

“Christian Nationalism” Used to Be Taboo. Now It’s All the Rage.

“If it makes the left or liberals upset, I’m more than willing to claim it.”

[Molly Olmstead](#) Aug 05, 2022 5:29 AM



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A year ago, calling someone a Christian nationalist was an insult.

The phrase was in the air after Jan. 6 rioters had come to the Capitol [wielding Christian iconography](#) and speaking of their cause as a religious crusade. Crosses and bibles and banners citing scripture were held aloft by a crowd calling to hang Mike Pence and overthrow a democratic election.

In the aftermath, as many horrified Republicans scrambled to condemn the violence, evangelical pastors decried “Christian nationalism” as deeply dangerous—especially in response to experts and reporters who [noted](#) that support for Trumpian extremism had become “inextricable from some parts of white evangelical power in America.”

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Al Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, called Christian nationalism “idolatrous” and [pushed back](#) on the idea that evangelical Christianity was linked to what had happened at the Capitol.

“Nationalism is always a clear and present danger,” he [wrote](#) a week after the insurrection. But linking it to “American evangelical Christianity,” he said, was an unfair “accusation.”

By this summer, Mohler had updated his thinking.

Speaking on [his podcast](#) on June 15, the theologian said: “We have the left routinely speaking of me and of others as Christian nationalists, as if we’re supposed to be running from that.” He added: “I’m not about to run from that.”

Mohler is not alone in changing his tune. Far-right politicians are warming to the label, too.

“I am being attacked by the godless left because I said I’m a proud Christian nationalist,” Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene [wrote](#) in a recent tweet. Two days later, she was hawking merch—a “Proud Christian Nationalist” T-shirt, for sale on her Instagram. “Share your love for our great nation with this shirt, available EXCLUSIVELY at the Official MTG Shop,” the caption said.

This is a remarkable shift. What was, not long ago, a scholarly term used to describe an ideology that holds that the U.S. was founded as—and should be governed as—an explicitly Christian nation has been reclaimed as an *identity*. In a matter of months, “Christian nationalist” transformed from being a taboo to cultural signifier.

And experts say that shift is not limited to a few extreme people.

“Inside evangelical spaces, as recently as a few months ago, there was more deflection,” said Kristin Kobes Du Mez, the author of *Jesus and John Wayne*, a history of the past half-century of white evangelicalism in the United States. “It was, ‘Oh, Christian nationalism, what even is that? This is just a tactic on the part of liberals and the left to smear good, patriotic, and godly Americans.’” In the last few months, Du Mez said, the attitude has changed to be more like: “‘Oh yeah? Of course, Christian nationalism is what we’re supposed to do.’”

Christian nationalism is an academic term that encompasses different degrees of intensity. It includes more harmless, everyday God-and-country white evangelicals who believe politicians and courts should eliminate barriers separating church and state—perhaps by allowing for prayer in schools or other public spaces—as well as those with a “dominionist” perspective, compelled to bring the nation’s institutions under control of people who [will enforce God’s law](#).

It also includes violent extremists willing to tear down democratic processes to bring about their vision of a white Christian nation. And while the vast majority of people who could be categorized as Christian nationalists fall into the first two camps, experts worry that the idea of a self-identified label could bring different kinds of Christian nationalists more closely together.

It’s a dangerous normalization. “You have surveys that show there’s correlation, that the more staunchly people hold Christian nationalist profiles, the less they defend democracy,” said Du Mez. Other scholars have shown

that Christian nationalism [seems to incline people](#) toward baseless conspiracy theories.

It may have been inevitable that some on the political right would reclaim the term. Groups that see themselves as victimized often tend to reappropriate accusatory language, and social media makes for a useful place to experiment with identities and test out the public's reaction. "Christian nationalism is simultaneously becoming more stigmatized in the mainstream," said Sam Perry, a sociologist at the University of Oklahoma who studies Christian nationalism. "And yet the people that do affirm it are becoming more radicalized, more militant, more really open about it. Like, 'OK, if this is who we are, we just need to embrace this thing.'"

Scholars and self-proclaimed Christian nationalists may not always mean the same thing when they use the term. Some self-identifying Christian nationalists might simply be social conservatives who advocate against gay marriage, for example. This is different from the scholarly study of those who believe the American political process itself should be overhauled to serve God—or that the reasoning undergirding the laws of the U.S. should be explicitly Christian.

But many Christian nationalists who identify that way likely know what they're advocating for. Greene may have missed some of the nuances of the conversation, but she opportunistically and openly represents brash, aggressive, stop-the-steal types of Americans. And she knows she can use the shock of the label to burnish her brand. As Andrew Whitehead, a sociologist studying Christian nationalism at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, put it: "It's, 'if it makes the left or liberals upset, I'm more than willing to claim it.'"

Other politicians who promote the ideals of Christian nationalism include [Doug Mastriano](#), the Republican nominee in the Pennsylvania gubernatorial race, who justified his [participation in](#) the Jan. 6 riots in religious terms and who promised that "above all" he would "[bring God back](#)" to Pennsylvania.

There's [Michael Peroutka](#), the Republican nominee to be Maryland's attorney general, who believes leaders should "take a biblical worldview and apply it to civil law and government," and who has said laws supporting gay marriage are null because they violate God's law. There's Rep. Lauren Boebert, who floated the idea of mandatory "[biblical citizenship training](#)," who has said "the church is supposed to direct the government" and that she's "tired of this [separation of church and state junk](#)."

It seems it's only a matter of time before the Mastrianos and Boeberts come to embrace the label of "Christian nationalism," too.

Partly in response to this softening of the term, some critics have begun using the phrase "Christo-fascism," meant to be an unambiguously negative term, to refer to the violent, extremist form of Christian nationalism seen during the Jan. 6 insurrection.

Phil Gorski, a Yale professor who studies white Christian nationalism, said he thought "Christo-fascism" could apply both to the white nationalist groups that have begun strategically using Christian language as a cover to make their racist aims more palatable, as well as to the extreme Christian nationalists who openly embrace the idea of using violence to achieve their ends.

"That's the most worrisome development I see," Gorski said. "More overlap in some cases with militia groups, more of this gun fetishism."

Right now, there's some debate as to whether "Christo-fascism" more accurately describes the danger posed by this increasingly emboldened segment of the Christian right—or if, conversely, it lets self-identifying Christian nationalists (and other evangelical Christians) off the hook for tacitly supporting extremism.

"A hallmark of fascism is this idea of regeneration through violence," Gorski said. "And that's something they're always talking around the edges of."