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White Christian Nationalism. A Review Essay

The reimagining of political governance, civic space, public discourse, population policing, history, education, gender roles, sexual identity, and more – activated by an eschatological vision that might be best described as an apocalyptic phantasm – is at the heart of current religious and political culture wars in the United States. What, up until the second decade of the twenty first century, was named, described, and analyzed as "religious fundamentalism" has morphed into "white Christian nationalism." While religious fundamentalism has operated since the 1920s at the margins of the U.S. American religious and political culture (although always with the ambition to be a more dominant force in society and politics), one hundred years later it has become weaponized by race-based nationalism. White Christian nationalism, one might say, is religious fundamentalism on steroids.

The Extent of the Menace

Though alliances between religious groups and alt-right political movements are not unique to the United States – we see them play out in Putin's Russia, Orban's Hungary, Poland's populist Law & Justice party, and various groups promoting "Great Replacement" conspiracies in Europe – the depth and fervor of this ideology are unprecedented in the United States. Political strongmen are galvanizing these movements. Whether we think of Trump, Putin, Orban, or Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party in Ethiopia (and we can expand our view to include

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leaders of other world religions, like Netanyahu in Israel and Erdogan in Turkey), it seems to matter little that these men are not particularly pious themselves. Rather, their followers regard them as part of a divine plan, as God's henchman to root out the rot of a godless, secular, pluralist, humanistic society. In precisely this sense, American Christian nationalism is a politically dangerous, apocalyptic, and unforgiving ideological phenomenon which Bradley Onishi, a former adherent of Christian nationalism and now a scholar of religion, has identified as a movement ready to strike with violence. Onishi, stirred by the political trauma of the January 6 insurrection in Washington D.C., wrote his book *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism – And What Comes Next* as an answer to how the "rise of the New Religious Right between 1960 and 2015 [gave] birth to violent White Christian nationalism during the Trump presidency and beyond" (2).

Onishi, who calls white Christian nationalism a "counter-revolution" (4), predicts in the book's conclusion that the January 6 insurrection was just the "first violent battle in what they [Christian nationalists] foresee as a coming civil war" (221). Phrasing the danger in such strong terms might, perhaps, be a reverse form of apocalyptic thinking among civic-minded liberals; yet, Onishi has argued in a 2023 Zoom conversation that to dismiss the danger would only work in favor of Christian nationalists. Were we to read their "call for war" as merely a rhetorical move, we would ignore the fact that people do prepare for violence.

Almost every week, the *New York Times* reports on instances that speak to the assault on liberal democracy driven by far-right populists and religionists on multiple fronts. On July 29, 2023, columnist Charles Blow wrote about Florida governor and presidential hopeful Ron DeSantis' radical overhaul of public education. In addition to anti-diversity and anti-LGBTQ restrictions, it includes the revised middle school instruction on American slavery. Students from now on will learn that "slaves developed skills which, in some instances,

could be applied for personal benefit." DeSantis is a supporter of the influential Hillsdale College, a private Christian school that is spearheading the rewriting of educational curricula – including anti-Black revisionist American history, in which slavery is reinterpreted as missionary work that civilized and Christianized Africans. At a 2022 event at Hillsdale College, DeSantis insinuated that he is God's chosen protector and encouraged his audience to be battle ready: "Put on the full armor of God. Stand firm against the left's schemes. You will face flaming arrows, but if you have the shield of faith, you will overcome them."[1] On August 2, 2023, Rachel Laser, president and CEO of the organization *Americans United for Separation of Church and State* (which publishes a monthly magazine alerting its readers to the attack on the constitutionality of church-state separation), reported on an Oklahoma School Board decision to fund a religious Catholic school through taxpayers' money as if it were a public school. Oklahoma's Constitution explicitly prohibits the use of public funds for any particular religion. The very conservative majority of the current U.S. Supreme Court, Laser laments, "has emboldened Christian nationalists" to seek funds for "private religious schools."[2]

Within evangelical congregations (and we should note here that not all evangelicals are Christian nationalists, and that some evangelical groups affirm the reality of climate-change and oppose social injustices), the large and influential Southern Baptist Convention voted in June 2023 to restrict church leadership positions for women. An ultraconservative wing, having seized power in the Convention, pushed for gender-based restrictions, which, not surprisingly, followed on

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1 Charles Blow, "A Christan-Nationalist-Tinged Assault on Black History," *New York Times* (July 29, 2023).

2 Rachel Laser, "This Charter School in Unconstitutional," *New York Times* (August 2, 2023).

the heels of the devastating ruling of the Supreme Court in June 2022 that eliminated the constitutional right to abortion.[3]

Katherine Stewart, author of *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, wrote an op-ed piece on July 7, 2022 on the nexus of religious authoritarianism and the political right. At the conservative "Road to Majority Policy Conference" she observed not only a sharp increase in the use of a rhetoric of violence but also a strong presence of the "theology of dominionism," the idea that true Christians have a biblically derived mandate to control all spheres of government. The emergence of "dominion theology" is sometimes attributed to a former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, Peter Wagner, and his 2008 book *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World*. But its roots go back to the 1960s Christian Calvinist Reconstructionist movement with its theonomic ideas of ruling society by biblical law. The most prominent names associated with dominion theology are Rousas Rushdoony and the libertarian Gary Kilgore North. At its most extreme end, Reconstructionist theology promotes the death penalty for homosexuality, witchcraft, adultery, and idolatry. What was once a fringe doctrine in fundamentalist theology, Stewart writes, has become a core of Christian nationalism, a political battle cry to "take this country back."[4]

Other articles point to institutional and personal networking among religious leaders, media personalities, and lawyers. Among them Michael Farris, a lawyer and chief executive of "Alliance Defending Freedom," a legal powerhouse of the Christian right with the goal to challenge church-state separation. Farris played a role in Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 election. There is also reporting on the relation of Tucker Carlson, the far-right former TV host of Fox News, with Tony Perkins, president of the Christian Family Research Council,

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[3] Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham, "At the Southern Baptist Convention, a Call to Enforce Biblical Gender Roles," *New York Times* (June 16, 2023).

[4] Katherine Stewart, "Christian Nationalists Are Excited About What's Next," *New York Times* (July 7, 2022).

and the support Carlson received from prominent Christian ministers after Fox News fired him in 2023. Last not least, we ought to mention the social media presence of conspiracy theories, including the spread of disinformation on Covid vaccination, where white supremacists and Christian nationalists find common ground. Andrew Torba, for example, the founder of the site Gab, proclaimed that "unapologetic Christian Nationalism is what will save the United States of America."[5]

New Publications

Dozens of new books have been published in recent years that address these issues. They are written by academic and independent scholars, straddling the line between scholarship, investigative journalism, and personal observations. They tackle Christian nationalism from different academic disciplines, including religious studies, history, and sociology.

I will briefly introduce eight books, organized in three rubrics. In the first rubric, the works of Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, New York 2019), Sarah Posner, *Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump* (Random House Publishing Group 2020), and Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, New York 2020), provide substantial coverage of different phenomena of white Christian nationalism from scholarly informed and investigative journalistic perspectives. The second set of books by Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2021), Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (Simon &

[5] Quoted in Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "A Lasting Legacy of Covid: Far-Right Platforms Spreading Health Myths," *New York Times* (November 25, 2022).

Schuster, New York 2020), and Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism – And What Comes Next* (Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis 2023), are part *Streitschrift*, part intellectual analysis infused with personal reflections. The final segment introduces sociological approaches by Andrew Whitehead/Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, New York 2020), and Philip Gorski/Samuel Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, New York 2022).

1. Unholy Power and Corruption

In order to keep track of the multitude of fundamentalist and Christian nationalist organizations and their leaders mentioned in the works of Posner, Steward, and Du Mez, I created an alphabetical chart that quickly expanded to a list of nearly 60 organizations and about 70 of the most important, recurring names of influential leaders. This list only captures individuals and organizations whose work garnered national and transregional attention and recognition, leaving out a dense network of hundreds of people and churches on local levels. As a vibrant movement, the who-is-who in Christian nationalism constantly changes: individuals are rotating in and out of positions or fall into disfavor, organizations melt away or merge with others, only to reappear under new names elsewhere. To give the reader a taste of these converging, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing networks, let me just list the letters A, F, and N. They include the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), the American Family Association (AFA), the American Renewal Project (ARP), the Faith and Freedom Coalition, The Family, the Family Alliance, the Family Research Council (FRC), the Focus on Family, the National Council of Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, the National Organization for

Marriage, the National Organization for Evangelicals (NAE), the National Prayer Breakfast & Fellowship Foundation, the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), and the influential New Life Church.

Sarah Posner, investigative reporter for major newspapers, wondered after the 2016 presidential election why Donald Trump was able to garner so many evangelical votes, given that he is anything but a devout Christian. *Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump* is a deep dive into the mentalities of the old and new Christian right that lifted an autocrat to power. Posner introduces the reader to copius materials on churches and para-churches, organizations, networks, and individual names. The unlikely alliance of Trump and evangelicals, according to Posner, was nurtured by identifying common cultural foes, such as the civil rights era or the celebration of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity. In response, Trump promised a return to an imagined great America – the infamous MAGA signature: Make America Great Again.

Regarding the puzzling question of how a godless, philandering (and accused of rape), self-serving, and untruthful man could garner the evangelical vote, Posner channels the voice of a believer: "He may not actually be a Christian, but God has chosen him to protect Christians and therefore America" (15). Under attack was also "political correctness" which, presumedly, the socialist "left" is using to oppress white people, and white Christians in particular. Trump himself, though hardly an oppressed person, has played successfully the victim and martyr card whenever he is criticized, thus offering a platform of affective identification for a disaffected population - the very same card he is currently playing in his 2023 court arraignments, facing multiple criminal charges.

Posner provides the names of influencers and organizers, including those of old guard fundamentalists and a newly emerging leadership bent toward power, no matter the cost to democracy. Among many personalities, we meet Eric Metaxas and Stephen K. Bannon, Lou Sheldon and Stephen Miller,

old-guard fundamentalist Pat Robertson and new-right Paul Weyrich, Brazilian Bolsonaro and Hungarian Orbán as well as Paula White, Trump's spiritual advisor and televangelist while he was in the White House. Posner also reports on the new ecumenical networks that have sprung up between American evangelicals and European conservative networks, chief among them the activities of the American World Congress of Families (WCF) which has organized meetings in Hungary, attended by autocrat Victor Orbán. Ignoring theological and doctrinal differences between evangelicalism, Catholicism, and Russian Orthodoxy, American and European ultra-conservative Christians bond over celebrating together traditional values and advocating for strong state-church alliances. These convergences might explain the odd love-relationship of patriotic evangelicals like Pat Buchanan with Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church. Their shared religious ideologies and political agendas shed light on the current reluctance by some Republicans and evangelicals to condemn Russia's invasion of the Ukraine (alt-right Republicans want to cut military aid to Ukraine, should they win the 2024 presidential election).

"For Trump's white evangelical supporters," Posner concludes, "defending him became indistinguishable from defending white Christian America" (260); the damage done to American democracy, she warns, won't be "healed overnight" (266).

Katherine Stewart's working assumption in *The Power Worshippers* is to shelve the idea of religious fundamentalism as a social movement because, in her reading, Christian nationalism is primarily a political movement. She dismisses the notion that Christian nationalism is a religious creed and, instead, suggests to read it as political ideology. Christian nationalism is not merely a "conservative" ideology that "seeks to preserve institutions…, the legitimacy of the judiciary [and] public education," but a "radical" movement that employs churchgoers as "foot soldiers" and "collaborates with

international leaders who seek to undermine the United States' traditional alliances and the postwar world order" (5-6).

Stewart arrives at these conclusions as an investigative journalist who has observed first-hand the movement by traveling through the world of religious fundamentalists and Christian nationalists. Part of her work is also to trace the flow of big money to radical conservative causes. It comes from a "subset of America's plutocratic class," she writes, such as the Green Family with their Hobby Lobby Stores and the DeVos family. The latter includes Betsy DeVos, whose political activism in favor of (religious) charter schools made her Trump's ideal candidate for U.S. Secretary of Education (2017-2021), and Betsy's brother Eric Prince, founder of the private military contracting firm Blackwater. The list includes also the lesser-known Olin Foundation, Bradley Foundation, Friess Family Foundation, and the National Christian Foundation, the latter channeling "hundreds of millions of dollars in annual donation" (8).

Stewart not only traces larger themes in this religio-political milieu, but actually conducts field research by attending various local and regional events. She participates in Baptist Church events where she witnesses their barely camouflaged political sermons and voter guides; attends agricultural tent meetings where local farmers are exposed to politically charged ministry; or walks with pro-lifers at the annual anti-abortion March of Life in Washington D.C. She introduces dozens of better and lesser-known individuals such as Jerry Falwell, Phyllis Schlafly, Ralph Reed, Kellyanne Conway, and Steve Bannon as well as myriads of networks, from para-churches to the National Rifle Organization. That Christian nationalists are pro-gun advocates goes without saying.

Thematically, Stewart introduces the reader to various aspects of Christian nationalism. These include the mentality of the militant male leadership with their pronounced anti-gay rhetoric and hypermasculinity; the roots of unreconstructed racial(ized) views which she traces back historically to the unapologetic Christian defense of slavery (a quote that struck

me is from a Georgian Baptist who, in 1861, declared that "both Christianity and slavery are from heaven [and] a blessing for humanity" [107]); or the movement's perpetuation of the myth that America is an exceptional nation under God that is at the brink of being destroyed by its enemies. Other chapters cover the idea that only a theocratic government will remedy the supposed loss of a Great America; the attack on women's rights and women's health, with particularly devastating results for Black women and economically deprived women; and, finally, the building of global alliances with Putin and Russian oligarchs in the name of pro-family policies, especially under Paul Weyrich's activist, Catholic's leadership: "We are radicals," Weyrich is quoted, "who want to change the existing power structure" (57).

Like Bradley Onishi, Stewart concludes with a bleak assessment. "Today's movement leaders have declared a new holy war against America's ethnically and religiously diverse democracy" (275). Yet, what seems to be the movement's strength, namely receiving financial support by a small plutocratic class channeling seemingly endless funds into the war chest of Christian nationalists, could, according to Stewart, become its weakness. Challenging those radicalized minority groups in the name of a democratic nation and by addressing inequalities, Stewart concludes, "will take some air out of its bellows" (277).

Perhaps. Or perhaps not. By portraying Christian nationalism as mainly a political movement financed by a small plutocratic class, Stewart might underestimate the religious fervor that drives Christian nationalism. Religious zeal can survive even without financial support, since radicalized religious actors, in their self-perception, fight a cosmic struggle that is not constraint by pragmatic considerations.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez's book *Jesus and John Wayne* locates the evangelical support for Trump less in the affective identification with a perceived strong leader (Posner) or in the plutocratic support of a radicalized political-religious minority (Stewart) but in the "evangelicals' embrace of militant

masculinity" (3). The issue of (hyper)masculinity did not escape Posner and Stewart's attention, but it was not their focus. For Du Mez, the power of Christian nationalism derives from the belief that "America is God's chosen nation and must be defended as such" (4). Coupled with white nostalgia for a lost past, a "rugged, aggressive, militant white masculinity" is seen as the force that can turn American back to a time when religious, ethnic, and sexual diversities did not undermine the authority of men in charge. Unsurprisingly, for Du Mez, white evangelicals share a Trumpian version of "nationalism, Islamophobia, racism, and nativism" (4)—and, we might add, antisemitism. The latter received national attention when radicalized men marched with torches in the 2017 Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally, chanting "Jews will not replace us."

Contrary to Stewart who sees Christian nationalism as a political movement, Du Mez, a historian, sees white evangelicalism as primarily a historical and cultural movement. She traces the reaffirmation of a masculine Christianity back to evangelicals like Billy Sunday and Billy Graham, as a reaction to soft versions of Victorian Christianity as well as the crisis of masculinity in the wake of World War 1. Billy Graham, committed to rigorous physical exercise, preached a "gospel of heroic Christian nationalism" (25). John Wayne, revered by evangelical Christians, recaptured in his movie roles the mystique of a cowboy and soldierly masculinity (though he never served in the army). That such militant masculinity was embodied by white men only was a given (Wayne himself was quite dismissive of fellow black male actors). Later, under the Reagan administration, another ideal of soldierly manhood arrived in the person of Lt. Col. Oliver North, whom evangelicals embraced. Oliver North was the key person of the secretive and illegal arms deal with Iran, channeling the profits to the Nicaraguan Contras who were fighting the leftist Sadinistas. At the time, President Reagan had already been featured on the evangelical Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) in support of the Nicaraguan Contras. The political scandal that came to light in 1987 revealed shared interests between

the NSC (National Security Council) and NAE (National Association of Evangelicals). Oliver North, who had grown up Catholic but converted to evangelicalism, belonged to the NSC while the NAE already worked closely with groups like the National Council of Evangelical Pastors in Nicaragua. After his conviction for lying to Congress (and receiving only a suspended sentence), North became a featured speaker at the Southern Baptist Convention. He impersonated the patriotic soldierly manliness that evangelicals embraced and promoted.

In other chapters, Du Mez introduces evangelical women's support of the masculine ideals promoted by fundamentalist and Christian Nationalists, including people like Marabel Morgan and her book *The Total Woman*, Anita Bryant's outspoken antigay activism, and Elisabeth Elliot's evangelical preaching about man and woman created by God as "complementary opposites" (65). Du Mez also mentions Phyllis Schlafly's Catholic, anti-Communist, anti-abortion crusading for traditional womanhood. Readers already familiar with the overlapping ideologies of family values and muscular (militant) masculinity would expect to hear about James Dobson and his "Focus on the Family" organization. And they won't be disappointed: Dobson, the evangelical child psychologist turned anti-feminist, appears prominently in Du Mez's pages. It was feminism that has, according to Dobson, "perniciously…denigrated masculine leadership" (83).

Additional expressions of evangelical masculinity covered in her book include the softer version of benign Christian paternalism preached by Bill McCartney's "Promise Keepers." The organization's promotion of a "tender warrior" was based on complementarian theology, the divinely ordained order of different roles for biblical womanhood and manhood. These softer proclamations of Christian manhood were soon challenged by more radical versions of what it means to be an evangelical man. John Eldrige's book *Wilde at Heart* (2001) eschewed male tenderness and promoted a tougher evangelical militant manhood. His work created a small cottage industry of like-minded reformulations of what it means to be a

man, only to see itself supplanted by the even more bellicose GodMen revivals and Xtreme Ministries. The latter railed against the "wuss-ification of America," created churches that "doubled as a Mixed Martial Arts academies" (187), promoted homeschooling, and preached pronatalist practices. In the Quiverfull movement (based on a literalist reading of Psalm 127, 4-5), for example, women were to birth as many children as possible for the purpose of creating domestic warriors against the enemies of Christianity. In yet other chapters, Du Mez addresses the increase of evangelicals in the American armed forces and the promotion of a tough Christian masculinity in popular films, like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*.

For the most part, Du Mez's book stays within the historical frame of what has been known as evangelical fundamentalism. Only toward the end does she venture into the 2010s and Trump's election to the presidency. Here we encounter Eric Metaxas, the author of, ironically, a book on the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, portrayed by Metaxas as an evangelical Christian who "battled not only Nazis but the liberal Christians purportedly behind the rise of Nazism" (243). Metaxas became a leading voice among evangelical men lamenting the decline of militant masculinity that, supposedly, had weakened "patriarchal authority [and] Christian nationalism" (244). Given this context, by the time scandals about Trump's sexual improprieties surfaced in the media, it could not hurt his standing among evangelical voters since the kind of masculinity he embodied matched well their understanding of who white Christian nationalist men should be. It ought to be said – as Du Mez reminds us – that a similar militant masculinity is largely denied to men of other skin colors and religions: Black men, Arab men, Hispanic men, indigenous men, and so forth are to be subservient to white Christian masculine hegemony.

2. White Evangelical Supremacy

Another set of books problematizes the rise of "whiteness" as part of evangelical fundamentalism and Christian nationalism. These works include Anthea Butler who, as a Black woman and professor of religion, analyzes the religio-political revolt through the lens of white racism; Robert Jones who, as a white Southern man and founder of the Public Religion Research Institute, focuses on the historical effects of white supremacy; and Bradley Onishi who, as a Japanese-American (on his father's side), professor of religion, and podcast co-host of *Straight White American Jesus*, is outspoken about the danger of white Christian nationalism. All three reveal their evangelical roots. Butler introduces herself early on as a "former evangelical" (11), later specifying her "Pentecostal" roots (91) and how her blackness rendered her invisible in the white power structure of evangelicalism. Jones speaks in the opening pages of his youthful commitment to the Southern Baptist tradition, only later to discover the "brutal violence" (5) of white Protestant Christianity and how its "undisputed cultural power" (10) kept white supremacy in place, though largely unrecognized from within. Onishi confesses to have been a "White Christian nationalist" (1) who in his youth zealously promoted its causes in Southern California. Throughout his book, Onishi wonders whether he could have been one of the insurrectionists in Washington D.C. on January 6 had he not become a religious studies scholar.

The legacy of America's system of slavery plays a large role in all three books, but particularly in Butler and Jones. The racism of slavery is so deeply enmeshed with white evangelicalism as to become indistinguishable with it and, hence, also invisible to those adhering to these traditions. That this insight is not new, Butler demonstrates in her book *White Evangelical Racism* by quoting Frederick Douglass. Douglass, once a slave and later a leader of the abolitionist movement, observed in the mid-1800s that "between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ" is "the widest

possible difference" (21). Butler explains how slaveholding Christianity of the 19th century morphed in the mid-20th century into notions of "Americanism," and how, in turn, Americanism - with the ascendancy of the Tea Party (as a racist reaction to Obama's presidency) and Trumpism - morphed into the unholy alliance of alt-right politics, evangelicalism, and nationalism. Throughout her book, Butler refrains from using the phrase "white Christian nationalism," though she frequently refers to racism, religious power structures, and white nationalism. Not until the very end of her *Streitschrift* (not in the sense of a polemic but a critical and personal essay) does she become more explicit: "Evangelicalism is an Americanized Christianity born in the context of white Christian slaveholders." She concludes – and here she resembles Du Mez and Stewart's assessments - that evangelicalism today is "not simply a religious group [but] a nationalistic political movement whose purpose it is to support the hegemony of white Christian men" (138).

Jones, the founder of a nonprofit research institute on the intersection of religion, culture and politics, enriches his observations with surveys on how evangelicals keep upholding the legacy of the white southern Confederacy. In *White Too Long*, he occasionally provides statistical data regarding the support of Confederate symbols and monuments, evangelical view of structural injustice, or how white religious groups fare on a racism scale. Not surprisingly, white evangelical Protestants show the least awareness concerning racism or the problematics of Confederate monuments compared to white mainline Protestants, white Catholics, Black Protestants, or religiously unaffiliated groups. Though largely similar to Butler's assessment of the unreconstructed racism among white evangelicals, Jones differs in that he also provides examples among whites working toward counteracting those attitudes. Despite voices that keep denying the existence of white privilege and oppression – among them the aforementioned Eric Metaxas or the popular evangelical author John MacArthur – Jones asserts that change among whites is not only possible,

but necessary. It requires an honest journey of reckoning and self-realization that "begins with the act of telling a more complete, and truer, story" (217) and moving "beyond forgetfulness and silence" (235) to "repentance" and "repair" (228).

Bradley Onishi would not disagree much with Butler's and Jones' insights into the racial, Americanist, and white supremacist underpinnings of fundamentalist Christianity, but his book is a more relentless clarion call to the dangers emanating from religiously inspired, nationalist politics. He wonders whether the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021 was the American version of Germany's Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, the first time Hitler tried to usurp power. Even though Onishi, like Jones and Butler, weaves his own story into his analysis, he employs it mostly as a warning sign. Confessing his own enmeshment with Christian nationalism, the fact that he left the movement is not used to tell a story of redemption but to exemplify the ideological sway this movement has over individuals. As a spiritually and rhetorically weaponized group, white Christian nationalists are willing to employ physical force to reach their goals. "The question is not if there will be another attack on our democracy," he writes. "The question is when" (197).

3. Christian Nationalism in Numbers

Sociologists, too, have addressed the issue of white Christian nationalism as a danger to American democracy. True to their discipline, they research this phenomenon through gathering and analyzing data, and those demand specific definitions of who and what it is that needs to be polled and examined. Defining the slippery terms of nationalism, evangelicalism, Americanism, religious identity, and political expressions is not an easy task; we have seen in the works reviewed above that the terminology often shifts and overlaps, sometimes with one term standing in for another (evangelicalism/fundamentalism/Christian nationalism), at other times referencing a particular phenomenon. What sociologists can teach us is a

more precise definition of terms or groups to be examined so as to design a transparent methodology and measurable data; what might get lost in such statistical analysis, however, is the messiness of lived religious and political experiences and how quickly identifications can change, morph, and overlap.

In fairness, I should confess that I am not a numbers and statistics person, and hence cannot deeply or accurately evaluate the findings of the two important sociological studies by Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, and Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Perhaps the most important take-away is that some of their statistical material counters more alarmist voices regarding the danger of Christian Nationalism, though the authors do not diminish the potential threat to democracy. It is also noteworthy to point out that the two quantitative studies, published two years apart (with Samuel Perry on both author teams), arrive at slightly different conclusions.

Regarding terminology, *Taking America Back for God* (2020) distinguishes between American evangelicalism (which they see as a "theological tradition prioritizing certain doctrinal commitments [like] biblical inerrancy" [x]) and Christian nationalism. The study also does not want to conflate white evangelicals with Christian nationalism, though the authors admit that there is overlap. Christian nationalism, they suggests, is about "historical identity, cultural preeminence, and political influence," which blurs and conflates religious identity with race, nativity, citizenship and political ideology (x). They also find that Christian nationalists do not have to be evangelicals and do not even have to be Christians, and that even the term "nationalism" may not always describe this movement well. Instead, they suggest that the term "Christian nation-ism" may capture more accurately the particular American identitarian politics that overlap with a "strain of Christianity" (xi). Finally, the study suggests, Christian nationalism cannot be reduced to racism since racial minority groups can

hold Christian nationalist views themselves. Christian nationalism, the authors claim, would exist even if "miraculously" (19) racism would be eliminated (a claim that Anthea Butler would dispute). For Whitehead and Perry, what matters is not the whiteness of Christian nationalism but "the *intersection* of race and Christian nationalism" (19; italics in original).

One of the statistics early in the book shows the number of Americans who reject or support Christian nationalist ideology. About 21% reject it completely and 27% resist it (meaning, they disagree with some issues, like prayer in public school, but are indecisive about other issues, like displaying religious symbols in public). On the other end, about 20% are wholly supportive of Christian nationalism while 32% are somewhat undecided but lean toward accepting and accommodating Christian nationalist demands. In other words, the nation is almost evenly split, with an undecisive center that is slightly more inclined toward Christian nationalist ideas.

This model of rejecters, resisters, accommodators, and ambassadors is then applied to subsets of additional survey questions, inquiring about educational levels, regional belonging, party affiliation, racial identity, and generational cohorts. Some results are counter-intuitively surprising: African Americans have the highest percentage of accommodating Christian nationalism and are about equal (in terms of percentage) with white people's embrace of Christian nationalism as ambassadors. Unsurprisingly, a denominational breakdown shows evangelical Christians scoring highest as ambassadors while Jewish people and religiously unaffiliated groups score lowest (a very small percentage among the latter two groups support Christian nationalist ideas). A chart tracing attitudes of different generations shows Millennials rejecting Christian nationalism at the highest rate while the Greatest Generation supports it at the highest rate. Among Baby Boomers, the overall scale tips toward accommodating or agreeing with Christian nationalist frameworks.

Other charts break down these numbers in terms of support/rejection of Trumpism, opposition/acceptance of abortion,

gender expectations, and attitudes toward same-sex marriage and migrants. Regarding the question what religion is perceived as the greatest threat, Muslims top the scale, followed, in descending order, by atheists, conservative Christians, and Jews.

In the final chapter, Whitehead and Perry draw some general conclusions. Christian nationalism as a "unique cultural framework" (154), they suggest, will continue to matter as it seeks to gain more power in the public and political spheres; Trumpism will continue to tap into the powerful ideology that Christian nationalism provides; as a threat to democratic society, Christian nationalism must be countered with an equally strong and persuasive narrative. The authors, who completed their study in 2019, predicted at the time that without a strong counter-narrative the Democratic party might lose the 2020 election; they also disavowed the idea that "whiteness" is a driving force of Christian nationalism.

Two years later, in 2022, Samuel Perry together with Philip Gorski published another sociological study, titled *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. By that time, we knew that President Biden had won the 2020 election (with Trump moving into the dangerous territory of election denialism). Compared to the earlier sociological study that Perry had co-authored, the changes in the title are noteworthy. For one, the 2022 title includes the phrase "white Christian nationalism," indicating that racial whiteness will assume a more central role than in the previous work; second, the inclusion of the word "threat" points to a perceived intensified peril.

The Flag and the Cross starts with the insurrection of January 6, 2021, with rioters carrying Confederate flags and Christian banners, wooden gallows and wooden crosses – symbolic objects that represent an increasingly "familiar ideology [of] white Christian nationalism" (1). This ideology, the authors declare, is "one of the oldest and most powerful currents in American politics" (1). It is America's "deep story" (4), telling itself that this country was founded by white men as a

Christian nation, blessed by God. Adherents of white Christian nationalism, who perceive themselves "as the most persecuted group in America" (8), have moved to promote "violence" as a legitimate means to restore order and regain freedom. "Order", of course, refers to the rule of white Christian men who need to fight for "freedom" from government restrictions (7). These expressions of white Christian nationalism, the authors suggest, "represent a serious threat to American democracy" (15).

The threat is measured by a "Christian nationalism scale" based on a set of questions that queries people's support or rejection of such issues a church-state separation, prayer in public schools, or whether the United States is a Christian nation and part of God's plan. Among Christian denominations, white evangelicals score highest, white liberal Protestants lowest (and Black conservative Christian second highest). This scale is then applied to subsets of issues, such as attitudes toward slavery, Covid vaccination, Trump, or a general fear of socialists.

One of the intriguing charts tells us how many Christian nationalists believe in Armageddon and the Rapture in a *literal* sense. While a minority among Christian nationalists do *not believe at all* in the literalness of these eschatological fantasies, three times as many *absolutely* believe in them. The scary part of such religious attitudes – as this review already indicated – is that such apocalyptic expectations free religious actors from the constraints of consensus-seeking, pragmatic decision making.

Despite these warning signs, Gorski and Perry arrive at more tempered conclusions. Yes, the warning signs and danger are real, they write early on in their study, but they conclude by stating that a "Trumpist America…would not be Hitler's Germany" (127). America might come to resemble Putin's Russia with its loyalist Russian Orthodox Church, Erdogan's Sunni Muslim Turkey, or the Junta in Buddhist Myanmar. It might become an incompetent, chaotic, "populist and kleptocratic regime" (127), but not Nazi Germany. We should note,

though, that Gorsky and Perry penned their assessment before the Russian military invasion of Ukraine – another sobering game changer in global politics, which elicited among Trump and his loyalists a tacit nod of approval or, at best, a muted response.

Despite the real perils, it is important to remind ourselves that there are choices. "America is at a crossroad. It has been there before," Gorsky and Perry write toward the end. There is a path "toward a multiracial democracy" and a path "toward white dominance" (127). There is still time to shift the momentum, with the next American election just around the corner.