

Article

The Far Right Culture War on ESG

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Abstract: This article examines connections between religious nationalism, extremist movements, and environmental politics, with a focus on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks and debates in the United States since 2020. It begins with a brief history of ESG, then examines responses from mainstream conservatives and far-right groups to the growth of ESG. It argues that the current backlash against the use of ESG is part of a larger conservative culture war against “woke” politics. The article offers a detailed look at the role of the conservative advocacy group Heritage Action and its “ESG Hurts” campaign, and shows how climate denial, conspiracy theories, and hostility to race and gender politics are interconnected parts of a growing ideological movement rooted in Christian Nationalism and climate denial.

Keywords: ESG; far-right extremism; culture war; Christian nationalism; social movements; climate change

1. Introduction

For the last few years, my research has explored the growing political impacts of religious nationalism and extremist movements on democratic politics. In this article, I focus on how these dynamics intersect with environmental and climate issues by using debates over environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks in the United States. An ESG framework typically focuses on what is known as the triple bottom line—environmental, social, and governance issues—in relation to how businesses operate, invest money, and make governance decisions. While there are many debates over how exactly to define and measure what is or is not ESG, for the purposes of this paper I understand ESG as a “broad term that refers to the inclusion of environmental (E), social (S) and governance (G) criteria into investment decisions taken by companies as a manifestation of responsible or sustainable investment practices” (Câmara 2022, p. 4). Related terms include corporate social responsibility (CSR) and socially responsible investing (SRI), and both terms address “a business organization’s configuration of principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and policies, programs, and observable outcomes as they relate to the firm’s societal relationships” (Wood 1991, p. 693). ESG frameworks use certain criteria or “screens” to evaluate the role of social policies, environmental impacts, and governance decisions in a given business. Examples of ESG investment screens include avoiding human rights violations in supply chains and incorporating climate reduction policies into business decisions.

The use of ESG investment frameworks has grown significantly in recent decades. This growth is fueled in part by the ongoing role of extractive capitalism in causing our planetary climate crisis, as well as growing calls among social advocates for more holistic corporate practices. Speaking to this shift, Paulo Câmara and Filipe Morais note in a recent handbook on ESG that “Sustainability is quickly becoming the Holy Grail for governments, businesses, and society. It represents a fundamental shift in human development arguably more significant than the industrial revolution” (Câmara and Morais 2022, p. ix). In this context, ESG frameworks are seen as one key mechanism to help push business practices towards more responsible and ethical directions, often with climate issues in mind. For example, one major ESG effort in recent years has been the campus fossil fuel



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divestment movement, led by groups such as 350.org. This movement calls on universities to divest from fossil fuel industries and their funders and instead invest in climate-friendly companies and practices (Maxim 2013).

In response to the growth of ESG frameworks, mainstream conservatives and far-right groups have increasingly framed ESG as part of a larger culture war that is forcing “woke” politics onto an unwilling public. Seen through this lens, ESG is simply the latest radical left issue that must be opposed, alongside police reform, social justice, and climate change (e.g., Levin 2021, 2023; Ramaswamy 2021). As Republican presidential hopeful Vivek Ramaswamy argued, “This new trend [of woke capitalism] has created a major cultural shift in America . . . It’s polarizing our politics. It’s dividing our country to the breaking point . . . Wokeness has remade American capitalism in its own image” (Ramaswamy 2021, p. 4).

Like most conservative Republicans opposed to ESG, both Levin and Ramaswamy are climate change deniers. “So this is actually, I think one of the grave threats to liberty today, you know, wherever you stand on climate change, I think most of the climate change agenda, I’m just going to say it is a hoax. I’m going to call that for what it is” (Ramaswamy 2023b). Ramaswamy later doubled down on his denial in response to a prerecorded audience question on youth support for climate change at the August 2023 GOP presidential candidate debate. “The climate change agenda is a hoax” (David Pakman Show 2023). This bold rejection of the scientific consensus isn’t a surprise given Ramaswamy’s stated politics. For example, in responding to another question about how the candidates would address US economic growth, Ramaswamy responded: “This isn’t that complicated guys. Unlock American energy. Drill, frack, burn coal, and embrace nuclear” (David Pakman Show 2023).

In a similar vein, Mark Levin argues in his latest book that “There is no better subject to illustrate such a colossal deception [of the public by Democrats] in today’s world than ‘climate change,’ which is central to the Democrat Party’s growing authoritarianism over all aspects of American life” (Levin 2023, p. 116). He later complains about Chuck Todd rejecting the call to provide equal airtime to question the validity of climate change. “Despite the fact that there are countless scientific experts throughout academia and think tanks who know far more than Todd, his producers, and NBC’s executives, and who have written extensively in scholarly books and papers questioning climate change, man-made climate change, the extent of climate change, the dangers of climate change, natural global and atmospheric changes, and on and on . . . they will not permit legitimate, substantive, intelligent, contrary views to meddle in their ideological agenda” (Levin 2023, p. 148).

The silencing of legitimate and substantive doubts about climate change due to mainstream media’s leftist bias is a common talking point on the right. But in truth, the reason climate denialism receives no serious consideration by mainstream media is because of the overwhelming international scientific consensus about the reality of climate change. As the UN’s latest AR6 *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report* makes clear, and with a “high confidence” assessment, “Human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperature reaching 1.1 °C above 1850–1900 in 2011–2020” (IPCC 2023, p. 4). It is scientific research, rather than ideological bias, that is the primary driver of mainstream media coverage of climate change as a serious (and real) political issue, but this fact is ignored by most right-wing media commentators.

Despite the growth of scholarship on conservative and right-wing politics in the social sciences, there remains a wide range of labels used to describe the movements I explore here. As Kathleen Blee and Kimberly Creasap note, “movements are difficult to label as either right-wing or conservative. A single movement is likely to have conservative and right-wing aspects . . . Many right-wing and conservative movements use similar strategies and rhetoric of vulnerability, fear, and threat” (Blee and Creasap 2017, p. 201). In his study of the populist radical right, Cas Mudde argues these movements “shares a core ideology that combines (at least) three features: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism” (Mudde 2017, p. 5). My own analysis uses a similar approach in defining these movements.

Attacks on ESG often draw on one or more of these features, particularly when ESG is described as promoting a radical Marxist agenda that is hostile to the nation and its core beliefs and values. As I will show, the narrative framing of ESG as anti-American is deeply entangled with both nativist and populist political claims about “we the people” as defined by far-right figures like Levin.

To help tell this story of how and why ESG has become a target of the far right, I begin with a brief history of how ESG and socially responsible investing emerged in the 1970s alongside modern environmentalism. As I discuss, social investing quickly became entangled with anti-apartheid politics and corporate investments in South Africa in the 1980s, and religious leaders like Leon Sullivan intentionally used corporate investments as a political tool to leverage social change. After briefly tracing how ESG evolved during and after this period, I turn to a case study of Heritage Action, one of the central advocacy groups behind the anti-ESG movement today, and their “ESG Hurts” campaign. I argue that this anti-ESG narrative needs to be understood as part of the resurgence of Christian nationalism and right-wing authoritarianism in the US, both of which view social justice and civil rights gains made since the 1960s as a threat to their idealized vision of the US. I develop this argument further by showing how far-right political figures such as Mark Levin and Vivek Ramaswamy have used their political platforms to spread an anti-ESG, pro-fossil fuel gospel. This extractivist gospel includes promoting a counter-narrative of climate denialism and greater fossil fuel expansion while simultaneously arguing the real threat is the radical left’s “woke” political agenda and its attack on free market capitalism and conservative Christian family values.

2. Discussion

2.1. *The Rise of Social Investing*

Why do people like Levin and Ramaswamy see ESG as a threat to religion, personal liberties, and American capitalism? Part of what makes this question so interesting is that, despite the generally strong opposition to ESG today from political and religious conservatives and the far-right, religious conservatives were not always hostile to social change campaigns that targeted corporations. In fact, religious groups were sometimes at the forefront of these early movements. To better understand these shifting alliances, we need to look at how ESG first rose to prominence.

Following the birth of modern environmental politics in the late 1960s, activists began to call on investors to stop supporting companies that polluted the environment for profit. Although no organized movement around what is today called ESG existed at that time, efforts to address social and governance issues go back to the early 20th century on issues such as labor rights, workplace safety, and business ethics (Bowen 1953).

Momentum picked up in the early 1970s after The Conference Board, a US-based non-profit business advocacy group, released its landmark *Social Responsibilities of Business Corporations* report in 1971. As the report argued, “There is now a pervasive feeling in the country that the social order somehow has gotten out of balance, and that greater affluence amid a deteriorating environment and community life does not make much sense . . . There is widespread complaint that corporations have become cavalier about consumer interests, have been largely indifferent to social deterioration around them, and are dangerous polluters of the environment” (CED 1971, p. 14). These trends opened a wider discussion about corporate social responsibility in business that would expand significantly in the years ahead (Frederick 1994).

Another important milestone was the creation in 1977 of the “Sullivan Principles”, a set of ethical business guidelines drafted by Reverend Leon Sullivan. At that time, Sullivan was a board member at General Motors, in addition to being a long-time civil rights activist and Baptist minister in Philadelphia. The Principles were a response to Sullivan’s concerns over human rights violations and apartheid in South Africa. “The Principles must serve as a catalyst, not only in the business community, but in all sectors of South African society,” he argued. “The signatories to the Principles must act as models for other

multinational companies, along with world religious bodies, colleges, financial institutions, governments, unions, and others, in regards to their dealings with South Africa" (Sullivan 1983, pp. 427, 430).

Drawing on his religious networks, Sullivan also mobilized faith groups to act, including forging a partnership with the National Council of Churches and holding meetings with the Church Commissioners of the Church of England. Sullivan hoped to encourage banks and institutional investors, including churches, to suspend investments and loans to the South African government until apartheid was abolished. This approach can still be seen today in the boycott, divestment, and sanction (BDS) movement (e.g., Palestine BDS movements and fossil fuel divestments). Sullivan wanted to create a "worldwide campaign of 'moral aggression' by churches" to put pressure on the South African apartheid government, arguing that if companies "neglect to respond satisfactorily, they should face divestment of church funds" (pp. 437–8). As a newsletter from the Coalition for Illinois' Divestment from South Africa (CIDSa) noted about their recent state-wide organizing drive, "During the week of April 14–19, speakers addressed over 50 groups throughout Illinois including churches, community, student and union organizations" (CIDSa 1985, p. 4). Historian Zeb Larson also pointed out that "Divestment created tangible targets for people to organize around and against that were also specific to where they lived: university pension boards, church investment boards, and local governments" (Larson 2022).

Although it is beyond the scope of this article, there is a long and rich history of interfaith and religious-based activism against apartheid in South Africa, included the divestment and boycott efforts led by the global Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and its Inter-Faith Colloquium on Apartheid, which was created in 1984 (AAM 2000; Hudson-Allison 2000; Presbyterian Historical Society 2013). As I noted before, there is also a rich history of what is commonly referred to as faith-based investing, which tended to focus on negative investment screening, such as avoiding investing in adult entertainment, alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and abortion. As *InvestmentNews* reporter Jeff Benjamin noted about links between ESG and earlier religious investing, "In many respects, faith-based investing is the original impact investing, so it's only natural that the rapidly expanding appeal of ESG and sustainable investing is also raising awareness of faith-based strategies" (Benjamin 2020).

Seen in this light, the current anti-ESG rhetoric coming from conservative religious circles appears to be a more recent trend and reflects the deeper shift of religious activism towards ultra-conservative politics that began in the 1980s with the rise of the Moral Majority and Christian Right (Schnabel 2013). However, as I briefly discuss below in relation to Bud Light and Target, another possible interpretation is that what has changed is not so much the religious activism focused on corporations, but rather the progressive orientation of these religious pressure campaigns. Social justice issues drove many religious actors to oppose apartheid in South Africa during the 1980s. Today, however, the most vocal religious voices are coming from conservatives on the right who are opposed to social and environmental justice issues, as well as reproductive and gender rights.

These trends continued to grow throughout the 1970s and 1980s, pushed along by additional books, such as R. Edward Freeman's book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Freeman opened his book by noting that both "business and service organizations are experiencing turbulence" and argued in response that "a new conceptual framework is needed" to address the growing social calls for businesses to change their ways (Freeman 1984, pp. 4–5). The Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India, in 1984 and the 1998 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska both spurred consumer advocacy, environmental, and other civic groups to increase their use of shareholder activism to address such problems.

By the early 1990s, a small but important set of actors began to emerge focused on these new social investment strategies, such as the Institutional Shareholder Services (ISS) company, which was founded by long-time shareholder activist Robert Monks in 1985. ISS was one of the first companies to provide ESG-related services to institutional investors

(Minow 2011). By the early 2000s, a variety of institutional structures began to emerge, including the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, which helped bring wider attention to ESG issues in the corporate sector. During this same period of the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was also a growing alter-globalization movement focused on the emerging nexus of ESG issues, especially in the fair trade and anti-sweatshop movements on university campuses, which helped give such issues both a wider appeal and great political attention (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Bartley and Child 2014).

Today, there are thousands of companies that focus on some form of ESG investing, as well as numerous indexed investment funds that use ESG screens to help select and direct investments. Legal scholar Quinn Curtis and co-authors noted that “ESG investing ... is growing explosively” (Curtis et al. 2021, p. 1), while another legal scholar, Elizabeth Pollman, argued that “ESG is one of the most notable trends in corporate governance, management, and investment of the past two decades.” However, this growth of interest and support for ESG in business has also led to a growing body of criticism from those opposed to these trends. As Pollman argues, ESG policies are “at the center of the largest and most contentious debates in contemporary corporate and securities law” (Pollman 2022, p. 1).

As an active participant in campus ESG movements since the late 1990s, I have watched it grow from a relatively arcane and specialist topic to a primetime buzz word used by mainstream conservative and far-right groups as part of their culture war talking points. Following the nationwide Black Lives Matter uprisings in the summer of 2020, ESG rapidly found itself lumped alongside Critical Race Theory (CRT), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), action civics, and LGBTQ+ politics by those on the right. According to their narrative framing, ESG and these other social issues are all part of a nefarious plot to destroy American families and undermine capitalism.

This recent spike in attention is clear if we look at the US Google search trends for “ESG” over a ten-year period from 15 September 2013 to 15 September 2023 (Figure 1). What we see in those search results is a clear uptick in interest in ESG around the fall of 2020. This trend of interest in ESG has grown more pronounced since 2020. As I discuss in more detail below, this growth of interest overlaps with the launch in 2022 of the “ESG Hurts” campaign by Heritage Action and an increased push by far-right groups and media figures to paint ESG as the latest and greatest threat to conservative values.

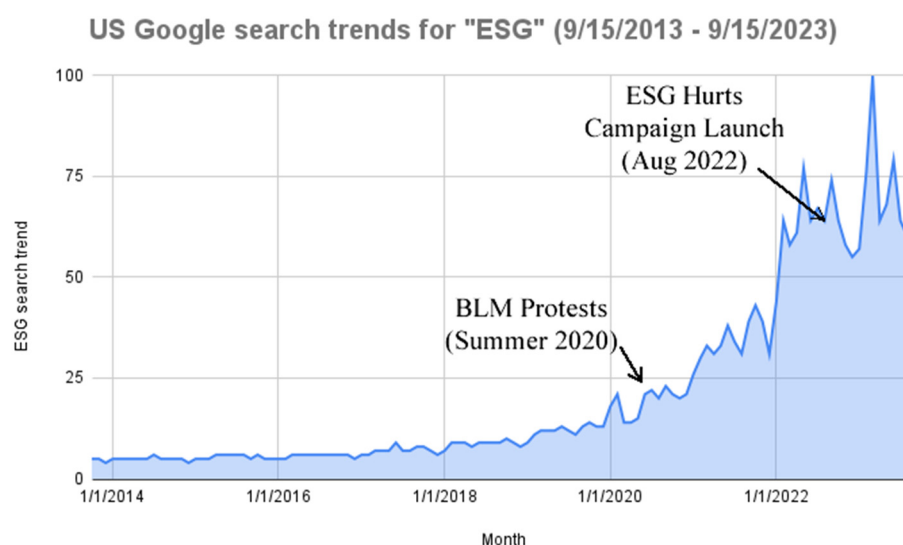


Figure 1. ESG Google search trends (2013–2023).

As a 2023 report from The Conference Board noted, this “ESG backlash is gaining momentum, and many companies expect it to further increase in the immediate future ... The increase in backlash will likely be driven by emotionally charged topics, such as

hot-button social issues and the transition to more sustainable forms of energy that raises fear of job losses” (Johnson 2023, p. 1).

To better understand who is behind this anti-ESG movement and how they are framing their opposition to ESG policies, we need to look closer at one of the central institutional players, Heritage Action.

2.2. Heritage Action & Anti-ESG Politics

Heritage Action is a 501(c)4 PAC created by the Heritage Foundation, which is a leading ultra-conservative, US-based think tank. The Heritage Foundation is at the center of most of the recent attacks on social justice issues, and because of this, understanding their role can help us better understand organized efforts to oppose ESG. This paper focuses specifically on their “ESG Hurts” digital campaign, how it has evolved since its launch in August of 2022, and how it is communicating with its supporters and allies.

It is important to note that along with ESG Hurts, the Heritage Foundation also created a handful of related front groups and affiliated websites, including Save our Elections, Save Our Schools, and the “Back the Blue” Police Pledge campaign. Each of these websites serves as a hub in a larger conservative network of political action groups working against “woke” politics. Figure 2 shows the ESG Hurts homepage (www.esghurts.com), which Heritage Action created as a digital resource portal for those opposed to ESG. The site includes a mix of vague information about ESG. Most of their information is factually inaccurate or relies on selective details to give a one-sided picture, but the average reader would likely not be able to tell. The site also links to various right-wing news articles and tv programs featuring Heritage Foundation and Heritage Action staff and allies expounding on the dangers posed by the “woke ESG agenda”. It also includes examples of model anti-ESG legislation that policymakers can adapt for local use and offers action steps that conservative activists can take to engage with ESG issues locally.



Figure 2. ESG Hurts website.

During the spring and summer of 2023, the “Take Action” tab was focused on efforts to support S.J. Res. 8 and H.J. Res. 30, which were both related to the 2023 Congressional Review Act then under debate. That legislation, which was ultimately vetoed by President Biden, sought to overturn a 2022 Department of Labor rule which allowed 401(k) investment fund managers to “consider climate change and other environmental, social, and governance factors when they make investment decisions and when they exercise shareholder rights, including voting on shareholder resolutions and board nominations” (Congress.gov 2023).

A press release announcing the launch of the ESG Hurts campaign in the summer of 2022 included quotes from two Heritage Foundation staff. The first, from a Heritage Foundation visiting fellow named Andy Puzder, claimed that ESG is “socialism in sheep’s clothing” and suggested the real goal of ESG supporters is to “avoid the inconvenience and messiness they see in our representative democracy and our free-market economy.” Puzder ended by arguing that “Most Americans are unaware of what’s happening or how to fight back. That must end. We must fight back against this Marxist ‘woke’ ideology that would turn our economy into a battlefield in the culture war” ([Heritage Foundation 2022](#)). I highlight this quote as it provides supporting evidence that groups like Heritage Action view ESG as part of the broader culture war they are waging against the political left and “woke” politics generally.

A second quote from Jessica Anderson, who was Heritage Action’s Executive Director at the time, similarly warned that “American families and workers should not be forced to abide by the left’s radical opinions on gender ideology, climate change, and abortion to make a living” ([Heritage Foundation 2022](#)). The framing here of climate change as the “left’s radical opinions,” rather than an empirically established scientific fact, is important to note, and echoes claims by Levin, Ramaswamy, and many other conservatives. This sort of framing underlies environmental skepticism in general, and climate denialism in particular, and shapes much of the far right and conservative opposition to environmental issues, including ESG.

After noting three common groups who promote ESG policies—left activists, financial firms, and government bodies—the ESH Hurts website offer this definition of ESG:

ESG is a political tool used by progressives to advance Leftist ideology in businesses and financial institutions. From requiring NASDAQ-listed companies to appoint board members based on race and sex, to requiring greenhouse gas emissions to be reported, ESG is destroying our free market and threatens both American interests and our cultural fabric of freedom, choice, and liberty.

ESG policies are a thinly veiled attempt to radically transform corporations into social justice warriors. Pro-ESG businesses support the Left’s “woke” culture war to redefine gender, promote critical race theory, and cancel conservatives . . . But companies that adopt ESG policies risk failing Americans who have invested their savings in the company and hurting Americans by moving our society into dangerous dependence on foreign oil, creating social credit scores, and demanding investment decisions based on pro-abortion policies. ([Heritage Action 2023](#))

To further reinforce these associative claims, the website includes a visual graphic depicting how a range of issues opposed by many conservatives fit under a broad ESG umbrella (Figure 3).

As this visual suggests, a cornucopia of issues have all been lumped under the ESG umbrella, from climate change and CRT to transgender politics, affirmative action, and anti-Chinese social credit score paranoia.

It is important to note that most of these issues have little to do with ESG frameworks and how they are used for investing. In the case of China specifically, this framing relies on inaccurate but common claims regarding how Chinese social credit initiatives supposedly work. These claims assume that any association with Chinese communism is enough to taint ESG as un-American, anti-democratic, and anti-capitalist, and that the average person does not know enough about China and their social credit initiatives to evaluate such claims ([Horsley 2018](#)). It is enough to simply state that ESG is “destroying our free market and threatens both American interests and our cultural fabric of freedom, choice and liberty” ([Heritage Action 2023](#)).

Attempts to lump everything conservatives dislike under this “woke” umbrella is most evident with the three issues highlighted under the “Social” category—Critical Race Theory, Pro-Abortion Policies, and Transgender Activism. Despite what conservatives often claim,

ESG frameworks have absolutely no relation to CRT, which is a high-level academic legal framework for analyzing the interconnections of race and law and their impacts on society (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). However, such framing works for conservative audiences because CRT and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs have successfully been conflated as the same thing. This helps explain why, in political discourse on the right, anything they oppose can easily be labeled as part of a radical Democrat or socialist agenda, or increasingly since 2020, as part of a new and dangerous wave of Cultural Marxism supposedly threatening to destroy Christianity and the nation (e.g., Levin 2021; Ramaswamy 2021; Wolfe 2022; Rufo 2023; Torba and Isker 2023).



Figure 3. Heritage Action ESG infographic.

Similarly, the connections between ESG, gender, and abortion are tenuous, but at least here there is some basis for ESG criticisms. For instance, it can be argued that shareholder activism and ESG-informed investment strategies which encourage the cultivation of gender-inclusive workplaces or promote employer insurance coverage for women's access to reproductive healthcare, to pick two common examples, are promoting a "leftist" ideology through an ESG frameworks. However, for such arguments to make logical sense, we must first accept two implicit conservative religious claims advanced by these anti-ESG proponents.

The first conservative claim is that gender-inclusive policies for LGBTQ+ individuals and access to reproductive choice for women are things we should oppose on religious grounds as immoral or sinful. The second conservative claim is that LGBTQ+ individuals' very existence, and a woman's right to make her own private reproductive health choices, are harmful to society and something that businesses should not be involved with. Similarly unquestioned normative assumptions were evident in a recent Heritage Action email calling out the "subversion" of conservative values by woke corporations that have embraced the "absurd" position of supporting the LGBTQ+ community, supposedly due to ESG:

The conservative grassroots have been fighting back hard against the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) agenda which sees large corporations and asset managers use the money of their investors i.e., you, to reinvest that money against your values.

Recent examples of such subversion come from Bud Light when they featured activist Dylan Mulvaney, who self-identifies as a woman, on promotional material as well as Target's promotion of absurd LGBTQ+ "Pride" merchandise targeting children. The predictable backlash resulted in the loss of dozens of billions of dollars for both companies. ("Saturday Summary" (Heritage Action Email 2023))

It seems obvious, but Bud Light hiring trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney to create an Instagram video promoting March Madness, or Target selling LGBTQ+ themed Pride Month merchandise in their stores, are not examples of a nefarious ESG agenda. Rather, those are examples of everyday business decisions, not the magical result of woke shareholder activism or ESG. Conservative activists were quick to point out that their boycott was having a major impact on these companies, pointing to reports that Bud Light stock prices fell as much as 26 percent following the boycott (Bary 2023). However, as many people pointed out, Bud Light stock prices had been in decline since at least 2015, and the overall financial impact of these boycotts was limited. However, as I noted earlier, such efforts suggest we may be seeing a renewal of religious-based corporate pressure campaigns like those during the 1980s, but this time in favor of more regressive social policies aligned with Christian nationalists and conservative social values. Rather than calling for more inclusive policies, religious boycotts target businesses who host drag queen story hours or promote gender-inclusive business practices or merchandise.

As the ESG Hurts campaign declared, “ESG is destroying our free market and threatens both American interests and our cultural fabric of freedom, choice and liberty” (Heritage Action 2023). In other words, radical leftists are using ESG to force corporations to address social issues, when they really have no role. They are simply market distortions that artificially drive up the price of doing business and lead to reduced dividends for shareholders—or as is commonly claimed by opponents, it goes against the “fiduciary responsibility” of investment managers to maximize returns for their clients—hence the mention of the loss of billions of dollars for both Bud Light and Target.

2.3. Disentangling Religion and Politics

As I noted earlier, what Heritage Action and many other anti-ESG critics typically leave unsaid is that these supposed “American interests” and the “cultural fabric of freedom, choice and liberty” are rooted in support for a patriarchal and heterosexual society where abortion and queerness are seen as socially deviant and sinful. Neither the Heritage Foundation nor Heritage Action appear to rely on explicit references to religious ideas such as sin, at least that I have seen. However, their claims about what is or is not a threat to the fabric of American culture are clearly rooted in conservative Evangelical and Catholic religious cosmologies in which the conflation of democracy, capitalism, and Christian nationalism is unquestioned. For anyone familiar with the growing body of scholarship on White Christian nationalism in the US, such claims are increasingly commonplace, and Heritage Action (as well as the Heritage Foundation) falls squarely within this sphere of conservative White ethno-religious identity politics (Whitehead and Perry 2020; Butler 2021; Posner 2021; Gorski and Perry 2022; Stewart 2022; Onishi 2023; Whitehead 2023; Crews Forthcoming).

However, individual opponents of ESG and the radical left agenda have no issues with using the language of religion in their criticism or defense of what they imagine is under threat by ESG policies. As one anti-ESG pundit, Peter Kalis, claimed, ESG is “an emergent faith as zealously embraced by some as Christianity is by others.” He goes on to argue that “It is central to this curious religion that the climate is changing in a way that will destroy humanity. It’s this fear above all that gives the movement its religious urgency. In theological terms, it’s an eschatology, a view of the end of the world—but crucially, one humanity can determine” (Kalis 2023).

In a similar vein, Vivek Ramaswamy stated in an August 2023 op-ed in the *New York Post* that “One of my favorite scientists, Blaise Pascal, said it best: If you have a hole the size of God in your heart and God doesn’t fill it, something else will. That’s how you get climatism, COVIDism and transgenderism. We all bend the knee—if not to God, to false idols instead. We must restore what is real over what is artificial to revive this nation” (Ramaswamy 2023a). These underlying conservative religious logics, and their associated transphobia and hostility to the LGBTQ+ community (among other issues), was evident in conservative efforts to boycott both Bud Light and Target in the summer of 2023. As another

example, during a June 2023 Pride Month protest organized by conservatives outside a Target store in Miami, Florida, two female protestors were photographed holding signs that read, respectively, “Keep Satan Away from !Our Kids!” and “Boycott Target Save Our Kid’s” [sic] (Sladky 2023).

Here, the use of religious language is explicit—it is Satan threatening children through the promotion of queer visibility, such as Target’s Pride Month displays. These are the same arguments advanced by the extremist conspiracy movement QAnon, the Save Our Kids campaign run by Heritage Action, and even Donald Trump. Heritage action has strong overlaps with extremist groups like Moms for Liberty, who are best known for their attacks on the teaching of CRT in primary school—a common yet false claim—as well as efforts to impose book bans in schools related to the topics of race and gender. This influence of Christian nationalism and extremist politics can be seen in remarks made by former President Trump at the September 2023 Pray, Vote, Stand Summit organized by the Family Research Council, a leading far-right political action group run by Tony Perkins that is well known for its militant pro-life Christian political agenda.

For four magnificent years, I was proud to be your relentless champion for freedom, for life, for liberty, and for the great biblical traditions of Western civilization, and that’s what it is . . . I was honored to get up every single day and do battle on your behalf. Oh, I did battle . . . I’m still doing battles, doing more battle than anybody even understands. But I wanted to and had to stand up to the communists, the Marxists, the atheists, and the evil and demonic forces that want to destroy our country. They’re destroying our country. (Trump 2023)

As such expressions of right-wing authoritarianism in the US suggest, many far-right partisans no longer view democratic politics as involving legitimate political disagreements. Rather, politics is a story of good versus evil in which political opponents are depicted as “evil and demonic forces.” The discursive framing offered in remarks like those from Trump further reinforces a Christian nationalist narrative of spiritual warfare in defense of capitalism, Western civilization, and the Judeo-Christian nation. One brief note of caution is warranted here regarding such language. I agree with Giovanni Maltese, who argues that “Scholars of religious studies should refrain from lumping Christians who seem to draw on spiritual warfare in with authoritarianism, fundamentalist militant Christianity or with the far-right, *tout court*” (Maltese 2021, p. 6). As Maltese clearly shows in relation to spiritual warfare discourse in the Philippines, such language can also advance anti-capitalism and social justice frames. However, as I have tried to show, this is not the case for how the US Christian right uses the language of spiritual warfare, which is far more rooted in notions of religious warfare and secular conspiracies.

It is this same conspiracy mindset that was behind the controversial Christian film *Sound of Freedom*, which is about child sex-trafficking. The film was a conservative blockbuster in the summer of 2023 as drag show protests and bills popped up across the US and spread false associations between drag shows, transgender individuals, and child sex-trafficking. As Chris Lehman argued about the *Sound of Freedom* in his review for *The Nation*, “It’s easy to see how this didactic vision of a demonic global network of powerful child predators keys directly into QAnon folklore—and how the ironclad moral certainty of Ballard and his allies reflects back the deliriums of apocalyptic redemption now convulsing the conspiracy-minded American right” (Lehman 2023).

This link was made even more explicit when Jim Caviezel, who played the lead character of Tim Ballard in the film, went on to promote QAnon lies about a secret underground cabal of Satan-worshipping globalists killing children and harvesting their adrenochrome—a long-standing antisemitic trope at the heart of the QAnon child sex-trafficking craze (Murray 2023). The irony for many outside observers was the fact that Christianity has a sordid history of complicity in child sex abuse cases (Craissati and Beech 2003; John Jay Report 2004; Eshuys and Smallbone 2006; Kewley et al. 2015). Thus, it was little surprise to many critics when news broke that Fabian Marta, a notorious host of “Sugar Daddy/Sugar

Baby” parties and an “Angel investor” for *Sound of Freedom*, had just been arrested for child kidnapping in Missouri (Phillips 2023).

At first glance, this seems unrelated to the ESG issues we have been discussing, but in conservative media circles they are part of the same narrative. There is a common claim that *Sound of Freedom*, which was completed in 2018 under license to 20th Century Fox, but which was then shelved after Walt Disney took over Fox in 2019, was shut down because of Disney’s woke ESG policies, its pro-LGBTQ+ stance, or maybe, some suggested, because Disney was part of these child sex-trafficking rings. As one conservative commentator on Twitter asked: “DISNEY bought & SHELVED #SoundOfFreedom refusing to release it. Why wouldn’t Disney want us to see human trafficked children saved? ... GOD’S CHILDREN ARE NOT FOR SALE” (Reborn 2023).

3. Conclusions

So, what we have seen is that over the past decade, and especially following the summer of 2020, conservative and far-right activists are collapsing distinction between their opposition to ESG, their belief that CRT is pushed in schools, worries about transgender issues, and their advocacy of climate denialism. These issues are described as part of a vast and evil (even demonic) left-wing conspiracy to destroy freedom and liberty in the US, undermine conservative Christian values, and call into question the merits and sustainability of continued extractive global capitalism. From borders and policing to crime and social policy, everything is part of a “woke” political conspiracy that now includes the entire Democratic party, the majority of mainstream media, and most political institutions. As Levin argues in his latest book, whose premise is that Democrats are the real authoritarian threat, “America is unraveling. Our founding and history are under assault. Our families and faiths are being degraded ... Capitalism and prosperity are being devoured by economic socialism and climate-change fanaticism” (Levin 2023, p. 2).

ESG is now squarely in the crosshairs of most conservatives, thanks in part to the efforts of a well-funded dark money political campaign led by groups such as Heritage Action, and regularly boosted by right-wing political figures such as Levin and Ramaswamy. It does not matter that most of what is blamed on ESG—such as the Dylan Mulvaney or Target examples discussed earlier—have nothing to do with ESG investing. Much as we saw with CRT in 2020, and then DEI in 2022, these terms are used as empty signifiers and have become catch-all terms for conservatives in their culture war narrative. “Reverse racism is racism. It’s wrong now just as it was in 1964. The ‘anti-racist’ movement actually creates more racism” (Ramaswamy 2023a).

Given the evolution of such rhetorical attacks on ESG and related climate issues, it should not be surprising that calling attention to our planetary climate emergency leads figures like Ramaswamy to claim our best solution is “abandoning the climate cult” and embracing even more fossil fuels. As Levin argues in his latest book, “For the Democrat Party, ‘climate change’ is not about science. It is the most lucrative, limitless, and successful source of power and control over the individual, the economy, and, consequently, the American lifestyle” (Levin 2023, p. 140). It is not hard to understand why organized opposition to ESG appears to be growing amongst some people when this is the dominant narrative being offered to conservative voters in the US in 2023.

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