

Christendom College, the Spanish Civil War, and Constructing the Past in Religious Conservatism¹

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Abstract: A common tactic among right-wing ideologies is the creation of an idealized or falsified past, which can be used to build a sense of common history among the followers of that ideology. One period in history which is a perennial favourite of right-wing ideologues to glamorize is the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. For instance, the history of the Spanish Civil War was resurrected during the Cold War as a rallying point for right-wing American Catholics, then engaged in a vigorous culture war against the social changes of the 1960s. They called the struggle a crusade, and viewed Franco as a hero. Several of the attendees at the Christian Commonwealth Institute, a summer educational program for American Catholics held in Franco-era Spain, went on to found Christendom College in 1977, in the spirit of what they had seen in Spain. Christendom College, and a handful of other small Catholic liberal arts colleges founded in the 1970s and after, constructed themselves as opponents to the trajectory of the mainstream American Church. They viewed themselves as akin to the Medieval warriors of the *Reconquista* in Spain, or the military leaders of Franco’s coup, in that they believed they would one day sally forth to retake mainstream culture from the forces of secularism. As more recent events have shown, this was no mere romantic pipe dream or metaphor, but a serious plan to transform the cultural landscape of the US in their image.

Keywords: Spanish Civil War, Alt-Right, Conservatism, Traditionalism, Catholicism

Religious nationalists and the alt-right often seek, not only to preserve or reinvigorate the institutions and traditions of the past, but also, sometimes more importantly, to derive a sense of style and aesthetic from the past. This sense of style, or a “vibe” as internet culture would say, is sometimes more important than articulated intellectual connections with the past. In the United States, believers in religious nationalism sometimes look to Europe and its deeper stores of history for stories and heroes to emulate. One such story that perennially crops up among American religious conservatives is that of the Spanish Civil War, or, at least, a particular version of the history of the Spanish Civil War, in which the struggle is painted as an anti-Communist crusade, rather than a tragic conflict among neighbours.² A key activity in building right-wing movements, attracting followers to those movements, and solidifying the loyalty of those already within their ranks, is the creation of an idealized past.³ These idealized pasts

1. In the name of full disclosure, it is important to note that I attended Christendom College from 2002–2006 and received my BA from them, with a double major in History in English. I do not cite my own experiences in this paper, but I did draw, in writing it, on my general familiarity with this milieu.

2. See, for instance, David J. Valaik, “American Catholic Dissenters and the Spanish Civil War,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 52, no. 4 (1968): 539, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25018041>. Valaik details how, at the time of the Spanish Civil War, American Catholic newspapers simplified the nuances of the conflict for their readers.

3. See Felipe Ximénez de Sandoval, “Ruin Aesthetics in the Falangist Narrative of the Civil War: ‘Camisa azul’ (1939),” *Castilla Estudios de Literatura* 16 (2025): 199–228, <https://doi.org/10.24197/cel.16.2025>, which discusses the fascist myth-making and romanticization that took place immediately after the close of the Spanish Civil War, and, moreover, how these activities sought to draw a connection between ancient Spanish heroes, like El Cid, and the

typically have many elements of truth in their version of the narrative, but those truths are mixed with heavy misdirection, omissions, minimizations of uncomfortable elements, or out-and-out lies.⁴ Oftentimes, the glittering image of an idealized past blinds the followers of right-wing movements to the blessings of a pluralistic society, free speech, religious liberty, and individual rights, which they already enjoy. Christendom College, founded in 1977, deliberately invites its students and supporters on a new crusade. Christendom's founder, Warren Carroll, a historian by training, was inspired to found Christendom while studying in Franco-era Spain, where he breathed in, alongside other discontented conservative American Catholics, a triumphalist version of Spanish history that depicted its turmoils, from the *Reconquista* to the Spanish Civil War, as a single heroic arc. Christendom Press' approving biography of Warren Carroll called him "one man perched on a rock,"⁵ playing on a phrase that Carroll used to describe the heroes of the Medieval *Reconquista*, "thirty barbarians perched on a rock."⁶ Although small in number, Christendom's founders saw themselves as having the same potential as Medieval Spaniards, or Franco's military coup, to retake the entire U.S. culture and inaugurate a new Catholic order. By examining the rhetoric of the anti-modern Catholic subculture that birthed Christendom College, we can observe how an idealized past is created and deployed.

Deus Vult 2.0

In recent times, Medieval, Western European Catholic imagery has gathered many admirers, who include, not only practicing Catholics and religious believers of other denominations, but also members of the far-right, who often indiscriminately lump together different eras of European history, like the Vikings and the Crusades, into a pastiche of propaganda.⁷ This loose Medieval imagery both signals to other true believers and creates an ideal past, which proponents of tradition and religious nationalism can point to. Cord J. Whitaker, in a 2019 webinar for the National Humanities Center, "Medieval Chivalry, the Crusades, and the Modern Far-Right," took note of trends in modern-day American culture, in which the alt-right repurposed Medieval imagery and created a fictionalized past which they held up as an ideal.⁸ Whitaker noted that many of his students in his own classes had fallen into what he called "Medieval innocence," in that they were only aware of the glamorous aspects of Medieval history, and not the grisly ones like plague, or the statistical likelihood that one would have been a serf rather than a knight.⁹ Whitaker's observation reflects a broader concern within medieval studies: that the popular fascination with an idealized past can

combatants during the war. This article also draws connections between Franco's style and Mussolini's, noting how Mussolini self-consciously sought to invoke the imagery of the Roman Empire in his Fascist pageantry.

4. Jo Livingstone, for example, delineates how white supremacists since the 1800s have participated in creating an "imagined Middle Ages." See Livingstone, "Racism, Medievalism, and the White Supremacists of Charlottesville," *New Republic*, August 15, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/144320/racism-medievalism-white-supremacists-charlottesville>.

5. Laura S. Gossin, *One Man Perched on a Rock: A Biography of Dr. Warren H. Carroll* (Christendom Press, 2017).
6. Warren H. Carroll, *The Building of Christendom*, vol. 2 of *A History of Christendom* (Christendom Press, 1987), 259.

7. Andrew B. R. Elliot, "A Vile Love Affair: Right-Wing Nationalism and the Middle Ages," *The Public Medievalist*, Feb 14, 2017, <https://publicmedievalist.com/vile-love-affair/>. (The Public Medievalist is a volunteer, scholar-run online magazine.)

8. Cord J. Whitaker, "Medieval Chivalry, the Crusades, and the Modern Far-Right," YouTube video, 1:31:38, posted by National Humanities Center, October 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5jOUH8n2Z0>.

9. Whitaker, "Medieval Chivalry."

inadvertently reinforce narratives that are readily appropriated by nationalist and far-right movements.¹⁰

The Crusaders' motto, "Deus Vult," is one of the most recognizable watchwords of the religious right,¹¹ and online Templar memes are some of its most ubiquitous currency (see Fig. 1 below). Sometimes contemporary military conflicts are referred to as crusades in a casual way, and others with more explicit intention to draw philosophical connections between Medieval and modern wars.¹² However, as will be discussed below, decades before our recent discourse, the founders of Christendom College, travelling in Franco's Spain in the 1970s, viewed the Spanish Civil War as a crusade in a very real sense, and used it to inform their ethos when founding the college.

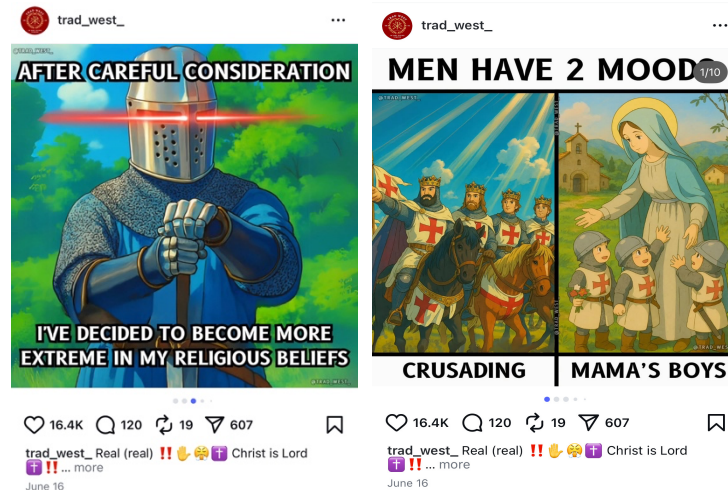


Fig. 1 Instagram posts, Trad West (@trad_west_), June 2025.

American Catholic Distinctiveness

In the late 1930s, the Spanish Civil War was a point of division for many American Catholics, one that separated them from mainstream consensus, which was largely pro-Republican or opposed to Franco's Nationalist rebels.¹³ The Spanish Civil War enjoyed widespread international scrutiny, with tens of thousands of international volunteers ultimately traveling to Spain to fight on both sides. Some foreign involvement was more formal, like the Nazi's support for the Nationalists, and the USSR's support for the Republics, but other individuals arrived piecemeal. The war also stirred up a good deal of literary attention: George Orwell volunteered for the Republics and wrote about his experiences in *Homage to Catalonia*,

10. Nick Roll, "A Schism in Medieval Studies, For All to See," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/19/one-professors-critique-another-divides-medieval-studies>.

11. For example, Pete Hegseth – an outspoken Christian conservative and current Secretary of the newly renamed United States "Department of War" – has a "Deus Vult" tattoo on his bicep, as well as a Crusader cross on his chest. See Lydia Wilson, "Pete Hegseth's Tattoos and the Crusading Obsession of the Far Right," *New Lines Magazine*, November 29, 2024, <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/pete-hegseths-tattoos-and-the-crusading-obsession-of-the-far-right/>.

12. See, for example, Alan Judd, "George W. Bush saw Iraq was as 'Crusade,' Declassified British Reports Say," *Straight Arrow News*, July 22, 2025, <https://san.com/cc/george-w-bush-saw-iraq-war-as-crusade-declassified-british-reports-say/>.

13. Richard Gid Powers, "American Catholics and Catholic Americans: The Rise and Fall of Catholic Anticommunism," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22, no. 4 (2004): 20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25154931>.

while Ernest Hemingway's experiences as a war correspondent inspired *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.¹⁴ On the Nationalist side, the Catholic convert, poet, and subsequent friend of the Inklings Roy Campbell, lived in Spain at the beginning of the war, and would later write in support of Franco emphasizing what he saw as the religious nature of the struggle.¹⁵

The American press saw the war as a struggle of democracy versus fascism, whereas many Catholics focused on their co-religionists' persecution at the hands of Communists and Anarchists.¹⁶ The Spanish Civil War was also an early instance of Catholic anti-Communism, which became a much louder point of faith, as well as ultimately a point of commonality between Catholics and the American mainstream, during the Cold War.¹⁷ Among Catholic publications in the US, *The Commonweal*, a lay edited publication, at first cautioned its readers against Franco, before ceding to financial pressure from readers to conform to the Catholic party line that Franco's war was a "crusade."¹⁸ Only the left-leaning and nonconformist *The Catholic Worker* refused to choose either side, and persisted in depicting the war as a tragedy rather than a righteous struggle.¹⁹ Nonetheless, history moved on, and American Catholics as a whole somewhat lost focus on the Spanish Civil War in light of the struggles of World War II that followed immediately after.

Reactionary Crusaders

Beginning in 1959, Francoist Spain implemented sweeping policy changes that were aimed at accelerating Spain out of the economic stagnation and poverty that had plagued it throughout the 1940s and 1950s.²⁰ The new policies invited foreign investment, normalized relationships with international financial networks, and cultivated a new image for Spain as an affordable, picturesque tourist destination. The policies enjoyed dramatic success, and are often referred to as the "Spanish miracle."²¹ At the same time, the aging Franco regime stepped up its self-mythologizing and historical revisionism on the Spanish Civil War as a crusade, trying to take advantage of the accelerating Cold War, and the new circumstance that most of the Western world now shared its intense opposition to Communism and the Soviet Union.²²

In the US, Vatican II and 1960s counterculture were about to spark a sharp parting of ways for left- and right-leaning Catholics, until they would barely seem to belong to the same religion. Catholic reactions to Vatican II were more along a spectrum than a binary, but they ranged from left-wing disappointment that the modernizing reforms of Vatican II had not gone far enough, to far-right conviction that the "Smoke of Satan," to borrow a well-known phrase, had entered the Church, or even that the popes since the death of

14. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Secker & Warburg, 1938); Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

15. Roy Campbell's book-length poem on the Spanish Civil War – *The Flowering Rifle* – not only explicitly praises Franco, but also includes anti-Semitic lines. See Roy Campbell, *The Flowering Rifle* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1939), 9.

16. Powers, "American Catholics and Catholic Americans," 21.

17. Powers, "American Catholics and Catholic Americans," 21.

18. David J. Valaik, "American Catholic Dissenters and the Spanish Civil War." *The Catholic Historical Review* 53, no. 4 (1968): 540–543, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25018041>.

19. David J. Valaik, "American Catholic Dissenters," 543.

20. Helen Graham, *Interrogating Francoism: History and Dictatorship in Twentieth-Century Spain* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 6.

21. Graham, *Interrogating Francoism*.

22. Graham, *Interrogating Francoism*.

Pius XII have been antipope impostors.²³ The conservative *National Review*, which was not, itself, a Catholic publication, but founded by the Catholic William F. Buckley, and with many Catholics among its writers, fully embraced the propaganda that Franco's regime was sending out into the world.²⁴ Just as the *National Review* shaped the tone and style of Cold War conservatism, so it also helped shape American Catholic opinion on Franco. Rather than focus on Franco's fascist or authoritarian tendencies, the rhetoric of the *National Review* declared Franco a defender of "Western Civilization" against atheism and Communism and thus humanized him by attaching him to the larger Western tradition.²⁵

In 1960, L. Brent Bozell Jr., a Catholic convert, writer for the *National Review*, and, some believed at the time, a rising star in the conservative movement, abruptly suggested to his wife Trish (William Buckley's sister) that they move their family, with several young children, to Spain.²⁶ Bozell was attracted by the low cost of living in Spain, as well as by the glowing recommendations of several of his conservative Catholic friends, including the philosophy professor Frederick Wilhelmsen, who taught at the Opus Dei-founded University of Navarra, as well as the University of Dallas. Upon moving to Spain, Bozell failed to reach even basic conversational fluency in the language, but nonetheless became convinced that in Franco's Spain, they still did "the Catholic thing" that had long been extinguished by the tides of modernity and secularism elsewhere.²⁷ Since Bozell could not converse with ordinary Spaniards, other than in translated conversations that were mediated by his right-wing travelling companions,²⁸ he had little opportunity to form an unfiltered opinion of Spain for himself that truly reflected the experiences of those out of favour with Franco's regime, as well as its beneficiaries.

Frederick Wilhelmsen, on a visit, took Brent and Trish to an annual Carlist commemorative gathering at Montejurra, in Navarre, that featured red-beret-wearing Requetés assembled en masse, as well as young boys and old men symbolically armed with pitchforks and tools, and Catholic banners unfurled.²⁹ The Carlists were a Spanish political faction dating from the 1800s, who backed the descendants of Don Carlos, Count of Molina, as claimants to the Spanish throne, in opposition to the Bourbons who had subsequently come to power. Their yearly gathering in Montejurra memorialized, not any battle during the Spanish Civil War, but the 1873 Battle of Montejurra during the Third Carlist War. During the Spanish Civil War, the Requeté militia of the Carlists supported Franco, although Franco did not support the Carlist cause.³⁰ Their fighters prayed the rosary daily and were the most fervent early adopters of the vision of the war as a crusade, in the lineage of the Medieval El Cid, who had fought the Moors.³¹ As a poetic lost cause, they attracted many of the conservative American Catholics who toured through Spain. The Carlist ceremony was a high point for Bozell, as he was swept up in the Medieval-seeming imagery, and stories of the Crusades, the Reconquista, and the martyred priests and laity of the Spanish Civil War all flowed together in his mind.³²

23. Mike Lewis, "What is Sedevacantism?" *Where Peter Is*, May 24, 2023, <https://wherepeteris.com/what-is-sedevacantism-who-is-a-sedevacantist/>.

24. William F. Buckley, "Letter from Spain," *National Review*, October 26, 1957, 369.

25. Sean Patrick Buchanan, "Symbolic Franco: Spain's Dictator in the American Conservative Imagination, 1950–1980" (MA thesis, Claremont Graduate University, 2020), 278. https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd/278/.

26. Daniel Kelly, *Living on Fire: The Life of L. Brent Bozell Jr* (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2014), 77.

27. Regis Martin, "Remembering Brent," *Crisis*, March 26, 2015, <https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/remembering-brent>.

28. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 81.

29. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 82.

30. Francisco J. Romero Salvadó, *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Civil War* (Scarecrow Press, 2013), 92.

31. Jeremy MacClancy, *The Decline of Carlism* (University of Nevada Press, 2000).

32. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 77–83.

Gradually, Bozell's self-conception began to change, from an American who happened to be Catholic to a Catholic who happened to be an American, and his former optimism on the mission of a pluralistic and tolerant American society faded.³³ A few years later, when Bozell led one of the first protests against the newly-passed *Roe v. Wade*, he and his associates decked themselves out in Carlist regalia: a red beret, a khaki shirt, a rosary around the neck, and a patch on their shirt with the image of the Sacred Heart.³⁴ One can only imagine the thoughts of spectators as they assembled outside of George Washington University Hospital in Washington, DC. Although both conservative writers were opposed to abortion, William Buckley condemned Bozell's group, which Bozell called *Los Hijos de Tormenta*, the Sons of Thunder, as overly sensationalistic but ineffective political theatre.³⁵ Nonetheless, Bozell's tactics were a forerunner of Christendom College's later, tamer pro-life efforts, which they would dub *Shield of Roses*, as rosary-praying students and faculty protested outside of abortion clinics in Washington, DC, and its suburbs, most weekends during the school year.³⁶

The Bozells only stayed in Spain for a bit more than two years, but, in 1970, they returned and brought friends.³⁷ In the years after his first stay in Spain, Bozell had split, on bad terms, from his erstwhile friend Buckley at the *National Review*, as Bozell now found Buckley insufficiently hardline on certain Catholic or political issues, and too prone to compromise with mainstream American society.³⁸ In 1966, Bozell founded *Triumph*, a short-lived Catholic magazine which offered commentary on religion, culture, politics, and world events from a traditionalist perspective.³⁹ *Triumph* only ran until 1976, but an intertwined project of Bozell's was an eight-week summer institute – the “Christian Commonwealth Institute” – in San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Spain, advertised in the magazine, which devotees of *Triumph*'s work could attend as an antidote to the presumably spiritually bankrupt American culture in which they found themselves.⁴⁰ Bozell by this time was openly negative towards America and apocalyptic about its future: as he wrote in June 1968 in *Triumph*, “Anyone who is not aware that the liberal Republic is coming down, and that it could be a matter of months, at most a few years, before the wreckage is visibly upon us, is too insensate to hope to draw into profitable conversation.”⁴¹ In its place, Bozell hoped, would rise a Catholic confessional state, perhaps with some of the *Triumph* summer institute attendees as its builders.

The *Triumph* writers seemed to waver in their messaging between the Benedict Option – a strategy of cultural withdrawal and community preservation popularized by Rod Dreher's 2017 book⁴² – and viewing themselves as “thirty barbarians perched on a rock” who would sally forth to retake it all. In another 1968 article in *Triumph*, Wilhelmssen wrote that Catholic Christianity had been the constituting and organizing principle of Western Civilization, ever since society had struggled back after the fall of the Roman Empire, and the West's recent discord and decline could be explained by its rejection of its Catholic

33. Kelly, *Living on Fire*.

34. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 192.

35. Jeet Heer, “Meet the Bozells, America's First Family of Right-Wing Violence,” *The Nation*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/bozell-buckley-right-violence/>.

36. “Largest Spring Mega-Shield Protest of Planned Parenthood,” Christendom College, March 18, 2013, <https://www.christendom.edu/2013/03/18/largest-spring-mega-shield-protest-of-planned-parenthood/>.

37. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 188.

38. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 142–146.

39. For a collection of Bozell's writings from *Triumph*, see: Brent L. Bozell Jr., *Mustard Seeds: A Conservative Becomes a Catholic* (Christendom Press, 2001).

40. Mark D. Popowski, *The Rise and Fall of Triumph: The History of a Radical Roman Catholic Magazine, 1966–1976* (Lexington Books, 2011), 49.

41. Bozell, *Mustard Seeds*, 89.

42. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (Sentinel, 2017).

roots since the time of the Enlightenment.⁴³ “We Catholics have been robbed of our civilizing role in history,” he wrote. “Living in a wholly secularist world, *we have nothing to do in history*” (emphasis his).⁴⁴ Wilhelmsen saw the modern world as in its “last agony,” although he left it ambiguous whether this meant that the world would be consumed by an apocalypse, or renewed after a period of collapse, as has happened many times before.⁴⁵ Warren Carroll’s view of the Catholic role in history was more optimistic, although militaristic. A favourite anecdote of Carroll’s was the story of Pelayo, the Catholic Visigothic nobleman who resisted the Muslim conquest of Spain after 711, high in the Pyrenees mountains in a remote stronghold, while the rest of Spain had fallen. Called on to surrender, Pelayo said, according to contemporary chronicles, “Our hope is in Christ; this little mountain will be the salvation of Spain and of the people of the Goths.”⁴⁶ One of the Muslim leaders did not even bother to try to take the stronghold, saying, “What are thirty barbarians perched on a rock? They must inevitably die.”⁴⁷ As history shows, the Spanish did, in fact, retake their entire country, although it was a 700-year-long struggle. The analogy was clear, that the small size or obscure circumstances of Christendom College meant nothing, since theirs was a holy war.

The summer institute held sessions each summer from 1970–1975, and was mostly attended by young people, college age or a bit older. In a rousing farewell lecture to attendees at the close of the 1972 program, Frederick Wilhelmsen said: “Every nation has its natural constitution...[for] the United States—the apotheosis of self-aggrandizement and enrichment. Spain was always the glory of the Holy God in his Holy Church.”⁴⁸ Against American society, now being transformed by the freewheeling counterculture and individualism that Wilhelmsen despised, Wilhelmsen said, “I urge this afternoon, my dear friends, that you go home and attack—attack on all fronts. God is with you.... How can you fail?”⁴⁹ He did not specify what exactly he envisioned by “attack.” He continued, “We will make America Catholic as the conquistadores made half the world Catholic, and if we do not do so we will have had the satisfaction of having served the King.”⁵⁰ The Commonwealth Institute speakers and Christendom College founders moved fluidly between poetic metaphor and literal battle plans in their rhetoric, which certainly afforded these right-wing activists ample room to maneuver.

William Marshner, who would become one of the founding faculty of Christendom College, wrote on his experiences at one of the Christian Commonwealth Institute’s centrepieces of its summer program, a visit to the Valley of the Fallen for Mass.⁵¹ The Valley of the Fallen is a monumental, neoclassical monument to the Nationalist dead of the Spanish Civil War, featuring the world’s tallest memorial cross and a massive underground basilica, and it was constructed in part using the labour of Republican prisoners from the war. Marshner dyspeptically contrasted the Valley of the Fallen’s overt religious imagery – which he regarded as superior – with the nondescript, secular war memorials erected by what he called “sensible,

43. Frederick Wilhelmsen, “Hallowed Be Thy World,” in *The Best of Triumph*, ed. Michael Lawrence (Christendom Press, 2001). Original article published in 1968.

44. Wilhelmsen, “Hallowed Be Thy World,” 427.

45. Wilhelmsen, “Hallowed Be Thy World,” 427.

46. Carroll, *The Building of Christendom*, 263.

47. Carroll, *The Building of Christendom*, 274.

48. Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, “Farewell Lecture,” in *The Best of Triumph*, ed. Michael Lawrence (Christendom Press, 2001), 56. Original lecture given in 1972.

49. Wilhelmsen, “Farewell Lecture,” 57.

50. Wilhelmsen, “Farewell Lecture,” 58.

51. William Marshner, “A Mass at the Valley of the Fallen,” *Triumph* 6, no. 3 (March 1971): <https://marshner.christendom.edu/?p=1530#more-1530>.

modern governments.”⁵² “Sensible, non-sectarian citizens” in other countries might come to see their government’s non-denominational war memorials from time to time, Marshner said, and think about “those poor young men who wanted to have it good like everybody else but got stuck in the army instead, and then wanted to get out after a normal hitch including the usual R and R and porno and native whores (because they’re only human) but are lying here instead.”⁵³ I am not sure where Marshner’s scathing hatred for, not just modern culture, but the people who participated in it, originated from, but it permeated other pieces of his writing as well.

In contrast to the secular monuments Marshner disapproved of, he glowingly described the architecture of the Valley of the Fallen’s façade – the cool vaults of its basilica, and its statues of “dark, militant angels” – and noted he felt aesthetically and spiritually transported by his experiences during Mass.⁵⁴ While Marshner saw the Valley of the Fallen as a generous monument by Franco to the war dead on both sides, and even mused that the Catholic martyrs of the war may have won spiritual favours that later won people over from Communism, the reality was darker. The Valley of the Fallen was a passion project of Franco’s, which was under construction from 1940 to 1954. To construct the enormous site, the regime used twenty thousand Republican prisoners of war from the Civil War, many of whom were injured or died due to the harsh working conditions.⁵⁵ Franco’s regime also took advantage of its hundreds of thousands of Republican prisoners for free labour in general, renting them out to private companies, and using them to complete giant public works projects.⁵⁶ Franco, who was still alive but in the last years of his life and his regime when Marshner attended Mass that day, would be buried there, alongside the bodies of the dead of both sides who had often been transported and buried there without their families’ consent. To this day, the site and its history are the subject of some controversy in Spain.⁵⁷

Carroll and Christendom

Warren H. Carroll, another friend of the *Triumph* crew, was not at the first Spanish institute in 1970, but Bozell asked him to teach a few classes there the following year.⁵⁸ Carroll held a PhD in History from Columbia University, which he had completed in 1959, but was something of a self-declared exile from academia.⁵⁹ He despised what he saw as the elitism, secularism, and moral relativism that had crept into contemporary academia, and so, after graduation, he had eventually gone to work for the CIA as an analyst of Communist propaganda.⁶⁰ One can only speculate that, during this time, Carroll became convinced of the galvanizing effect that a properly presented story, with flair and passion, can have on people’s sympathies.⁶¹ After he left the CIA, he converted to Catholicism, inspired by his wife Anne, and began to take an interest in the new right and politics. Similar to Bozell, enchanted by his summers in Spain with the obliging tour guide Wilhelmsen, and the pageantry of the Carlists, Carroll went from a believer in

52. Marshner, “A Mass,” para. 1.

53. Marshner, “A Mass,” para. 2.

54. Marshner, “A Mass,” para. 4.

55. Francisco J. Romero Salvadó, *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Civil War* (Scarecrow Press, 2013).

56. Paul Preston, *A People Betrayed: A History of Corruption, Political Incompetence, and Social Division in Modern Spain* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 335.

57. Danny Bird, “Eight Decades After Spain’s Civil War, a Controversial Monument Still Haunts the Country,” *TIME*, April 1, 2019, <https://time.com/5560387/spain-civil-war-monument/>.

58. Gossin, *One Man Perched on a Rock*, 152.

59. Gossin, *One Man Perched on a Rock*, 73.

60. Gossin, *One Man Perched on a Rock*, 74.

61. Gossin, *One Man Perched on a Rock*, 73–75.

American political culture to “an all-flags-flying confessional state triumphalist,” as Marshner later recalled approvingly.⁶² Always a prolix writer, Carroll began to plan out a body of historical works which would reflect this triumphalist viewpoint he had solidified in Spain. He eventually authored many books, but his writing style was always that of poetically depicting a scene for maximum emotional impact on the reader, rather than that of a neutral scholar.

Brent Bozell’s life story was tragic in many ways: he suffered from bipolar disorder and alcoholism, among other health issues, and his bipolar symptoms began to intensify in the later years of *Triumph*, which eventually, paired with recurring cash flow issues, caused the magazine to go under.⁶³ Carroll, however, felt inspired to gather a small number of fellow *Triumph* acolytes and refugees from academia around him, and founded Christendom College in 1977, just a year after the last *Triumph* publication.⁶⁴ Christendom College started out as a tiny, quixotic endeavour, which advertised itself as an alternative to mainstream Catholic universities that had grown liberal, with five founding faculty and twenty-six students in its first year.⁶⁵ Its grand-sounding name was informed by Bozell and Carroll’s aspiration to restore a Catholic social order that emulated Europe before the Reformation.⁶⁶ Christendom College also carried on the *Triumph* institute’s grand aspirations to remake the American social order; as a blurb in the college’s 1981–1982 bulletin read:

It is hardly controversial to maintain that the United States and the West are today clearly suffering from serious political malaise and disarray. Catholics seem to be particularly uncertain about how to participate effectively in the political system. This is unfortunate, since an authentically Catholic approach to the study and practice of politics is precisely what is needed for the renovation of the social order.⁶⁷

Carroll and the other Christendom founders sought to form their students into, to borrow the Protestant Evangelical term, part of the Joshua Generation to go forth and reclaim the culture.

Christendom College was one of a small but prominent handful of conservative Catholic colleges, such as Franciscan University of Steubenville, Thomas Aquinas College, Thomas More College, University of Dallas, and Wyoming Catholic College, which either were founded or redefined their image in reaction to the changes that took place in Catholic higher education in the 1960s and beyond. The 1967 Land O’Lakes Statement, published as the distillation of a conference on academic freedom in Catholic higher education held at the University of Notre Dame the previous year, affirmed the right of faculty at Catholic institutions to teach material that ran contrary to the doctrine of the Catholic Church.⁶⁸ This, and similar statements of dissent, like Charles Curran’s at Catholic University in DC,⁶⁹ showed the new, bold atmosphere in Catholic education in the wake of Vatican II, as educators now felt empowered to question Church teachings. The founders of Thomas Aquinas College were inspired to found their new college

62. Gossin, *One Man Perched on a Rock*, 162.

63. Popowski, *The Rise and Fall of Triumph*, 230.

64. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 189.

65. Gossin, *One Man Perched on a Rock*, 194.

66. “A History of Christendom College,” Christendom College, accessed February 14, 2026, <https://www.christendom.edu/about/a-history-of-christendom-college/>.

67. *Christendom College Bulletin*, 1981–1982, 47, Christendom College Papers, Christendom College Library, Front Royal, VA.

68. “The Idea of the Catholic University,” University of Notre Dame Archives Online, accessed February 14, 2026, <https://archives.nd.edu/episodes/visitors/lor/idea.htm>.

69. Paul C. Saunders, “A Cautionary Tale: Academic Freedom, ‘Ex Corde,’ and the Curran Case,” *Commonweal*, June 21, 2004, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/cautionary-tale-0>.

directly in reaction to and disapproval of the Land O’Lakes Statement, and what they saw as the “turmoil and disintegration [...] dominant relativism and skepticism” of mainstream institutions in that era.⁷⁰

At the beginning of each academic year, at Christendom College, the entire faculty takes an oath of fidelity to the Magisterium, although this is above and beyond what is normally expected from professors at Catholic colleges.⁷¹ One can find a fuller guide to “faithful Catholic colleges” from the Cardinal Newman Society, for those curious about the larger landscape of conservative Catholic colleges.⁷² Their guide valorizes colleges where nearly the entire faculty and student bodies are Catholic, and no speakers who oppose or question Catholic moral teaching are invited to campus. Such a homogeneous environment would doubtless shield young and impressionable students from the secular modern world, but graduates of these conservative colleges have had mixed results at maintaining their faith when they do step out into the world, with little preparation or inoculation for what they might encounter there. One way in which Christendom College differs from its counterpart colleges, although the different institutions do circulate professors and speakers amicably, is its emphasis on history. Warren Carroll was the only founder amongst these colleges whose background was in history; others had studied philosophy or theology, and shaped their colleges with imagery that was more contemplative and less martial – a tad more Benedict Option, although triumphalist rhetoric was typically present as well.⁷³ Christendom College was also the closest to Washington, DC: just a little more than an hour down I-66, so naturally its adherents’ thoughts would turn to the workings of power in the capitol.

Christendom College is one of a tiny handful of colleges in the US, along with Wyoming Catholic College and fundamentalist Protestant colleges like Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, VA, also just over an hour outside of Washington, DC, that decline all federal funding to avoid government interference in their curricula and community setup, which often involves teachings and community regulations that discriminate against women and LGBT individuals.⁷⁴ Patrick Henry, along with a few other fundamentalist Protestant colleges, was on the advisory board for Project 2025 at the Heritage Foundation, fulfilling PHC founder Michael Farris’ long-standing vision that the tiny, rigorously-trained student body at Patrick Henry would become part of “Generation Joshua,” which would go forth and retake America from the forces of secularism and relativism.⁷⁵ It is a quirk of the modern-day culture wars that Christendom College and Patrick Henry, although professing different creeds that historically would have been enemies, see themselves as on the same side in the larger struggle against liberalism, and support the same right-wing organizations like the Heritage Foundation.

70. “Mission and History,” Thomas Aquinas College, accessed February 14, 2026, <https://www.thomasaquinas.edu/about/mission-history>.

71. “Entire Christendom College Faculty Makes Oath of Fidelity to Church,” Christendom College, August 27, 2001, <https://www.christendom.edu/2001/08/27/entire-christendom-college-faculty-makes-oath-of-fidelity-to-church/>.

72. “The Newman Guide Recommended Colleges,” Cardinal Newman Society, accessed February 14, 2026, <https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/college/>.

73. William Marshner, “Our Educational Philosophy,” *Christendom Magazine*, 1983, <https://marshner.christendom.edu/?p=1745#more-1745>.

74. Iby Caputo and John Marcus, “Some Religious Colleges Forego Federal Funding, Staying Free of Civil Rights Rules,” *The Hechinger Report*, July 7, 2016, <https://hechingerreport.org/religious-colleges-forgo-federal-funding-staying-free-civil-rights-rules/#:~:text=Among%20the%20other%20schools%20that,which%20have%20150%20and%2022>.

75. “Project 2025 Continues to Grow with 60 Partners Preparing for Next Presidential Administration,” Heritage Foundation, May 19, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/press/project-2025-continues-grow-60-partners-preparing-next-presidential-administration>.

Warren Carroll was Christendom's first president until he stepped down in 1985 and then taught history classes there until he retired in 2002.⁷⁶ Nearly all students who came through Christendom took his classes, and so his influence over students' intellectual development was uniform and permeating.⁷⁷ Some Christendom senior thesis titles from those early years include "The First Amendment and Catholicism: Are they Compatible?" (Yes, according to the thesis, but not in the sense that modern secular culture understands it), and a thesis that Carroll supervised, "The Civil War in Spain: A Twentieth-Century Crusade," from 1986.⁷⁸ Oddly enough, for a history thesis, its introduction explained: "The following is not intended to be a historical account of the Spanish Civil War. Its purpose, rather, is to show that it is a modern crusade."⁷⁹ The thesis had a bibliography of just sixteen titles, perhaps a bit short even for a thesis from before the days of digital resources. The writer, as Carroll would later, drew heavily on Hugh Thomas' history of the Spanish Civil War, which was the standard English-language work for many years.⁸⁰ If the purpose of this senior thesis was not to investigate a period of history, then was it to demonstrate that the writer had imbibed the right beliefs and was prepared to defend them?

Although Christendom College's student enrollment, even in recent decades, has only ever risen into the hundreds,⁸¹ and they have indeed remained small by design, they have always had powerful connections. William Casey, Ronald Reagan's Director of Central Intelligence and a devout Catholic, knew of the college and supported it, and in turn was posthumously honoured by a reading room named after him in their library, and by a donation from Sophia Casey, his widow, of \$150,000 to create the William J. Casey Scholarship Fund.⁸² Vernon Walters, a former Deputy Director of the CIA and Reagan's US Ambassador to the UN, served for many years in the 1980s on Christendom's board of directors. One of the daughters of Paul Weyrich, the founder of the Heritage Foundation, attended Christendom, and she later served on its board of directors.⁸³ I name these influential friends of the college to emphasize that they were not just some fringe group of true believers, but rather an organization which had the potential, and certainly the intention, to impact larger American culture and politics in real ways.

"When you kill a Red, you will have a year less in Purgatory"

Warren Carroll finally completed a book-length work on the Spanish Civil War, *The Last Crusade*, in 1996, drawing on earlier classes he had taught for his students at Christendom.⁸⁴ The general tone of the book can be summarized by Carroll's approving quote of a Carlist slogan, which, he said, echoed

76. Gossin, *One Man Perched on a Rock*, 271.

77. "Warren H. Carroll, Founder of Christendom College," Christendom College, accessed February 14, 2026, <https://www.christendom.edu/about/warren-h-carroll/>.

78. Angelique N. Syversen, "The First Amendment and Catholicism: Are they Compatible?" (Senior Thesis, Christendom College, Front Royal, Virginia, 1982), and Laura Hibl, "The Civil War in Spain: A Twentieth-Century Crusade" (Senior Thesis, Christendom College, Front Royal, Virginia, 1986).

79. Hibl, "The Civil War in Spain," introduction.

80. Hibl, "The Civil War in Spain," bibliography.

81. "Christendom College," Cardinal Newman Society, accessed February 14, 2026, <https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/college/christendom-college/>.

82. Dennis Lynch, "Christendom Creates Casey Scholarship Fund," *Northern Virginia Daily*, September 27, 1990, 38.

83. "Father of College Alumna and 'Religious Right' Paul Weyrich Dies at 66," Christendom College, January 8, 2009, <https://www.christendom.edu/2009/01/08/father-of-college-alumna-and-religious-right-paul-weyrich-dies-at-66/>.

84. Warren H. Carroll, *The Last Crusade: Spain, 1936* (Christendom Press, 1996).

the sentiment of the original Crusades: “When you kill a Red, you will have a year less in Purgatory.”⁸⁵ At various points, he takes issue with other well-known historians of the Spanish Civil War, including Hugh Thomas and Paul Preston.⁸⁶ Thomas was a centrist who started out his historical journey in sympathy with the Republicans, but who leaned more towards the Nationalists as he grew older.⁸⁷ His book,⁸⁸ *The Spanish Civil War*, was, nonetheless, still damning enough towards the Nationalists to be banned in Franco’s Spain.⁸⁹ Paul Preston’s thousand-page biography *Franco*, originally published in 1993,⁹⁰ aroused Carroll’s particular hostility: he called Preston’s assertion that Franco’s Catholicism was mostly political pageantry, and not sincere, “contemptible.”⁹¹ Many of Franco’s contemporaries, incidentally, also commented on his lack of discernible ideology, as one of his ministers called him “a sphinx without a secret.”⁹²

In August 1936, the Battle, or Massacre, of Badajoz was one of the first full-scale engagements of the Spanish Civil War, close to its beginning. Badajoz is a city close to Spain’s border with Portugal, with ancient fortifications. Led by Lieutenant Colonel Yagüe, Spanish Foreign Legion and Moroccan troops overwhelmed the less well-equipped, less trained Republicans, and took the city within a few days. Afterwards, Yagüe allowed his troops to sack the city, and presided over the execution of somewhere upwards of a thousand known Republican sympathizers at the city’s bullfighting ring, where they were gathered together, mown down with machine guns, and transported in trucks to the town’s cemetery, where they were burned.⁹³ Documentation of this massacre is abundant, as four Portuguese reporters were present for the events and described the horrific sights they witnessed. One, Mario Neves, was so shaken by what he saw that he vowed to never return to Badajoz.⁹⁴ *The Washington Post* also reported on “bloody Badajoz.”⁹⁵ A writer for the *Chicago Tribune* numbered the victims of the massacre at around eighteen hundred, and, like Neves, recounted that witnessing the cold-blooded killing left him “sick at heart and in body.”⁹⁶

For his part, Warren Carroll would later write of Badajoz:

It was called a massacre, wildly exaggerated by foreign correspondents and Republican propaganda at the time and by many historians ever since. But a massacre is a slaughter of helpless men, women and children who have no arms and cannot escape. (There were many of these to come, mostly inflicted by the revolutionaries.) All through history the storming of a heavily defended city has led to scenes like those enacted at Badajoz August 14, 1936. They are part of the generic horror of war; but no one at a safe distance, writing at a safe desk, is in a position to judge men fighting in such a place, against such enemies, in so

85. Carroll, *The Last Crusade*, 207.

86. Carroll, *The Last Crusade*, 52 and 57.

87. Alan Cowell, “Hugh Thomas, Prodigious Author of Spanish History, Dies at 85,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/10/obituaries/hugh-thomas-prodigious-author-of-spanish-history-dies-at-85.html>.

88. Thomas Hugh, *The Spanish Civil War* (Harper & Row, 1986).

89. Pablo Guimón, “Obituary: Hugh Thomas, Author of Seminal Book on the Spanish Civil War,” *El País*, May 8, 2017, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/05/08/inenglish/1494240641_585596.html.

90. Paul Preston, *Franco: A Biography* (HarperCollins, 1993).

91. Carroll, *The Last Crusade*, 205.

92. Preston, *Franco*, 701.

93. Salvadó, *Historical Dictionary*, 71.

94. Clara Sanz-Hernando, “War Chronicles: The Massacre of Badajoz and the Battle of the Alcázar of Toledo in the Portuguese press,” *Ler História* 77 (2020): <http://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/7581>.

95. Jay Allen, “Slaughter of 4,000 at Badajoz, City of Horrors,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 30, 1936.

96. Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos, *Eyes of the World: Robert Capa, Gerda Taro, and the Invention of Modern Photojournalism* (Henry Holt & Company, 2017), 54.

savage a struggle. Let him who has met death face to face across the blade of a revolutionary's knife cast the first stone. Blood is thicker than ink.⁹⁷

This type of minimization of massacres as either part of the natural events of war, or exaggerated by later accounts, was somewhat of a refrain in Carroll's work, as he sought to memorialize a particular version of the past, but felt compelled to acknowledge other perspectives. When writing on the Crusaders' infamous conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 and their subsequent massacre of the city's inhabitants, for example, he says this: "It is no excuse, far less a justification, but may be some palliation of what the Crusaders did immediately after bursting into Jerusalem, to point out that until the invention of the explosive shell made city walls obsolete, almost every army in every country in situations like this occasionally went out of control."⁹⁸

Other atrocities from the Nationalist side, like the famous bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by Germany's Condor Legion in 1937,⁹⁹ or the White Terror of purges and political executions that followed Franco's victory at the end of the war,¹⁰⁰ or the tens of thousands of children taken from left-leaning or poor parents to be given to wealthy Nationalist families during Franco's regime,¹⁰¹ simply do not appear in Carroll's work. Carroll does frequently offer that his history seeks to honour the memory of the Catholic martyrs at the hands of Republican violence; the difference between the mainstream historical treatment of the Spanish Civil War, and Carroll's angle, is that no mainstream history denies the killing of Catholic priests, nuns, and bishops during the early months of the war.¹⁰² The *National Review*, incidentally, went further than Carroll and outright called the accounts of the bombing of Guernica fake news. For example, a 1973 article in the *National Review* by Jeffrey Hary called Guernica a fraud,¹⁰³ along with accounts of US excesses in the Vietnam War, and was one of the most controversial *National Review* articles of the Cold War.¹⁰⁴ In a further wrinkle, a few Catholic priests who supported Basque separatism were also executed during the war.¹⁰⁵ Guernica itself was a center of the Basque independence movement, which is why it was selected for destruction, but also a thoroughly Catholic town. In a church in the center of the town, as it went up in flames, a priest tried to use communion wine to put out the fires around him.¹⁰⁶ One of the few points of criticism Carroll had for Franco was that he was ungrateful to the Carlists, as he appointed relatively few sympathizers in his new government, and viewed them with mild suspicion as monarchists and possible subversives.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, during the years of the *Triumph* summer institute, the attendees' enthusiastic chatter on Carlism had been overheard by Franco's police, and one attendee had been sent

97. Carroll, *The Last Crusade*, 102.

98. Carroll, *The Building of Christendom*, 545.

99. Larry A. Grant, "Guernica," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Paul Joseph, (SAGE Publications, 2017), 746–747, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483359878.n285>.

100. Salvadó, *Historical Dictionary*, 21.

101. Nicholas Casey, "Taken Under Fascism, Spain's 'Stolen Babies' Are Learning the Truth: Thousands of Spanish Children Were Taken from Hospitals and Sold to Wealthy Catholic Families. This Is Ana Belén Pintado's Story," *New York Times*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/27/magazine/spain-stolen-babies.html>.

102. See Julio de la Cueva, "Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition and Revolution: On Atrocities against the Clergy during the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 3 (1998): 355–369, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261121>.

103. Jeffrey Hary, "The Great Guernica Fraud," *National Review*, January 5, 1973, 27–29.

104. Buchanan, "Symbolic Franco," 48.

105. Salvadó, *Historical Dictionary*, 55.

106. Adam Hochschild, *Spain in our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 176.

107. Carroll, *The Last Crusade*, 205.

home early for anti-Franco statements.¹⁰⁸ This might have alarmed another American studying abroad, but not Carroll.

In 1977, the same year Christendom College was founded, and two years after Franco's death, Spain's parliament passed an amnesty law for participants on both sides of the war, which was aimed at protecting Spain's fragile new democracy.¹⁰⁹ Often called the "pact of forgetting," this much-criticized act has been described as aimed at discouraging investigation into the past. One group which has attempted to counter this is the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, founded in 2000, and run by over 5,000 volunteers – professional archeologists, anthropologists, and forensic scientists, as well as ordinary civilians.¹¹⁰ The Association lost its funding in 2011 as a new coalition government came to power, and a slew of Spanish-language books that rehashed old Francoist propaganda sprang up around the same time.¹¹¹ In a 2023 VICE News documentary on the Association's efforts, a reporter pressed Norberto Pico, the leader of a present-day falangist and traditionalist group in Spain, on whether he denied the atrocities, massacres, rapes, mass graves, and theft of children from their parents that took place at the hands of the Nationalists during the war.¹¹² Pico contended that there was insufficient evidence for any of these allegations, and then prevaricated, "But I'm not a historian. I'm trying to do politics in 2023."¹¹³ For some individuals, history only matters under very specific circumstances.

Unlikely Illiberal Allies in the Continuing Culture War

Other commentators have also noted general parallels between the Cold War-era right's affection for Franco's Spain – not only by the writers of *Triumph*, but also by more mainstream publications like the *National Review* – and the contemporary right's promotion of Orban's Hungary.¹¹⁴ Like the *Triumph* writers, many contemporary right-wing intellectuals have either made pilgrimages to Hungary, or outright moved there, to better experience life under Orban's illiberal Christian democracy.¹¹⁵ Right-wing thinkers of both eras view Spain, and now Hungary, in a rather idyllic way, as nations blessed with a glorious Catholic past which they were/are self-consciously resurrecting and preserving through moralistic legislation.

During the final years of Trump's first term, a critically acclaimed off-Broadway play put small Catholic conservative colleges back into the popular consciousness. Will Arbery's 2019 *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* depicts four young Catholics who reunite at an afterparty celebrating the inauguration of a new college president, at a small liberal arts college in Wyoming that is heavily based off of Wyoming

108. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 189.

109. "Spain," International Commission on Missing Persons, accessed February 14, 2026, <https://icmp.int/the-missing/where-are-the-missing/spain/>. See also: Paloma Aguilar, "The Spanish Amnesty Law of 1977 in Comparative Perspective," in *Amnesty in the Age of Human Rights Accountability*, ed. Francesca Lessa and Leigh A. Payne (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 315–335.

110. Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, "What Is the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH)," accessed Feb 14, 2026, <https://memoriahistorica.org.es/who-are-we/>.

111. Preston, *A People Betrayed*, 549.

112. VICE News, "The Skeletons of Spain's Fascist Past," YouTube video, 16:35, posted by Vice News, July 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exDUKAJ9NIM>.

113. VICE News, "The Skeletons," 10:20.

114. Joshua Tait, "Long Before Hungary, the Right was Fixated on Another Country," *The Bulwark*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/long-before-hungary-the-right-was-fixated-on-another-country>.

115. Ana Luisa Albuquerque, "Hungary's Plan to Build an Army of US Intellectuals," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/19/hungary-american-conservative-right-wing-intellectuals-orban/>.

Catholic.¹¹⁶ Three of the friends are graduates of the college, and the other, Emily, is the daughter of the new college president, who lives with her parents because of an unspecified chronic illness. Will Arbery himself is the son of Glenn Arbery, the former president of WCC. *Politico* named it one of “eight pieces of pop culture that defined the Trump era” in a 2021 article, praising Arbery’s adeptness in humanizing the adherents of an ideology, while still taking conservatism to task for its lack of empathy.¹¹⁷ Incidentally, the *Politico* article came out just before January 6th, while *Heroes* is set in the aftermath of Charlottesville, and tackles, among other subjects, the acceleration of political violence, and the right’s increasing comfort with warlike rhetoric or calls-to-arms, that threatens to bubble over from metaphor to reality. In the conversations of his four main characters on one dark Wyoming night, Arbery traces Catholic conservatism’s unlikely cultural arc from the Cold War to Trump, whose crass populism is a far cry from the romantic and genteel worldview of Buckley and Bozell. Charlottesville, Steve Bannon, Pat Buchanan, Barry Goldwater, the John Birch Society, the Benedict Option, *Portlandia*, and more come up over the course of the evening. The characters in *Heroes* waver between ideological and disillusioned, but, in one monologue, one of them, Kevin, sums up the yearning for certainty that might lead young Catholics to believe one-note narratives like Warren Carroll’s:

I want it to all be 100% true & perpetual & urgent. And I want the binaries to be true – good and evil – the party line – I want sinners to go to hell, I want the righteous to be assured of the kingdom of heaven, I want abortion to be stopped, transgender people to be given, I dunno, gentle psychiatric attention, wars to end, and slums to spill over with life-saving Christian charity. I want us all to live it, all the time. I want us all to believe it, all the time. But that doesn’t happen, right? Things stay bad and mundane and confusing and EMPTY— not only because we’re not good believers, and we don’t truly believe it all the time, and we’re lazy – but ALSO because there are billions of people on this planet who don’t believe it, who have never pretended to believe it, and who somehow manage to live beautiful, moral lives without the pressure of having to believe it. So what the heck do we do with them?¹¹⁸

Arbery’s play was praised by conservatives as well as by liberals,¹¹⁹ precisely because it captured this yearning for truth, for heroism, and for certainty, that Carroll’s version of history appealed to. It also questioned whether a faith-based in these triumphalist feelings of certainty could weather the ambiguity that young people encounter in the modern world once they venture beyond their particular belief communities.

Christendom College and its followers easily flowed from Cold War culture wars to those of the contemporary era. Christendom professor Bracy Bersnak travelled to Orban’s Hungary twice, in 2019 and again in 2022, presenting both times at the Orban-backed Tusványos festival and summer university.¹²⁰ Tusványos was originally a harmless summer camp meant to promote Carpathian culture and cross-border dialogue, but it has become more an expression of Orban’s regime in recent years. In 2022, Bersnak presented on the panel *New Conservatism in the 21st Century*, proclaiming, “The future of conservatism

116. Will Arbery, *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, script accessible online at: https://media.playwrightshorizons.org/filer_public/2019/07/18/heroes_of_the_fourth_turning_-_061319.pdf.

117. Derek Robertson, “Eight Pieces of Pop Culture that Defined the Trump Era,” *Politico*, January 2, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/02/pop-culture-trump-era-2020-analysis-449495>.

118. Arbery, *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, 32–33.

119. Rod Dreher, “Will Arbery’s *Heroes*,” *The American Conservative*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/will-arbery-heroes-of-the-fourth-turning/>.

120. “Professor Defends Christian Values in Europe,” Christendom College, February 25, 2020, <https://www.christendom.edu/2020/02/25/professor-defends-christian-values-in-europe/>.

must inevitably come from the past.”¹²¹ Just in early 2025, Christendom alumnus Mark Rohlena became the new president of the well-heeled conservative Catholic Napa Institute, whose previous speakers have included Lindsey Graham, J. D. Vance, and L. Brent Bozell Jr.’s son L. Brent Bozell III.¹²² Both Christendom College and Wyoming Catholic’s current college presidents were present at an April 2025 Heritage Foundation forum in Washington, D.C. on “Reclaiming the Culture of American Higher Education.”¹²³ Incidentally, L. Brent Bozell IV, the original Bozell’s grandson, was one of the January 6th rioters in Washington, DC, and was sentenced to time in prison for his part in the attacks.¹²⁴

Part of the reason I have chosen to focus on Christendom College is that there is very little academic commentary on this topic,¹²⁵ or on conservative Catholic colleges in general: Mary Jo Weaver covered Christendom along with other small conservative Catholic colleges in her chapter in the 1995 *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, but she dismissed these new institutions’ missions as quixotic and implausible.¹²⁶ The possibility of a right-wing coup such as Franco’s happening in the US seemed, in the nineties, like either a fever-dream nightmare or a far-fetched daydream, depending on one’s ideological affiliations. As recent articles have noted, despite his anti-mainstream trajectory, the successes of religious nationalism have forced commentators to take Brent Bozell seriously, as they search the twentieth century for the germinating factors of the theocratic conservative resurgence.¹²⁷ If we can glean anything from contemporary political events, it is surely that the dreams of reactionaries for a confessional state are not nearly as implausible as we may have hoped and believed a decade ago.

Not only is Christendom College entwined with other institutions across the landscape of the contemporary religious right, but Warren Carroll’s ideas on the Spanish Civil War have found a new and eager audience. Far-right news commentator Jack Posobiec, also known for promoting the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theory that a popular Northwest DC pizzeria was a secret site of child sex trafficking and Satanic ritual abuse,¹²⁸ has spoken approvingly of Franco on several platforms. Posobiec’s 2024 book *Unhumans: The Secret History of Communist Revolutions (And How to Crush Them)*, with a foreword by Steve Bannon, revives the rhetoric of the John Birch Society from the Cold War, and does, in fact, proclaim “McCarthy

121. Tamás Orbán, “Old Principles, Modern Approaches: Defining Conservatism in the 21st Century,” *Hungarian Conservative*, July 26, 2022, <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/philosophy/old-principles-modern-approaches-defining-conservatism-in-the-21st-century/>.

122. “Alumnus Mark Rohlena Named President of the Napa Institute,” Christendom College, January 10, 2025, <https://www.christendom.edu/2025/01/10/alumnus-mark-rohlena-named-president-of-the-napa-institute/>.

123. Josh Moody, “Conservatives Seize the Moment to Remake Higher Ed,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2025/04/09/conservatives-seize-moment-remake-higher-ed>.

124. Ryan J. Reilly and Julia Jester, “Conservative Scion Brent Bozell IV Sentenced to Nearly Four Years in January 6 Case,” *NBC News*, May 17, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/justice-department/conservative-scion-brent-bozell-iv-sentenced-jan-6-case-rcna151150>.

125. There is a sociological-ethnographic examination of Catholic postsecondary institutions in the U.S., with some focus on Christendom College, but the study primarily analyzes the response of the American Catholic Right to the Second Vatican Council reforms. For further details, see Michael W. Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

126. Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America* (Indiana University Press, 1995).

127. Jacob Heilbrunn, “He Was Dismissed as a Conservative Kook. Now the Supreme Court Is Embracing His Blueprint. To really understand the GOP’s hard-right turn, look to L. Brent Bozell Jr.,” *Politico*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/07/07/leo-brent-bozell-abortion-game-00044246>.

128. Karma Allen, “Trump Retweets Alt-Right Activist Who Pushed ‘Pizzagate’ Conspiracy,” *ABC News*, August 15, 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/trump-retweets-alt-activist-pushed-pizzagate-conspiracy/story?id=49221083>.

was right” in a subsection of one chapter.¹²⁹ Like Carroll, Posobiec sees the forces of evil as a coherent movement throughout history, and, like Carroll, he draws ties between the French Revolution’s original rejection of Church and Crown, and the Russian Revolution’s ultimate attempt to realize a Communist society.¹³⁰ *Unhumans* contains a chapter on the Spanish Civil War, in which Posobiec declares that almost all the historical works on it are wrong, in that they unfairly portray Franco as a fascist and a dictator.¹³¹ The only accurate work he’s found, he says, is Warren Carroll’s *The Last Crusade*.¹³² Posobiec even quotes a long paragraph straight from Carroll, affirming that Carroll’s view of the Spanish Civil War as a holy war is correct.¹³³ To associate Franco’s cause with that of the modern-day religious right in the US, Posobiec says that Franco’s message could be “translated for modern audiences” into “Make Spain Great Again!”¹³⁴ In 2024, Posobiec and other far-right X accounts also began posting “Franco Friday” photos and clips of the dictator in commemoration, sometimes accompanied by the rallying cry, “Viva Cristo Rey!” It is unclear how Posobiec, who is Catholic, came across Carroll’s works, but the ideological cross-fertilization runs strong in right-wing Catholicism from the Cold War to the present.

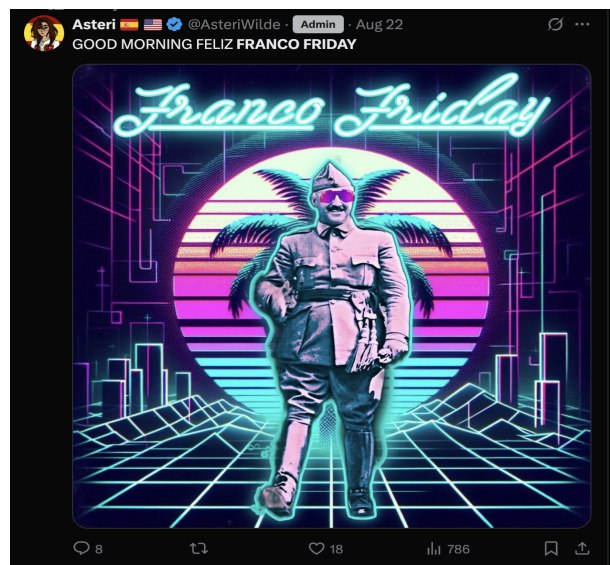
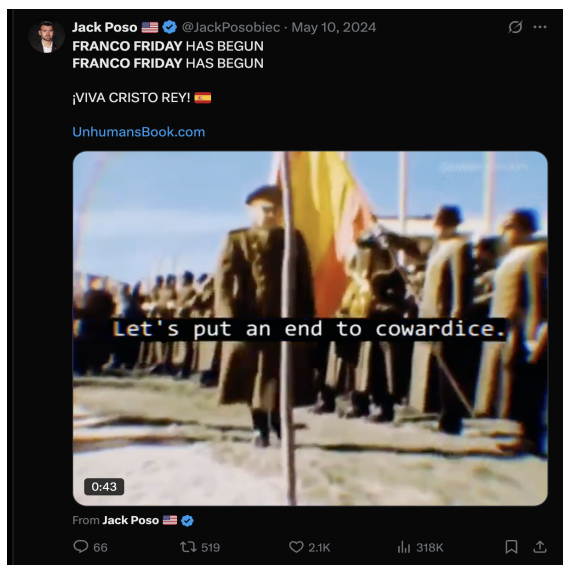


Fig. 2 Posts on X. Posobiec, Jack (@JackPosobiec) 2024; Asteri Wilde (@AsteriWilde) 2025.

Warren Carroll labelled the Spanish Civil War “the Last Crusade” in an effort to imbue it with a romantic aura,¹³⁵ but the war was actually an ugly struggle and, for Franco and his followers, a successful grab at power that led to the values of one group being imposed on a nation for decades. While some conservative and traditionalist Catholics acted on their frustration with and alienation from the world of the 1960s by withdrawing to small enclaves of fellow believers, others withdrew only to strengthen their

129. Jack Posobiec and Joshua Liseć, *Unhumans: The Secret History of Communist Revolutions (And How to Crush Them)* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2024), 213.

130. Posobiec and Liseć, *Unhumans*.

131. Jack Posobiec and Joshua Liseć, “The Last Crusade: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War,” in *Unhumans: The Secret History of Communist Revolutions (And How to Crush Them)* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2024), 143–176.

132. Posobiec and Joshua Liseć, “The Last Crusade.”

133. Posobiec and Joshua Liseć, *Unhumans*, 134.

134. Posobiec and Joshua Liseć, *Unhumans*, 142.

135. Carroll, *The Last Crusade*.

followers' ideology and resolve. Christendom College, and other small alternative Catholic, as well as fundamentalist Christian colleges, formed followers who, on the surface, seem to care about historical accuracy and the search for truth, but who also come equipped with hefty blinders that shield them from considering any counter-narratives. Preserving the imagery of a crusade became, for Carroll and his mentees, more important than delving into accurate narratives of the past. The appeal of black-and-white narratives of the past is quite powerful and deserves to be studied for itself, to afford us a window into the mindset of those who view themselves as crusaders and their enemies in the culture wars as evil. The Spanish Civil War, and the history of the histories of the Spanish Civil War, is one microcosm of right-wing repurposing of the past, but there are many such narratives afloat, and more will proliferate unless we learn to diffuse the seductive power of history/story as propaganda.

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