

White Christian Nationalism

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Twenty years ago, while living in small town Indiana I was pursuing many interests: organizational development, religion, politics, astronomy, world religions, developmental psychology, international relations, population demographics, and the history of western philosophy. I had completed a Master of Divinity degree at Harvard Divinity School in 1978 and since 1984 had been working in private practice as a management consultant. How could all of my interests be harmonized under a single occupation. Was I headed to being a . . . Unitarian minister? Now, twenty years later, here I am, playing the role of a Unitarian minister. Let's see if I can put a few thoughts together in a coherent meditation for a Unitarian congregation in Central Square, New York.

Arny Stieber and I have been good friends for about 15 years. We met at the First Unitarian Church of Chicago and worked closely together in Veterans for Peace for many years. During this time, I was completing a PhD program at Chicago Theological Seminary. My research interest was on how nations coopt religion to legitimate killing in war.

Today I want to explore with you the historical development of white Christian nationalism in America, its current expression, and the danger it poses to democracy.

Western Europeans have a long history of empire and domination. We know of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the Greek empire around 300 BCE. Next rose the Roman Empire from the first century BCE through the fifth century CE. Then Europe slept for a thousand years until we see the development of Spanish and British empires from the sixteenth century through the twentieth centuries and the American empire from World War I through the present.

All of these European empires were undergirded by religious beliefs which sanctified the empire and its conquests. Nearly all western nations and empires construct a god or pantheon of gods who call the nation into existence, give it an exceptional identity, and promise victory in war and conquest. White Christian nationalism in America is not a new phenomenon. White Europeans have been claiming divine legitimation for war and conquest for at least the last twenty-three hundred years. Let's take a look at the American chapter of the divine right of nations and empires.

Around the time of Christopher Columbus in 1492, European explorers and conquerors were claiming the right to subdue and enslave newly discovered peoples and nations around the globe. This came to be known as the “doctrine of discovery.” When Christian Europeans discover a new land, they have the right to own, control, and exploit the new lands for their own benefit. There were waves of explorers, soldiers, merchants, and priests. The pretext was to Christianize and civilize the barbarians and savages.

The Puritans were a zealous Christian sect in England and then they traveled to the “new world,” landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620. They came to establish the pure church and the Kingdom of God. A few years earlier European settlers had arrived at James Town in 1607. From these rustic beginnings European Christians arrived as explorers, trappers, traders, farmers, merchants, soldiers, and missionaries. Armed battles pushed away the native inhabitants who had been on the land for hundreds of years. Beginning in 1619, enslaved persons from Africa were brought to America as agricultural laborers. With free land and free labor, American investors and entrepreneurs became exceptionally prosperous and gave birth to American exceptionalism. A Calvinist theology, developed around 1536, gave the Puritans support for hard work, thrift, financial accumulation, capital investment, growth, progress, and hope for signs of God’s blessing and salvation. This Calvinist underpinning gave rise to major Christian denominations: Congregationalists, United Church of Christ, Presbyterians, and Unitarians.

White American Christians claimed divine legitimation in their struggle for freedom and independence in a revolutionary war with England. The new American nation grew out of White Christian Nationalism, which unified the nation until the conflict over slavery led to a Civil War in 1860. At that point the energy of White Christian nationalism gravitated to the Southern Confederacy, where white supremacy was the dominant and overriding ideology.

Historians such as Heather Cox Richardson see that the white Christian nationalism of the Southern Confederacy is still a potent force in American religion and politics into the current 21st century.¹ White Christian nationalism was in retreat for a decade or two during the Civil war and Reconstruction, but it came back under the label of Jim Crow and was largely uncowed until historic 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs Board of Education* that declared that segregated schools did not offer equal quality and opportunity. White Christian Nationalism rallied quickly to resist the racial integration of public schools, giving impetus to the movement for (White) Christian academies and home schooling.

We need to back up a bit to catch another major development in the White Christian Nationalism movement. Discontent among fundamentalist Christians was simmering

¹ *Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America*, by Heather Cox Richardson (New York: Viking, 2023)

after the defeat in the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925, concerning the teaching of evolutionary theory in the public schools. The conflict between fundamentalist and modernist Christians was very evident.

Then the shock of the Great Depression led to the election of FDR and his development of the New Deal political platform. This political initiative increased taxes for wealthy Americans and put regulations on American manufacturing and financial institutions. The oligarchs who ran the American business establishment were not happy. They soon realized that the New Deal was largely supported by American voters. How could the oligarchs rally American voters to oppose the New Deal of FDR? The oligarchs chose conservative Christianity as the most promising segment of American voters who could be wooed to the cause of opposing taxation and regulation.²

This represents one of the most powerful forces in American politics over the last seventy years. Wealthy oligarchs pumping billions of dollars into white Christian organizations in order to construct a voter base that would oppose taxation and regulation. Historian Kevin Kruse writes that decades before President Eisenhower's support to build up Christian identity in America, "corporate titan enlisted conservative clergymen in an effort to promote a new political argument embodied in the phrase 'freedom under God.' . . . this new ideology was designed to defeat the state power its architects feared most – not the Soviet regime in Moscow, but Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration in Washington."³ But a popular pretext was needed for this movement. The masses could not be expected to rally to support the interests of the wealthy elite.

The oligarchs developed a series of pretext issues to mobilize the masses to their cause. The first and most pervasive pretext was anti-communism. Billy Graham joined this bandwagon in 1949 at his Los Angeles crusade following the Soviet Union development of atomic bombs. Publishing magnate, William Randolph Hearst, sent out a message to his publishing empire: "Puff Graham;" and immediately Billy Graham became a powerful force in rallying white evangelical Christians to the cause of conservative politics in America. The oligarchs claimed that the New Deal Democrats were actually Communists. This rallying cry reached a fevered pitch with the efforts of Joseph McCarthy to purge the U.S. government of Communists in the 1950s.

The 1950s were a busy time for the oligarchs solidifying their voting base among white Christian nationalists. President Dwight Eisenhower led the way in putting "In God We Trust" on American currency and putting "Under God" in the pledge of allegiance. The

² *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, by Kevin M. Kruse (New York: Basic Books, 2015)

³ Kruse, xiv

culture wars were in full swing: anti-communism, anti-secularism in the schools, and anti-integration in the schools.

The next major rallying cry pretext for the conservative oligarchs was the movement to preserve racial segregation following the Supreme Court ruling against segregated schools in 1954. Some states like Virginia began defunding and closing public schools. Millions of white evangelical Christian voters flocked to the movement to oppose the federal government interjecting itself in the business of running local schools. Segregated private schools were opened as an alternative to integrated public schools.⁴ This added another layer of opposition to public schools, alongside opposition to the teaching of evolutionary theory.

Another related rallying cry was the Supreme Court decisions in 1962 to prohibit mandatory Bible reading and prayer in public schools. Conservative outrage was generated against the travesty of “taking God out of the public schools.” They still resented the teaching of evolutionary theory in the public schools and the racial integration of public schools. Conservative opposition to public education was growing.

The Supreme Court gave the oligarchs another pretext for rallying conservative White Christian voters to the Republican party in 1974 with the decision on Roe vs Wade, which provided legalization for some abortions. The anti-abortion movement has been the most powerful conservative rallying cry from the 1980s through 2022, when the Supreme Court reversed itself on the legality of abortion.

The invisible work of wealthy oligarchs was proving successful in the reshaping of the U.S. Supreme Court. Major decisions on dark money in politics (Citizens United in 2010), abortion, and affirmative action have given new leverage and energy to the oligarch’s strategy to build a conservative voter base.

Rich oligarchs have funded and reinforced a conservative American institutional ecosystem that includes “Christianity Today,” Fox News, the Christian Broadcasting System, educational institutions (like Liberty University). Conservative law schools and business schools in universities have been strengthened and expanded.

The most powerful current rallying cry for white Christian nationalism is the demonization of immigrants of color. Donald Trump was first elected president in 2016 on the anti-immigrant rallying cry of “build the wall” on the Mexican border. He was re-elected in 2024 on the promise of “mass deportation.” Donald Trump currently mobilizes conservative energies to oppose “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” programs and “sanctuary cities.”

⁴ *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America*, by Nancy MacLean (New York: Viking, 2017)

White Male power is being protected by the Trump movement against the encroachment of women and people of color. Sexual identity anxieties are currently being excited by an anti-transsexual movement.

Another dimension of the conservative rallying cry is the pretext to protect “family values,” which means to maintain the male patriarchal power within traditional heterosexual marriage. The institutional base of this movement is the “Focus on the Family” organization in Colorado Springs. Many use the evangelical missional tagline of “Faith, Family, and Country.” This is perhaps the purest formulation of white Christian nationalism. It is a simple and effective rallying cry.

An additional rallying cry is to protect “religious freedom,” which means to protect and privilege fundamentalist political sentiment and positions from the equalizing pressure of secular humanism imbedded in the U.S. Constitution and legal traditions. Conservative Christians assert that they have the “religious freedom” to oppose gay marriage, racially integrated schools, the teaching of evolutionary theory, affirmative action to give opportunities to Black Americans, and programs of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

To make white Christian nationalism more concrete, I want to describe two case studies. The first is from the 20th century and the long tenure of J. Edgar Hoover as Director of the FBI.⁵ Hoover was known as a Sunday school teacher and a devout Presbyterian. During his long tenure as Director of the FBI he cultivated a culture of white Christian nationalism within the nation’s premier law enforcement agency, that brought together conservative Protestants and conservative Catholics. He recruited conservative Christians and ritualized this religiosity through regular worship services, featuring prominent conservative clergy. Hoover maintained that his special agents were doing God’s work in protecting Christian civilization. If there were times when this divine mission called for the breaking of mere human laws, then his men ignored the laws and pursued their divine mission. I think this is one of the most basic and pernicious characteristics of white Christian nationalism. The higher calling of God’s divine mission overcomes the obligation to act within human laws. The Christian patriot is free to transgress national laws in the pursuit of a divine mission to preserve white Christian control of the country in the face of rampant secularism and humanism. (Look out Unitarians!)

A second case study involved more recent dynamics. Author, Katherine Stewart, devoted a lot of time to observing the behavior of white Christian nationalists in preparation for her 2019 book on *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*.⁶

⁵ *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI Aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism*, by Lerone A. Martin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023)

⁶ *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, by Katherine Stewart (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019)

One of her most interesting observations took place in the central valley of California. There she observed wealthy landowners supporting conservative Christian evangelists seeking to convert and guide immigrant farm workers, who worked the fields of the wealthy. The message was to seek salvation for the next world in spite of dire living situations in this world. At the same time the wealthy landowners supported conservative politicians who sought to lower taxes and defund the social safety net and legal protections for farm workers. So, we see here that the wealthy benefactors supported a tightly interwoven system of ideology and social structures. They supported religious preaching that downplayed oppressive working conditions in this world and promised paradise in the next world. At the same time, they supported conservative politicians who enacted laws that made working conditions much worse, with the byproduct of lower taxes for the wealthy landowners. The wealthy landowners got cheap labor and lower taxes, for the modest cost of supporting conservative Christian evangelists – a pretty efficient and effective system, if you ask me.

Katherine Stewart summarizes her observation of white Christian nationalists:

Many Americans still mistakenly believe that leaders of the religious right confine their attention to a few hot button concerns and that if we could just find “common ground” on, say, abortion, the hostilities would cease. The religion I found in Tulare [California], however, is mostly about money and power. The speakers on [evangelist Ralph] Drollinger’s stage declare their intention to dominate every aspect of life in America, from government to education to the economy, in accordance with their religious “principles.”

My assessment of these dynamics is that the wealthy oligarchs of America, since the FDR New Deal to the present, are only interested in less regulation and lower taxes, which gives them higher profits and a more profligate lifestyle. They pretend to have an interest in conservative Christianity, but this is only a pretext and a shrewd strategy for creating a winning voter base.

But the political impact of this religious charade is very real. Here is my list of political and social impacts of this alliance between wealthy oligarchs and white Christian nationalists:

1. Lower taxes on the oligarchs and their corporations, resulting in less tax revenue available for supporting the poor and middle-class in areas such as **education, healthcare, and housing.**
2. More anonymous money from oligarchs in elections, so that **the voice of the people is coopted through political propaganda** to end up being actually the voice of the oligarchs. A Princeton University study a few years ago showed that the most important factor in federal legislation becoming law was that it was backed by

wealthy interest groups. The interests of the average citizen were entirely neutralized.

3. Fewer **legal protections** for the less powerful: workers, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities.
4. Fewer educational and employment **opportunities for Black Americans** because of the gutting of Affirmative Action programs and efforts to increase Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.
5. Less money for public education and more resources available for White Christian academies. As resources are pulled back from public education, test scores drop, and new arguments are made for the failure of public schools. **Science and evolutionary theories** of human origins are downplayed in favor of a “biblical worldview.”
6. America’s white Christian nationalists see an expanding **kinship with white Christian nationalist in Russia** and the Russian Orthodox Church. Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump are both seen as divine messengers, bring biblical order in a chaotic world, especially in their **opposition to sexual expression** outside of heterosexual marriages.
7. This global white Christian nationalist movement is highly patriarchal, giving men power to control women and **construct male dominated structures** in business, government, and society.
8. **American oligarchs, building a base of white Christian nationalists, reached a zenith in their power** in the 2024 national elections. They currently control the presidency, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Supreme Court.

We now have a well-financed and highly integrated political system controlled by wealthy white American oligarchs.

There are probably many strategies for controlling and reshaping this nexus of oligarchic power. My personal strategy may surprise you. My reading of first century Christian literature – the New Testament – is that the early Christian literature was a project of the Roman Empire to disempower Jewish wars of rebellion and make the Jewish people more amenable to assimilation into the ethos and structures of the Roman Empire. A great deal of early Christian writing was tailormade for the support of empire – the Roman Empire or the American Empire. Here are two of the most vivid examples from the Christian New Testament. Romans 13:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. . . Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Paul is probably writing this to the Christians in Rome in the middle of the first century.

Here is another passage from the Christian New Testament.

First Peter 2:13-17:

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

This passage is tailor-made for the domination of empire: "For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors. . . . Fear God. Honor the emperor." This letter of First Peter was probably written in the later years of the first century.

With my understanding of the New Testament as a project of Roman Empire propaganda, I see that today's white Christian nationalists in America are living out the original vision of the New Testament: to obey the authorities and support the empire, whether the empire is Roman or American.

In order to control the organizing power of white Christian nationalists in America, I find that it is necessary to critique the first century Christian narrative of obedience to the Roman Emperor. We are the heirs and recipients of a two-thousand-year tradition of nationalist propaganda that has its origin in the Christian New Testament. We need to **expose and oppose narrow Christian nationalism** in the era of the Roman Empire and in current day America. Our national foundation for this effort is the Declaration of Independence: "All people are created equal;" and the First Amendment that states that: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," establishing a separation of church and state.

Of course there are other strategies, but that will have to wait for another sermon. I invite conversation on this crucial topic of white Christian nationalism in American politics. What are your observations and questions? (3263 words, 25 minutes)