THE POWER WORSHIPPERS

Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism

KATHERINE STEWART

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Names matter, so I will take a moment here to lay out some of the terms of my investigation. Christian nationalism is not a religious creed but, in my view, a political ideology. It promotes the myth that the American republic was founded as a Christian nation. It asserts that legitimate government rests not on the consent of the governed but on adherence to the doctrines of a specific religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage. It demands that our laws be based not on the reasoned deliberation of our democratic institutions but on particular, idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible. Its defining fear is that the nation has strayed from the truths that once made it great. Christian nationalism looks backward on a fictionalized history of America's allegedly Christian founding. It looks forward to a future in which its versions of the Christian religion and its adherents, along with their political allies, enjoy positions of exceptional privilege and power in government and in law.

Christian nationalism is also a device for mobilizing (and often manipulating) large segments of the population and concentrating power in the hands of a new elite. It does not merely reflect the religious identity it pretends to defend but actively works to construct and promote new varieties of religion for the sake of accumulating power. It actively generates or exploits cultural conflict in order to improve its grip on its target population.

Other observers may reasonably use terms like "theocracy," "dominionism," "fundamentalism," or "Christian right." I use those terms where appropriate, but often prefer "Christian nationalism" in referring to the

whole, because it both reflects the political character of the movement and because it makes clear its parallels between the American version and comparable political movements around the world and throughout history.

This is not a book about "evangelicals." The movement I am describing includes many people who identify as evangelical, but it excludes many evangelicals, too, and it includes conservative representatives of other varieties of Protestant and non-Protestant religion. This movement is a form of nationalism because it purports to derive its legitimacy from its claim to represent a specific identity unique to and representative of the American nation. And I join with others who study the field in calling it "Christian nationalism" in deference to the movement's own understanding of this national identity, which it sees as inextricably bound up with a particular religion. However, I do not mean to suggest that Christian nationalism is representative of American Christianity as a whole. Indeed, a great many people who identify as Christians oppose the movement, and quite a few even question whether it is authentically Christian in the first place.

I have been following this movement for over a decade as an investigative reporter and journalist. I remain as impressed with the organization and determination of its leaders as I am alarmed by the widespread lack of awareness of its influence among the general public. The aims of the movement's leaders have been clear for some time, often openly stated in the forums that they share. Their recent achievements have exceeded reasonable expectations. Yet much of the public continues to believe that little has changed.

Perhaps the most salient impediment to our understanding of the movement is the notion that Christian nationalism is a "conservative" ideology. The correct word is "radical." A genuinely conservative movement would seek to preserve institutions of value that have been crafted over centuries of American history. It would prize the integrity of electoral politics, the legitimacy of the judiciary, the importance of public education, and the values of tolerance and mutual respect that have sustained our pluralistic society even as others have been torn apart by sectarian conflict. Christian

nationalism pretends to work toward the revival of "traditional values" yet its values contradict the long-established principles and norms of our democracy. It has no interest in securing the legitimacy of the Supreme Court; it will happily steal seats and pack the Court as long as it gets the rulings it wants. It cheers along voter suppression and gerrymandering schemes that allow Republicans to maintain disproportionate legislative control. It collaborates with international leaders who seek to undermine the United States' traditional alliances and the postwar world order built up over the past seven decades. And it claims to defend "the family," but treats so many American families with contempt.

The widespread misunderstanding of Christian nationalism stems in large part from the failure to distinguish between the leaders of the movement and its followers. The foot soldiers of the movement—the many millions of churchgoers who dutifully cast their votes for the movement's favored politicians, who populate its marches and flood its coffers with small-dollar donations—are the root source of its political strength. But they are not the source of its ideas.

The rank and file come to the movement with a variety of concerns, including questions about life's deeper meaning, a love and appreciation of God and Scripture, ethnic and family solidarity, the hope of community and friendship, and a desire to mark life's most significant passages or express feelings of joy and sorrow. They also come with a longing for certainty in an uncertain world. Against a backdrop of escalating economic inequality, deindustrialization, rapid technological change, and climate instability, many people, on all points of the economic spectrum, feel that the world has entered a state of disorder. The movement gives them confidence, an identity, and the feeling that their position in the world is safe.

Yet the price of certainty is often the surrendering of one's political will to those who claim to offer refuge from the tempest of modern life. The leaders of the movement have demonstrated real savvy in satisfying some of the emotional concerns of their followers, but they have little intention of giving them a voice in where the movement is going. I can still hear the words of one activist I met along the way. When I asked her if the anti-democratic aspects of the movement ever bothered her, she replied, "The Bible tells us that we don't need to worry about anything."

The Christian nationalist movement is not a grassroots movement. Understanding its appeal to a broad mass of American voters is necessary in explaining its strength but is not sufficient in explaining the movement's direction. It is a means through which a small number of people—quite a few of them residing in the Washington, D.C., area—harness the passions, resentments, and insecurities of a large and diverse population in their own quest for power. The leaders of the movement have quite consciously reframed the Christian religion itself to suit their political objectives and then promoted this new reactionary religion as widely as possible, thus turning citizens into congregants and congregants into voters.

From the perspective of the movement's leadership, vast numbers of America's conservative churches have been converted into the loyal cells of a shadow political party. Here, too, there is a widespread misunderstanding of the way Christian nationalism works. Its greatest asset is its national infrastructure, and that infrastructure consists not only of organizations uniting and coordinating its leadership, and a burgeoning far-right media, but also in large part the nation's conservative houses of worship. The churches may be fragmented in a variety of denominations and theologies, but Christian nationalist leaders have had considerable success in uniting them around their political vision and mobilizing them to get out the vote for their chosen candidates. Movement leaders understand very well that this access to conservative Christians through their churches is a key source of their power, and for this reason they are committed to overturning regulatory, legal, or constitutional restrictions on the political activity of churches.