

Faith leaders explain how to confront Christian nationalism

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—For those who have been tracking Christian nationalism in the United States, the siege of the U.S. Capitol was shocking, but it wasn't surprising, according to Andrew Whitehead, co-author of [*Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*](#).

It's clearer than ever Christian nationalism is a threat to both faith and democracy, Whitehead and Christian leaders agreed at a Jan. 27 virtual event addressing the topic.

But the question remains: What can Christians do about it?



Amanda Tyler

“Christian nationalism is not new, but the frequency of violent acts inspired by Christian nationalism and a resurgence in attempts to legislate and govern from a position infused with Christian nationalism has been on a dramatic uptick in recent years,” said Amanda Tyler, executive director of the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Freedom](#).

“We believe that Christians bear a special responsibility to understand and to root out Christian nationalism.”

The heads of two of the largest mainline Protestant denominations in the United States Bishop Michael Curry of the Episcopal Church and Bishop Elizabeth Eaton of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—joined Whitehead and Tyler for the panel discussion “[Democracy and Faith Under](#)

[Siege: Responding to Christian Nationalism](#),” hosted by [Christians Against Christian Nationalism](#), an initiative spearheaded by BJC.

They shared thoughts on what Christians can do to counter Christian nationalism and to “de-radicalize” those who believe in the cultural framework that privileges primarily white Christians in American civic life.

Prevalent across Christian traditions

It’s important for Christians to push back against that idea, Whitehead said, because of its prevalence across Christian traditions—and because it impacts everything from people’s attitudes toward racism to their behaviors regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

✘ The majority of evangelical Protestants, he said, may not be overtly Christian nationalist in their beliefs, but they accommodate that attitude—and it’s not just evangelicals, according to his research.

“As we think of Christian nationalism and how to face it, we have to be attuned to the fact that within Christian religious traditions, Christian nationalism is prevalent and is a part of the people that worship with us,” he said.

One good first step for Christians is to learn more about Christian nationalism—and why it conflicts with Christianity, Eaton said. The presiding bishop of the ELCA pointed to Whitehead’s book as a good place to start.

“Christian nationalism is different from being a patriot. God knows I love my country,” she said. “But my primary allegiance as a Christian isn’t to my country, but to God.”

Curry pointed to the famous words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out

hate, only love can do that.”

Offer positive alternative

That means Christians should offer a positive alternative to Christian nationalism, he said.

“We must counter these negative perversions of Christianity and of our humanity. We must counter them with an affirmative, positive way of being Christian,” he said. “Christianity must re-center itself on the teachings, the example and the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth.”

The presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church also suggested Christians rebuild relationships across differences of politics, race and religion.

“Everybody who knows somebody who’s different than they are, get to know them, spend some time with them, let that become a personal value for your life. Then maybe we can begin to chip away,” he said.

“Everybody won’t get on board, but somebody will.”

In addition to those individual actions, Whitehead said, there also are structural changes that need to take place. People in positions of relative power need to advocate for those who are marginalized in terms of race, religion, gender, sexuality and in other ways.

Hold people accountable for what they value

At a separate event Wednesday, Al Vivian, son of C.T. Vivian, said some of the practices his father used as a civil rights activist on King’s executive staff should be applied in the wake of the storming of the Capitol.

“When Dad was training me, he always talked to me about holding people accountable for what they say they value,” Al Vivian said at an online news conference about the forthcoming posthumously published memoir of his father, [*It's in the Action: Memories of a Nonviolent Warrior*](#).

“There are two documents that white America consistently says that it values: the Constitution and the Bible, he said. So, every argument we ever used lined up with those two documents,” he said.

Those include constitutional rights and freedoms, as well as biblical instruction to love one’s neighbor.

“You find out what people value, you hold them accountable to that, and you do not back down,” the younger Vivian said of the principles that can be applied by church and corporation leaders. “You hold them accountable to live the values they say they believe in.”