

Q&A With ‘The Flag And The Cross’ Author Samuel L. Perry On White Christian Nationalism

By Kenneth E. Frantz · April 8, 2022

Christian nationalism has returned to the center of the political and religious conversation in America due to former President Donald Trump’s refusal to accept his loss in the 2020 election and the number of Christian symbols and signage at the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot.

Two sociologists of religion, Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, wrote a recently released book titled “The Flag and the Cross,” which explores Christian nationalism through the lens of history and recent survey data. Gorski and Perry attempt to explain White Christian nationalism’s past — defined as aiming to privilege White Christianity in both the public and private sphere — while explaining its importance for understanding the future of American religion and politics.

ReligionUnplugged.com contributor Kenneth E. Frantz interviewed Perry about his new book over Zoom. Their conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Kenneth E. Frantz: Could you start off by explaining a little bit about what Christian nationalism is and why you and your co-author, Gorski, thought it was important to write about?

Samuel L. Perry: Christian nationalism broadly is an ideology that idealizes and advocates, a fusion of American civic life with a particular kind of “Christianity.” We always want to put an asterisk or scare quotes around Christianity because I think the Christianity that many Americans have in mind when they want to see a fusion of this kind of Christianity with American civic life is an ethnically specific Christianity. And this is why we call it White Christian nationalism.

We are trying to be more specific that the phenomenon that we’re describing is White Christian nationalism because for these Americans, they envision a fusion of American identity symbolism, policies and sacred values with an expression of Christianity that is shaped by White conservative, nativist understandings of what it means to be an American.

“Christian” represents not being a disciple of Jesus or somebody who has made Jesus the Lord and savior of their life but somebody who is like us — somebody who is culturally conservative, somebody who is born in the United States, someone who is probably a Republican or a politically conservative Christian in identity. It’s someone who is at the very least Christian according to certain kinds of values if not actually a Christian, but like Christian enough — or at least pro-Christian.

We have documented with survey data that this kind of ideology — and we measure it in various ways — is far more pervasive than many Americans realize. And it is also one of the leading predictors of embracing political views and values that are anti-democratic, that are authoritarian, that are pro violence, that are xenophobic and racially prejudiced and Islamophobic.

We feel like this is antithetical to a lot of the values that most Americans would say are worth cherishing and supporting. And so we thought this was worth talking about. For the book, we begin with the Capitol insurrection — the attempted insurrection — because we saw these flags; we saw not only flags, but we saw Jesus flags and “Jesus saves” and impromptu worship sessions and prayers in Jesus’ name in the Senate

chamber.

We feel like rather than viewing that as something that is fringe and something that is so weird and bizarre and out there, we actually want to make an argument that maybe that expression of White Christian nationalism was fringed. Like most of the people who subscribe to White Christian nationalism are not going to be going and trying to stage a coup at the capital, but we believe the underlying ideology that feeds into that kind of expression is far more pervasive and mainstream than many recognize. And so we thought this was worth talking about in depth.

Frantz: Your book was trying to provide a partial explanation of the Jan. 6 insurrection. Would you care to elaborate more on why you think Christian nationalism was central to that?

Perry: I think Christian nationalism represents a part of that story — White Christian nationalism in particular because what was motivating a lot of people who were at the Capitol insurrection was the belief that America is for people like us and for the kinds of values, the kind of beliefs, the kinds of political priorities that we hold dear. And it is not for people like them, people who had just won the election.

If you listen to the prayer that the QAnon shaman gave in the Senate chamber after they had taken over the Capitol, the kind of language that they're using. — he's thanking God for filling the chamber with patriots who love God and love Christ. And he was thanking God for allowing them to send a message to the tyrants and the communists and the globalists.

And he says this verbatim. He says sending messages that this is our nation, not theirs. And beneath that, I think, is the White Christian nationalist assumption that America properly belongs to people like us. It is the kind of people who are entering, who are in that chamber, who are willing to not only support Trump but willing to fight, to take back a country that they feel like had been stolen away. That is at the core of White Christian nationalism: the belief that America is for people like us, and "Christian" is a part of that, but it's also broader — it's ethnic, it's cultural, it's nativist. And Christian nationalism is associated with being willing to engage in authoritarian violence to be able to maintain law and order.

But it's the kind of law and order that ends up privileging White Americans primarily over, say, non-White Americans or White Christian Americans over non-Christians. It tends to be anti-democratic. And so that would help explain why these Americans were more likely to go in and stage a coup and to take over the Capitol and to try to overturn the election results by force if necessary – because White Christian nationalism is associated and, I believe, influences support for restricting participation in democracy.

So, as we've shown in a previous study – both in the book and in peer-reviewed research in journal articles – we've shown that White Christian nationalism is powerfully associated with Americans believing that we make it too easy to vote, being willing to restrict voting access to people who could pass basic civics tests or who hadn't committed certain felonies, or even believing in conspiracy theories that voter fraud is rampant or in the core beliefs of QAnon that there are there is a cabal of liberal elites who are running a pedophile ring out of a pizza store.

We believe that White Christian nationalism helps us understand the Capitol insurrection and all of these other things that are going on in the country because all of the things that we witnessed at the Capitol – the authoritarian violence, the anti-democratic practice, the ethnocentric belief that this is a nation for people like us and not people like them – it is powerfully correlated with Christian nationalist beliefs. When combined with the symbolism that we saw at the Capitol, I think it's a slam dunk case with these kinds of expressions of Christian worship right alongside violent violations of democratic norms, belief in conspiracy theory – all those kinds of things.

Frantz: Elsewhere you've said Christian nationalism was a type of fascism. So would you mind elaborating on that?

Perry: There are many parallels between what Jason Stanley writes about in his book, "How Fascism Works," which is a fantastic book. That's influenced my thinking on the subject tremendously. There's a difference between calling somebody a fascist, which would suggest that they're self-identified as a fascist or that they are somehow clinically crossed over into full-on fascism.

I prefer not to call people Christian nationalists because Christian nationalism properly understood is a spectrum and ideology that people can be more or less adherent to, and White Christian nationalism is the same way. So I think you see a lot of parallels between fascist-style politics and fascist ideology and what we identify as White Christian nationalism. For example, a division of all society into people like us versus people like them, good guys and bad guys, and that the bad guys are unworthy of participation in politics and democracy. Their very presence defiles the nation's heritage and our national character and our values that unite as a people. That's fascism, but that's also White Christian nationalism.

White Christian nationalism subscribes to the idea that America is for us — that the presence of secular people, the presence of socialists, the presence of leftists, the presence of immigrants who were not born in the United States, the presence of Muslims and the presence of atheists really sullies America's Christian heritage. So our goal as a nation is to minimize their influence by force, if necessary, by making sure that we institutionalize White Christian conservative ideals and values in our policies, our sacred symbols and our national self-understanding — just like fascism often rallies around a myth of national identity and heritage and where we come from as a nation.

Christian nationalism is built on that myth that the nation was founded on Christian principles: All of the founding fathers were either Christians themselves or were powerfully influenced by the Christian or biblical worldview to create a nation that is for these kinds of values. Fascism as a political strategy usually is very much in favor of strong male leaders who embody the values of the nation. Christian nationalism is very much in favor of that kind of authoritarian leadership embodied in, say, Trump. One of the leading predictors that you voted for Donald Trump in 2016 or 2020 was Christian nationalist ideology.

Part of that was you believe that Trump was going to win back the nation that felt like had been taken away from you — these religious values and this kind of like persecution that White Christians feel. Also, it is support of that kind of leadership — frankly, it's not just Trump's promises but Trump's style. Trump promises to be a tough guy, to not apologize, to not be politically correct.

White Christian nationalism is a proto-fascist ideology. It's fascist light. White Christian nationalism would have a difficult time manifesting in the United States as a full-on fascist dictatorship because of our checks and balances, because of our norms of democracy, because of our institutional constraints on that kind of behavior.

And yet there are so many parallels between White Christian nationalist ideology and the point of ideology that Jason Stanley talks about that ends up resulting in kind of a fascist situation of radical ultra-nationalism characterized by strong male leadership around a populist myth, anti-elites, anti-cities, patriarchal, pro-fertility, extreme sexual anxiety about homosexuals in our case right now, at this moment in our country's history. It's not just anti-gay, but it's also anti-trans men and women. So, I think there are so many parallels that White Christian nationalism should be understood as a kind of on-ramp to full-blown, fascist-style politics.

Frantz: And you also connect Christian nationalism to other ideologies like White nationalism and Christian libertarianism. Would you mind elaborating on what those ideologies are and why they're important to understanding Christian nationalism?

Perry: I think there are so many parallels between White Christian nationalism and White nationalism. Often the difference is, one would foreground Christianity or religious values or culture as the primary thing worth saving, worth defending and protecting. White nationalists specifically would foreground this kind racial heritage. Like we feel racially attacked that the David Dukes and the neo-Nazi kind of contingent would foreground this kind of assault on White culture, White race. White Christian nationalism could imply Whiteness. And in fact, I actually think it does imply Whiteness, as we show in the book. Christian nationalist language is, for White Americans, powerfully associated with perceptions of White victimhood and that their rights are discriminated against, and Black Americans are not discriminated against.

White Christian nationalism is in many ways disguising White nationalist impulses and beliefs and ideologies. But the language is couched in terms of culture. It's couched in terms of heritage and religion and faith. And so that would be the distinguishing characteristic — one is more likely to foreground the religious values component rather than the racial or ethnic

component. I think most people who subscribe to White Christian nationalism would not explicitly say so boldly that America is for White people, but they would say America is for Christians, and Whiteness is implied there. And so I think we have evidence to suggest that Whiteness is implied even though Christianity is kind of as talked about as the leading characteristic there.

The White Christian nationalism is also powerfully associated with White Christian libertarianism, as Gerardo Marty has also shown his book “American Blind Spot.” He talks more about this in terms of the historical narrative. But we find that White Christian nationalism has a very powerful libertarian element – for example, with belief that during the pandemic the government should have been protecting our economy versus defending the vulnerable. That’s a very libertarian belief, but White Christian nationalism is powerfully associated with that kind of belief that the government should prioritize our own freedom to go into public spaces, to not wear masks, to not get vaccinated, to go to church rather than restricting and having stay-at-home orders or mandates to restrict that kind of freedom. White Christian nationalism would be far more likely to support that kind of libertarian impulse there.

The enemy in the minds of many Americans who subscribe to White Christian nationalism isn’t Muslims, and it isn’t atheists – it’s socialists. And this is something that I think was really hit home to us. When we look at the quantitative data, White Christian nationalism is associated with prejudice toward atheist and prejudice toward Muslims, but it’s most strongly associated with prejudice toward socialists. Why? Because socialists represent leftism in its worst possible form. It’s not just cultural leftism – which atheism and Islam would be associated with – but socialism represent not only cultural atheism but radical minority identity politics. It represents economic communism. It represents mandated secularism – enforced secularism.

I think this also suggests that that Christian nationalism has this kind of neoliberal, libertarian element to it that is not just cultural conservatism. It also radical economic conservatism. And in fact, White Christian nationalism is one of the leading indicators that you subscribe to economic neoliberal ideology – that you believe the government shouldn’t regulate businesses, that we should not have robust social safety nets, that we don’t

need to intervene to try to correct economic inequality, those kinds of things. I think White Christian nationalism has all kinds of connections with not only White nationalism but also White libertarianism.

Frantz: You trace Christian nationalism back to 1690. What's the importance of emphasizing that date in understanding Christian nationalism?

Perry: Phil Gorski calls this the spirit of 1690 rather than the spirit of 1776. And this is what he is writing about. There is in new England, the thrust of Anglo-Protestant supremacism that expresses itself as the central defining characteristic of what it meant to be a person in the colonies, a citizen of the colonies who was supposed to rule or conquer or overcome not only Catholics but Native Americans in particular. There was this juxtaposition of those who were God's chosen people: Anglo-Protestants, Brits, English, Englishmen. So there was an ethnic component, there was a religious component, and there was a racial component.

The enemies were Native Americans who were coming against those in the colonies as the cultural and racial and economic threats to the proper kind of victors of that land. So there were all kinds of those conceptions of who the land rightfully belongs to and who God has to send to conquer this land and to make it prosperous and successful. And so 1690 represents the rough date of when we see the emergence of White Christian nationalism in the form of Anglo-Protestant, British supremacism.

Frantz: I've seen part of an argument for nationalism among certain conservative political writers lately. The argument seems to be that a society needs shared values and norms in order to function, and Christian nationalism is an attempt to provide those shared values and norms. How would you respond to that argument?

Perry: I think at some point we end up playing word games, and that's been going on a lot since, say, the Ukrainian conflict – or the Russian invasion of Ukraine – because people look at Ukraine like conservatives have been looking at Ukraine, especially people like Brad Little John and people who are pro-nationalism who would like to look at the Ukraine and say, “Oh, look, nationalism is awesome. Everybody applauds nationalism when it's Ukraine but not nationalism in the United States.” And I think we end up

playing word games because I think if nationalism refers to my response to an invasion, but it also it also refers to the impulse that led to the invasion in the first place, then I think nationalism isn't a very helpful concept.

We have to be able to distinguish between those two things – the kind that defends your country from invasion or the kind that actually invades another country violently. If nationalism is the word for both of those, then I think we can actually come up with better terms. I'm not the only person to do this. I'm following the lead of political theorists Stephen Smith, or even Christian conservative political theorists like Paul Miller would distinguish between Christian patriotism and Christian nationalism.

Patriotism gives us a better understanding of the kind of thing that we are applauding in Ukraine and that we would applaud in the United States, and patriotism can refer to common values. And I think we, as Americans, do need to be united around common values. Any sociologist understands that common identities and values allow us to cooperate – and in those kinds of important ways. What is often portrayed as the good kind of nationalism is kind of an ethnic culture.

The dominant ethnicity or the dominant culture of a society should be the uniting values. And what do you do with the people who don't adhere to that? What do you do with the people who don't share those kinds of common historic norms like in the United States? We are a nation of nations and a people comprised of immigrants. And we have been historically this kind of mishmash of all kinds of different cultures.

As a nation, it's really difficult to make an argument that we have some kind of core "Americanness" that is not our allegiance to creed that we find in the Declaration of Independence – that all people are created people equal, that we have inalienable rights, that we have a government that is limited, that we are ruled by the people, that we are committed to democratic norms and legal equality and civic republicanism.

If you want to talk about being united around those kinds of norms and values, then I'm all for it. I think we ought to promote that kind of civic responsibility and value sharing.

Frantz: I think you've documented that Christian nationalism is related to some support for Putin and Russia. That's because he's a strong male

leader, and Christian nationalists associate the Orthodox Russian church with Russia. Would you mind elaborating on that? Could you see American Christian nationalists empathizing with authoritarian leaders and Christian nationalist leaders abroad?

Perry: We're seeing that now — not only with Putin, but we're also seeing it with Victor Orbán's regime in Hungary that is authoritarian, far right anti-democratic. We see Christian nationalist leaders on the far right supporting his regime — Trump included, but also others — as an example of what it means to take charge in your own country and defend your kind of conservative culture and make sure that outsiders don't have any influence in your society. I showed in 2018 PRI data that that most Americans, even conservative Americans, when they were asked about Putin or Russia, or whether Russia's our friends, most Americans, even the conservative ones, don't believe Putin is a good guy or Russia is really great or that they are our friends.

But among the leading predictors associated with believing that Putin was good — that you support Putin, that you support Russia, and you believe that Russia's is our ally or friend — was support for Trump. If you had high approval of Trump, you were also more likely to have high approval of Putin or Russia and to believe that Russia is our friend or ally. And if you believe that America has been, always was, at least was at some time, or still is a Christian nation, you were also more likely to believe that Russia is our friend or ally.

I would think that were that same question asked right now, you might see a smaller percentage of the population that would support the idea that Russia is our friend, Putin is our friend, but I bet the correlation with Christian nationalism would be even stronger because of polarization. Once the far-right conservative position becomes support for Putin, support for Russia, then Christian nationalism is going to double down on that. I think the kind of Christian nationalism that these kinds of conservative leaders are promoting isn't the kind that is pro-Ukraine. It's the kind that ends up being pro-Putin.

The kind of Christian nationalism that we see in the United States doesn't end up being the kind that we would say challenges tyrants, but it ends up siding with tyrants and authoritarian regimes. I don't think Christian

nationalism is associated with a Christian patriotism that we think sticks up for freedom from oppression. It's more likely to be the one that exercises that kind of authoritarianism or supports it.

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