



Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism

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Abstract

This paper defines and explores the concept of Christian nationalism and its implications for democracy. It describes Christian nationalism not just as an anti-democratic political ideology, but also as a political machine, a leadership-driven movement that seeks political power and domination in all areas of government and society. Christian nationalism succeeds by cultivating and exploiting a mindset with four key features: the belief in a particular, authentic, and superior identity group within America; the conviction that the members of this group are the most persecuted group in society; the apocalyptic fear that the nation is on the verge of collapse; and an affinity for strongman leadership. Rather than merely advocating for conservative positions on social issues like abortion, Christian nationalist activists use these topics as tools to advance an anti-democratic agenda and advantage religious and political elites. I show that Christian nationalism is a key feature of the anti-democratic coalition, and has always been a top-down movement, driven by a leadership cadre that has transformed Christian nationalism into an anti-democratic, pro-oligarchic force. Opposing this movement requires us to collaborate with those who share at least a majority of our common goals to build a pro-democracy movement at all levels.

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In terms of presidential overreach and corruption, we are presently in a situation without precedent. To be sure, there have been instances in the past of attempts at presidential overreach—Lincoln (arguably) claimed new wartime powers; Wilson suppressed dissent; and FDR had his court-packing scheme. But those efforts occurred mostly in exceptional circumstances (like war), and mostly could claim some plausible, if misguided, appeal to national interest and supporting legal theory. The Trump administration, on the other hand, is consciously and willfully denying the legitimacy of the Constitution, the judiciary, or any law that places limits on its action. This is the most lawless administration in American history, without exception.

There has been corruption in the past, too—Nixon with his attempts to subvert the Department of Justice, the Harding administration with its Teapot Domes, and so on. But no President has organized pure up-front grift along the lines of Trump's meme-coin scheme. No President has handed an Elon Musk-type oligarch who profits from government contracts unaccountable and unconstitutional power over government. The combination of corruption with authoritarian overreach makes the present situation unique and exceptionally dangerous.

The betrayal of America's national security interests is also without precedent. To be sure, we have had Presidents pursue wrong-headed and destructive foreign policies. But we haven't before had one who destroys alliances and aligns with adversaries in ways that can be justified only by his self-interest, instead of the national interest. We haven't had a situation where, in the face of clear and dangerous breaches of national security processes, the president responds by praising the individuals who are endangering us.

The degree of incompetence in the current administration is also without precedent. Limiting ourselves to the relevant period, say the mid-twentieth century on, there is nothing that can compare with Trump's on-again, off-again-lunatic-spreadsheet tariff program; with the mass firings of federal employees that are likely both unlawful and costly; with the ham-handed and likely unlawful termination of government programs and contracts; and so on.

In other respects, the present moment is more in line with bad episodes from the past. The anti-DEI push is really a resurgence of the Jim Crow segregationist mentality—very bad stuff, not consigned to history as it turns out. The push to use state power to impose gender hierarchy and norms through coercion also has precedent in various moral crusades and panics. The suppression of dissent and policing of the federal bureaucracy for “anti-Christian bias” is anti-communist wine poured into new bottles.

How did we get here? To be sure, there are major anti-democratic forces at work around the globe: a system that generates a deadly mix of mass discontent and mass disinformation. Still, no explanation of the movement to destroy American democracy would be complete without an understanding of Christian nationalism. If we are to grasp how the war on democracy has unfolded, it is important to know something about the movement's organization, its psychology, and the ways in which it mobilizes millions for an antidemocratic agenda.

What exactly is Christian nationalism? For starters, it is not a religion. It is an anti-democratic political ideology as well as a political phenomenon, more specifically a political movement. It appeals to religious ideas and tropes, yet it contains a multitude of denominations and doctrines, lacking internal theological consistency. As a political ideology, the main idea of Christian nationalism is that the United States is defined neither by its commitment to equality nor any other constitutional principle, but rather by its particular national, cultural, and religious heritage; that this heritage is now under existential threat from progressivism, “wokism,” secularism, immigration, and other supposedly anti-American forces; and that the

only solution is to turn all power over to an authoritarian leader who is above the law and can defend “real” Americans against the internal enemy.

While the movement has changed significantly from the old days of the “Moral Majority,” our understanding of it has not always kept up. So, I will draw some sharp—perhaps too sharp—distinctions for the sake of highlighting key aspects of this transformation.

First, as mentioned, this is a political movement, not just a social movement. A wealthy progressive once asked me, “What if we just give in on abortion—will that make them calm down?” Set aside for a moment the sad idea of trading away women’s rights for the hope of temporary political gain. What struck me, in fact, was my friend’s outdated understanding of the Religious Right. The common assumption is that the movement came together as a grassroots response to certain social issues, like abortion and gay marriage. That is false: It came together when a set of reactionary political and religious leaders discovered the power of dividing Americans by instrumentalizing these issues.

Second, the religious or denominational aspect of the movement is far more diverse than most observers understand. It is still common to see Christian nationalists equated with “white evangelicals.” But rank-and-file supporters of the movement, along with some segments of leadership, come from an increasing variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds. A vital sector of movement leadership is Catholic. And Christian nationalism has drawn new energy from independent charismatic movements, such as the New Apostolic Reformation, which are multiracial as well as transnational movements.

Third, money plays a big role in driving the movement, and big money plays an especially central role. The wealthy funders are a diverse group who overwhelmingly hail from the very top of the economic ladder. They include evangelicals, Protestants, ultra-conservative Catholics, Jews, and even atheistic types—though the latter may adopt a quasi-religious identity for strategic reasons.

The movement does invest considerable effort in grassroots fundraising, with donations from individuals, churches, and other conservative and religious organizations funneled into partisan operations. But the biggest piece of the pie comes from this relatively small number of plutocratic donors. And they expect rather specific returns on their donations, which often have more to do with far-right and libertarian economic policies, along with privileged contracts for their monopolistic businesses, than with right-wing positions in the so-called culture wars. They have been instrumental in shaping Christian nationalism into an antidemocratic, pro-oligarchic force.

The core policy agenda—to destroy the social safety net, erode regulatory policies along with those that protect the workforce, and increase the vast upward concentrations of wealth—is inherently unpopular and damaging to most people. That’s where the culture wars play a role. Many people who have been persuaded that, say, abortion (or whatever culture war issue of the day) is the single most important moral issue of our time do not necessarily identify as “Christian nationalists.” But by casting their vote for far-right or pro-authoritarian candidates simply because those leaders promise to end whatever policy they object to, they lend their support to a Christian nationalist agenda.

Christian nationalism succeeds largely by cultivating and then exploiting a certain mindset. That mindset has four key features.

First, there’s apocalypticism: Once America was great, but now, because of woke liberals and secularists, we are supposedly facing an absolute emergency. To borrow the language of contributors to Project 2025, the 900-page blueprint for a second

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Trump administration, we have one shot to save our country—should we fail, America is doomed.

The second feature is a persecution complex. It is easy to think of many groups in society today that suffer some form of discrimination. Christian nationalists can often name only one such group: themselves.

Third, membership brings the privilege of identifying with an “in-group.” Christian nationalist leaders promote the idea that people like themselves are the only true and authentic representatives of the American nation.

A “strongman reflex” represents the fourth and final feature. Movement leaders say nice things about “love” from time to time, but mostly they promote the idea that this world cannot be governed in a nice way. They reject the ideals of pluralism, equality, and rule of law upon which the institutions of democracy depend. In fact, they believe the situation is too dire for rules to be followed anymore, and long for someone willing to flout the rules of democracy in order to defeat the “enemy within.”

More than just a mindset or a set of policy goals, as I mentioned earlier, Christian nationalism is also a complicated political machine. Like any such machine, it has deeply networked groupings of organizations and a powerful set of leaders—and they set the agenda, not the grassroots. To be sure, the rank and file matter too—they need to turn up on election day—but they are on the receiving end of the leadership’s schemes, the funders’ investments, and the disinformation on their airwaves or in their social media feeds.

Among the underappreciated parts of this political machine are the pastor networks that mobilize tens of thousands of conservative-leaning religious and community leaders, who help turn out millions of voters for far-right candidates. Movement leaders understand that their power derives from their ability to drive voters to the polls. Yet this does not mean they aim to satisfy expressed voter preferences or safeguard their interests. On the contrary, they have exploited their power to protect their agenda from democratic influences. The best illustration of this is their relentless focus on capturing and using the courts to impose policy that is broadly unpopular and, by their own admission, would not stand a chance in democratic elections.

The right-wing legal machine, in its current form, got its start in the early 1980s, when leaders of the Christian Right created and began to invest in legal advocacy organizations and to cultivate and develop right-wing legal talent. They set about picking the right cases to bring to judges favorable to their interests. They were strategic, patient, and long-range in their thinking. Over time, they created novel legal building blocks that would lead to significant victories, eventually sidelining the Establishment Clause, turning civil rights law on its head, and expanding the privileges of religious organizations, including the right to taxpayer money.

Many people believed that the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol would usher in a new era of popular commitment to democracy. But that failed to materialize because many supporters of the attack simply did not care about the destruction of democracy and its institutions. They sought to put an authoritarian in power who would advance what they believe are the “correct” policies against what they had been led to believe is a dangerous, radical left.

How did they come to that conclusion? Part of the answer is that they had been colossally misinformed, and this misinformation helped them to rationalize their choices at the ballot box. It is, of course, far effective to promote the lie that all Democrats are hell-bent on destroying women’s sports, and then to exploit this lie for outrage politics, than it is to sell the rank and file on rejiggering the economy for the benefit of billionaires or ushering in an era of cronyistic corruption and

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graft, the costs of which will fall on them. But authoritarianism loves a misinformed and disinformed public, so the antidemocratic movement has funded massive propaganda campaigns that lean heavily on such culture war flash points. A longer explanation as to why we are where we are today involves the effectiveness of the Christian nationalist movement's voter turnout operations.

Those of us who oppose this movement will not wish to replicate its intellectual dishonesty, its rhetoric of political violence, and its dehumanization of "others," much less its politics. But we would do well to note its determination and its laser-focus on voter turnout operations. By embracing a big-tent mentality, we can and should collaborate with those who share at least a majority of our goals. And finally, we would do well to build the infrastructure of a pro-democracy movement at all levels.

