



**INTERFAITH  
ALLIANCE**

PROTECTING FAITH AND FREEDOM

## A Concise Introduction to Christian Nationalism

For millions of Americans, the January 6th insurrection demonstrated the potent threats our nation faces from anti-democratic forces. While the mob that attacked the U.S. Capitol included self-identified Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and other far right groups, some of the most indelible images from that day prominently featured religious symbols and language. In the aftermath, many are coming to understand the threat of Christian nationalism for the first time.

Interfaith Alliance is a national advocacy organization that champions an inclusive vision of religious freedom, protective of people of all faiths and none. Americans adhere to nearly 3,000 religious and spiritual traditions, protected by the First Amendment right to believe as we choose without fear of discrimination or harm. The Establishment Clause safeguards this diversity of belief by setting out the expectation that the government won't play favorites among religious traditions or favor religion over nonreligion.

Christian nationalism rejects these constitutional guarantees, instead seeking to privilege Christians above all others. Drawing on recent scholarship and thought leadership around religion, the First Amendment, and racial justice, this primer offers an introduction to this ideology and the distinct threat its proponents pose to our pluralistic democracy.

*“White Christian nationalism is one of the oldest and most powerful currents in American politics. But until the insurrection, it was invisible to most Americans.”*

– SAMUEL PERRY & PHILIP GORSKY, *The Flag and the Cross*





## What is Christian Nationalism?

Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that conflates American identity with an exclusive form of religious identity. Rooted in the myth that we were founded as a Christian nation and therefore enjoy special favor by God, proponents of Christian nationalism seek a fusion of religious and civil life - to the detriment of both. Christian nationalism incorporates anti-democratic notions of white supremacy, nativism, patriarchy, and authoritarianism, seeking to concentrate power in a select group.

Katherine Stewart, author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, notes that “because Christian nationalism is identified (or, more accurately, because it identifies itself) with a religion, the movement is often understood as a set of religious and/or theological positions.” But, she emphasizes, “Christian nationalism is, first and foremost, a political movement. Its principal goal, and the goal of its most active leaders, is power.”<sup>1</sup>

By fusing “Americanness” with an exclusive view of Christianity, non-Christians and even those who identify as Christians but don’t meet its qualifications are perpetually suspect. In practice, this ideology motivates laws and policies that undermine voting rights for marginalized groups, exclude diverse perspectives from public schools, withhold access to reproductive and gender affirming healthcare, and more.



## Distinguishing a Political Ideology from a Religious Tradition

Christian nationalism draws on the symbols and language of Christian religious life in service of a political and cultural goal. Supporters tend to believe that the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation, believe our laws and policies should be guided by Christian principles, support the display of religious symbols in public places and prayer in schools, and view our national success as part of a divine plan.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the “Christian” elements of this ideology are more about identity than religion. Researchers find that strong supporters of Christian nationalism generally adhere to political conservatism (distinguishable from party affiliation) rather than show traditional markers of religiosity, like regularly attending a house of worship.<sup>3</sup>

Reporting will sometimes equate supporters of Christian nationalism with self-identified Evangelicals, leading to confusion about members of a particular religious community and their political behavior. But a closer look shows that religious affiliation has less bearing on a person’s social attitudes than their support for the central tenets of Christian nationalism. For instance, being Evangelical is less predictive of one’s support for a Middle East travel ban than espousing strong Christian nationalist views.<sup>4</sup>

“This story – this mythology – goes against the very text of the Constitution, a constitution that mentions religion exactly once, and that is to prohibit religious tests for public office.”

– AMANDA TYLER, CEO of the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty and leader of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism initiative

<sup>1</sup> Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty & Freedom From Religion Foundation, *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection*, p. 10, (2022), [https://bjcconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Christian\\_Nationalism\\_and\\_the\\_Jan6\\_Insurrection-2-9-22.pdf](https://bjcconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Christian_Nationalism_and_the_Jan6_Insurrection-2-9-22.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking Back America for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, p. 8 (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Whitehead and Perry, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Whitehead and Perry, p. 20 & 70.

## White Supremacy and Christian Nationalism

The Christian nationalist conflation of religious and national identity has deep ties to racial subjugation. White proponents of slavery justified the dehumanization of enslaved Africans, even those who converted to Christianity, using Christian scriptures. The North's victory in the Civil War gave rise to "the religion of the Lost Cause," providing texture and grounding to a regressive worldview that connected an idealized Christian past with an ongoing investment in white supremacy.<sup>5</sup>

This fusion movement would be brought to bear throughout the 20th century through the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, through opposition to communism and the Civil Rights Movement, and, later, to support the amorphous "war on terror."<sup>6</sup> Proponents wielded two conflicting ideas: that the United States holds a special status because of God's favor and is also in a state of moral decay, requiring action by "real" Americans to regain power and control. Contemporary supporters of Christian nationalism aim to achieve this goal by declaring the United States a Christian nation, reintroducing prayer in schools, and more.

But white Christian nationalism is far from the only faith-based narrative that has called its supporters into public life. "The Black church tradition," Dr. Jemar Tisby, author of *The Color of Compromise*, "presents another version of patriotism. In contrast to white Christian nationalism, Black Christians have historically tended to embrace a kind of patriotism that leads to an expansion of democratic processes, the inclusion of marginalized people, and a call for the nation to live up to its foundational ideals."<sup>7</sup>

## Advancing an Inclusive Vision of Religious Freedom

The Christian nationalism of our current moment draws on centuries of exclusionary rhetoric and violence. Yet, those who labor toward a more just society build upon the leadership of visionaries within a very different faith-based understanding of patriotism. Our success will require a sustained multi-faith commitment to achieving a truly inclusive democracy.

The freedom to believe as we choose is a fundamental component of this vision. We refuse to cede ground to anti-democratic activists who seek to recast religious freedom as a license to discriminate. *True* religious freedom protects people of all faiths and none.

**Freedom of and Freedom from Religion:** Religious and moral beliefs are deeply personal and, for many of us, a key part of our sense of self. The First Amendment protects the right of every person to believe as we choose with the expectation that the government won't play favorites among traditions or favor religion over nonreligion. Religious freedom is often called our "first freedom" because our founders saw freedom of conscience as the cornerstone for all other rights.

*"It does not matter whether the United States is or ever was a Christian nation. What matters is that a significant number of Americans believe that it is."*

– ANDREW L. WHITEHEAD AND SAMUEL P. PERRY, *Taking Back America for God*

*"What we're seeing is the effort of a minority — white Christians — attempting to exert undue influence on the majority of Americans."*

– REV. PAUL BRANDEIS RAUSHENBUSH, president and CEO of Interfaith Alliance

5 Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, p. 81-92 (2020).

6 See Dr. Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (2021).

7 Baptist Joint Committee & Freedom From Religion Foundation, p. 7.

**Diversity of Belief is a Source of Strength:** Americans adhere to nearly 3,000 religious and spiritual traditions<sup>8</sup> with no one community claiming a privileged status. People of all faiths and none are equal contributors to our shared society and all are eligible to run for office.

**Pluralism in Action:** The right to religious freedom is unalienable – but it’s not unlimited. For every American to believe as they choose, we can’t impose our beliefs on others. Religious freedom doesn’t include the right to coerce, shame, or exclude others from public life because they don’t share our beliefs.

**Personal Belief, Public Life:** The wall of separation between church and state protects religious institutions as much as it protects our government. Religious communities have the freedom to share their teachings without government interference, provided the public sphere remains open to all.

**Equality:** Across religious traditions, we are taught that every person is imbued with sacred dignity and worth. We strengthen our moral foundation by advancing policies that affirm our shared humanity and ensure that all people are treated equally under law.

Overtly Christian nationalist appeals are becoming increasingly common in American life. But this anti-democratic ideology is not new, even as it gains cultural and political force. By learning to recognize and reject Christian nationalism in a unified voice, we can finally deliver on our nation’s foundational promises.

## Learn more about Christian nationalism through these resources:

### Christians Against Christian Nationalism

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty  
[www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org](http://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org)

### Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty & The Freedom From Religion Foundation  
<https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/jan6report>

### Taking Back America for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States

Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, Oxford University Press (2020)

### The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism

Katherine Stewart, Bloomsbury Publishing (2019)

### White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity

Robert P. Jones, Simon & Schuster (2020)



<sup>8</sup> Mark Trainor, *Exploring Religious Freedom and Diversity in the United States*, <https://share.america.gov/exploring-religious-freedom-and-diversity-in-u-s/>.

*This primer is a product of Interfaith Alliance Foundation. To learn more about our work to advance an inclusive vision of religious freedom, please contact [policy@interfaithalliance.org](mailto:policy@interfaithalliance.org).*