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# One Reason the Trump Fever Won't Break

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The more I consider the challenge posed by Christian nationalism, the more I think most observers and critics are paying too much attention to the wrong group of Christian nationalists. We mainly think of Christian nationalism as a theology or at least as a philosophy. In reality, the Christian nationalist movement that actually matters is rooted in emotion and ostensibly divine revelation, and it's that emotional and spiritual movement that so stubbornly clings to Donald Trump.

Three related stories illustrate the challenge.

First, Katherine Stewart wrote a disturbing report for *The New Republic* about the latest iteration of the ReAwaken America Tour, a radical right-wing road show sponsored by Charisma News, a Pentecostal Christian publication. The tour has attracted national attention, including in *The Times*, and features a collection of the far right's most notorious conspiracy theorists and Christian populists.

The rhetoric at these events, which often attract crowds of thousands, is unhinged. There, as Stewart reported, you'll hear a pastor named Mark Burns declare, "This is a God nation, this is a Jesus nation, and you will never take my God and my gun out of this nation." You'll also hear him say, "I have come ready to declare war on Satan and every race-baiting Democrat that tries to destroy our way of life here in the United States of America." You'll hear the right-wing radio host Stew Peters call for "Nuremberg Trials 2.0" and death for Anthony Fauci and Hunter Biden. The same speaker taunted the Fulton County, Ga., prosecutor Fani Willis by shouting: "Big Fani. Big fat Fani. Big fat Black Fani Willis."

Then there's Thursday's report in The Times describing how an anti-Trump conservative group with close ties to the Club for Growth is finding that virtually nothing is shaking Trump voters' confidence in Trump. As the group wrote in a memo to donors, "Every traditional postproduction ad attacking President Trump either backfired or produced no impact on his ballot support and favorability." Even video evidence of Trump making "liberal" or "stupid" comments failed to shake supporters' faith in him.

And finally, we cannot forget the astounding finding of a HarrisX poll for The Deseret News, showing that more Republicans see Donald Trump as a "person of faith" than see openly religious figures like Mitt Romney, Tim Scott and Mike Pence, Trump's own (very evangelical) vice president, that way. It's an utterly inexplicable result, until you understand the nature of the connection between so many Christian voters and Donald Trump.

In the immediate aftermath of the Jan. 6 insurrection, there was a tremendous surge of interest in Christian nationalism. Christian displays were common in the crowd at the Capitol. Rioters and protesters carried Christian flags, Christian banners and Bibles. They prayed openly, and a Dispatch reporter in the crowd

told me that in the late afternoon Christian worship music was blaring from loudspeakers. I started to hear questions I'd never heard before: What is Christian nationalism and how is it different from patriotism?

I've long thought that the best single answer to that question comes from a church history professor at Baylor named Thomas Kidd. In the days before Jan. 6, when apocalyptic Christian rhetoric about the 2020 election was building to a fever pitch, Kidd distinguished between intellectual or theological Christian nationalism and emotional Christian nationalism.

The intellectual definition is contentious. There are differences, for example, among Catholic integralism, which specifically seeks to "integrate" Catholic religious authority with the state; Protestant theonomy, which "believes that civil law should follow the example of Israel's civil and judicial laws under the Mosaic covenant"; and Pentecostalism's Seven Mountain Mandate, which seeks to place every key political and cultural institution in the United States under Christian control.

But walk into Christian MAGA America and mention any one of those terms, and you're likely to be greeted with a blank look. "Actual Christian nationalism," Kidd argues, "is more a visceral reaction than a rationally chosen stance." He's right. Essays and books about philosophy and theology are important for determining the ultimate health of the church, but on the ground or in the pews? They're much less important than emotion, prophecy and spiritualism.

Arguments about the proper role of virtue in the public square, for example, or arguments over the proper balance between order and liberty, are helpless in the face of prophecies, like the declarations from Christian "apostles" that Donald Trump is God's appointed leader, destined to save the nation from destruction. Sometimes there's no need for a prophet to deliver the message. Instead,

Christians will claim that the Holy Spirit spoke to them directly. As one longtime friend told me, “David, I was with you on opposing Trump until the Holy Spirit told me that God had appointed him to lead.”

Several weeks ago, I wrote about the “rage and joy” of MAGA America. Outsiders see the rage and hatred directed at them and miss that a key part of Trump’s appeal is the joy and fellowship that Trump supporters feel with each other. But there’s one last element that cements that bond with Trump: faith, including a burning sense of certainty that by supporting him, they are instruments of God’s divine plan.

For this reason, I’ve started answering questions about Christian nationalism by saying it’s not serious, but it’s very dangerous. It’s not a serious position to argue that this diverse, secularizing country will shed liberal democracy for Catholic or Protestant religious rule. But it’s exceedingly dangerous and destabilizing when millions of citizens believe that the fate of the church is bound up in the person they believe is the once and future president of the United States.

That’s why the Trump fever won’t break. That’s why even the most biblically based arguments against Trump fall on deaf ears. That’s why the very act of Christian opposition to Trump is often seen as a grave betrayal of Christ himself. In 2024, this nation will wrestle with Christian nationalism once again, but it won’t be the nationalism of ideas. It will be a nationalism rooted more in emotion and mysticism than theology. The fever may not break until the “prophecies” change, and that is a factor that is entirely out of our control.

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