

Progressive Tradition.

European Vision.

White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy

by Philip S. Gorski

On October 25, 2023, the US House of Representatives elected Mike Johnson – a little-known Republican Congressman from Louisiana – to the office of Speaker of the House. As such, Johnson not only presides over the House of Representatives; he is also second in line for the Presidency following Vice President Kamala Harris. What does Johnson's unexpected elevation tell us about the current state of the Republican Party? And the future of American Democracy? In short: nothing good. Johnson is a White Christian Nationalist, and White Christian Nationalism (WCN) is a reactionary ideology that is deeply at odds with some of the most basic tenets of liberal democracy.¹ Until recently, WCN operated out of view and behind the scenes. No more. It is now out in the open and at the commanding heights of power. Which is exactly where it wants to be.²

What is White Christian Nationalism (WCN)?

WCN is many things. For one, a fusion of racial, religious and national identity, an identity that lays claim to cultural and political privilege.³ From this perspective, being a "real American" means being a conservative (usually white) Christian, and vice versa. WCN is also a political ideology that says, "we built America, it's our country, and we are going to take it back." Making America great again, means making it Christian again – a particular kind of Christian. And that means imposing a certain set of "values" on the country. Ideally, by writing them into law.

WCN is also a political vision, a set of social and policy prescriptions.⁴ Amongst other things, proponents of WCN are against abortion, gay marriage, transgender rights, public schooling, gun regulations and social

1 Thomas Edsall, "The Embodiment of White Christian Nationalism in a Tailored Suit," Opinion, Guest Essay, *The New York Times*, November 1 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/01/opinion/mike-johnson-christian-nationalism-speaker.html>.

2 Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

3 Bradley B. Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism – and What Comes Next* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2023).

4 Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

welfare (except for themselves). And they are for “family values”, government funds for religious school and religious homeschoolers, capital punishment, free-market capitalism, a strong military and “law and order” (when applied to others). Not to be outdone, Mike Johnson once proposed the criminalization of gay sex, has long opposed separation of church and state, and was centrally involved in the plot to overturn the 2020 Presidential Election.⁵ He a radical and a reactionary.

But what, you might ask, does any of this have to do with Christianity? Don’t Christians believe that we are all created in the image of God? That Christians are commanded to love their neighbors? To welcome the stranger? To practice selfless charity? To such questions, Mike Johnson and other Christian Nationalist leaders respond that God has sorted humanity into nations; that the Biblical Israelites were wall builders, too; and that love, hospitality and charity are the responsibility of the church and not the state and of individuals not institutions; and, moreover, that the sole purpose of the state is to enforce the law – meaning “the moral law” as they happen to understand it. WCN is actually a heretical version of Christian political theology that worships at the altar of power, fear and violence.⁶

While most Christian Nationalists would readily affirm the foregoing, they tend to bristle at the addition of the term “white”, loudly insisting that they are “not racists.” Unfortunately, the evidence suggests otherwise. Statistical measures of WCN are strongly and robustly correlated with various indicators of racial animus and white grievance, such as opposition to interracial marriage and adoption as well as belief in anti-white discrimination. *But only amongst whites.* What’s more, while many African Americans also embrace the idea of the United States as a “Christian nation”, they mean something very different by this, namely, a nation that lives up to liberal democratic values of freedom and equality for all. Their understanding of the term Christian nation is inspired by Martin Luther King. Not Mike Johnson.

When Was WCN?

Contemporary WCN ideology closely aligns with the political positions of a Trumpified GOP. But WCN is much more than just a partisan platform. Its real foundation is a mythological version of American history. A myth that is far, far older than the Christian Right that took shape during the 1980s. That myth goes something like this:

“America was founded as a (white) Christian nation; the founding fathers were orthodox (evangelical) Christians; its founding documents – the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution – were based on Biblical (Protestant) principles; God has entrusted America with a divine mission; to that end, He has blessed the United States with unparalleled wealth and power; but the increasing presence of non-whites, non-Christians and non-native born people is endangering that missions and those blessings; it imperative that we Make American Christian Again; or at least bring it back under the control of true Christians.”

Today, this vision of American history is propagated through various channels, including: “history” textbooks produced for Christian homeschoolers; the sermons of Christian nationalist pastors such as Robert Jeffress; political commentaries in so-called “patriot Bibles”; and reactionary Christian organizations such as the Family Research Council. The most successful entrepreneur in this Christian-Nationalist industrial complex is a man named David Barton, a pseudo-historian who hawks books, gives lectures and produces videos promoting a caricatured version of American history. Mike Johnson attests that Barton has “strongly influenced” his “worldview.” He is not alone. Depending on how one defines and measures WCN ideology, somewhere between 10% and 20% can be counted as strong believers and another 20–30% as moderate believers. WCN

5 Peter Wehner, “The Polite Zealotry of Mike Johnson,” *The Atlantic*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/polite-zealotry-mike-johnson/675845/>.

6 Andrew Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023).

is not a “fringe” movement. On the contrary, it is one of the most powerful movements in contemporary American politics – well-organized, well-financed – and increasingly radical.

WCN also has deep roots in American history, religion and culture. Very deep roots. In fact, as Samuel Perry and I show in our recent book, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*, its roots can be traced all the way back to Puritan New England in the late 17th century, where it served to legitimate savage wars against the native peoples and the “peculiar institution” of chattel slavery.⁷ WCN can also be psychologically deep. For some Christian leaders and activists, such as Johnson, it is a consciously held belief system embedded in “Christian” history textbooks, propagated by “patriotic pastors”, and printed in the marginal commentary of so-called “patriots Bibles.” For others though – probably most – WCN is less an explicit ideology and more a vague set of intuitions absorbed from the conservative, Christian subculture about who is, and is not, a “real American.” Thirdly and finally, WCN is culturally deep, because it has seeped out into the secular culture as well. Secular versions of “American exceptionalism” are rooted in the Puritans vision of the “New World” as a “New Israel” – and of themselves as a new “Chosen People.” Likewise, the post-apocalyptic genre of movies and novels so popular in the contemporary US resonates with the literalist reading of the Biblical apocalypse embraced by conservative evangelicals. For all these reasons, Perry and I conceptualize WCN as a “deep story”, a story that is historically, psychologically, and culturally deep.

WCN also goes together with a certain understanding of nationalism. Scholars of nationalism have long distinguished between “civic” and “ethnic” forms of nationalism.⁸ Civic nationalism is based on a shared allegiance to democratic ideals and institutions, such as civic

equality and the rule of law. Ethnic nationalism is based on biological descent and shared territory (i.e., “blood and soil”), which is to say hierarchy and power. The “American exceptionalism” of the Reagan era was very much of the civic variety, and echoes of it can still be heard today from members of the old Republican “establishment” such as Mitt Romney and Liz Cheney. By contrast, the WCN of the Trump era is very much of the ethnic variety. Indeed, MAGA-adjacent intellectuals have explicitly rejected the view that America is a “creed” or an “idea” and argued that it is defined by “culture” and “land.”⁹ This is why some observers on the left now warn about “Christo-Fascism.”¹⁰

Who are the Christian Nationalists? And Where are they Heading?

Until recently, the term “Christian Nationalism” was rarely heard outside of seminar rooms. It entered public discourse following the failed coup of January 6, 2021, after it appeared in national media outlets such as CNN and *The New York Times*. Today, it is often used as a catch-all term for “the Christian Right” or “evangelical Christian.” This is unfortunate, because not all conservative Christians are Christian Nationalists, and vice versa. In fact, some of the most outspoken critics of Christian Nationalism are theologically and politically conservative, white Christians, such as David French, Paul D. Miller, Russell Moore and Peter Wehner. (Most theologically conservative Black Christians have never been under any illusions about Trumpism). And some of the most influential Christian Nationalists are not evangelical Christians (e.g., Steve Bannon, Michael Flynn, and Yoram Hazony). And what is true at the leadership level also holds amongst their followers. While many white evangelicals are also WCNs, some are not. Conversely, many WCNs are mainline

7 Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

8 Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background* (New York: McMillan Publishing Co, 1944).

9 Emile Doak, “America Isn’t an Idea,” *The American Conservative*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/america-isnt-an-idea/>; Ramesh Ponnoru, “No, Sen. Graham, America is not an idea,” *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), January 20 2018, Opinion, <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2018/01/20/no-sen-graham-america-is-not-an-idea/>.

10 Ed Kilgore, “Mixing Christianity With Nationalism Is a Recipe for Fascism,” *New York Magazine*, September 18, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/09/mixing-christianity-with-nationalism-is-a-recipe-for-fascism.html>.

Protestants and conservative Catholics. A few are not particularly religious, and some are non-Christians. For them, WCN is more political ideology than religious conviction. Or, in some cases, just a polite way of being racist. After all, defending “Judeo-Christian civilization” sounds nobler than railing against “white genocide.” Sometimes, WCN is just a fig-leaf that provides cover for white supremacism.

The focus on conservative evangelicals and the organizations of the Christian Right is also misleading in another way: they are no longer the torchbearers of WCN. The most radical partisans of WCN, and the tip of the spear on the religious right today are the loose networks of “independent charismatics” known as the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). Their radical political theology is fundamentally incompatible with American liberal democracy. Its three core tenets are “spiritual warfare”, “seven mountains” and “kingdom now.” Followers of the NAR believe that they are engaged in an ongoing battle between the forces of good and evil, all around us, all the time; that people and places can be, and often are, possessed by demonic forces; and that Christians must join the battle and deploy “spiritual weapons”, and maybe physical ones, too. They also believe that modern societies are comprised of “seven mountains” of influence (business, media, education, government, religion, family, and the arts); and that Christians are commanded to take control over each mountain, by whatever means necessary. Finally, they believe that the Second Coming of Christ will commence once the seven mountains are under their control; that “end times” are imminent, and that Christians can bring them about through political action. Needless to say, this reduces democratic politics to a mere means to authoritarian ends.

WCN is a deep undercurrent within American politics that rises to the surface from time to time. The periscope broke the surface on January 6, 2021. The whole submarine surfaced on October 25, 2023, joining the main battleship in the MAGA flotilla. Christian Nationalism is no longer operating

beneath the surface or in the background. It’s now front and center at the commanding heights of power. And it now threatens to torpedo American democracy itself.¹¹

11 Katelyn Fossett, “He Seems to Be Saying His Commitment Is to Minority Rule,” *Politico*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/10/27/mike-johnson-christian-nationalist-ideas-qa-00123882>.

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