

# Proud Boys, Nationalism, and Religion

Margo Kitts

*Hawai'i Pacific University*

## **Abstract:**

The Proud Boys are an opportunistic hate group whose message of white male chauvinism is infused with religious and nationalist symbols. They fit into the global trend of religious nationalism in that they are driven by a reaction to religious pluralism, entertain atavistic yearnings, and celebrate a founding hero, Donald Trump. Enthralled with fist fighting, in both their initiatory rituals and their engagements with antifa groups, they delight in offending the genteel sensibilities they associate with the "white liberal elite." They are proudly anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and anti-feminist, but their list of enemies appears to be ever shifting, suggesting a toxic virility run amuck. While they are but one expression of an enduring European-American chauvinism, their celebration of masculinity resembles the masculinism and misogyny that arose in response to the Victorian era in the US.

## **Keywords:**

Proud Boys, hate group, religious pluralism, white nationalism, religious nationalism, misogyny

It is impossible not to notice the upsurge in religious nationalism world round. From the Middle East to Asia, we hear of a rise in impassioned religious identities, not just the familiar Jewish Zionists and Salafi-Jihadi Muslims, but the Hindutva movement in India, the Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka, the 969 and MaBaTha movements in Myanmar, and many others which attract fewer headlines. Europe and the United States have their own nationalist groups, of course –The Five Star Movement and AfD winning notoriety in Europe and Identity Evropa and countless Neo-Nazi offshoots being notorious in the US.<sup>18</sup> Although each is rooted in complex historical contingencies, and their group dynamics are not equally insular, all of these movements do share three features: a yearning for some kind of lost golden age, a lionization of classical heroes, and a repulsion from the dilution of culture that inevitably accompanies globalization.<sup>19</sup> Another feature these

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/identity-evropa>

<sup>19</sup>On contemporary Asian nationalist movements, see excellent summaries by Jaffrelot (2007 and 1999), Schonthal and Walton (2016), Jerryson (2016), and Frydenlund (2017).

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movements seem to share is that their rhetoric slips frequently into that of religious hatred and cultural chauvinism.

In the United States there is a new contender for the label of most notorious nationalist group: the Proud Boys. Similar to other nationalist movements, the Proud Boys exist to oppose contemporary religious pluralism. Like Hindutva and the Bodu Bala Sena movements they have explicit cultural foes (Jews, Muslims, feminists), have civilizational heroes (Donald Trump), and have constructed a romanticized historical legacy: Make America Great Again, which of course is Donald Trump's motto. Although by all accounts they were born the night of the US presidential election in 2016, the Proud Boys yearn for an era when, as founder Gavin McInnes puts it, "men were men and girls were girls," which is to say the pre-feminist era of the 1950s and the nuclear family. As Noel Kent put it about the Oahu chapter, they long for "a mythical golden age that's never existed" and "basically want to take us back to the pre-civil rights days and the social hierarchy that existed then."<sup>20</sup> While these may not seem to be explicitly religious goals, entwined with their nationalist rhetoric is, they say, a loyalty to Judeo-Christian ethics, Western civilization, and the Greco-Roman tradition of the Republic.<sup>21</sup> But anyone who knows history at all can see how little informed are their conceptions of these.

The purpose of this essay is to summarize Proud Boy ideology as one among the ever multiplying and fluid alt-right ideologies in the US. Below are discussed the Proud Boys in brief, their ritual traditions, their promotion of misogyny and Incels, their enthrallment with violence, and their embrace of western cultural chauvinism, with a highlight first on superficial Christian ideas and second on the metapolitical background that informs Proud Boys and other alt-right movements.

### **Proud Boys in Brief**

"White men are not the problem" is a key motto of the Proud Boys. They claim that the targets of their loathing are not exclusively racial or ethnic,<sup>22</sup> and that anyone can join as long as s/he agrees with the basic motto that the ills of contemporary society are not due to white men. Despite that claim about inclusivity, their adulation of Western civilization is distinctly hostile to multiculturalism, particularly to sharing the label of Western civilization with Jews and Muslims. They are hostile as well to feminism which, in their view, has eroded the natural gender order and the nuclear family, seen as the backbone of Western civilization. In terms of self-proclaimed identities, Proud Boys are a mixed bag of titles and slogans, ranging from Incels (involuntary celibates),<sup>23</sup> who rage against women's liberation and their own lack of sexual opportunity, to Catholic Proud Boys, who fashion themselves white knights defending conservative Catholic social teachings.<sup>24</sup> There are some too who identify with Odinists and Asatru, although with a

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>21</sup> <https://officialproudboys.com/uncategorized/what-is-a-western-chauvinist/> Lloyd Somerset, contributor to Proud Boy Magazine).

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/25/raw-hatred-why-incel-movement-targets-terrorises-women>

<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/cathproudboys?lang=en>.

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limited awareness of how broad or historically deep those affiliations can be.<sup>25</sup> In the same vein, some tout neo-Nazi and skinhead symbols, replete with hand gestures such as the A-OK sign, but indicating not A-OK, but rather, with three fingers up, A-KKK, for the Ku Klux Klan. Overall, with its variety of affiliations and ever shifting list of enemies, the Proud Boys can be understood as a quirky hate group eager to promote a storybook picture of Western society that few of us have seen in our lifetimes.

Religiously speaking, while the Proud Boys do extoll the "sacred roots, mythic symbols and eschatological values" (Stern 2020) of the West, they show few signs of actual religious literacy. Instead, what is unmistakably religious about the Proud Boys is what they oppose. Proud Boys are in the main anti-Semitic and Islamophobic, proclaiming the superiority of white Western civilization, conceived as male, and, as noted above, with a fairly limited awareness of what Western civilization is and how it was built. There are no classical historians among them, for instance, nor religious historians.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, few of their most visible members are old enough to have earned PhDs. Gavin McInnes, their founder, is currently 49, but in age he is an outlier and he has only a bachelor's degree.

There has arisen something of a cult of personality for McInnes, who is delighted to scandalize what he considers the white liberal elite. Although he claims now to disapprove of violence, Proud Boy rallies have been full of it, as crowds thrilled to his overtly racist and misogynistic tropes and incitements to physical altercations. Most notable of these incidents are the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August of 2017, where one of his boys killed Heather Heyer by car, a Patriot Prayer march in June of 2018 in Portland, where Proud Boys and others of similar ilk came to blows with antifascist groups, and another in New York in October 2018, where nine of his Proud Boys were arrested for beating up counter-protesters, and two sentenced to four years in prison. You can still hear him in his podcast Get Off My Lawn (GOML), which is back again on YouTube, surprisingly, as he was banned from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for inspiring hate. The signature taunt in his current program is: "We tried their way. We tried apologies, capitulation, and shame. Now its time for them to try something. GET OFF MY LAWN."<sup>27</sup>

In sum, the Proud Boys are an opportunistic hate group in that just about every hate is permitted. To promote hate, they stage publicized marches in major cities, inaugurally in February 2017 when Breitbart acolyte Milo Yiannopoulos was disinvited from speaking on UC Berkeley's campus. This led to a brawl of Proud Boys versus students. There is now even a group in Honolulu, which is usually a beacon of multiculturalism. The Oahu chapter is distinguishable from mainland groups because members are somewhat ethnically mixed, yet united by support for Trump and by iconic

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/04/far-right-white-supremacists-berkeley-protests-antifa-trump/>  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2016/principals-race-war-plot-said-practice-neo-pagan-asatru-religion>  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/asatru-heathenry-racism/543864/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate>

<sup>27</sup> <https://getoffmylawnpod.libsyn.com/>; <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>. See his latest on the Floyd riots: "The Race War is Here." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F\\_2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F_2c), in which he in fact says little about the race wars, and much about erection supplements.

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chants such as "Black Lives Don't Matter" and "Build the Wall"<sup>28</sup>—neither of which is particularly relevant to the island of Oahu. Still, due to their hate filled rants, they managed to be expelled from a local university campus after they barged into a meeting of the Ethnic Studies department and refused to leave. By Oahu's ohana standards, the local chapter seems cartoonish. If they weren't violent, they would be laughable.

### **Ritual Initiations**

Before we get into their religious targets, let us explore their peculiar initiation rituals. Yes, they have initiation rituals, which suggests they are deliberate in building up group spirit. Because of their violence, Proud Boys initiations are reminiscent of adolescent initiation rituals in groups prone to war, as studied by anthropologists.<sup>29</sup> But they are also reminiscent of college fraternity initiations from decades past, that is, they are sensational and sophomoric. The steps are four.

First, one must publicly declare oneself a Proud Boy, "boy" being the operative word here. Part of the Proud Boys mission is to foster masculine identity. Although there is a fledgling Proud Boys' Girls organization, to date they are quite low profile, although, as explored below, there are a few recent European female members with emerging online personalities.<sup>30</sup> In the past, McInnes has said that women were not allowed to join Proud Boys, and also that women tended to be lazy and wanted to be downright abused, which is why he had to "stop playing nice with them."<sup>31</sup>

Second, a new initiate must allow himself to be pummeled by fist by other members while the initiate shouts out five kinds of breakfast cereal. Why? While the breakfast cereals may be arbitrary – presumably a trope for Americana culture – McInnes says there is a motive behind enduring physical abuse: "[T]his is all to train for "better 'adrenaline control'." "Both physical fighting and arguing require you to maintain your composure and not get petty... Defending the West against the people who want to shut it down is like remembering cereals as you're being bombarded with ten fists," he said.<sup>32</sup>

Another aspect to this component of endurance is that one must vow to stop masturbating and to shun pornography. The claim is that masturbation increases one's sense of solitude, and detracts from two goals of the group: (1) the pursuit of ideal relationships with a significant female other and (2) enhancement of one's sense of belonging to a "pro-West fraternal organization" comprised of men who "refuse to apologize for creating the modern world."<sup>33</sup> Proud Boys approve of heterosexuality, provided women "know their place." In the meantime, the fraternal bonds are to replace whatever pleasure Proud Boys used to take alone, through masturbation.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>29</sup> For an anthropological analysis of violent bonding rituals among adolescent males, see Alcorta and Sosis (2005), Whitehouse (2007) and Kitts (2018).

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/post/proud-boys-hawai-i-#stream/0>.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/15/17978358/proud-boys-gavin-mcinnis-manhattan-gop-violence>.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.myrecipes.com/extracrispy/why-the-proud-boys-initiation-ritual-involves-cereal>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.myrecipes.com/extracrispy/why-the-proud-boys-initiation-ritual-involves-cereal>

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Third one must get a Proud Boys tattoo. Although some of these have images of roosters, the primary thing appears to be the words Proud Boy on one's forearm or chest.

Fourth, according to the Daily Dot,<sup>34</sup> one must engage in physical violence with members of Antifa, a label loosely applied to antifascist protesters. In Proud Boy thinking, the two groups inversely define each other. Proud Boys must "serve the cause," says McInnes, by engaging in a physical brawl with the far-left and anarchist antifascist movement.<sup>35</sup> It is apparent to anyone who follows them that the group is thrilled with violence. After nine Proud Boys were arrested and two convicted for fighting in New York in December 2018, McInnes claimed he was done with violence. However, in February of 2017 he had argued, "I want violence. I want punching in the face." And "violence doesn't feel good, justified violence feels great, and fighting solves everything."<sup>36</sup>

### **Misogyny and Incels**

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Proud Boy ideology is its open misogyny and longing for 1950s era gender roles. Nick Ochs, Proud Boy founder in Hawai'i, proclaims they are "alt-lite, proud Western Chauvinists," who "venerate the stay-at-home housewife."<sup>37</sup> McInnes himself believes that "95 percent of women would be happier at home," "I'm fine with being perceived as a misogynist. That's fine. [But] extreme radical hate group... that's nuts." "Maybe the reason I'm sexist is because women are dumb. No, I'm just kidding, ladies. But you do tend to not thrive in certain areas — like writing."<sup>38</sup>

Of course, the anti-feminist sentiment is mixed into a soup of other sentiments. McInnes says that Proud Boys are pro-life, pro-free-speech, pro-drug legalization, and pro-Trump, while they stand against Islam, Nazism, and feminism. He manages to hit two birds with one stone when he says that Muslim women don't really mind rape: "It's such a rape culture with these immigrants, I don't even think these women see it as rape. They see it as just like having a teeth [sic] pulled. 'It's a Monday. I don't really enjoy it,' but that's what you do. I wouldn't be surprised if [rape] doesn't have the same trauma as it would for a middle-class white girl in the suburbs because it's so entrenched into their culture."<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, Proud Boys approve of heteronormative marriage, and tie this to the taboo on masturbation. Masturbation fosters self-indulgence, private pleasure, and prevents men from connecting with partners. Ostensibly, the taboo promotes finding a mate, and also promotes male bonding, because masturbation distracts from the Proud Boy mission. This is part of their push back against a decadent liberal culture, with its internet porn and hook-up sites, all of which is taken to be lamentable modern-day hedonism. The anti-masturbation platform is not so surprising as some of them adore the Catholic Church, also a traditional pillar against private pleasure. One

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/proud-boys/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/proud-boys/>

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/gavin\\_mcinnes\\_955883](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/gavin_mcinnes_955883)

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>38</sup> <https://podbay.fm/podcast/1309316469/e/1529080817>

<sup>39</sup> <https://podbay.fm/podcast/1309316469/e/1529428354>

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article points out that Proud Boys are to limit masturbation to once every 30 days. Even then they are not allowed to climax unless they are within one yard of a woman and with her consent. This policy has a name: #No-Wanks.<sup>40</sup>

Then there are the Incels. Officially predating Proud Boys, they intersect with Proud Boys in their distaste for women who insist on autonomy and in their fixation on sex, in their case on not having sex. "Incel" is short for "involuntarily celibate," used to describe young men who claim to feel ignored, even berated, by women. They are active mostly on social media,<sup>41</sup> where they can complain without risk of face to face engagement with women. According to Vox:

Incels have developed an elaborate sociopolitical explanation for their sexual failures, one that centers on the idea that women are shallow, vicious, and only attracted to hyper-muscular men. They see this as a profound injustice against men like them, who suffer an inherent genetic disadvantage through no fault of their own. A small radical fringe believes that violence, especially against women, is an appropriate response — that an “Incel Rebellion” or “Beta [Male] Uprising” will eventually overturn the sexual status quo.<sup>42</sup>

We might think this a joke, except that in April 2018 Alek Minassian rented a truck in Toronto and rammed it into a crowd, killing 10, injuring 15, proclaiming on facebook that "The Incel Rebellion has already begun!" Minassian, it seemed, was following in the wake of sexually frustrated Elliot Rodger, who, in 2014, killed six and wounded 14 in a shooting spree in Santa Barbara, California, because he was still a virgin. According to his online manifesto, this was retaliation against women en mass because they refused to have sex with him, despite the fact that he was a supreme gentleman. Rodger was praised by Minassian as a “Supreme Gentleman” on Facebook just before the Toronto attacks.<sup>43</sup>

How do proud boys and Incels link up? According to Sarah Diefendorf in *The Cut*, paraphrased in an article by Thomas Mcbee, the manosphere and opposition to feminism are the links. The "manosphere," blogs dedicated to men's rights, lately promote abstinence from marriage, sex, and dating because, they claim, feminism has ruined it all. There are forums for MGTOWs, Men Going Their Own Way, who feel they are losers in a gender war and prefer to just stay out it. And of course Incels are mad that they get no sex. Together they promote a hatred and disgust with women that many of us have not seen in our lifetimes. As Diefendorf sees it, Incels feel a loss of power, which she ties with Proud Boy defiance.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.thecut.com/2018/12/a-sociological-investigation-of-nowanks.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/4/25/17277496/incele-toronto-attack-alek-minassian>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189>; <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/4/25/17277496/incele-toronto-attack-alek-minassian>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.thecut.com/2018/12/a-sociological-investigation-of-nowanks.html>

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### **Violence**

It is surely cheap psychology to pin Proud Boy violence on a sense of powerlessness and sexual frustration. We religious historians argue that ideas truly move people, quite alongside any sociological or psychological frustrations, which is not to say the two cannot coincide. The violent ideology among Proud Boys is decidedly atavistic: they long for a return to an era when, as McInnes said, men were men and girls were girls. A toxic masculinity is on display particularly in the open thrill in fist fighting, in the face of a society which shuns it. Two prongs of the aforementioned initiation rituals, the cereal fighting and the antifa fighting, attest to this thrall with fighting. McInnes's motto – "I want violence. I want punching in the face"<sup>45</sup> – apparently captivates other Proud Boys as well, even the Hoa Proud Boys on Oahu, where, one would think, a more aloha mentality would be appealing. But, as chapter leader Nick Ochs grudgingly admits: "We're not averse to breaking your nose, if you attack us," he said. "People think that's controversial to say. I don't find it to be such. I'm not personally itching for a fight. I don't enjoy fighting. ... But it's not the worst thing in the world."<sup>46</sup>

The Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, or FOAK, is a Proud Boy fighting wing. It apparently took flight when, during a pro-Trump march on the UC Berkeley campus in 2017, Kyle Chapman was filmed slamming antifascist protesters with a stick. When he was arrested, Proud Boys crowdfunded his bail money. Chapman calls FOAK the Proud Boys' "tactical defensive arm." According to McInnes, FOAK is strictly a defensive shield against antifa or black block activists.<sup>47</sup> But we have already heard his opinions on the thrill of fighting.

Rich Lowry in the *National Review* made a few good points about the "marketable product" that McInnes is selling. He compares McInnes and Proud Boys to British soccer hooligans, as described by Bill Buford in *Among the Thugs*. Buford claims that despite his search for reasons for hooliganism, the mayhem of violence seems to be its own point. "Violence is one of the most intensely lived experiences and, for those capable of giving themselves over to it, is one of the most intense pleasures."<sup>48</sup>

It would be a mistake not to take seriously the Proud Boy enthrallment with violence, particularly in June of 2020 (the time of this writing). Because of their appetite for violence overall and their agitation for civil conflict in particular, the Proud Boys are rumored to see the Black Lives Matter protests as a stage to raise mayhem with the ultimate goal of promoting civil unrest, enticing governmental forces to respond forcefully against civil rights activists, and ushering in what has been called the "boogaloo."<sup>49</sup> The Proud Boys may not be identical with the "Boogaloo Bois," but their aims are similar: to disrupt our multicultural society, launch a civil war, and restore Western

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/10/gavin-mcinnnes-proud-boys-poisonous-violence/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/proud-boys/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/10/gavin-mcinnnes-proud-boys-poisonous-violence/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-boogaloo-extremists-new-slang-term-for-a-coming-civil-war>. See too <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/twitter-takes-down-washington-protest-disinformation-bot-behavior-n1221456>

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civilization as they envision it.<sup>50</sup> Notably, McInnes announced on his May 29, 2020 youtube show, "the race war is here."<sup>51</sup>

### **Western Chauvinism**

#### *White Christian Culture versus Everyone Else*

The one thing that defines Proud Boys above all is the endorsement of Western chauvinism. As noted in Proud Boys magazine, a Western chauvinist "is a proponent of Western Civilization, someone who supports a secular government whose legal code is informed by Judeo-Christian ethics and whose origins lie in the Greco-Roman tradition of the Republic."<sup>52</sup> Despite this proclamation of Judeo-Christian ethics, many Proud Boys members are outrightly anti-Semitic and apparently blind to the contradiction. As Brian Brathovd put it in his podcast The Daily Shoah, if the Proud Boys "were pressed on the issue, I guarantee you that like 90% of them would tell you something along the lines of 'Hitler was right. Gas the Jews.'"<sup>53</sup> Founder McInnes, after a recent trip to Israel, got down and dirty: "Hebrew is "spit talk" and "whole language is clearing your throat, it's like Gaza, they're launching little tiny missiles from your mouth onto your shirt." Israelis, he said, have a "whiny paranoid fear of Nazis that's making them scared of Christians and Trumps who are their greatest allies."<sup>54</sup>

What is astonishing about the overt anti-Semitism is that, until the last decade, most US citizens thought they had transcended the anti-Semitic vitriol of a century ago. Then they heard the chant at the Unite the Right march in Charlottesville: "Jews will not replace us" (alternatively "You will not replace us"<sup>55</sup>). It may seem obvious that this was a fabricated fear, as Jews comprise just 1.9% of the US population, according to the Pew Research Census.<sup>56</sup> Yet anti-Semitic incidents are surging all over the US – the Anti-Defamation League counts nearly 2000 each in 2018 and 2019, and those are just reported incidents.<sup>57</sup> As for a reason behind the fixation of Proud Boys on Jews, one can only guess that having a declared ethnic enemy, even an imaginary one, consolidates the base.

*McInnes is certainly the mouthpiece for this vitriol. Among "Ten Things I Hate about Jews," recently amended to, "about Israel," he includes that Jews are not grateful enough about America defeating Nazi Germany, that they can't get over dwelling on the past, "[a]nd this whole nation-state is talking about 'Seventy-five years ago, my people were killed.' Always the Jews, always killing us, we are the scapegoats."<sup>58</sup> He also astonishingly blames Jews for the deaths by starvation*

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-boogaloo-extremists-new-slang-term-for-a-coming-civil-war>;

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F\\_2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F_2c),

<sup>51</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F\\_2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F_2c),

<sup>52</sup> <https://officialproudboys.com/uncategorized/what-is-a-western-chauvinist/> Lloyd Somerset, contributor to Proud Boy Magazine).

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/vice-co-founder-lists-the-10-things-he-hates-the-most-about-jews-1.5449718>

<sup>55</sup> The rallying cry seemed to shift back and forth. <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/you-will-not-replace-us>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.adl.org/what-we-do/anti-semitism/anti-semitism-in-the-us>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/rebel-media-star-gets-flak-10-things-hate-jews-video>

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of millions of Ukrainians under Josef Stalin. “I think it was 10 million Ukrainians who were killed. That was by Jews. That was by Marxist, Stalinist, left-wing, commie, socialist Jews.”<sup>59</sup> Further he blames “Jewish intellectuals” for influencing the treaty that ended World War I and paved the way to World War II.<sup>60</sup> This cabal of conspiracy theory resembles the hysteria of the old Protocols of Zion, which is to say that its seeds are not fresh, but persistent.<sup>61</sup>

As for what is Christian about this group, on the surface it appears to be Christian only insofar as it detests what is not Christian. There is a vast history to this apparent ignorance. To US historians, Christian identity is eminently pliable. As Daniel Lee points out:

In the colonial era, for instance, religion differentiated Puritans, Quakers, Catholics, Mennonites, and other sects from one another. Yet religion was also used to consolidate all Christians against the “savage” Native Americans. On the plantations of the antebellum South, masters and slaves were “united in Christ.” Nonetheless, racially segregated congregations developed exclusive modes of religious expression. Blacks and Whites were clearly aware that they worshiped the same God in different ways. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, White Americans rallied around their common Christianity in a desperate attempt to organize themselves against the growing population of non-Christian, non-White Americans. (2004:2).

Thus, religion has both united and divided citizens since the colonial era and remains a flag to wave over identity and difference for the Proud Boys in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although few Proud Boys likely have studied it, Proud Boy anti-Semitism is rooted in a concept called Christian supersessionism. Supersessionism decries the religious openness of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), and especially its dictum of *Nostra Aetate*, which stipulates that Jews were and remain God's chosen people. Hard supersessionists claim that the Jews can no longer claim to be the Chosen people because God has retracted the covenant of chosenness stemming from Abraham, and has chosen the Christians instead.<sup>62</sup> Christians are cosmically destined to lead, a destiny which will come to fruition in history. One may see this sentiment among, for instance, Zionist Christians, who support the Jewish claim to the promised land of Israel, but only until the messiah comes.<sup>63</sup>

In the face of globalization and multiculturalism, another conspicuous Proud Boy theme is the fear of lost identity and a sense of victimization. As Jason Kessler, avowed white nationalist, pointed out on the *The Gavin McInnes Show*, “What’s really under attack is if you say, ‘I want to stand up for white people. I want to stand up for western civilization. I want to stand up for men. I want to stand up for Christians,’” to which McInnes nodded in agreement and added other

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/rebel-media-star-gets-flak-10-things-hate-jews-video>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/rebel-media-star-gets-flak-10-things-hate-jews-video>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.wired.com/2017/03/internet-protocols-elders-zion/>

<sup>62</sup> Novak 2019. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/02/supersessionism-hard-and-soft>

<sup>63</sup> See Durbin 2019.

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examples: "I'm against immigration...I'm against jihadis. I'm against radical Islam."<sup>64</sup> In a New York Times profile, McInnes is reported to have said, "I don't want our culture diluted. We need to close the borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, English-speaking way of life."<sup>65</sup>

Anti-immigrant voices have become notably shrill since the election in 2016, and, here is something perhaps novel, Proud Boy spokespersons now include three female European media personalities who agitate against the diffusion of white culture: Tara McCarthy, Brittany Pettibone, and Lana Lokteff. McCarthy hosts the Reality Calls podcast (subtitle: Let's Make Western Civilization Great Again) and partners with Pettibone in another, Virtues of the West, which extolls the nuclear family, motherhood, patriotism, and traditional gender roles. Lokteff with her husband hosts a radio show Radio3Fourteen which celebrates European identity and culture, from Sweden and the US.<sup>66</sup>

However, the ideology of the Proud Boys seems to be ever fluctuating, as are its targets. It has been pointed out that founder McInnes plays a duplicitous rhetorical game in rejecting the label of white nationalist and alt-right while espousing many tenets associated therewith.<sup>67</sup> He claims the group is not racist nor homophobic, but, as pointed out, all members must adhere to the belief that "white men are not the problem."<sup>68</sup> Although he has promoted racial eugenics in the past, on the subject of African Americans his furor lately is directed against white liberals.

I don't dislike minorities. I hate white liberals and the good news is, their days are numbered. The myth of "diversity is our strength" is contingent on nobody trying it. When we're all forced to live side by side, we'll quickly realize we are incompatible, and agree to disagree. The blind utopians at the *New York Times* will be crushed and the rest of us realists will be dancing in the streets.<sup>69</sup>

Elsewhere he claims that white liberals infantilize African Americans by depriving them of full responsibility for their failures in school and their surplus in prison populations:

This does way more damage to black youth than the KKK. When you strip people of culpability and tell them the odds are stacked against them, they don't feel like trying. White liberals make this worse by then using affirmative action to "correct" society's mistakes. When blacks are forced into schools they aren't qualified for they have no choice but to drop out. Instead of going back a step to a school they can handle, they tend to give up on higher education entirely. Thanks to the Marxist

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<sup>64</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate>. Lokteff's Radio3Fourteen is affiliated with Red Ice, a media platform for alt-right propaganda.

<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/10/21/youtube-takes-down-red-ices-main-channel>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/proud-boys/>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.amren.com/news/2014/06/america-in-2034-7/>

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myth of ubiquitous equality, this ‘mismatch’ leaves blacks less educated than they would have been had they been left to their own devices.<sup>70</sup>

Whatever the merits or demerits of these racial claims, McInnes's Islamophobia is indisputable. For one thing, he claims the label, Islamophobe: “I’m not a fan of Islam. I think it’s fair to call me Islamophobic” (*Gavin McInnes, NBC interview, 2017*). And “Palestinians are stupid. Muslims are stupid. And the only thing they really respect is violence and being tough.”<sup>71</sup> However spurious, he also quips, “Why don’t we take back Bethlehem? Why don’t we take back Northern Iraq? Why don’t we start our own Crusades? That’s what the Crusades were. They weren’t just someone picking on Muslims for no reason — they were a reaction to Muslim tyranny. We finally fought back.”<sup>72</sup> One is never sure if one should take McInnes's ignorance seriously, but if he means what he says, *he does not appear to know that western Christians initiated the Crusades and lost all but the first one, a surprise attack on Jerusalem which rid the city not just of Muslims, but of Christians and Jews. He knows nothing about Charlemagne or Bernard of Clairvoux, the schools of crusader knights and commoner pilgrims, or for that matter that it was Muslim Saladin who opened the city of Jerusalem to all Abrahamic religions. As pointed out earlier, few if any Proud Boys are highly educated.*

*To be fair, McInnes's xenophobia does not appear restricted to Muslims or Jews. In "Ten Things I Like about White Guys," he said “We brought roads and infrastructure to India and they are still using them as toilets. Our criminals built nice roads in Australia but aboriginals keep using them as a bed. The next time someone bitches about colonization, the correct response is ‘You’re welcome.’”<sup>73</sup>*

### ***Underlying Metapolitics***

*But there are deeper roots to the Proud Boys' ideological platform.* However sensational, Proud Boy ideology is rooted in a European chauvinism at least two centuries old, which we can barely cover here. Yet we would be remiss not to acknowledge some key ideas and the relatively sophisticated deployments of them to advance an insidious ideology of Western cultural supremacy. Recently Stern has described this religious rhetoric in terms of white nationalist “metapolitics,” metapolitics being to politics like metaphysics is to physics<sup>74</sup>:

To study the “meta” required forays into the transcendental and religious dimensions of politics, which in turn often translated into a foregrounding of “sacred roots, mythic symbols, and eschatological values” (Bosteels 2010).

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<sup>70</sup> Gavin McInnes, “America in 2034,” *American Renaissance*, June 17, 2014.

<https://www.amren.com/author/gavinmcinnes/>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS-sniVi3IU>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS-sniVi3IU>

<sup>73</sup> [https://www.takimag.com/article/10\\_things\\_i\\_like\\_about\\_white\\_guys\\_gavin\\_mcinnes/](https://www.takimag.com/article/10_things_i_like_about_white_guys_gavin_mcinnes/)

<sup>74</sup> Typically the notion of metapolitics is ascribed to Gramsci, although there are disputes about that ascription. <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/praxis1313/karl-ekeman-on-gramscianism-of-the-right/?cn-reloaded=1>

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Metapolitics was distinct from, if not antithetical to, materialism; it rejected classic Marxism or structuralism and was outside the epistemological margins of empirical disciplines such as sociology or history. (Stern 2020:13).

Bosteels, in turn, describes metapolitics thusly:

Metapolitics, in this first broad sense, is the study of the ultimate founding ideas, myths, and values behind all concrete forms of political practice. It signals both a movement by which political science becomes increasingly self-reflexive and the possibility of rooting the empirical and mundane in *transcendent or transcendental—frequently divine or eschatological—principles*. As such, the term frequently acquires a pejorative connotation, for example, in Peter Viereck's study into the dark cultural and spiritual roots of Nazism. (Bosteels 2010: 2) [italics added]

The emphasis on "sacred roots, mythic symbols, and eschatological values" over materialism and conservative political action (voting, campaigning, supporting political candidates, etc.) highlights identity-myths and ethnonationalist atavism, which capture the ideological leanings of the Proud Boys and other proponents of the Alt-Right. Relevant metapolitical notions include the aspiration that heroic white men – in some treatises the chosen descendants of Adam (Gardell 2006) – are destined to defeat the variegated forces of darkness and to lead the world [back] to a divinely sanctioned golden age. While this notion is in some ways informed by 19<sup>th</sup> colonialism and praise poets such as Rudyard Kipling ("white man's burden"<sup>75</sup>), there are also mystical, transcendental ideas elaborated in 20<sup>th</sup> century treatises. Savitri Devi (1905-1982), Julius Evola (1989-1974), and René Guénon (1886-1951) are a few European intellectuals who championed racist eschatologies and predicted an apocalyptic moment of truth which would establish a stable civic life with a right racial hierarchy based on innate aptitudes (Stern 2020:33-44, 75).

Lest this white longing be seen as merely the fascist fantasies of a few extremists, we should point out that there remain some enduring and influential organizations in Europe which publicly lament the disintegration of European heritage and actively promote a European Renaissance, in the form of the New Right (an unstable term, per Casadio (2014)). The French Group for the Research and Study of European Civilization (GRECE) is one cultural association which extolled Hellenic origins and pride as early as 1968 (Casadio 2014, Stern 2020). According to GRECE, cultural power is a necessary prelude to political power – a staple notion of metapolitics— and therefore the GRECE elite strives to promote classical philosophies (e.g. Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas) and literature in order to reinvigorate European self-awareness and to discourage any

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<sup>75</sup> See Rudyard Kipling: "White Man's Burden" at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5478/>. See too his exaltation of rugged manliness: "If" at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46473/if--->.

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leanings toward cultural egalitarianism.<sup>76</sup> There are of course similar groups in Italy (Casadio 2014) and elsewhere. It is a huge topic.

Transposed to US soil in the last few centuries, such ideals promote a dream which, if less than classically informed, is romantic and tinged with apocalypticism. Gardell reflects on white racist religions in the US:

Knightly values such as courage, strength, honesty, honor, and valiance are hailed as primary Aryan virtues. ... they can rise above the trivialities of the everyday commoner and emerge in shining armor at the battleground for the final conflict, lifting their swords for race, nation, blood, and honor. (Gardell 2006:5)

It is disputable whether Proud Boys study their ostensible European roots, but it is not hard to imagine that they respond to the heroism implicit in the idea of defending an endangered white identity. Fed by a victimization narrative and the craving for a white patriarchal ethnostate, the Proud Boys are but one expression of the social disintegration so apparent now within our multicultural and religiously pluralistic society. Their identitarian sentiments are fed by clever internet sites and memes, such as "the red pill" (from the Matrix trilogy) to refer to the moment of true awakening to white identity and destiny.<sup>77</sup> But however more edgy and creative, the Proud Boy narrative today continues a 20th century pining for a climactic battle of ideas to restore European patriarchal hegemony over culture and civic life.<sup>78</sup>

### **Conclusion: Why Now?**

Although McInnes claims the Proud Boys were meant to be a sophomoric group of hoodlums promoting politically conservative antics and a lot of beer drinking, they have also become a political force. Even though the group was only born with the 2016 election of Trump – which McInnes called the greatest night of his life – it now claims anywhere from 6000 to 20,000 members,<sup>79</sup> its own national anthem ("Proud of Your Boy," from the musical *Aladdin*), a fighting wing, explicit sexual taboos, ill-defined but nonetheless evident atavistic longings, and a wide range of declared enemies: Antifa, Muslims, Jews, Blacks, women, and white liberals being chief among them. McInnes says that his boys are just normal. They want to return to an era when men's groups played a larger role in American society, to have families, live in the suburbs, and love America. But as Lowry points out, the atavistic impulse of the Proud Boys is straight from the movie *Fight Club*, in which a violent men's group revolts against a banal, overly feminized bourgeois society by holding clandestine fistfights.

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<sup>76</sup> According to Casadio, GRECE explicitly chose to abandon militant and activist ambitions in order to nurture an ideological platform with two themes: anti-egalitarianism and the definition of an authentically European identity (2014: 51)

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

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So the question is why now? A plurality of reasons seems plausible, but two which are easy to identify are a response to the feminization of society and a reaction to globalization, as seen in the chorus of voices proclaiming identity in the face of difference.

First, it should be noted that 1930s era paramilitary groups such as Blackshirts and Sturmabteilung often come up as parallels to the Proud Boys, because of their glorification of violence and targeting of Jews. But, depending on which of the Proud Boy targets one fixes upon, one could also compare the Proud Boy rebellion with an earlier era and culture: that of 19<sup>th</sup> century American masculinism and misogyny such as we see in the writings of Melville, Thoreau, and Mark Twain, all of whom were eager to reject the controls of a Victorian society they identified as feminine and suffocating. The origins of toxic masculinity in the overreach of 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian sensibilities have been noted by Ann Douglas (1998), Josh McMullen (2015) and Josephine Robbins (2017), who see hyper-masculinism as a reclamation of the frontier mentality of rugged individualism and as a rejection of the lack of virility and vigor associated with Victorian refinement.<sup>80</sup>

Since the 1960s and the second wave of feminism, unquestionably US culture has shifted complexly, integrating women and their concerns, and also inspiring extreme reactions against them. It is not a simple topic, but it is an astonishing truth that not only the Incels but the broader Proud Boys repudiate the women's movement, to the point of insisting on the label of "girls," venerating the stay at home housewife, and McInnes explicitly calling women "dumb." The Proud Boy women Tara McCarthy, Brittany Pettibone, and Lana Lokteff too repudiate the women's movement, blaming it for the decline in western civilization and ruination of the nuclear family. For that matter, just indulging in fistfighting is a repudiation of the genteel sensibilities we associate with cultural refinement and the stereotypically "feminine," however disputable the label. As noted earlier, the Proud Boys represent a toxic virility run amuck.

As for globalization, the Proud Boys are expressly against its effects, which are, among other things, multiculturalism and religious pluralism. Hence, as we have seen, they rant against Muslims, Jews, and even Hindus and Australian aboriginals. Not unlike the Indian Hindutva and Sri Lankan Bodu Bala Sena movements,<sup>81</sup> Proud Boys cherish a religious identity – ostensibly Judeo-Christian – defined less by history than by opposition to everything that is not them. They explicitly resent Islamic and Jewish influence. Proud Boys rallies and initiation rituals might even be compared to Hindutva Ghar Wapsi revivals, which strive to welcome home Indian Muslims and Christians, whom Hindutva perceives as lapsed Hindus, to true Hindu identity.<sup>82</sup> The ritual initiations of the Proud Boys, fistfighting and more, involve a similar zeal and nostalgia, in their case for a reinvigorated role for white men in US society, championed by their hero, Donald Trump.

If there is any generalization that may be taken away from this foray, it is that nationalist rhetoric, especially for movements cloaked with religious symbols, is currently at a fevered pitch.

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<sup>80</sup> See Swallowing the Red Pill, at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>

<sup>81</sup> See, e.g., Frydenlund, Iselin. 2017a. Schonthal and Walton 2016. Rajeshwar and Amore 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Rajeshwar and Amore 2019.

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