticism. Then his fiancé persuaded him to start attending a fundamentalist church, not long before Trump was elected, and the veil was lifted. For instance, he says, now he can see the “gay agenda” of the Democrats. “Actually, they’re pedophiles.”

Jones is only the second person I’ve met at the rally, so I don’t yet know just how common this perspective is. Through a season of Trump rallies across the country, before the global pandemic forced the president to retreat for a while from the nation’s arenas, I spoke with dozens of Trump supporters who believe that the Democratic establishment primarily serves as a cover for child sex trafficking. Some were familiar with “QAnon” — the name claimed by believers in a host of conspiracy theories centered around an alleged “deep state” coup against Trump and his supposedly ingenious countermeasures, referred to as the “Storm,” or “Great Awakening” — but most were not. It was, they told me, simply *known*. “Perverts and murderers,” said a woman in Bossier City. One man, a Venezuelan immigrant, explained that many socialists are **literal cannibals** (ed. note: perhaps they are just hungry?) There were the Clintons, of course, but a youth pastor promised me that Trump knew the names of all the guilty parties and was preparing their just deserts. The president himself, in speech after speech, intimates that Judgment Day is coming. In Hershey, Pennsylvania, he spoke of “illegals,” hacking and raping and bludgeoning, “relentlessly beating a wonderful, beautiful high school teenager to death with a baseball bat and chopping the body apart with a machete.” And that, he added, was only what he could reveal. There was more, he said, much, much more. *Believe me*.

Such is the intimacy of *Trumpjism*: innuendo and intimidation, the wink and the revelation. Jones gets it. To demonstrate, he pops up his Trump mask, bends over, and begins sniffing the wet blacktop like a hound. “Creepy Joe!” cries another supporter.

Jones bounces up and beams. It's his imitation of Joe Biden, on the trail of young boys to molest. Biden as a child sniffer is a popular right-wing meme, but it's not really Biden himself who matters. They know Joe is one among many. "Demons," says Jones, speaking of the Democratic Party leadership in general. "Not even human." Which is why it will take the Great White Hope, chosen by God, to confront them. They're too powerful for the likes of ordinary men such as Jones. He'd tried.

"I made a mistake," he says. "I called them up."

On December 4, 2016, a man traveled from North Carolina with an AR-15 and opened fire on Comet Ping Pong, the D.C. pizzeria believed by some Trump supporters to be the HQ of Hillary Clinton's child sex trafficking ring. Jones, inspired, decided to do his part. There days after the assault, according to testimony he later gave, Jones called another pizzeria down the street. "I'm coming there to save the kids, and then I'm going to shoot you and everyone in the place." It didn't occur to him to block his number. (ed. note: Typical aspiring 'very stable genius'.)

After spending 40 days and 40 nights in jail, he says (33, actually), Jones decided to plead guilty to one count of interstate threatening communications. He claims he didn't actually threaten to shoot, but he had his lawn service business to attend to. Also, pets. "So I said fuck it, I'll take the guilty plea, because at least what I'm pleading to is good. Even my preacher said that. He said, 'You did a good thing.'"

"It's good," agrees another Trump supporter, impressed by Jones's skirmish with the enemy.

"It's real!" says Jones, eyes wide.

The *real* of which he speaks — "I was on Yahoo News," Jones says, holding up the page on his phone — is that of the reality TV from which his leader sprang, *The Apprentice*, *Celebrity Apprentice*. A reality set free from context or history, shimmering with feeling, millions of individual truths — all streaming toward one great fact: Trump.

Jones disappears behind his mask. It's past noon. The president will be here in less than seven hours. It's time to get in line.

For the past four years, Trump has systematically done what Barack Obama refused to do: played directly to his base, whipping his followers into fury. His rallies transcend live events. They manifest in press briefings, conducted at a length and with a passion once reserved for the stage. It's there in the tweets with which he mobilizes his fans "IRL," urging them to LIBERATE VIRGINIA and LIBERATE MICHIGAN. And the fury will be there as we approach the pivotal moment in November, when our future may well hinge on these passion plays.

In 2016, I attended Trump rallies around the country to witness the role played by religion. I found it in the fervor for oft-traded stories of the candidates riches, his private plane, "Trump Force One" and its golden interior, and in the promises of D-list preachers who opened his rallies with sermons ranging from the staples of abortion and decadence to the miraculous wealth with which God had anointed Trump. Back then, the candidate was taken as living proof of what's known as the Prosperity Gospel, a kind of country cousin to establishment Christian conservatism, not so much about saving society as it is about getting right with God by getting rich. Show your faith in his blessings, as revealed in the opulent lives of his anointed preachers, and good fortune will trickle down. **Like Trump, the Prosperity Gospel is transactional — a ready-made religion for a man who came by it, like so little else in his life, honestly.** In the books he claims to have written, Trump invokes a personal trinity: his father, Fred, who taught him strength; his mentor, the red-hunting mafia lawyer Roy Cohn, who taught him cunning; and his childhood pastor, bestselling Christian self-help author Norman Vincent Peale, who taught him *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Believe in it, preached Peale, and it can be yours. Quid pro quo, a deal with God: affluence (or the dream of it to come) in return for unquestioning loyalty. Trump's campaign channeled a convergence of conservatisms: Fred Trump's brutality, Cohn's corruption, and the cross wrapped in a flag preached by Peale.

As Trump knows, the best kind of deal — the kind that pays — is not only transactional, it's transformative. With some minor exceptions, the establishment Christian right has embraced the gospel of Trump, and it has prospered: Trump's administration stocked top to bottom with its apostles, the movement mightier now than it was under George W. Bush or Ronald Reagan. Trump, meanwhile, has fused his penchant for self-pity with the paranoia than runs like a third rail through Christian conservatism, the thrilling promise of "spiritual war" with dark and hidden powers.

In 2016, the Trump faith was name it and claim it, Make America Great Again, the prospect of the restoration of a -mythic (read: white) past. Now, though, the kingdom has come. Trump is no longer storming the gates; he holds the power. The faith for 2020, I learned at his rallies, is a secret one, its password a wink that's really a warning, its enemy invisible and everywhere: the deep state, the pesos and the FBI, Democrat-ruled sanctuary cities and the "illegals" they send forth to pillage the heartland. MAGA has become KAG, Keep America Great - which requires not a new prosperity but the eradication of America's enemies within. "If you do not bring forth what is within you," as the gospel of Thomas puts it, "what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

The gospel of Thomas — the doubting one - does not, of course, reside with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in your King James. But then, Trump doesn't read the Bible. He doesn't need to. Rule books are for losers. *Reading* is for losers. The gospel of Trump, like that of Thomas — noncanonical, antiestablishment — is gnostic, a form a secret knowledge reserved for the faithful, a "truth" you must have eyes to see in order to believe.

Gnosticism, which dates at least to the second century A.D., is the path Christianity did not take, its texts destroyed as heretical, its ideas mostly forgotten until the 1945 discovery in Egypt of 13 ancient books in a sealed clay jar. Or maybe not so much forgotten as woven over the centuries into countless conspiracy theories, the deep-seated belief that there exist truths *they* — there is always a *they* in gnosticism, from the bishops and bureaucrats of the early church, coastal elites of the ancient world, to the modern media peddling fake news — do not want *us*, the people, to perceive.

There's something almost democratic about gnosticism, in its American distortion. "Recognize what is before your eyes," the gospel of Thomas advises, "and that which is hidden will be revealed." One needs no diplomas to know truth, no "data" contrived by "experts." Knowledge lies not in scholarship or information but within, "the gut," as Trump has long maintained, or "right here," as he said more recently at one of his coronavirus briefings, tapping his temple to show us "the metric" by which he would know when it was safe for us to go outside, when we could gather again by the thousands to adore him.

In Bossier City, the line winds through a vast parking lot, a sluggish serpent that moves only in hiccups and burps. Nobody seems to mind. Two young women in front of me, who took off work to travel from Arkansas in bedazzled red-white-and-blue Trump gear, pass the time bragging about their firsthand knowledge of the Clintons. They hold my place so I can take a snapshot of a man who despite the chill wears camouflage shorts and a T-shirt depicting Bill and Hillary — him with a handgun, her, leather-gloved, flexing a garrote — over the words CLINTONS: THEY CAN'T SUICIDE US ALL. "They say," confides one of the women, who credits God and Trump for the success of her new catering business, "that the Clintons may have suicided my uncle." He'd been a prominent conservative lawyer, she explains, and he'd died at a restaurant, choking on steak. Or had he? "They say it didn't make any sense," she says, which is perhaps her truest observation. *They* call such killings - caused by the Clintons, for reasons you can only guess at - "Arkan-cide."

Inside, on the arena floor, it's mostly men. A crowd has gathered before the stage to stand for hours - no sitting permitted — rather than wait in the stands. I strike up a conversation with a middle-aged couple. They'd been first in line that morning, before dawn; as a reward for this devotion, they had been presented by traveling evangelists with matching black long-sleeved shirts declaring in white block letters, TRUMP'S TWEETS MATTER. They're missionaries themselves, (ed. note: beautiful) says the husband, Pastor Sean Jones. He wears a red MAGA hat and a biblically full beard; his face looks weathered, wary, and wise. Wedged between his legs is a black hat that reads GOD WINS, a reference to a seminal QAnon post. He'd been gifted the shirt and the hat by another pastor, who, like Pastor Sean, travels from rally to rally. Pastor Sean's gift for his fellow Trumpers, in turn, was a small New Testament enhanced with the U.S. Constitution, a document he believes was "God-breathed." He says he's distributed thousands.

Four years ago, the mood at Trump's rallies was electric but heavy, a mix of anger and the possibility of "winning" — winning so much, Trump promised, that we'd get tired of winning. Since then he has won; and won and won and won. The energy is now victorious — and even darker. If the arena is a safe space for Trumpers, a church where the like-minded can join together in a sea of red hats, the world outside is scarier than ever. "Secret murders everywhere," says Pastor Sean, his voice low and growly. "Pedophiles and evil." That's why he loves Trump: because he believes God has chosen Trump for this hour. That which Trump's critics see as crude and divisive, Pastor Sean takes as proof of his anointing. He is God's champion, a fighter, a "counterpuncher." All of which has put Trump's life in danger, says Pastor Sean. "He knows too much."

"About the Democrats?" I ask.

Pastor Sean nods. He is not like some of these people - he waves to the crowd — so deluded as to believe that most Democrats are *conscious* servants of Satan. Sean, himself a victim of SRA — Satanic Ritual Abuse - knows that there are those who do the devil's work without realizing whom they serve. To him the great value of Trump is clarity. At this late hour, he says, with so many of us broken, so many of us scarred and wary, we cannot help but see through a glass darkly. But even in this dim tide the brightness grows, and we see illuminated not the glory but the horror: the American carnage, the vastness of the forces arrayed against God. Democrats, CNN, "all of it," Pastor Sean grumbles, flicking a finger at the caged-in media pen where most of the press sits. "Lot of movie stars too," he adds. He scans the crowd. "De Niro," he mutters, low enough that I have to lean in to hear him. But before he can explain, the music stops; it is time to pledge allegiance. To the flag, sure, and to the president for which it stands, one man, under God.

After the pledge, I make my way over to the source of the TRUMP'S TWEETS MATTER T-shirts: a cluster of men close to the stage, eating beef jerky. The shirts are the work of one among them, a black-hatted man known as the Trumped-Up Cowboy. But the Cowboy is busy at the moment, so a former youth pastor in his entourage, Dave Thompson, agrees to speak to me. He hands me his card: "God Wins/Prayer Warrior," and on the back a Bible verse, 2 Chronicles 7:14, in which God promises "my people" that he will "heal their land." Like Pastor Sean, Pastor Dave follows Trump across the country, leading prayer meetings outside the president's rallies every day at 7:14, a.m. and p.m.

A real estate broker by day, Pastor Dave felt a "spiritual drawing" to devote a season of his life to Trump. He started at a rally in his home state of Texas, where he befriended some superfans: Richard, from New York, who had been to 68 or 69 rallies, and Rick, from Ohio, who'd been to 17. He followed them to a rally in Minneapolis, at which Trump debuted his orgasmic impression of texts between former FBI agents Lisa Page and Peter Strzok, who figure prominently in QAnon's portrait of the president's deep state enemies. "Oh, I love you so much," Trump moaned, pretending to be Page. "I love you Peter!" Then he was Strzok, working up to a climax: "I love you too Lisa! Lisa! Lisa! Oh, God! I love you Lisa!"

At a rally in Mississippi, Pastor Dave met the Cowboy, who had taken under his wing a group of boys from Kentucky. Pastor Dave and the Cowboy began traveling the Trump trail together, serving as chaperones for the kids, who became known as the Trumped-Up Teens. The Cowboy personally paid for the boys' airfare and put them up in tents in parking lots outside the arenas. "Look," Dave says, gesturing toward the stage. Near the front stand the boys, eight of them wearing matching shirts from the Cowboy. Dave eats the shirts aloud: "Trumps. Tweets. Matter." The Cowboy, Dave says, found the boys in the woods. (Or maybe, he says later, it was actually at a Trump rally in Lexington.) Now he flies them to these rallies." To spread the word.

"The tweets?" I ask.

"Yes," says Pastor Dave. "They matter."

"Right," I say.

“They mean things,” he explains. He points. There: a shirt. And there, up in the seats. Another shirt. And there, and there, and there. As if repetition itself is all the proof needed.

“It’s not a joke?” I ask Dave. The shirts seem like a rebuke to Black Lives Matter.

“No!” Dave isn’t offended. It’s unthinkable that anyone down here, so close to Trump’s podium, could really believe that. “It’s like - ” he looks for a word.

“Scripture?” I say.

“Yes,” he says with a youth pastor’s grin. “Like Scripture.” Every tweet, every misspelling, every typo, every strange capitalization - especially the capitalizations, says Dave — has meaning. “The truth is right there in what the media think are his mistakes. He doesn’t make mistakes.” (ed note: So Finland *really* is part of Russia?) The message of the shirt to Dave is: Study the layers. “Trump is known as a five-dimension chess player,” Dave says later. (ed note: Sure it’s not checkers?) And he’s sending us clues. (ed note: Clues for the *clueless*? Pfuuuck!) About the Democrats and Ukraine and his plans. “There are major operations going on,” Dave tells me months later, suggesting that Trump is using COVID-19 field hospitals as “a cover” to rescue children from sex trafficking.

“Look,” he says, again pointing at the Kentucky boys. Phil Collins is playing, “In the Air Tonight,” and the boys lean hard over the barrier in front of the stage, grinning as it approaches: the drum solo, eight boys drumming air, ba-dum-dum-dum-dum, like a body tumbling down a flight of stairs. *I can feel it, coming in the air tonight, oh Lord.* They’re 16, maybe 17. They’ve been waiting for this moment all their lives. Trump’s campaign manager, Brad Parscale, takes the stage, a tower of taut, trim pale suit. He points to the boys, he points to the Cowboy, his black hat bobbing above the crowd. The red sea roars.

Look upon me, you who reflect upon me,” declares the divine voice of perhaps the most famous gnostic text, a poem called “The Thunder, Perfect Mind.” So it is in the arenas of Trump, thousands of red hats just like his, the hats that at each rally he throws to the crowd, giving of himself. Such are the miracles of Trump, adored for his golden tower, his golden faucets, his generosity. He who has taken the most also gives the most.

“The Thunder,” too, presents the divine as a series of contradictions:

I am the honored one and the scorned one.

I am the whore and the holy one...

You who tell the truth about me, lie about me,
and you who have lied about me, lie about me,

I am strength and I am fear....

I am the one who is disgraced and the great one....

I, I am godless,

and I am the one whose God is great....

I am the control and the uncontrollable.

I am the union and the dissolution.

Nonbelievers roll their eyes over what they see as the gobsmacking hypocrisy of Trump as a tribune of family values, the dopiness of the rubes who consider him a moral man. Nonbelievers, in other words, miss the point. They lack gnosis. Very few believers deny Trump’s sordid past. Some turn to the old Christian ready-made of redemption: Their man was lost, but now he’s found. Others love him precisely *because* he is a sinner - if a man of such vast, crass, and open appetites can embody the nation (and really, who is more American — vast, crass, and open - than Trump), than you too, student of porn, monster truck lover, ultimate fighter in your dreams and games, can claim an anointing. The gnostics would have especially appreciated the most absurd Trumpian paradox: He sits at the heart of power, even as he proclaims himself an outsider. He is, by virtue of decades of what we might call *executive drift* — our slow but steady abandonment of checks and balances, our embrace of the “unitary executive” — literally the “greatest,” so long as we detach “great” from its modern conflation with “good.” Trump is for his followers what gnostics called “The Depth,” or, perhaps more aptly, “The Abyss.” Gnostics believed that what other Christians considered God was a “demiurge” — fake news, an entity deluded into believing itself the source of power because it had constructed the material world. In the gospel of Trump, the bureaucracy. Cut the red tape, drain the swamp, deregulate, and the true depth of the divine is revealed.

But if Trump is The Depth, what to make of the deep state? The gnostics had a term for that too, for the bishops and deacons, the elites of the church they loathed as corrupt. They called such people “waterless canals.” Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer: waterless canals. Barack Obama, Joe Biden: waterless canals. And all those who betray Trump, those whom the believers insist he invited into his sphere only to expose them — Jeff Sessions, John Kelly, Jim Mattis, Anthony Fauci — revealed — waterless canals.

Two weeks after the rally in Bossier City, I travel to the BB&T Center in Sunrise, Florida, for another gathering of the faithful. In the parking lot I meet Ed Himmelman, a Biker for Trump. Beneath his MAGA cap he wears his white beard in two braids adorned with red, white and blue beads. His camouflage vest declares him a member of the Last Militia, founded in 2009 to champion a more masculine America, one where men can wear knives and guns.” The second Amendment, in Ed’s book, is second only, to, well, the first. Freedom of religion — or, as Ed thinks of it, religion as freedom. So it has been in Ed’s life, a far rougher proposition before he came to the Lord. “I am not quite a priest, he tells me,” he tells me. “But I am a brother of the Franciscan order.” When he isn’t in camouflage, he wears a monk’s brown robe. “I’ve taken my vows,” Ed says. Just as Trump has. “God is using him,” Ed explains, nodding serenely.

“The chosen one?” I ask.

“He may be,” says Ed, stroking his beard braids. He doesn’t want me to misunderstand. “I’m a chosen one too.” We’re all chosen by God, each given a mission. Trump’s? “He’s the chosen one to run America.”

It’s time to enter the arena. Inside, close to the stage, a man gives me his business card. JFK35.com, it reads — his private collection of Kennedy paraphernalia, including JFK’s sweater, his cuff links, and a perfect duplicate of the 1961 Lincoln limo in which he was killed. **Many I met at the rallies said they had been Democrats once, back when the Democratic Party stood for something besides open borders and child molesters. The Democratic Party, as far as this crowd is concerned, is dead, and the Republicans have a lifeline only so long as they hitch it to Trump.** The joy of a Trump rally is not partisan; it’s the ecstasy of liberation. It’s the convert’s conviction that they have transcended compromise and coalition, that they have entered into the light, undiluted and pure.

The most ardent convert I meet in Sunrise is Diane G., who asks me not to use her last name, for fear of Democratic retaliation.

Diane G.’s hair is platinum and long, her jeans white, her skin very tan. A tooth is missing in front, but her ice-blue eyes are so large that she seems to sparkle when she smiles. “I’m in the electrical world,” she says. She means she once owned a successful lighting design firm; she points at the great banks of stage lights — there, and there, and there, glorying in Trump’s illumination. She was born into spectacle, a “PK,” a preacher’s kid, raised in the Church of the Foursquare Gospel — a Pentecostal denomination founded in 1923 by Aimee Semple McPherson with the belief that church should above all be entertaining. She once preached a sermon dressed as a motorcycle cop, complete with a motorcycle onstage. Likewise, it was Trump’s showmanship that won Diane over, his 2015 descent to the people byway of his golden escalator, the gleam of his gold-trimmed private 727, “Trump Force One,” the way in which, in 2016, he seemed to fill TV screens with oversized power. She couldn’t look away even when she wanted to. “I was a Never Trumper!” she says, marveling over how lost she’d once been.

Was it something he said? I ask. A policy, a position?

No, she says. “My faith helped me to see him.” The Holy Ghost gave her what some Christians call the gift of discernment, an idea rooted in the Book of Acts that just as some are gifted the ability to speak in tongues, languages not their own, others are gifted the ability to speak in tongues, languages not their own, others are gifted the ability to discern spirits, to perceive wickedness within what might, to the undiscerning, be mistaken for profane. She learned discernment the hard way.

Disillusionment in her church, about which she could not speak — “this is the church now!” she said, turning in a circle — and heartbreak in Haiti, where she said she had inherited from her father a home for abused children. She raised money for school fees and sneakers and backpacks, but after the 2010 earthquake, she learned firsthand the deception of so many who promise aid.

It was the Clintons who poisoned her. Before the earthquake, they pushed “the American plan,” an aid program that drove Haitians off their land. Even Bill Clinton called it a “devils bargain.” After the earthquake, it was worse: epic mismanagement of disaster relief by Clinton loyalists, allegations of corruption. Diane lacked the language of structural critique; she had only the blunt terms of her faith, *good* and *evil* and *spiritual war*. The Clintons’ mistakes were not errors, they were sins. They were evildoers. Thus the logic and theology of the Democratic Party’s dissolving margin: the arrogance of good intentions, followed by incompetence, leading to the conclusion that the system must have been rigged all along.

Enter the businessman. “Trump is not my God,” says Diane. “But God put him there.” God put him in power and planted a seed of faith in his heart. If you knew how to look, you could watch it grow. “It’s amazing,” Diane shouts. She takes hold of my arm, squeezing. “It gets bigger and bigger!”

As her faith in Trump grew, so too her certainty that what she’d witnessed abroad had been not just wrong but wicked. “They’re raping and pillaging Haiti!,” she tells me.

It’s too terrible to speak of. She turns away, to the happiness of a small circle of new friends she’s made at the rally, a whole family decked out in Trump wear. But she keeps coming back. “The truth and the lies,” she says. I don’t know what she means. She turns away again, returns again, her eyes watery. “I’m going to say it,” she decides. But she can’t. She walks away. Her friends seem worried. She comes back, leans in. “*They eat the children.*” She shakes with tears. Her friends nod.

Later I ask several of them if they share Diane’s concern. Some say no, they don’t think there was any cannibalism afoot. **Just pedophilia.** Some say the Clintons are killers, **that’s for sure. “Arkan-cide.”** But in the moment, here at the rally, there is only fellow feeling for Diane, a red-white-and-blue bedazzled woman beside her, draping an arm gently across her sister-in-Trump’s quivering shoulders.

After the rally, in the far reaches of the parking lot, Diane invites me to sit with her in her white Cadillac SUV. Beside us a mini-jumbotron, attended by a group of Black Trump supporters, displays rapid-fire images of Trump, his giant face illuminating the night. Music throbs, blue, green, purple light pulses into the Caddy, but Diane’s face is in shadow. She wants to know if I got the message, if I had *discerned*. “You listened to him tonight and you kept in mind what I said and you realized he talks to us in codes, right? she asks. “Now you get it?”

Maybe I do. “The Great Awakening?” I say, referring to a Q meme she’s searching for on her phone, tying Trump’s ascendancy to the religious revival that preceded the American Revolution.

“Exactly!” Diane says, proud. She points to the kabbalistic discipline of alphanumeric codes known as gematria, in which numbers and letters are treated as interchangeable. “The numbers tell us certain things,” she says. “And the capital letters” — the tweets, just as Pastor Dave had told me in Louisiana. “Anything capitalized,” Diane says, “we add up as a number.” (ed. note: Is there a secret Trump ouija board or crystal-powered secret decoder ring which is available to

believers to facilitate the interpretation of this horseshit?) Such codes are a baseline of conspiracy theories going back centuries. To Diane and other Q believers, this does not disprove the system; it is evidence of how deep runs the struggle. “Two thousand years,” say Diane. Christianity, roughly speaking.

“It’s a lot to take in,” I stammer. “I didn’t know Q had anything to do with God.”

“It’s all about God!” Diane shouts. “All about spiritual warfare. Trump will tell you that. Over and over and over.”

“But he didn’t talk a lot about God —

“*You’re not listening.*” The knowledge is waiting for me, she whispers, moved again nearly to tears: *awaken*.

It’s time to proceed down the “rabbit holes.” These aren’t conversational digressions so much as secret pathways to spiritual truths. There’s a long riff, for instance, about how Disney draws on satanic influences to control the minds of America’s youth, and a discussion of Operation Paperclip, the post-World War II program by which the U.S. government really did secretly import former Nazi war criminals to work on biological weapons. Then there’s what *really* happened in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017, when, according to the *official* story, a lone gunman named Stephen Paddock shot and killed 59 concertgoers at a country music festival. According to Diane, this was part of a plan to kill Trump, who she said was scheduled to speak in Vegas just days after. Whose plan? Saudi Arabia.

“I didn’t know that,” I say.

Diane rolls her eyes. “I know that,” she says. “I’m *telling* you.”

Later, as I listened to my recording of our conversation (made with Diane’s permission) I found myself thinking, I can’t use any of this. It’s too much. This doesn’t represent anything but one woman’s delusions. Then I googled the Las Vegas shooting. And holy shit — Diane is far from alone. The belief that the Vegas massacre was the work of a nefarious “they” is actually much closer to the world most of us inhabit than the outer reaches of QAnon. It began with Alex Jones, then gathered force via a 51-page PowerPoint document by a retired senior CIA officer and Rich Higgins, Trump’s former director of strategic planning for the National Security Council. The theory notes that the Islamic State claimed credit for the attack; that a man on the same floor as the shooter had reportedly eaten Turkish kebab; and that this man was also known to have supported transgender rights on his Facebook page. Which adds up to — **obviously** — as ISIS-antifa attack on American soil. From Jones to Higgins and then to Tucker Carlson, who several months after the shooting invited Scott Perry, a GOP congressman and retired Army National Guard brigadier general, onto his show to promulgate what he described as “credible evidence of a possible terrorist nexus” behind the massacre.

Which may seem to you insane. But it is also, compared to this article, “mainstream.” Carlson’s show alone has three times the viewership of this magazine’s print circulation. Add to that Jones’s Infowar empire, and countless tweets, posts, and threads online — not to mention the conspiratorial anti-Muslim musings of Trump himself — and what you get is this: **Diane is not fringe. She may be closer to the new center of American life than you are.**

Diane and I step out of her Cadillac so she can smoke. As we stand beneath the flat hot Florida night sky, I start to ask why Trump doesn’t just come straight out and give a speech revealing all the secrets he has been shown by God (ed. note: or by Franklin Graham?) But then I catch myself. If the gospel of Trump is a gift to the initiated, its value lies precisely in its exclusivity. Let the elites and the ivory tower fools wallow in their “expertise.”

“Diane,” I ask, “are you familiar with the concept of gnosticism?”

It isn’t cold but she shivers. “Yes! Very much.” She seems to appraise me differently, as if the question itself is the answer.

“Secret knowledge,” I say — and also not like it.

“It’s not that,” Diane nods, “but it is.” She is speaking in the aphoristic language of one of those ancient codices.

“Why,” I ask, “do the numbers matter?” The endless gematria, the counting of letters, every date an echo of another.

“They” — the big *they* — “think dates have power. Numbers.”

“But Diane,” I say. “The don’t.”

Her eyes go wide. She grins. “*Exactly.*”

There’s a point in every rally when Trump confronts the enemy directly. Not Hillary Clinton, or Joe Biden, or Mexican immigrants, but a small group of men and women penned in a metal cage on the arena floor. They’re “very bad people” and “scum” and “liars.” “Look at them!” he cries, pointing. His thousands turn to the cage to scream. If I had thought to bring a sound-level meter to the rallies, I could give you a precise rendering in decibels of the ascending passions of the **Trumpocene**: God, guns, and, loudest of all, hating CNN. A cartoon Trump pissing on the CNN logo is a popular T-shirt at rallies; another reads: “**Rope. Tree. Journalist. Some assembly required.**” (ed. note: PMT — I O S I D F. PFUCK ME TWICE — If Only So I Don’t Forget.)

Does *anybody* think the media is honest?” Trump asks the crowd at the third rally I attend, in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

“No!” they cry.

“Does anybody think they’re totally corrupt and dishonest?”

“Yes!” they cry. A woman next to me leans back on her heels, lower lip tucked under her teeth, eyes closed, arms outstretched, her two middle fingers raised.

Journalists are the true enemy within. The enemy is cunning; it attempts to blend. In czarist Russia and Nazi Germany, it was the Jews; in Cold War America, it was communists; after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the American right rallied for a while around hating the gays. All had in common the ability to pass. Now it is the journalists. They move among us unseen; your own child could become one.

So it is in Hershey, where I — a writer, a Jew, no less, get my ticket and enter with the crowd and finally, at last, put on the red hat. So many around me are wearing camouflage, why shouldn’t I? In part it’s a practical decision, made in the parking lot, after hours in line. It’s cold and it’s raining, and I am bald. When a vendor comes by pushing a cart, I fork over \$20. It also feels prudent. The crowd here in Hershey — the self-declared “sweetest place on earth,” where the streetlights are shaped like giant Hershey kisses — feels meaner than in Louisiana or Florida. There seem to be fewer families and more knots of young men chanting *Trump! Trump! Trump!*, punctuating the name with fists raised.

Inside I find a spot not far from the stage. Sometimes Trump rambles; sometimes he owns the crowd. When Trump is on, he works his hands like a bellows, in and out, counting the lies, the deceptions. “They spied on our campaign!” Who spied? *Who* doesn’t matter, it’s the verb that counts. *Spied*. “They hid it!” he says. “Hid it so nobody could see it!” Hid what? *What* doesn’t matter, it’s the verb, *hid*, and the response, Trump spreading his hands wide before him: *Trump! Trump! Trump!*

Don’t be fooled by his fractured syntax. When Trump is on, his sentences are not broken but syncretic, fusing with the thoughts of his followers. There is comedy: a full skit about windmills, the Lisa Page routine. There are numbers: 131 records, 182 judges, one eighth of an inch, 250 years, 160,000 new jobs. What do these numbers mean? Trump. The numbers are Trump numbers, good numbers, the best numbers, just as the enemies are Trump enemies, bad enemies, the worst enemies. “Say it!” Trump growls, as if he’s holding Shifty Schiff by the throat, choking a confession out of him. “Say it, you crooked bastard!” The crowd screams. Say what? Who cares. Crooked. *Bastard*. “I’d like to force him to say it!” The crowd would like to watch.

Trump’s timing, so puzzling to those who expect somber gravitas, is that of a Borscht Belt comedian. Only he tweaks the Jewish comic formula of funny because it’s sad, sad because it’s funny.

With Trump, it’s funny because it’s mean.

Time for a “joke,” again with numbers. “Five years,” Trump says. He pauses, smirks. Nine years, 13 years, 17 years, 21 years, 25 years, 29 years.

Then the punch line: “When I leave office.”

The crowd roars. “Now,” Trump says, pointing to his cage full of reporters, “I’m only doing that to drive them totally crazy. That drives them crazy. Even joking about it!” Joking. “I don’t know, should we give it a shot.” Maybe. “I’m only kidding. Media, I’m only kidding.” Not joking. It works: His “joke” will be the only part of the rally that makes the evening news. Funny because it’s shocking: Without transition, because none is needed, suddenly Trump is not joking at all. “Deadly sanctuary cities,” he announces, as if that’s what he’s been talking about all along. “These jurisdictions deliberately release dangerous, violent, criminal aliens out of their jails and directly onto to your streets, where they are free to offend, where they are free to kill, where they are free to rape.” Trump’s bellows hands shift, horizontal to vertical; now he’s chopping. “Brutalized,” *chop!* “Murdered,” *chop!* “Hacking,” *chop!* “Ripping out, in two cases, their hearts.” The beautiful high school teenager, hacked to death with a machete. All because Democrats gave “safe haven to those who commit violent sex crimes.”

More: “These are only the cases we know about.” There are dark truths, hidden. Philadelphia, he says, and the crowd in Hershey, Pennsylvania, boos. “One of the very worst sanctuaries anywhere in America. Philadelphia.” A man’s voice somewhere ahead of me cries out “fuuuck!” More, like a liturgy, a horrible psalm of repetition, “illegal alien” and “rape” and “sexual assault of a child” and “alien,” and “unlawful contact with a minor” and “rape” and “indecent exposure” and “sex crimes” and “animal”; “released by Philadelphia to wander free in your communities.”

How did this happen? Because *they* want it to. “They fought with ICE,” Trump says. “As we speak, a criminal illegal alien with three prior deportations is roaming free in Pennsylvania because he was released by the city of Philadelphia! The city of” — he smirks, joking, not joking, smirking and shaking his head, wait for it, the punch line, his thumb and finger pinching together, the O.K. — sign-that-is-not a sign because it’s just the way Trump moves — “the city of brotherly love!”

“There’s a lot of drops,” Pastor Dave tells me by phone months after we met in Bossier City. By “drops” he means clues. The pandemic is in full and terrible blossom, and tens of thousands of Americans are dying from a virus that Trump attempted to laugh off. His rallies temporarily suspended, he stumbled on his daily coronavirus briefings as a form of mass spectacle, a way to continue attacking the media and dismissing the experts and disseminating secret codes. The two-hour performances weren’t meant to inform or comfort or unite. They were Trump’s rallies for what would prove to be an all-too-brief era of social distancing. The president’s most devoted followers continued to parse his words, his gestures, even the color of his ties for hidden meaning.

“Think of it as many layers,” Dave explains. He’s sending messages.” The venue may have changed, but the pattern remained: Trump, the press, the invisible enemies. Codes within codes, beyond our understanding. Red tie, pink tie. Stripes? Consider the implications. Don’t blink. “If you watch,” Dave says, “he’ll do the air Q with his hands, a circle with a slash at the bottom.”

Does Trump really mean to slide in such an obvious tell? Wouldn’t that give it away?

“Take it as a whole,” Dave says. All of it — virus, rapists, child murderers. How *they* conspire against Trump.

Aren’t they winning?

Not at all. This is the plan. “He wants to discipline us,” Dave says. *He*, in this instance, means not Trump but his father: God. Like Trump, COVID-19 is an instrument of his will, and he has allowed the virus as a punishment for our “corporate” sin, our failure as a nation to fully embrace him and his messenger, Trump, a view not so distant from that of many Christian right leaders, including Franklin Graham, Fox News preacher Robert Jeffress, and Ralph Drollinger, who leads a White House Bible study. (ed. note: COVID-19 as the second coming of the AIDS virus? Why read a Bible when it will more than suffice to hold one up — albeit *upside* down.)

But there’s good news, says Dave. God has given us a chance to redeem ourselves. “We could use this as an opportunity to purge. To get rid of the dross and hold onto the pure.” (ed. note: Trump as the messenger (and manifestation) of true Christian love? Okaaaay!)

A purge. A promise. “Take it as a whole,” Dave repeats, advising me to watch the briefings for every detail — the way those on the stage next to Trump tap their legs, (ed. note: Couldn’t that just signal a burgeoning need to pee?) perhaps a spiritual Morse code, they way the blink. Open your eyes. The awakening will be great, the greatest, and the rallies will return. (Indeed, as this story goes to press, the death toll of one pandemic, COVID-19, rising, and that of another, anti-blackness, coming into national focus as never before, Trump has announced his plans to gather again his masses before him.)

Only the truly initiated — Dave, Diane, QAnon — know the name of “The Storm” that’s coming, but nearly all of Trump’s devotees can read the signs, red flares overrule seas: A CNN crew arrested on camera, live, in Minneapolis; in New York, a viral video of a riot cop flashing the O.K. symbol; and in Washington, following a gas procession, the president of the United States marching through the sterile aftermath to hold aloft a Bible, upside down — a sign? A signal? — its red ribbon dangling along his wrist like a snake’s tongue.

What does it mean?

“Pray over it” says Dave, of that which is given for our witness. “Let it settle.”

Jeff Sharlet is the best-selling author and editor of seven books, including *The Family*, recently made into a Netflix documentary series, and *This Brilliant Darkness: A Book of Strangers*. He is the Frederick Sessions Beebe ’35 Professor in the Art of Writing at Dartmouth College.