



The “chosen” few

One of the benefits of semi-retirement is having time to read more widely and wander down the rabbit holes of podcasts and Netflix. This summer, I could not escape a recurring theme of self-aggrandizing quests for glory.

It seems there is no shortage of Americans who see themselves as being “chosen” for greatness, a convenient rationale to justify all sorts of questionable activities and obsessions. Many religions employ prophets, holy texts and revelations from God to inspire their adherents to follow a righteous path, but today there is an everyman quality to destiny seekers outside of the traditional religions that can be frightening, threatening and self-destructive.

Last year, 26-year-old John Allen Chau embarked on a dangerous voyage, certain that God had planned the perilous journey exclusively for him. His story was chronicled in *Outside* magazine as “The Island of No Return,” describing Chau’s last days as he

traveled to one of the world’s most remote islands to preach his version of evangelical sagacity to one of the last uncontacted tribes in the world. The trip did not end well when the self-anointed missionary, regarded by some as a “deluded Christian supremacist” was murdered by the tribe whose members have made it clear they want no contact with the outside world. Chau knew there was a good chance he would be killed on his mission but was determined to fulfill his destiny, writing in his journal, “God, I thank you for choosing me before I was even formed in my mother’s womb.”

The memoir of Amber Scolah, author of *Leaving the Witness: Exiting a Religion and Finding a Life*, is a compelling account of being raised as a Jehovah’s Witness, with the imminent destruction of the morally corrupt world at Armageddon a certainty for non-believers. Scolah travels to China to secretly spread her gospel but slowly

realizes the fallacy of her life-long belief system as an online friend challenges her on the cult-like nature of the Witnesses. She writes, “There is no human so bold as the preacher. Or so blind. For they do all the talking, and none of the asking.”

I found these stories fascinating, but it was a podcast and a Netflix series that filled me with dread about the concealed nature of off-brand “chosen ones” who are no less convinced of their righteousness. The podcast is *Bundyville: The Remnant*, which focuses on the “apocalyptic cult” of Cliven Bundy and his family of followers in season 1 and reveals the broader underpinnings of their extremist and violent beliefs in scary season 2. The conspiracy theories and paranoia of these self-proclaimed “patriots” is absolutely chilling.

I started watching *The Family*, a five-episode series on Netflix to revisit the saga of Nevada’s former U.S. Senator John Ensign and then binged all the way

through, hooked on the development of this secret society of Christians convinced their God has chosen them to lead. I was reminded of a phone call I received from Chuck Colson a few years after my first election to the state Assembly. He left a message that he had been referred to me by a local judge who thought I’d be interested in joining a spiritual fellowship for lawmakers dealing with tough policy decisions.

I thought it couldn’t possibly be “the” Chuck Colson from Watergate, but I looked him up and learned how deeply he became involved in fundamentalist evangelical activities after his release from prison—and I didn’t return the call. It dawned on me watching *The Family* that he had been trying to recruit me, not realizing that I would have immediately rejected the premise of being “chosen” to govern.

It also left me wondering who else he called in Nevada. □

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