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ISSUES IN THE NEWS

White Supremacy & Christian Nationalism

By Rev. Charles Brock
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Editor's note: In the following article the Rev. Charles Brock discusses white supremacy and Christian nationalism, the subjects of his Jefferson talk at Lincoln Library in Fairview on May 1.

Right off the bat we must say that both white supremacy and Christian nationalism have existed a long time – the former for around 10,000 years and the latter since Jesus walked the Earth. And you find the equivalent in most cultures – each country or group thinks it is better than the rest and tries to impose its religion and political ideas on others sometimes with force. Can you think of any exceptions? I cannot. Sometimes they are benign. Most often they are not.

But some can take nasty turns and we are seeing that in the United States today. It is not benign. Congress had a hearing on this:

I. Congressional hearing examines threat of white Christian nationalism

From Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, Southern Poverty Law Center, December 28, 2022

The House Oversight Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties held its seventh and last hearing on the threat of white nationalism this month. As Amanda Tyler, co-organizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism, testified during the hearing: “Christian nationalism seeks to manipulate

religious devotion into giving unquestioning moral support for its political goals.”

Tyler is also executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

White Christian nationalism combines American exceptionalism – the belief that America occupies a special and privileged place in the world – with the belief that God is the source of all American liberties and prosperity. This includes the belief that Americans are more valued in God’s eyes than people from other nations.

The “Christian” in Christian nationalism is more about identity than religion and carries with it assumptions about nativism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and militarism.

What’s more, large segments of the American population are seen as un-American. Some leaders of this movement uphold the racist idea that white Americans are the image of sacred Americanness. Civil rights advocates who struggle for a pluralist, multiracial, equitable democracy are often smeared as Marxists, communists and even pedophiles by this movement.

The danger of this ideology was apparent during the attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Amid the chaos of that day, Christian symbols, including crosses and Christian flags, were displayed next to “Make America Great Again” and QAnon banners. This placement was not accidental, but for some that day, these symbols expressed their false belief that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump, whom they somehow believe was God-sent to restore their republic.

Eric Ward, senior adviser at Western States Center and executive vice president of Race Forward, told the committee that the insurrection really has not ended – it is a “daily reality” in so much of the country. This is exemplified, he said, by the attempted attack on Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, which resulted in the severe injury of her husband.

Hard-right extremists have refocused their energies on local elections and school board meetings. Extremist activity has focused on minority communities, such as LGBTQ+ events and organizations, and – by opposing inclusive education and anti-racism initiatives in local schools – such activity targets Black and brown communities as well.

However, it’s only a veneer of respectability. The witnesses at the hearing spoke about the antisemitism that is sometimes found in white Christian nationalism. As one witness explained, the conspiracy that progressives are pedophiles who traffic and kill children draws from old antisemitic tales about blood libel and

the undermining of Christian youth. Some politicians and public figures aligning themselves with white Christian nationalism have, unfortunately, helped renew this anti-Jewish hatred for another generation and stoked recent anti-LGBTQ+ activities.

II. from the *Berkley Forum* for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs – Georgetown University

White Christian Nationalism: The Deep Story Behind the Capitol Insurrection

By: Philip Gorski, January 22, 2021, Faith and the American Insurrection

As one observer noted, the January 6 protesters seemed a motley crew: “country club Republicans, well-dressed social conservatives, and white Evangelicals in Jesus caps ... shoulder to shoulder with QAnon cultists, Second Amendment cosplay commandos, and doughy, hardcore white nationalists.” One group erected a giant cross, another a wooden gallows for Mike Pence. Someone waved a “Jesus Saves” banner, while another sported a “Camp Auschwitz” hoodie.

But the closer you look, the murkier things become. Christians waved Trump flags. The “Proud Boys” kneeled and prayed. One man, decked out as a cosplay crusader, clutched a large leather Bible to his chest with skeleton gloves. What looked like apples and oranges turned out to be a fruit cocktail: white Christian nationalism.

White Christian nationalism is, first of all, a story about America. It says: America was founded as a Christian nation, by (white) Christians; and its laws and institutions are based on “Biblical” (that is, Protestant) Christianity. This much is certain, though: America is divinely favored. Whence its enormous wealth and power. In exchange for these blessings, America has been given a mission: to spread religion, freedom, and civilization – by force, if necessary. But that mission is endangered by the growing presence of non-whites, non-Christians, and non-Americans on American soil. White Christians must therefore “take back the country,” *their* country.

White Christian nationalism is not just a story. It is also a political vision. Violence and racial purity are central to that vision. As Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead have shown, white Christian nationalists tend to favor a strong military and capital punishment and oppose gun control. White Christian nationalism is thus strongly correlated with opposition to interracial marriage, non-white immigration, and affirmative action.

About the Author – Philip Gorski is professor of sociology and religious studies at Yale University. He is co-director (with Julia Adams) of Yale’s Center for Comparative Research and co-runs the Religion and Politics Colloquium at Yale’s MacMillan Center. He is the author of *American*

Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present and The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Growth of State Power in Early Modern Europe.

White supremacy includes a lot of beliefs, hopes, and fears. If the people are deeply anxious or frightened of some real or imagined threat (e.g., socialism, mass immigration, crime, threats to their religion, transgender takeover), they may well vote for someone who promises to stand up to those threats, even if that person has no regard for preserving democracy. They don't like Muslims, Hispanics, Blacks, women, Asians, Mexicans, Arabs, Jews, immigrants, gays, liberals, transitionals, nude art, vaccines, wokeness. And they burn books like the Nazis of old.

Parris Baker writes for the Jefferson Educational Society: "Lawrence Glickman, professor of History at Cornell University, reported that the resentment and resistance displayed by some white people described one of the oldest and deepest patterns in American politics deeply woven into American political culture and that extends back to the era of Reconstruction."

III. Was America founded to be a white Christian nation?

This does not have an easy answer. John Adams: "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." This is a superb summary of Adams' overview and the practical effect that he hoped would influence the mission and the wars of America. Where did this come from? It is the olde Puritan English and New England tradition. It is not against the First Amendment, but it gives the United States a mission of purpose as opposed to just making money. Adams did not want a "bebanked, bewhiskied, bedollared nation."

Thomas Jefferson: Doubtless his education and the theological atmosphere in America affected his views. In his First Inaugural Address he claimed America was "a chosen country" and "the world's best hope"; "enlightened by a benign religion" and "acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence." It is a surprise to some who know not the theology of the Founders that they acknowledge "that overruling Providence which governs the destinies of men and nations" and "watches over our country's freedom and welfare." Max Lerner wrote: "Adams and Jefferson [and many other presidents] believed America was providentially chosen to carry out this moral sense by breaking away from the depravity of Europe and restoring the original moral innocence of mankind." Michael Beran sees the connection between the Puritans and founders seeing America as a "chosen country ... [and] a second Israel." This was common 17th

and 18th century Puritan teaching in American universities and was picked up by the seculars as well.

To understand how American Christianity became so entangled with racism and violence, we first must trace it back to its scriptural roots. (a la Gorski). Those roots are dual. The first is a *promised land* story. The New England Puritans saw themselves as the heirs of the biblical Israelites. They imagined themselves as a “chosen people,” and they came to see the “new world” as their “promised land.” And as their relationship with the natives shifted from curiosity to hostility, they began to see the Natives as “Canaanites,” who had to be conquered.

The second story is an *end times* story. Most Christian theologians read *Revelation* in allegorical terms, as a depiction of the moral struggles within the believer’s heart. But some interpreted the text more literally, as a description of bloody political struggles to come with the Romans (you remember the early persecutions). That is how many Puritan radicals read it politically; England was Rome, George III was Caesar, and they exported those ideas to New England.

The two stories gradually fused together during the Puritans’ wars with the Indians. Cotton Mather came to believe that the New World would be the central battlefield in the final struggle between good and evil. He placed himself and his brethren on the side of the good, and the Catholic French and their native allies on the side of evil. He likened the Indians to demons and viewed the killing of Indians as a blood sacrifice to an angry God. It was war that welded Protestantism and Englishness together in the New World.

But how did Protestantism and Englishness get entangled with whiteness? To answer that question, we need to shift our focus to Virginia. There, and elsewhere, the most common justification for the enslavement of kidnapped Indians and Africans was that they were “heathens.” But this argument broke down in the late 17th century as some enslaved persons converted to Christianity and some white Christians sought to evangelize them. The problem was initially resolved by shifting the legal basis of slavery from religion to color: “Blacks” could be slaves; “whites” could not. It was then more fully resolved by creating a new theological basis for slavery. Perhaps the most influential was the “Curse of Ham.” Blacks were the descendants of Noah’s son, Ham, the argument went, and their color and enslavement were a result of the curse that Noah had called down on his head.

“Trumpism is, among other things, the latest version of the white Christian nationalism frame. Echoing the promised land story, Trump says he will “take back the country” from the outsiders and invaders who have taken control – immigrants and secularists, Muslims and Mexicans – and then restore it to its rightful owners: “real” (that is, white, Christian) Americans. Echoing the end times story, Trump paints the world in terms of us and them, good and evil, and

hints at violent struggles to come. The first such struggle took place on January 6, 2021. It will not, I fear, be the last.” *Philip Gorski*

What if we went further and developed the idea of a “religious nation” rather than a Christian one? This would take Judaism and Islam into account, and going further afield we could include other great world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. We could add in native American religions for good measure. I take it that this is beyond most people today, but we might try in the future to conceive of a multicultural and multireligious nation while we are at it – it gives us a sense of purpose. An appendix is attached with some suggestions along these lines.

IV. How do we move forward progressively?

Despite the grim threat of white Christian supremacy and nationalism, there are steps that can be taken to counter it. The Southern Poverty Law Center offers the following recommendations:

1. It is important for individuals and groups to reach out to their neighbors to support them and to provide another vision on the local level for a pluralist, open, and equitable democracy.
2. Congress and the Joe Biden administration must protect the rule of law and support an equitable and pluralistic democracy.
3. Social media sites have demonstrated how unable they are to oversee themselves. E.g., Fox News, Et al. Lie after lie.
4. Funding is required for local communities, election officials, and governments to build community resilience against extremism and white Christian nationalism along with anti-racism initiatives and anti-fascist programs.
5. Overall, community challenges require a community response. Communities need cooperation between local and national civil rights, human rights, and other advocacy organizations.

As Amanda Tyler, the co-organizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism, said in her committee testimony: “Understanding the political ideology and cultural framework of Christian nationalism is imperative to both dismantling white supremacy and preserving religious freedom for all. ... Our belonging in American society must never depend on how we worship, what we believe, or how we identify religiously.”

To end, I would like to add this theological Unitarian/Universalist (UU) point – Yes, I believe America is a chosen nation (a la Adams and Jefferson, FDR and Reagan, G.W. Bush Et al.). Bbut so are many others from Israel on as well – we aren’t the only ones. And I believe we have a covenant with God just as Israel and other nations had. It is mutual.

And that means being a “light unto the nations” and a “city on a hill.” All presidents believed this (especially Unitarians like Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, JQ Adams, Lincoln) and acted on it. It is a national holy calling to fight for the oppressed here and abroad. The mission of Jesus was this as defined by Isaiah 61 and repeated by Jesus in Luke 4:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.[1]*

[2]That is what it means to be a Christian nation. Not the fights against abortion, gays, trans, Micky Mouse, Muslims, refugees, and which bathroom to use. And an equal nation means that everybody should have a fair shot at the American Dream, not restricted to whites or the horrible phrase “real Americans.” And consider being a religious nation too – see below.

The rebel John Brown and Girard Unitarian Universalist represent that today. Recall the mural of Brown in the Kansas Statehouse, looking like Moses, with Bible in one hand and rifle in the other. It also can serve as a crucifixion scene that did happen with his death by the Virginians. Churches need to be in on this. We need to fight for inclusion, equality, and pluralism.

Colleges need to include this in basic introductory courses to American social and political thought. At present they ignore this in favor of vocational training. We need to produce citizens, not just technocrats.

And you and I – we must get in on the drama too. It is a holy calling. Let's not be bewitched, bothered, and bewildered by what is going on, but hang in there for understanding and just actions.

[1] **The Jubilee Year** occurred every 50 years. It is an economic, cultural, environmental, and communal reset, when the land and people rest, and all those who are in slavery are set free to return to their communities. It is a political *and* spiritual idea – the Hebrews didn't separate those concepts as we do today.

Lord our God... You envelop the ever-expanding Universe.
With Brahman, Gaia, Yahweh, Kwan Yin – we will strive for Love.



From the West – freedom and forgiveness
 Give us insight as if we were slaves in Egypt. *Jewish*
 God brought down rulers from their thrones,
 but has lifted up the humble. *Mary*
 Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us,
 therefore let us keep the feast. *Paul*
 The great jihad is to battle your own soul,
 to fight the evil within yourself. *Muslim*

From the East – unity and compassion
 God says: I am in every being,
 wherever they go, they remain in me. *Hindu*
 Separation is the world's misery,
 compassion is the world's strength. *Buddha*
 My doctrine is an all-pervading unity. *Confucius*
 All have Yin/Yang,
 they blend their life breaths to produce harmony. *Lao-Tse*

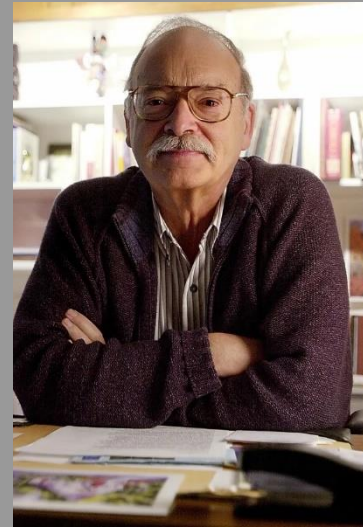
From Gaia – love of and care for nature
 Mother Earth and Father Sky
 never deny their children my brothers, sisters. *Zuni*
 Destroy nature and she will destroy you.
 Love her, and she will give you abundance. *Seneca*

Sing or say (Old Hundredth)
Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise God all creatures here below
Praise God all heavenly hosts above,
Praise God with Oneness, Justice, Love

Take Action
 Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,
 and your neighbor as yourself. *Jesus, from Leviticus*
 Go in Peace. Walk in Beauty. *Navaho*
 OM, AMEN, ALLEULIA *Hindu, Hebrew*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society's Board of Trustees.



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