



Taking it Personally: How Christian Nationalism Helps Fuel the Republican Outrage Machine

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Abstract

Recent US elections saw a rise in the prominence of culture war issues centering around questions of how to address contentious issues including race and history. These debates were often marked by criticism from dominant groups who vocally resisted suggestions that their group could be implicated in wrongdoing. Using data from the 2021 General Social Survey, this paper seeks to understand why conservative Christians are more sensitive to interpreting criticism of their religious group as a personal criticism. It forwards two mechanisms by which this takes place: 1) members fuse their identity with that of their social group, and 2) members have an expectation that their religious group should be held in high esteem. I find that religious commitment and Christian nationalism are strong predictors of interpreting group criticisms as personal attacks. More specifically, I find that, when mapping Christian Nationalism against other identifiers such as race, religious tradition, religious commitment, partisan identity, and ideological identity I find that perceptions of group criticism as a personal attack are predominantly a feature of White, devout, Protestant, and conservative Americans. This paper contributes to understanding the impact of Christian Nationalism in shaping public debate about history and education and its utilization by the Republican Party's outrage machine.

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Public education has always been ground zero in culture war politics, from segregation academies in the 1970s to the contemporary push for “school choice” and publicly funded religious schools. As always, the issue of curriculum is a central point of contention. For example, recent campaigns have taken place in red states like Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana to remove important details of history that might highlight the culpability of White Americans, Christianity, or both in racial oppression while insisting on the importance of the Bible and the free market, the end goal being a more “patriotic” curriculum.

These debates underscore the perennial challenge in promoting a public understanding both of national history and of the contemporary political situation, critical for a functioning liberal democracy. This challenge is that members of dominant groups tend to resist their groups’ being implicated in wrongdoing. For example, though White Protestant theology, leadership, and institutions played a powerful role in justifying and maintaining chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation, American religious conservatives have been obstinate in their opposition to acknowledging this history formally and its ongoing implications for the Black community or the eternally racialized nature of American politics.

This situation contributes to an infamous paradox in American politics: On the one hand, White conservative Christians—Protestants in particular—are the dominant group historically; on the other hand, they harbor a sense of perpetual persecution, that they are maligned by elites in the academy and the media. This paradox has important political implications, making White conservative Christians in particular ripe for outrage-stoking and ready to interpret any public recognition of conservative Christian failures (for example, in the treatment of racial and religious minorities, workers, women, or LGBTQ persons) as “leftist propaganda” that should be opposed.

But why are White conservative Christians particularly sensitive to perceiving criticism of their religious group as personal attacks? I submit that there are two important psychological and ideological mechanisms. The first is what psychologists call “identity fusion”—the extent to which actors fuse their personal identity with that of their social group, such that those more embedded within their particular group perceive group-level criticisms as personal criticisms. Empirically, we might expect someone more attached to their religious community (for example, someone who exhibits high levels of religious commitment) to perceive criticism of their religious group as an attack on them personally.

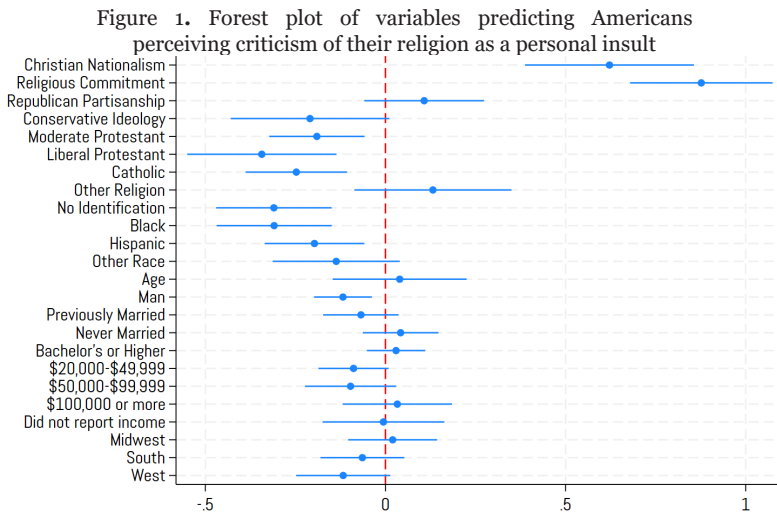
This dynamic is also shaped by a second mechanism, namely, the extent to which White conservative Christians hold an expectation that their religious group should be publicly esteemed. This, I argue, will be related to both Christian nationalism and Americans’ identification with groups for which ethno-religious minority status is unfamiliar and/or rejected. These are White Americans, Protestants, and political conservatives.

At the ideological level, Christian nationalism represents both a deep story about America’s Anglo-Protestant foundations and a vision for (re)institutionalizing Anglo-Protestant supremacy in identity and policy today. Thus, the more someone embraces Christian nationalist ideology, the more likely they are to be personally offended by public criticism of their religion, viewing it as a violation of the sanctity of group solidarity and tradition. We might also expect a similar effect for others who are unaccustomed to ethno-religious minority status. White Americans, Protestants, and conservatives, for example, might likewise see their religion as dominant or

“prototypical,” with any violation of that understanding through criticism interpreted as a personal insult.

Data from the 2021 General Social Survey (GSS) help me demonstrate how this works. In 2021, Americans were asked “If someone criticized your religion, to what extent would it feel like a personal insult?” Responses range from 1 (“not at all”) to 4 (“a great deal”). I measure Christian nationalism with a scale compiled from three GSS measures where Americans indicated their agreement with the following statements: “The federal government should advocate Christian values”; “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan”; and “The U.S. would be a better country if religion had less influence.” My analyses also include a host of controls for religious characteristics (religious commitment and tradition) and political characteristics (Republican partisanship and ideological conservatism), as well as standard sociodemographic measures.

Figure 1 plots the results from an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to show what factors predict whether Americans take criticism of their religion as a personal insult. Effects to the right of the red dotted vertical line are positively associated with taking religious criticism as a personal insult, those to the left are negatively associated. Error bars that do not touch the red dotted line are statistically significant. All the measures are standardized so the size of their effects can be compared.



Source: General Social Survey (N = 3,119; weighted).

Note: Results from ordinary least squares regression. Error bars are robust standard errors.

The most striking pattern is that religious commitment and Christian nationalism are by far the strongest predictors that Americans perceive criticism of their religion as an insult. The fact that both are so strongly associated with the outcome when they are included in the model is also noteworthy, suggesting that each makes a distinct contribution. Religious commitment is likely capturing the extent to which Americans are fusing their own identity with that of their religious group (thus, an

insult to the latter is an insult to the former). Meanwhile, Christian nationalism is likely capturing the expectation that one's religious group should be publicly honored, so criticisms are perceived as a deeply personal violation.

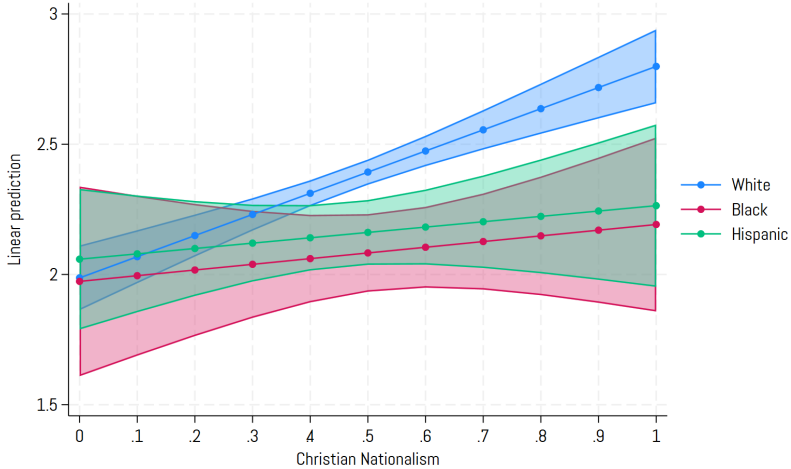
Other patterns are also noteworthy. For example, it seems that members of most religious traditions are less likely than sectarian Protestants to take criticism of their religion as an insult, as are non-White Americans compared with White Americans. In other words, sectarian Protestants and White Americans are the groups relatively more likely to perceive criticism of their religion as an insult. It is also interesting that neither Republican partisanship nor conservative ideology is significantly associated with perceiving criticism of religion as a personal insult, but this is because religious commitment, tradition, and Christian nationalism are explaining any association that might exist with those political characteristics.

Though these individual characteristics each seem to contribute something to taking religious criticism personally, they do not work separately in reality; rather, they work in combination. And when they are combined in a cross-product interaction term with Christian nationalism, racial, religious, and political characteristics, each shows important patterns.

In Figure 2, for example, I graph the marginal values of taking religious criticism as a personal insult across values of Christian nationalism (rescaled to range from 0 to 1) by whether an American is White, Black, or Hispanic. Notice that as Christian nationalism increases, the trend line for Black and Hispanic Americans stays mostly flat. But the line for White Americans rises sharply. This indicates that the connection between Christian nationalism and perceiving criticism of one's religion as a personal insult is essentially limited only to White Americans. Thus, it is not the idea of Christianity's central role in American public life that matters *on its own*, but that idea in combination with White Americans' expectation of cultural and political supremacy. It is these Americans who perceive criticism of their religion as a personal insult.

There are other patterns with religious and political characteristics as well. For example, Figure 3 shows the results from OLS regression models where I interact Christian nationalism with religious commitment and religious tradition. Looking at the top panel, it seems that among persons who are weakly attached to their religion, Christian nationalism does not drastically affect their likelihood of taking criticism of their religion as a personal insult. But among Americans who are strongly religious (likely having fused their own personal identity with that of their religious group), the slope of the trend line is steeper. This means as Christian nationalism increases, they are more likely to take religious criticism as a personal insult.

Figure 2: Marginal values of Americans perceiving criticism of their religion as a personal insult across values of Christian nationalism by racial identity

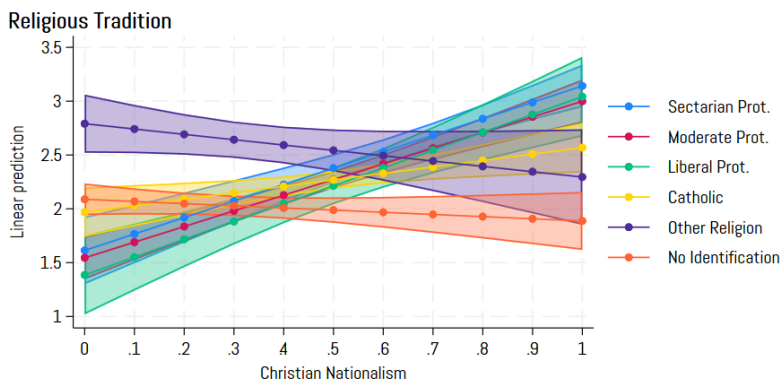
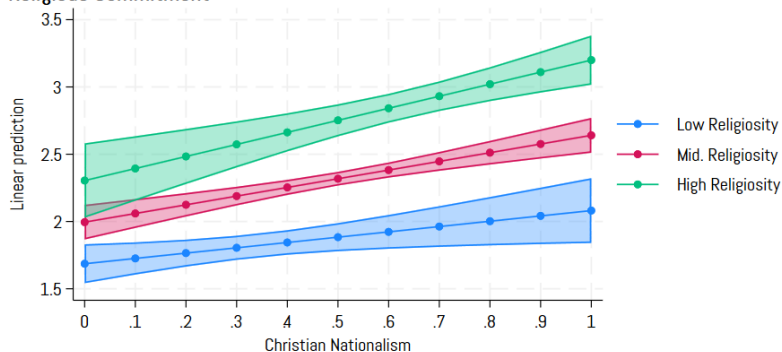


Source: General Social Survey (N = 3,119; weighted).

Note: Results from ordinary least squares regression. Error bands are 95% confidence intervals. All control variables are held at their means.

The bottom panel shows a different angle. Here, I shift from quantitative to qualitative attachment to religion. That is, rather than focusing on the intensity of one's religious commitment, I am looking at the kind of religion. As Christian nationalism increases for persons of non-Christian traditions or with no religious identification, the likelihood that they take criticism of their religion as an insult does not increase at all. Among Catholics, it increases only slightly. The trend lines indicate that Christian nationalism seems connected with perceiving insults of one's religion as a personal insult really only among Protestants.

Figure 3: Marginal values of Americans perceiving criticism of their religion as a personal insult across values of Christian nationalism by religious characteristics



Source: General Social Survey (N = 3,119; weighted).

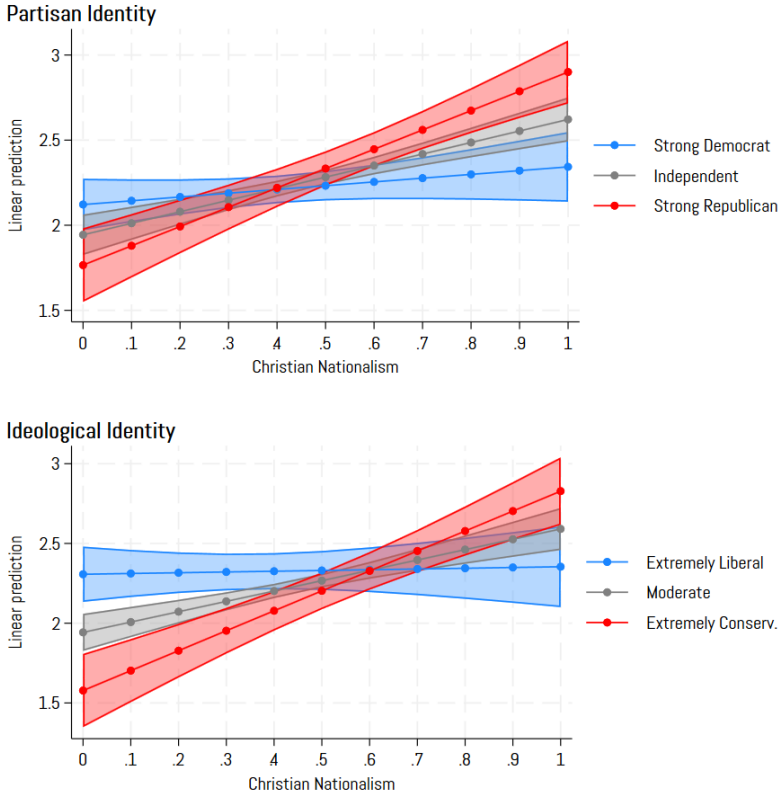
Note: Results from ordinary least squares regression. Error bands are 95% confidence intervals. All control variables are held at their means.

Thus, when it comes to the connection between Christian nationalism and taking personal offense at public criticisms toward one's religion, it is not just those who are deeply attached to their religion, but Christians (Protestants especially), whose religion has been the dominant one in American history and who are thus accustomed to receiving public respect.

Finally, political characteristics also shape Christian nationalism's association with perceiving criticism toward one's religion as a personal insult. Figure 4 illustrates how partisanship and ideological identity matter. Christian nationalism does not make strong Democrats and extremely liberal Americans more inclined to take personal offense at criticism of their religion. In addition, among independents and moderates this happens only slightly more. Rather it is strong Republicans

and extremely conservative Americans for whom Christian nationalism is most powerfully associated with perceiving criticism of one's religion as an insult.

Figure 4: Marginal values of Americans perceiving criticism of their religion as a personal insult across values of Christian nationalism by political characteristics



Source: General Social Survey (N = 3,119; weighted).
 Note: Results from ordinary least squares regression. Error bands are 95% confidence intervals. All control variables are held at their means.

Taken together, these patterns also show that Christian nationalist ideology plays a powerful role in explaining who is more likely to take personal offense at public criticism of their religion. But it only works this way in combination with other key factors—specifically, among White, devout, Protestant, and conservative Americans, namely, those for whom religious-political minority status is wholly unfamiliar or rejected, or both.

These patterns help us to understand Christian nationalism's nuanced role in fueling contemporary debates about national history and public education, as well as the Republican Party's outrage machine. The dynamics I have documented here, in addition to conservative Christian resistance to seeing certain historical facts taught

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in public spaces, suggest right-wing populist politicians, knowing their audiences will largely be White, devout, Protestant, conservative Americans who subscribe to Christian nationalist ideology, will be the keenest to exploit reports of public slights against their religion.

The criticisms do not have to be direct, however. When Donald Trump or his surrogates have lamented the decline of the prominent place of *Christianity* in American cultural life, the implication is American *Christians* are losing their prominent place in American cultural life. The tacit assault on the former is an assault on the latter. And given the success of Donald Trump and MAGA Republicans in the 2024 election, it is likely this rhetorical tactic will be used to great effect for the foreseeable future.