How white is “white Christian nationalism,” and does it matter what we call it?

Session 2
Audience Q&A Session

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An Important Terminological Debate

What is at stake if we choose one phrase over the other?
Our Plan for Today

1) What is the history of interlinking whiteness and Christianity in the United States?

2) How do the sides in this debate frame their positions?

3) Does this debate even matter? *(HINT: Yes! In fact, from a certain angle, the 2024 election could hinge on it.)*

4) What are the actual racial/ethnic demographics of Christian nationalism in the U.S.? *(and taking a Christian nationalism self-diagnostic)*

5) Is there a better way forward in this debate?
What is the difference between saying "Christian nationalism" (CN) and saying "white Christian nationalism" (WCN)?
History of Whiteness & Christianity in the U.S.
(This could easily be a 3-week course unto itself.)

1607 - Jamestown colony founded

1619 - first enslaved persons brought to North America

1776 - “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”

1787 - Three-Fifths Compromise

1800 - most Protestant denominations fracture over slave-holding

1800 - Black Protestants forced to start their own churches & denominations

1900 - Civil Rights Movement

1900 - Martin Luther King Jr.

1940 - American Slavery theologically justified

2000

Jim Crow theologically justified

1st KKK

2nd KKK

3rd KKK

Doctrine of Discovery justifies (Catholic) colonialism & American anti-indigenous abuse
Summary

- It’s impossible today to think about American religion without also thinking about race. White Christians’ racism and segregationist impulses forged this connection.

- “Whiteness” is not a stable category in American history. It started out meaning roughly “Anglo-Protestant,” but expanded to include Catholics and Jews of European descent.

- The foundations of today’s American Christian nationalism were laid by white Christians maintaining their privileges and imagining their uniqueness.
Arguments for “white Christian nationalism” terminology

- Look at this history! White American Christianity built the structures and scaffolding of Christian nationalism.

- While not all of the Americans who participate in Christian nationalism today are white, white Christian dominance is the “deep story” (Gorski and Perry) of American Christian nationalism.

- Surveys show that there’s a strong correlation between views upholding whiteness and Christian nationalism.

“Christian nationalism is fundamentally about preserving or returning to a mythic society in which traditional hierarchical relationships (e.g., between men and women, whites and blacks) are upheld, and authority structures are biblical and just.”

-Whitehead & Perry

Race is a central element in white Christian nationalism, and it speaks to the kind of social structure they want to create—namely one with white, monied men at the top and all others in degrees of subordinate roles.

-Jemar Tisby
Arguments for just “Christian nationalism” terminology

• Christian nationalism is a global phenomenon. Labeling it “white Christian nationalism” imposes a very American lens on the broader movement or tendency.

• Yes, American Christian nationalism is deeply bound up with race, but what about all of the non-white people who also participate in Christian nationalism? Are they inherently racist or bought into white supremacy?

• While the majority of Christian nationalists (like the majority of all Americans) are white, their language and rhetoric is rarely overtly racist and often intentionally ethnically inclusive.

... when I told friends I was attended services at charismatic and fundamentalist churches, the reaction was often 'They're all a bunch of racists.' I found that some of the most racially integrated spaces I've experienced have been in nondenominational megachurches, whether in Oklahoma or Times Square.

- Anne Nelson
Here’s why it matters...

- Most religiously unaffiliated and people of other religions voted for Democrats in both elections.
- Most white Christians (not to mention a huge majority of white Christian nationalists) have aligned solidly around Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020. This included white mainline Protestants and white Catholics.
- Christians of color make up 25% of the U.S. population, and many of them are swing voters whose cultural affinities might lean Democrat but whose religious sensibilities might lean Republican.

The outcome of the 2024 election could very well hinge on the degree to which American Christians of color are embracing Christian nationalism, and I can’t find anyone paying attention to that or closely measuring it, because it doesn’t fit our categories.
So, what are the actual racial/ethnic demographics of American Christian nationalism today and has Christian nationalism made inroads among non-white Christians?

- survey conducted Nov-Dec 2022
- ~6000 adult respondents coming from all 50 states
- Based on their responses to 5 statements, respondents were sorted into 4 categories: CN Adherents, CN Sympthizers, CN Skeptics, CN Rejecters
- So let’s take the survey!
A. The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation.

B. U.S. laws should be based on Christian values.

C. If the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore.

D. Being Christian is an important part of being truly American.

E. God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.
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E. God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

Now total up your score (should be a number between 0 and 5), and divide by 5.
Where do you fall?

0 = Christian Nationalism Rejecters

0.01 - 0.49 = Christian Nationalism Skeptics

0.5 - 0.74 = Christian Nationalism Sympathizers

0.75 - 1 = Christian Nationalism Adherents
So where did you fall?
The PRRI/Brookings survey results (entire U.S. population):
How does Christian nationalism break down by religious identity?

Almost $\frac{2}{3}$ of white evangelicals are either adherents or sympathizers.

Approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of white mainline Protestants and Catholics are either adherents or sympathizers.

*Footnote: One of the five diagnostic questions was about “dominion theology” which has not historically been a Catholic concept, so the Catholic numbers may skew low overall.
According to this survey, all three categories of Protestants of color are more likely to adhere to or sympathize with Christian nationalism than are white mainline Protestants or white Catholics.

How does Christian nationalism break down by religious identity?

PRRI typically only counts “white evangelicals” and splits Protestants of color into Hispanic (Latino/a) Protestants, Black Protestants, and “Other Protestants of Color.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Identity</th>
<th>Adherents</th>
<th>Sympathizers</th>
<th>No Score</th>
<th>Skeptics</th>
<th>Rejecters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Protestant of color</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Protestant</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Protestant</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Catholic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
But those are just percentages. What about real numbers? How many Christian nationalists are white vs. people of color?

blue + green = 67% of all Americans are Christians

Let's take the non-Christians (unaffiliated & other religions) out of the equation.

Christianity in the U.S. is approximately 60% white & 37% people of color.

*Other Christians includes LDS & Orthodox, which PRRI does not break down by race.

Christian nationalist Adherence among U.S. Christians is approximately 64% white & 33% people of color.
Let’s take the non-Christians (unaffiliated & other religions) out of the equation

Breakdown of U.S. Christians by racial identity/sect

Christianity in the U.S. is approximately 60% white & 37% people of color

Breakdown of CN Sympathy

Christian nationalist sympathy among U.S. Christians is approximately 65% white & 31% people of color
Conclusions from Our Numerical Deep Dive

1) White Christians in the U.S. overall show mildly elevated rates of Christian nationalism adherence (64%) and sympathy (65%) compared to their 60% share of the Christian population.

2) Christians of color in the U.S. overall show mildly lower rates of Christian nationalism adherence (33%) and sympathy (31%) compared to their 37% share of the Christian population.

3) But it is quite clear, demographically, there is something more than simple “white Christian nationalism” going on in this survey.

So what are we supposed to call it?
On the one hand, race and white racism are inextricable from American Christian history, and clearly there is a racial dimension at play in American Christian nationalism.

On the other hand, if we simply call it all “white Christian nationalism,” we risk mislabeling and misunderstanding roughly one-third of the people involved.
The problem is that both sides are acting as though “Christian nationalism” is one clear and undifferentiated phenomenon.

What is our taxonomy of Christian nationalism?

Very general: contains many organisms

Very specific: contains closely related organisms
What is our taxonomy of Christian nationalism?

ORDER: religious nationalisms
(blending political, partisan, clannish IDs with religious IDs)

FAMILY: Christian nationalisms

GENUS: American Christian nationalisms
(Awakenings, Civil War, “Judeo-Christian,” etc.)

SPECIES: white Christian nationalism

ORDER: religious nationalisms
(blending political, partisan, clannish IDs with religious IDs)
Conclusions

• We should never analyze or understand religion as detached from race in the United States. Our history has assured that those two dimensions of identity are thoroughly entwined.

• But it would be equally simplistic to think that “white Christianity” = bad / anti-democratic and “non-white Christianity” = good / pro-social. The race-religion interface in the U.S. is complicated, regionalized, and layered.

• Christian nationalism, like the United States itself, has become diversified. (More on how this happened next week.)

• Yes, “white Christian nationalism” is a real force in American politics, but if we only pay attention to “white Christian nationalism,” we risk not seeing the subterranean spread of these ideas into communities of Christians of color who are a pivotal voice in our society.
Recommended Reading

*The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* by Katherine Stewart

*God & Country* by JD?

*The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* by Robert P. Jones

"Jones's writing, White Too Long brilliantly argues that his fellow white Christians must discern from their received faith and embrace a theology of racial justice... A prophetic call of redemption." — Michael Eric Dyson, author of *Long Time Coming: Reckoning with Race in America*