

Let Death Seize Upon Them: Populism in Political Prayers of Imprecation

Cynthia Burack 
Ohio State University

Abstract: In the United States, religious elites routinely use prayer to set and communicate political agendas, shape the opinions of Christian publics, and mobilize political activism. Among political prayers distributed to believers, imprecation is rare. In this paper, I examine a set of cases of imprecatory political prayers publicized since the turn of millennium that have undeniable U.S. political subtexts and objects. Using the work of James Scott and Jan-Werner Müller, I argue that most political prayers of imprecation can fruitfully be read as manifestations of right-wing populism. These prayers reveal a hidden transcript of rage aimed not only at mainstream political arrangements and political elites but also at the comparatively polite discourse characteristic of mainstream U.S. Christian traditions, including much Christian conservatism.

THE IMPRECATION TEMPTATION

In March 2017, actor Alec Baldwin impersonated President Donald Trump on Saturday Night Live and satirized a character that was easily identified as right-wing conspiracist media figure Alex Jones. Jones, who did not appreciate the homage, responded on his Infowars broadcast by denouncing Baldwin (and another foe) and appealing to God in prayer to “defeat” them:

I pray to God, on the altar of Jesus Christ, and the Father and the Holy Spirit to give me the strength and just to continue to have the hedge of protection of Providence. ... God, please, please, please, please open everybody’s eyes and raise up other leaders to defeat these people. I just want to see this scum

Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Cynthia Burack, Ohio State University, 286 University Hall, 230 North Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210-1311. E-mail: burack.1@osu.edu

defeated. They hate us so much. They are sickening filth. God they are the most dishonorable monsters the world has ever seen (Tashman 2017).

Jones's reaction to the Baldwin satire was unusual but not unprecedented. The prayer he offered was one of imprecation: "an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies or the enemies of God" (Laney 1981, 35).

Praying is a common spiritual activity; most Americans believe in God or a supernatural power, and a majority of Americans reports praying every day (Pew Research Center 2019). These prayers are likely to fit within the categories of prayer distinguished from each other by their contents and aspirations: thanksgiving; praise/adoration; dedication/consecration; penitence/expiation; petition/supPLICATION; and intercession. Although there is broad agreement among believers and students of Christianity about these categories of prayer, absent from most lists is imprecation. Those who pray imprecatory prayers ask God to smite evil, disobedience, or a threat to God's will or representatives. The exclusion of imprecation from routine lists of prayer categories compiled by the devout suggests the discomfort that imprecatory prayers incite and a desire on the part of many believers to keep them at arm's length.

In "The Politics of a Praying Nation: The Presidential Prayer Team and Christian Right Sexual Morality," I examined the phenomenon of *political prayer*: prayers that can be analyzed as political texts because they feature political content such as biblical principles as political arguments, or faith-based positions on legislation, court decisions, or choices of political leaders (Burack 2014). Most political prayers are prayers of thanksgiving, praise, dedication, penitence, petition, intercession, or some combination of these. Religious elites routinely use political prayers to set and communicate political agendas, shape the opinions of Christian publics, and mobilize political activism.

In addition to prayers at Christian right activist events and prayers constructed to communicate with believers in online venues, Christian conservative political "prayer projects" have proliferated in recent years, providing a context for and invitation to believers/supporters to engage in intercessory prayer or to serve as "prayer warriors" for causes and public policies that organizations and sectors of the Christian conservative movement advocate. Among political prayers that are distributed publicly to believers, as well as members and subscribers of faith-based organizations, imprecation is rare. Even so, such prayers provide fruitful information about intersections between religion and American politics, and they

deserve the kind of careful investigation scholars give to other topics and phenomena in religion and politics.

Prayer projects of recent years, all of which are conservative in political orientation, include: the Presidential Prayer Team; Forty Days for Life; Intercessors for America; the Salt and Light Council; Call 2 Fall; Mayday! Mayday! A Distress Call for Prayer; and POTUS Shield. The latest of these projects, POTUS Shield, advertises itself as “a council of prelates assembling to raise up a spiritual shield” to protect President Donald Trump and his administration from human and supernatural threats ([POTUS Shield Nd](#)). Although all of these prayer projects are politically conservative, none is explicitly imprecatory. Even POTUS Shield, which emerged from a dominionist theology that “emphasizes direct supernatural experience,” does not frame prayers to online subscribers in the form of imprecations ([Montgomery 2017b](#)). However, reporting from one of the group’s gatherings in 2017, Peter Montgomery describes a speech by Lou Engle, founder of mass prayer events known as “TheCall,” in which Engle prayed for God to “sweep away” impediments in the Supreme Court that would bring an end to the right of women in the United States to secure an abortion. Engle asked God to “Sweep away the Nazgul, the Haman spirit of death. We decree, God, the sweeping of the Supreme Court.” Although Engle reports the reference appeared to him in a prophetic dream, J.R.R. Tolkien created the Nazgûl, immortal wraiths committed to the evil Sauron ([Montgomery 2017a](#)).

In this paper, I make two arguments. Using the work of James Scott, I argue that imprecatory political prayers reveal a “hidden transcript” of rage aimed at mainstream political arrangements and political elites. However, this hidden transcript is not only a form of insubordination against liberals/progressives, Democrats, the political “establishment” or “Washington, DC,” but also constitutes a protest against the *comparatively* polite discourse characteristic of mainstream U.S. Christian traditions, including much Christian conservatism. When minor—often formerly unknown—moral entrepreneurs engage in imprecatory political prayer, we can understand the uproar and demands that ensue as the process of a critique of power emerging into the open: what Scott calls “the hidden transcript storming the stage” ([Scott 1990](#), 6). This way of conceptualizing the process of imprecatory prayers bursting into public view is consistent with my analysis of the Christian right movement’s development over time of distinct forms of political and therapeutic rhetorics for delivery to public and ingroup audiences ([Burack 2008](#), 28). Second, I argue that imprecatory prayer can be read as one manifestation of right-wing

populist political discourse. Right-wing populism acquired new salience in 2016 as a result of such events as the United Kingdom's Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. In this analysis, I use Jan-Werner Müller's parsimonious conceptualization of populism to analyze Christian imprecatory political prayers (Müller 2017).

I begin the analysis with an overview of curse prayers and, in particular, the imprecatory Psalms. Then, I introduce the theoretical infrastructure for this analysis drawn from the work of Scott and Müller. I examine five cases of right-wing imprecatory political prayers publicized since the turn of millennium that have undeniable U.S. political subtexts and objects. The five are: Pat Robertson's 2003 plea for Christian conservatives to pray for the replacement of Supreme Court Justices; military chaplain Gordon Klingenschmitt's prayer aimed at critics of Christian conservative proselytizing in the U.S. military; and three other uses of Psalm 109 to pray about and "for" Barack Obama. A final case, this time emanating from the political left, is Pastor Jeremiah Wright's controversial sermon calling upon God to damn America. Finally, I offer conclusions that provide important insights into how imprecation can function as right-wing populist rhetoric even if, as the Wright example suggests, it is possible for imprecatory political prayers to contribute to democratic, rather than populist, discourse.

PRAYERS AS CURSES

Human beings have long beseeched deities to avenge harms perpetrated on them by foes. Indeed, the impulse to pray imprecatory prayers cuts across religious traditions and has been traced back to the ancient world. Lead curse tablets have been discovered throughout the breadth of the ancient Roman Empire, their texts inscribed onto small flattened sheets of metal and then either rolled up, pierced with a nail and posted, or buried to be read only by the gods. The following curse, named Uley 76 after the town in Gloucestershire, England where it and others like it were discovered in the 1970s, is directed against unknown enemies:

To the holy god Mercury. I complain to you about those who are badly disposed towards me (and) who are acting badly over (?) ... , whether slave or free, whether male or female. Do not allow them to stand or sit, to drink or eat, or to buy off these provocations (?) unless with their own blood (Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents Nd).¹

Another curse, whose provenance is unknown, names a Roman Senator as its object: “Crush, kill Fistus the senator . . . May Fistus dilute, languish, sink, and may all his limbs be dissolved” (Lobell 2012). Curses inscribed on tablets might include lists of names of those suspected in theft or list the body parts of malefactors the author wished to target, an incentive for the deities to be comprehensive in their punishment. That curses were assumed to be effective by those who inscribed them is evidence for a belief in “sympathetic magic”—the idea that “things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy” or “can physically affect each other through a space which appears to be empty” (Frazer Nd).

It’s helpful to have a sense of historical perspective on public curses as we examine the cases that follow. By the standards of curse tablets and much sympathetic magic, today’s political prayers of imprecation are relatively innocuous. Even so, of all political prayers, prayers of imprecation are the most likely to be associated with negative effects toward those who deploy them. When they are composed by establishment figures and they do see the light of day—which is to say, when they are made public, often after being delivered in some context to a particular set of ideal recipients—they are more likely to spark consternation among political allies and condemnation among political opponents than any other kind of prayer. Most leaders who are, or who wish to be, affiliated with mainstream religious organizations and positions of influence are embarrassed to be associated with prayers of imprecation, and some apologize or attempt to explain away their prayer when called to account over the indiscretion. Imprecatory prayers are disreputable enough that they are often associated primarily with religious actors on the margins of public life—if not respectability—who can offer such prayers without attracting mainstream attention. As the Reverend Jeremiah Wright can attest, imprecatory prayers can also bring previously obscure figures to wider public familiarity.

Christian imprecatory prayers usually gesture directly or indirectly to the biblical source that provides their clearest justification: the imprecatory psalms. Taken as a whole, the book of Psalms consists of short poetic texts that include prayers of thanksgiving, praise, and supplication. Psalms have often been sung in addition to being read or spoken as part of a liturgy and, indeed, the word “psalm” itself means “the words accompanying the music” (Murphy 1993, 626). However, the book of Psalms also “reveals startling poetic invocations of *imprecation*.” Focusing attention on these Psalms, John Day argues that “there is hardly an area of biblical theology more troublesome to the Christian conscience than the so-called

imprecatory psalms—psalms that proclaim a desire for God’s just vengeance to fall upon enemies” (Day 2005, 10, emphasis in the original).

There is some disagreement among students of theology about which of the biblical Psalms qualify as imprecatory.² But whichever set is so identified, the “imprecatory Psalms” detail the terrible consequences God may justly visit on the wicked and invites the person who invokes them to join with God in envisioning the most terrible punishments for extreme forms of wickedness. Although some theologians also consider parts of Psalms 7, 35, 69, 79, 137, and 139 to be imprecatory, included on most lists of imprecatory psalms are Psalms 55 and 58:

Let death seize upon them, [and] let them go down quick into hell: for wickedness [is] in their dwellings, [and] among them (Psalms 55:15).

Yea, in heart ye work wickedness; ye weigh the violence of your hands in the earth.

The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies . . .

Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth: break out the great teeth of the young lions, O LORD.

Let them melt away as waters which run continually: when he bendeth his bow to shoot his arrows, let them be as cut in pieces.

The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked (Psalms 58:2–10).

As I have demonstrated using texts from The Presidential Prayer Team, Christian conservatives found it to be more of a challenge to pray unreservedly for Barack Obama than it was for them to pray for George W. Bush before him. Nonetheless, some Christian conservatives did find a way to pray for the President that was politically, as well as theologically, appealing: employing curses drawn from Psalm 109. Even among the imprecatory Psalms, Chapter 109 of the Book of Psalms long has been considered to be an especially malignant prayer for vengeance against, and annihilation of, the wicked. For example, in The Mayor of Casterbridge, published in 1886, Thomas Hardy uses the Psalm to illustrate both the deep hatred for a rival of his unhappy protagonist and the ambivalence with which the imprecatory psalms are regarded by believers. When the protagonist demands that members of a church choir sing verses 10 to 15 to satisfy his rage at his rival, the choirmaster at first refuses,

declaring that he “can’t fathom” “whatever Servant David were thinking about when he made a Psalm that nobody can sing without disgracing himself.” The protagonist seizes a fireplace poker and threatens the choristers until they sing the verses (Hardy 2001, 175–78).

Psalm 109 begins with five verses that set the stage for the pleas for God’s vengeance that follow. The curse dimension of Psalm 109 comprises verses six through fifteen:

⁶ Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right hand.

⁷ When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin.

⁸ Let his days be few; and let another take his office.

⁹ Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.

¹⁰ Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg: let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places.

¹¹ Let the extortioner catch all that he hath; and let the strangers spoil his labour.

¹² Let there be none to extend mercy unto him: neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children.

¹³ Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let their name be blotted out.

¹⁴ Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered with the LORD; and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out.

¹⁵ Let them be before the LORD continually, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth.

In recent U.S. politics, Psalm 109:8, which refers to the malefactor’s high position or “office,” has been particularly popular and has appeared on merchandise such as t-shirts and bumper stickers. It is worth noting that before it was used by Christian conservatives to curse Obama, Psalm 109:8 was interpreted by Christians as the “Judas Psalm,” a reference to Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus. In Acts 1:15–26, Peter uses Psalm texts to justify the replacement of the deceased Judas with another disciple (Novick 2010).

Students of theology, some of whom are Christian believers who wrestle with the challenges to faith posed by curse prayers, have long

meditated on the unique challenges posed by the “angry outbursts peppered throughout the Psalms” (Youngblood 2011, 153). Among the issues raised about imprecatory prayers, even among believers, are whether God blesses and answers them; the kinds of provocations that might legitimate them; and whether they can be reconciled with the morality of Jesus depicted in the New Testament. Daniel Michael Nehrbass argues that exegetes have used many theories to interpret the imprecatory psalms, some of which more or less consign these psalms to biblical history while others validate their deployment by modern people. As Nehrbass points out, at least contemporary believers who understand imprecation as an authorized form of expression rely on God to avenge injuries instead of “tak[ing] matters into their own hands” (Nehrbass 2013, 47).

IMPRECATORY PRAYERS AS A POPULIST HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT

When imprecatory political prayers are reported and reach mainstream audiences, predictable consequences occur: political adversaries—as well as some individuals and groups within the ideological sector from which the imprecation emanated—repudiate the prayer, disclaim association with it, and criticize its agent. Others emphatically, even enthusiastically, defend imprecation. I argue that imprecatory political prayers constitute a category of political discourse that can be analyzed in its contemporary U.S. political context. Here, I will apply the typology of “public”/“hidden transcripts” and the analytical category of populism to argue that imprecatory political prayers aren’t merely random, idiosyncratic biblical expressions of bile against political opponents. Instead, as public discourse they share a number of features and collectively reveal a populist political logic.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott argues the relations and discourse that prevail between socio-political dominants and subordinates constitute a public transcript: “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” in which “both parties tacitly conspire in misrepresentation.” By contrast, the “hidden transcript” is “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation”: “offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (Scott 1990, 4–5). Scott applies this typology not only to relations between dominant and subordinate groups but to

distinctions and forms of conflict that take place *within* groups, processes that have been analyzed variously as “in-group purification” (Goffman 1986, 108) and “secondary marginalization” (Cohen 1999, 10–11). In Scott’s theory, whether they are dominant or subordinate in the larger political context, groups are divided internally by “powerholders,” demands for cohesion, and the suppression of competition *within* populations. Groups frequently impose punishments on those who deviate from the norms that constitute the public transcript of the group’s “power and interests” with regard to other groups (Scott 1990, 27).

Scholars have theorized and investigated the political phenomenon of populism in somewhat different ways, but many agree that populism is a “political logic” rather than an ideology with consistent tenets (De Cleen and Galanopoulos 2016; Müller 2017). Thus, it can appear on the political left or the political right, though the recent populist movements in the United States and Europe are right-wing or “reactionary” populism, which Margaret Canovan describes as movements that occur “in the context of a political culture committed to democratic principles but riven by cleavages between the progressive culture of the elite and the reactionary instincts of the populace” (Canovan 1981, 15).

Among recent scholars of populism, Jan-Werner Müller lays out a parsimonious set of features characteristic of the populisms that currently threaten democracy and human rights in many parts of the world, including the United States. In his analysis, populism: insists “that a part of the people *is* the people”; moralizes politics and political conflict in a way that discredits and demonizes opponents and compromise with those opponents; and treats political opponents as “enemies of the people” (Müller 2017, 22, 19, 4). These features of populism have analogs in imprecatory political prayer, especially imprecations that emanate from the political right. In these prayers, “only some of the people are actually the real, authentic people,” and they are Christian conservatives whose compact with God includes a promise to punish their foes (Müller 2017, 44). For proponents of imprecation, the issues that arise in politics and policy are saturated with moral significance such that Christians who curse their political opponents understand themselves and their purposes as “morally pure” rather than as contending democratic citizens and claims. Finally, opposition—to God’s people in general or to particular members of the group that defines itself in this way—renders opposing citizens or democratic representatives as enemies not just of God’s people but of God himself.

Contemporary political prayers of imprecation do not perfectly reflect all characteristics that scholars have associated with populist movements. For example, Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons point out that right-wing populist movements “often defy conventional explanations of ‘extremism’ because they combine attacks on socially oppressed groups with grassroots mass mobilization and distorted forms of antielitism based on scapegoating.” Right-wing populist leaders and movements direct anger both “downward” and “upward,” urging followers to target *both* disfavored groups and elites. Such populist movements appeal to and induct followers who are “average people motivated by a combination of material and ideological grievances and rhetoric” and represent a “backlash against liberation movements, social reform, or revolution” (Berlet and Lyons 2002, 1, 10, 419, 3). However common a feature of right-wing populism, imprecatory political prayer doesn’t seem to curse elites and disfavored or stigmatized groups alike. As some of the examples here suggest, disfavored groups may be implicitly implicated in the imprecation aimed at elites. Yet, in the main, imprecatory prayers target elites for thwarting right-wing Christian goals and sometimes for colluding with disfavored groups.

Imprecatory prayers are disruptive and polarizing, constituting a punitive and theologically-controversial hidden transcript that, though it *might* emerge either from within left- or right-wing Christian politics, is much more common on the political right than the left. Interpreting imprecatory political prayers in this way enables us to discern meaning in their deployment that cannot be reduced to personal rancor or the invocation of sacred text. Instead, these political expressions of condemnation against opponents invite political analysis.

PRAYING RIGHT-WING POPULISM

My survey of political prayers of imprecation includes those that have enjoyed some degree of public scrutiny since the turn of the millennium. In a famous conversation two days after the September 11 attacks, Jerry Falwell noted that “God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve” and Pat Robertson confirmed Falwell’s interpretation. As similar to imprecatory prayer as the comments were, however, Robertson and Falwell did not ask God to punish the United States but, rather, explained the punishment the United States had, in their understanding, already incurred. Yet one dimension of the Falwell-Robertson conversation is valuable as a reminder

of the hazardous terrain of imprecatory prayer: when the conversation was publicized, both Robertson and Falwell were denounced and called upon by critics across the political spectrum to apologize. Falwell did so, albeit in a way that cleverly left his original statements unrebutted. Robertson, widely believed to have apologized, did not (Burack 2008, 109–11). And Robertson followed just 2 years later with an imprecatory project in which he invited Christian believers to scrutinize the Supreme Court and to call upon God to remake it in accordance with God's plan for America.

Operation Supreme Court Freedom

In the summer of 2003, self-described “Broadcaster, Humanitarian, Author, Christian, Businessman, Statesman,” and talk show host Pat Robertson launched “Operation Supreme Court Freedom” (OSCF), an initiative to pray for the retirement, and perhaps for the death, of Supreme Court justices (Robertson Nd b). Robertson initiated the prayer project as a direct response to the Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence versus Texas*, the ruling that reversed the 1986 decision in *Bowers versus Hardwick* and established a constitutional right of American citizens to engage in private, consensual same-sex sexual relations. In his announcement, Robertson wrote:

Now, the Supreme Court has declared a constitutional right to consensual sodomy and, by the language in its decision, has opened the door to homosexual marriages, bigamy, legalized prostitution, and even incest. The framers of our Constitution never intended anything like this to take place in our land. Yet we seem to be helpless to do anything about it. Why? Because we are under the tyranny of a nonelected oligarchy. Just think, five unelected men and women who serve for life can change the moral fabric of our nation and take away the protections which our elected legislators have wisely put in place

Would you join with me and many others in crying out to our Lord to change the Court? If we fast and pray and earnestly seek God's face, then He will hear our prayer and give us relief.

One justice is 83 years old, another has cancer, and another has a heart condition. Would it not be possible for God to put it in the minds of these three judges that the time has come to retire? With their retirement and the appointment of conservative judges, a massive change in federal

jurisprudence can take place. ...

Please join us in prayer to support a massive prayer offensive that we are going to call **Operation Supreme Court Freedom** (Robertson Nd a. Emphasis in the original).

By the time Robertson launched OSCF he had long been a public figure with many detractors as well as followers. Robertson has been criticized most frequently for his predictions and explanations of disasters linked to immorality, though he has also been criticized for his business investments and behavior, and his relationships with dictators (Marley 2007). More recent than Robertson's warnings against the extreme weather and terrorist consequences of same-sex sexuality have been his statements equating opposition to Trump's goals and acts with opposition to God.

In spite of his reputation for extravagant jeremiads and prophesies, Robertson's Operation Supreme Court Freedom is actually the most circumspect, even polite, of the imprecatory prayers that would become public in the years that followed. In its appeal to the godliness of the founders, the fear of tyranny (including judicial tyranny), and the moral deterioration of America, Operation Supreme Court Freedom shared an ideology and political agenda with the mainstream Christian conservative movement as well as with the Tea Party movement that mobilized in 2009. Tea Party proponents generally framed their movement around concerns about constitutional deference and fiscal probity, but scholars have found that race and "culture war" morality issues were central to Tea Party adherents (Wilson and Burack 2012). Unlike the Tea Party, Pat Robertson's imprecatory Operation Supreme Court Freedom doesn't directly target disfavored groups as analyses of populism would predict. However, OSCF does indict the Court for its role in normalizing "consensual sodomy," an indirect criticism of LGBTQ people's political activism and the normalizing of LGBTQ rights.

Pray in Jesus Name Project

Neither Gordon Klingenschmitt nor Michael L. Mikey Weinstein was a public figure before the bitter clash that brought them to public attention. The dispute between Klingenschmitt and Weinstein was precipitated by Weinstein's advocacy to end officially-sanctioned Christian proselytizing in the U.S. military. In 2006, Weinstein, a military veteran and White House attorney during the Reagan administration, founded the Military

Religious Freedom Foundation, which he continues to direct as president. Most recently Klingenschmitt has served a term in the Colorado House of Representatives. However, in 2006, while serving as a Navy Chaplain, Klingenschmitt was reprimanded for appearing in uniform at a political protest against the Bush administration's failure to issue an executive order that would permit chaplains to offer sectarian prayers—to pray in the name of Jesus—at ceremonial events (Cooperman 2006). He was subsequently separated from the Navy and founded the Pray in Jesus Name Project to advocate for religious freedom, including the freedom he claims was violated by the military policy on sectarian prayers.

In April 2009, in response to Weinstein's advocacy, Gordon Klingenschmitt posted an imprecatory prayer on his website and uploaded it to YouTube. In it he named Weinstein and Barry Lynn, long-time executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and prayed for their death and "replacement," as well as for the despoiling of their goods and family line:

Let us pray. Almighty God, today we pray imprecatory prayers from Psalm 109 against the enemies of religious liberty, including Barry Lynn and Mikey Weinstein, who issued press releases this week attacking me personally. God, do not remain silent, for wicked men surround us and tell lies about us. We bless them, but they curse us. Therefore find them guilty, not me. Let their days be few, and replace them with Godly people. Plunder their fields, and seize their assets. Cut off their descendants, and remember their sins, in Jesus' name. Amen (Kaminer 2009).

While Klingenschmitt's prayer was publicized by groups that track and report on right-wing political activism, being identified with imprecatory prayer did not damage his reputation among supporters. On the contrary, Klingenschmitt was elected to represent the citizens of District 15 in the Colorado House of Representatives in 2014, though he was defeated in a primary challenge in 2016. Colorado's District 15 includes both the U.S. Naval Academy and Colorado Springs, which long has been "a mecca for evangelical Christians" (Brady 2015). If Klingenschmitt's constituents were comfortable with the former chaplain praying from Psalm 109 in Jesus's name even though we have no reason to infer from the Gospels that Jesus affirmed such prayers, Christian conservative influence in the district Klingenschmitt won may help to explain the incongruity.

Imprecatory Prayers for the Usurper that is in the White House

In June 2009, in the early months of the formation of the Tea Party and shortly after Klingenschmitt posted his Psalm 109-based prayer, California pastor Wiley Drake appeared on the Alan Colmes show on Fox News Radio. Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park, California, was also an aspiring politician. In 2008, when Alan Keyes launched his quixotic bid for president on the American Independent Party ticket, Drake joined Keyes as his Vice-Presidential running mate. In the early months of the Obama administration, on May 31, 2009, Dr. George Tiller, medical director of Wichita, Kansas Women's Health Care Services and late-term abortion provider, was murdered by an abortion opponent. Far from distancing himself from the murder, Drake claimed credit for it based on imprecatory prayers he had offered against Tiller from Psalm 109. When Colmes asked Drake if he offered prayers of imprecation for anyone else, Drake noted that he was praying for several people and specifically named "the usurper that is in the White House ... B. Hussein Obama." Part of the conversation that ensued between Drake and Colmes was shared widely online:

"Are you praying for his death?" Colmes asked.

"Yes," Drake replied.

"So you're praying for the death of the president of the United States?"

"Yes."

"If he does not turn to God and does not turn his life around, I am asking God to enforce imprecatory prayers that are throughout the Scripture that would cause him death, that's correct" (Allen 2009).

In the same interview, Drake defended his use of imprecation, telling Colmes, "I don't just preach the soft, fuzzy, warm stuff where we're supposed to be nice to everybody. I preach the whole Bible."

A Biblical Prayer for our President!

In 2012, O'Neal had served 28 years in the Kansas House of Representatives where he supported tort reform; pro-life reproductive policies; "conscience protection" for doctors and pharmacists who refuse to

provide abortion and contraceptive services and referrals; reductions of corporate taxes; and a state ban on the application of Sharia law in Kansas (Celock 2012). Representative O’Neal listed only some of these areas of policy interest on his LinkedIn page, which noted his legislative work in “economic development and tort reform.” However, Mike O’Neal’s brief tenure in the national spotlight resulted from the exposure of an email he sent his Republican colleagues in the Kansas legislature early in 2012. In the email, O’Neal quoted Psalm 109:8 without surrounding verses but then added a comment that seemed to attract as much attention as his use of scripture: “At last—I can honestly voice a Biblical prayer for our president! Look it up—it is word for word! Let us all bow our heads and pray. Brothers and Sisters, can I get an AMEN? AMEN!!!!!!”

After the text became public, O’Neal came under some pressure from political adversaries to apologize and resign his office. Faithful America, a liberal non-profit and online faith group, organized a petition to encourage O’Neal to step down. The petition, which collected a few thousand online signatures, stipulated that “scripture should never be used to justify praying for the death of anyone. Speaker O’Neal’s hateful abuse of scripture is unacceptable and a disgrace to his office, and he should immediately resign” (Sementelli Nd). In response to the petition some public pressure, O’Neal at first refused, either to apologize or to resign, though months later he announced his retirement.

Compared to Klingenschmitt’s more thorough and deliberate deployment of the 109th psalm, in composing his biblical prayer for Obama O’Neal limited himself to verse 8: “Let his days be few; and let another take his office.” However, O’Neal’s critics refused to take this verse of the Psalm out of context and focused their attention on the next verse, in which the psalmist writes: “Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.” Critics suggested that this verse constituted an unspoken surmise that not only would resonate with politically like-minded readers of the Psalms but also demonstrate their collective willingness to plead to God for Obama’s death.

Pray for Obama: Psalm 109:8

Attracting some attention from national news media was a contentious political dispute that played out during the 2012 presidential campaign in the town of Victoria, TX when a businessman, Milton Neitsch Jr.,

paid to erect a billboard on a downtown street. The billboard's message reproduced the text familiar from t-shirts and bumper stickers: "Pray for Obama[.]" Psalm 109:8. Besides the larger size of the message and its public deployment, another difference between O'Neal's email and Neitsch's billboard was that the billboard text was updated with images: Obama's profile and artist Albrecht Durer's classic praying hands. The billboard story originally was reported by San Antonio news station KENS 5-TV on August 30, 2012 because Neitsch's billboard stirred the interest of the Secret Service in a possible threat on the President's life. Eventually, and in part because of the intervention of the local pastor of a church associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Neitsch was persuaded to remove the billboard (Josephson and Burack 2006).

A postscript to the dispute between Klingenschmitt and Weinstein, and by extension to other imprecatory prayers against political adversaries, was a 2012 district court case in Texas. Weinstein brought a lawsuit against Klingenschmitt that argued that the latter's imprecatory prayers incited others to vandalize Weinstein's property and to make threats against Weinstein and his family. A Dallas judge dismissed the suit, and Christian Reconstructionist John W. Whitehead, president of the Rutherford Institute, praised the decision: "Thankfully, the district court recognized that if people are forced to stop offering imprecatory prayers, half the churches, synagogues and mosques in this country will have to be shut down" (Gibson 2012).

Whitehead surely exaggerates the appeal of imprecation. Still, imprecatory political prayers are not only to be found on the political right. In April 2003, just months before Pat Robertson debuted Operation Supreme Court Freedom, Senator Barack Obama's Chicago minister, Pastor Jeremiah Wright, Senior Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, delivered the sermon that eventually would attract national scrutiny. However, the sermon did not come to public attention until 2008 when news organizations responded to Senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign by seeking information about the candidate and his associations. Obama's relationship with Wright was close and long-standing; Wright married the Obamas in 1992, and the Obama family attended Trinity United until Obama concluded that the controversy over Wright's racial politics threatened his quest for the presidency. Wright's sermon, delivered well before the 2008 presidential race, raised questions about racism, patriotism and Obama's relationship to radical left-wing politics.

GOD DAMN AMERICA

Wright's controversial 2003 sermon, "Confusing God and Government," was inspired by Luke 19, in which Jesus approaches Jerusalem, where his disciples believe he may be crowned king. Instead, Jesus weeps over the coming destruction of the city and preaches to his last crowds before he is betrayed to the Romans. The conclusion of Wright's sermon is hopeful and celebratory: "Where governments fail, God never fails . . . God never fails." However, before reaching this note, Wright's jeremiad denounces "governments" for lying and doing harm and calls upon God to "damn America" for its sins. The key passage of "Confusing God and Government" is:

"No, no, no, not God Bless America. God damn America—that's in the Bible—for killing innocent people. God damn America, for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America, as long as she tries to act like she is God, and she is supreme. The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent" ([Wright Nd](#)).

When news organizations reported on Wright's "inflammatory" rhetoric, the sermon quickly became known as the "God Damn America" sermon (Ross and El-Buri [2008](#)). As history, the sermon is a polemic composed of fundamentally accurate characterizations of episodes in U.S. (and world) history alongside meaningful falsehoods, including Wright's account of the Tuskegee experiment, formally the "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male," and his charge that the [US] government "invent[ed] the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color." These erroneous statements are as meaningful as are the accurate statements. As Patricia A. Turner has argued, they are "rumors" that have circulated through African American communities that, although false, express fears of white racial enmity against African Americans (Turner [1994](#)).

A direct result of the exposure of Wright's sermons and the criticism of Wright's—and, by extension, Obama's—political beliefs was Obama's decision to use a speech to address racial differences and politics and to decisively repudiate Wright (Obama [2008](#)). Obama delivered the speech, "A More Perfect Union," in Philadelphia in March, 2008 and, for many reasons explored by scholars, it was a success (Frank [2009](#); Rowland and Jones [2011](#)). Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs argues that Obama's association with Wright and Trinity functioned to racialize him as "black enough" for African American voters, and his later disassociation

from Wright and Trinity functioned to deracialize him in a way that enhanced his electability for white voters (Tucker-Worgs 2011). Through reporting on his sermons and the defenses he mounted in a variety of venues, Wright became a national figure. But Wright did not emerge from the affair with a positive reputation. According to survey research conducted by the Pew Research Center, a majority of Americans who knew of Wright's call to "damn America" from media reports disagreed with Wright but approved of the response by which Obama "weathered the Wright storm" (Pew Research Center 2008).

Wright's sermon is different than the other examples of imprecatory prayer that have become public in recent years in four key respects. First, Wright's imprecation hailed from the political left, rather than the political right. Second, Wright gave as the reason for imprecatory prayer the nation's treatment of a historically denigrated outgroup, African Americans, not Christian believers. Third, for his biblical support, Wright recurred to a New Testament text, the book of Luke, rather than to imprecatory psalms. And finally, media and conservative attention to the imprecatory prayer embedded in Wright's sermon came to pose a threat to Obama's presidential aspirations—a more potent electoral political consequence than is associated with any of the other imprecatory prayers I document.

Müller provides a way to make sense of the ways in which Wright's prayer deviates from the others I offer as cases. Arguing that not all claims about political exclusion—that is, claims on behalf of "we the people"—are necessarily populist, Müller distinguishes between populist political claims that "*we and only we* are the people" and non-populist democratic claims made by those "fighting for inclusion" that "*we are also the people*" (Müller 2017, 68, 70). I argue that Wright's "God Damn America" sermon exemplifies such a democratic claim that African Americans, often treated as "other" by America and Americans, "*are also the people*." Even if we don't categorize Wright's "God Damn America" sermon as a form of populist political rhetoric, including it in this analysis highlights important differences between the sermon and other examples of political imprecation and demonstrates continuities among the imprecatory prayers that qualify as right-wing populist rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the spirit and texts of the imprecatory psalms, and especially Psalm 109:8, has been very useful as a meme/slogan and an indirect

ingroup expression of political enmity and disapproval. Seeking to compare progressives' disapproval of President George W. Bush, some blog commenters invoked liberals' and progressives' use of the date Bush would leave office, January 20, 2009—rendered on t-shirts, magnets, bumper stickers, and other paraphernalia as 1.20.09 (variations include 1/20/09 and 1-20-09) and sometimes accompanied by the phrase, "the end of an error"—and compared the two as similar expressions of vigorous disagreement with a president by his political opponents. The two slogans have in common their dependence on subtext and ingroup knowledge for their full appreciation. However, the comparison ends there. The context invoked by 1.20.09—with or without "the end of an error"—was political: the date on which a peaceful institutionalized transition from one administration to the next would occur. By contrast, the context of Psalm 109:8 is theological as well as political, suggesting as it does the calling down of God's vengeance to punish objective evil. Though I will not belabor the point, partisans on both sides would have had to call a draw if Bush's critics on the left had routinely sported the slogan, "Pray for Bush: Uley 76."

The proliferation of prayer projects that produce political prayers and other forms of devotional political rhetoric is a contemporary feature of the Christian conservative movement (Burack 2014). One form that political prayer takes is imprecation. Imprecatory prayers constitute both a site in which a hidden transcript and challenge to mainstream Christian political discourse can be discerned and a site of right-wing populist invective against liberal elites or against conservative elites who may be cast as liberal or faithless when they express discomfort with imprecation. The discourse is angry and vengeful, prepared to call upon the creator of the universe to visit irreversible consequences on political enemies.

From these cases of political prayers of imprecation that have come to public attention, we can draw several conclusions. First, as the imbalance of publicized cases of imprecatory prayers suggests, figures on the Christian right are more likely than figures on the Christian left to deploy such prayers. This disparity may be overdetermined by many differences between, on the one hand, political and theological Christian conservatism and, on the other hand, political and theological centrism or liberalism. One factor is no doubt the influence over time of Christian Reconstructionism on conservative Christianity in the United States. As Julie Ingersoll explains, Christian Reconstructionist theonomy dictates the "unity of scripture," the view that the Bible is a "coherent

whole” and that “the Old and New Testaments are integrated and remain authoritative” for contemporary people:

For these [Reconstructionist] Christians, most of the explicit condemnations in the Old Testament are still applicable. Reconstructionists don’t see them as being outside the “character of God,” as many other Christians might. Moreover … Christians who find it hard to countenance the God of the Old Testament are guilty of presuming that their own reason is adequate to question the sovereign God who is Lord and Creator of all. To embrace those aspects of God’s character that strike us as angry, harsh, and violent is the very test of obedience (Ingersoll 2015, 23–24).

The influence of Reconstructionism may be a factor in Pastor Wiley Drake’s defense of imprecation, that instead of just preaching “the fuzzy, warm stuff” about “be[ing] nice to everybody,” Drake “preach [es] the whole Bible” (Allen 2009).

Second, the decision to level political curses in God’s name is fraught with hazards to reputation that manifest themselves in the same sphere of collective life that the prayers are meant to influence and transform. Most moral entrepreneurs who rely on curse prayers don’t benefit in obvious ways from the controversies that ensue when the curses become public. In part because imprecatory prayers may both raise the profile of those who deploy them as well as incite criticism, those who pray imprecatory prayers that come to public attention are often figures who enjoy some authority inside particular communities of believers but who are unknown to outsiders. When their imprecatory prayers are broadcast outside the movement by mainstream or partisan media, these actors become public figures whose prayers call attention to and may divide their own movements.

Third, imprecatory prayers perform social movement work: first as a subversion of the public transcript of Christian and conservative politics; and second, as a hidden transcript of oppositional consciousness, not only against political opponents but also against expositors of more polite orthodoxy within conservative religious communities. Compared with other types of political prayer, imprecation mobilizes both political adversaries who disapprove of the sentiments expressed in the prayer and diverse sets of erstwhile political allies, some who disapprove of such prayers and others who perceive them as legitimate and necessary.

We can see these group processes in responses to Pastor Wiley Drake’s public defense of imprecatory prayer. Drake’s imprecation occasioned soul-searching and exegesis among Southern Baptists, in part because

he had served as an Officer in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) from 2007 to 2008. One SBC spokesperson who went on the record against Drake's deployment of imprecatory was Roger S. "Sing" Oldham, Vice President of Convention Communications and Relations of the SBC Executive Committee:

"Mr. Drake does not represent Southern Baptist actions, resolutions, or positions in his interpretation and application of 'imprecatory prayers,'" Oldham said. "Any comments made by Wiley Drake on this subject represent his personal views, not those of the Convention."

Oldham said most Baptists view the imprecatory prayers found in the Psalms as private, heartfelt conversations between oppressed people and God, and reflect confidence that God will eventually vindicate the innocent. He said they generally close with a conscious decision not to bear malice and leave final judgment up to God.

"I think it is fair to say that the vast majority of Southern Baptists reject any call to pray imprecatory prayers of death over any individual," he said (Allen 2009).

Nor was Oldham the only Christian conservative who rebutted Drake's theology and his use of the imprecatory Psalms.

In an essay on a Southern Baptist Convention blog, *SBC Voices*, editor David Miller considers the question of imprecatory prayers such as those employed by Drake, calling them the biblical David's "personal laments on steroids." And he defends the "**thesis ... that Wiley Drake is using scripture wrongly**, that the Imprecatory Psalms, while inspired, do not support his use of them and that we cannot, in this day, use these psalms to justify public prayers for the death of the president or any other political foe."³ In a "note" appended at the end of the essay, Miller acknowledges that his readers are likely to disagree sharply on the question of imprecatory prayers:

NOTE: This is a volatile subject. I may regret that I published this. But one commenter on the immigration post began to advocate imprecatory prayers against Obama and even to say that those who did not pray such were sinful, compromising against God and the Word.

Miller concludes the Note with a statement—"I will probably moderate the comments on this more carefully than usual"—that suggests he expected vociferous disagreement from readers (Miller 2011).

And finally, right-wing political prayers of imprecation reflect the three key features of populist political discourse identified by Müller, but they do appear to be deployed primarily against elites—or figures perceived to be elites—rather than against disfavored minority groups that are frequent targets for populist parties, groups, and moral entrepreneurs. While the right-wing imprecatory prayers all specify their objects, only Wright’s “God Damn America” sermon issues a blanket indictment against “America.” Like ancient curse tablets, imprecatory prayers offer those who deploy them the confidence that they have focused God’s wrath on specific targets whose punishment they will be able to witness and relish.

Christian believers are entreated in the Bible to pray and even, in 1 Thessalonians, to “pray without ceasing.” Prayer is often regarded as an act of private spirituality with no political significance. However, prayer projects organized by Christian movement elites produce and organize prayer and devotional rhetoric for political purposes, and these prayers convey political content that is intended to inform, socialize, and mobilize believers. Scholars of religion and politics should focus attention on political—including imprecatory—prayers, analyzing their provenance, producers, content, and reception by believers. Documenting shifts in the kinds, frequency, and even the grammatical structure of prayers provides valuable information about processes of political socialization and mobilization in response to leaders, like Trump, who are popular with the Christian right as well as to leaders, like Obama, who are not (Burack 2014).

Clearly, a subset of political prayer calls upon God to allow believers to wash their feet in the blood of the wicked or to assure that their adversaries will go down quick into hell. When these prayers come to light, we can see in them the frustration of believers who have breached a public transcript of civil discourse and expressed rage at the political status quo.

NOTES

1. Question marks where text is no longer legible are in the original.
2. Day produces a useful taxonomy of the imprecatory psalms that divide them into imprecation “against societal enemies,” “against nation or community,” and “against personal enemy.” Even though Psalm 109 has obviously been used for political purposes, Day situates Psalm 109 as an imprecation against a personal enemy (17).
3. Emphasis in the original. *SBC Voices* is an “unofficial source of news and opinion about the Southern Baptist Convention,” and David Miller is the blog’s editor.

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