

Commentary: ‘Christian nationalism’ is not the most perilous part

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(RNS)—I grew up in a conservative, evangelical Christian household and attended private evangelical schools where we pledged allegiance to the Christian flag alongside the American flag every morning. We would belt out “God Bless America” with gusto.

My teachers, classmates and I were attached to a somewhat mythological story of America’s Christian heritage. We were the type of sentimental Christian nationalists Donald Trump is targeting with his recent turn as a [Bible salesman](#).

But the primary way we applied our ideals came when we voted like any of our neighbors. We didn’t menace American democracy. But today, at the other end of the Christian nationalism spectrum, is a more perilous style of Christian politics, presented by hard-line, programmatic Christians who aim to dominate society.

Situating Christian nationalism

If you’re unacquainted, Christian nationalism refers to how some—not all—American Christians blend their religious devotion with nationalistic ardor, aiming to refashion America as a Christian nation.

Some conservative Christians have begun [pushing back](#) on this phrase, claiming “Christian nationalist” is a slur, representing [a progressive effort](#) to make the idea of Christians involved in politics sound scary.

As a scholar who's studied American Christianity for years, I can state confidently the term is not an insult. Rather, it's descriptive: When people blur any religious identity with their partisan political identities, we call that "religious nationalism."

It's an [extremely common phenomenon](#), occurring in numerous modern nations, from India to Turkey to Brazil. "Christian nationalism" is just the Christian variety.

Yes, some commentators do paint with too broad a brush in how they categorize or describe Christian nationalism. As with me and my schoolmates, some forms of Christian nationalism pose no imminent threat to American democracy.

The new breed

But there is a new breed of chauvinistic, theologically bull-headed Christian nationalists who might better be called "Christian supremacists."

These hard-liners believe Christianity deserves a privileged space in American society—that Christians, being better than other human beings, should be entitled to a superior form of citizenship. They claim Christians even are destined by God to rule over society.

What is hazy nostalgia to the "God Bless America" crowd is an organized theological and political program for the Christian supremacists. They are deadly serious.

There are at least two major strands of Christian supremacy operating in the United States today: the highbrow Calvinists and the populist charismatics. Both groups are Protestant, and both have theological roots in an obscure group of Reformed (Calvinist) American theologians called the "[Christian Reconstructionists](#)," who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Reconstructionists draw inspiration from 16th-century theologian John Calvin's Geneva, a theocratic city-state where unrepentant heretics could be executed by a government that enforced orthodoxy.

Though certainly not representative of all Calvinists, today's Reconstructionists have embraced a vision of what they call "dominion theology." They interpret certain Bible passages to mean Christians must "take dominion" over every society and remake it into the kingdom of God. Today, they hold conferences with titles such as "[Blueprints for Christendom 2.0](#)" and talk about how they will help Jesus the "[warrior-king](#)" to "[dominion-ize](#)" this world.

Calvinist and charismatic

These theological intellectuals of the Christian far right are radicalizing more run-of-the-mill Christian nationalists. Reconstructionist luminaries today include people like Stephen Wolfe, a scholar with a Ph.D. in political theory who argues full-throatedly in his book *The Case for Christian Nationalism* that "Non-Christians ... are not entitled to political equality."

Like good Calvinists, the Reconstructionists are intellectual and systematic, imagining detailed programs by which Christians can re-Christianize America and, ultimately, the world. They hope their heady ideas will help trigger such a global crusade, while recognizing their high-octane Calvinist theology will never be everyone's cup of tea.

So, beginning in the 1980s, the Reconstructionist theologians intentionally spread their ideas into other Christian communities and networks, sometimes with the more rigid Calvinist casing shaved off. They especially [cross-pollinated](#) with a rapidly growing segment of American Christianity that gets little media coverage: nondenominational charismatic Christians.

Charismatic Christians are those trying to restore the more supernatural

dimensions of early Christianity—speaking in tongues, performing miracles and believing in modern prophecies. This is the world of next-gen televangelism, ecstatic megachurches and itinerant prophets. [Nondenominational charismatics](#) are the energetic, tech-savvy, insurgent populists of American Christianity.

Seven Mountain Mandate

Many of these nondenominational charismatics eagerly embraced the Reconstructionists' dominion ideas, if not their formal Calvinism, giving rise to the populist charismatic style of Christian supremacy.

At the front of this pack is a pastor, sometimes referred to as prophet, named [Lance Wallnau](#), who has taken some of these dominion theology ideas and rebranded them as a prophecy called the [Seven Mountain Mandate](#).

Wallnau's vision of Christian supremacy entails dividing society up into seven "mountains" or arenas of influence—religion, family, government, education, media, entertainment and commerce—and urging Christians to conquer the top of every mountain in their community or nation so Christian influence will trickle down into society.

These Seven Mountains programs are [fueling many local conservative Christian groups to take over city councils or school boards](#), making the dominion program tactical and marketable.

Wallnau also is a leader in a nondenominational movement called the New Apostolic Reformation, which has helped spread this Seven Mountains prophecy everywhere within evangelical circles.

Not coincidentally, Wallnau also was [one of the first Christian leaders to endorse Donald Trump in the 2016](#) campaign cycle. Wallnau is the [author](#)

[of some of the prophecies and theology](#) that now customarily present Christian support for Trump, not merely in terms of achieving conservative Christian goals or choosing the lesser of two evils, but as a positive good, ordained by God to be president again.

Wallnau used prophetic propaganda to galvanize and mobilize charismatic Christians to endorse Trump's election lies. In this sense, he was one of the principal theological architects of the Jan. 6 riots at the U.S. Capitol, and he even was there at the Capitol that day to speak at one of the instigating rallies.

Caution and call

This all goes beyond a baseless slur. I recommend to those Christians of the kind I grew up with that you might get over the sting of being labeled, perhaps unfairly, as a Christian nationalist.

Christianity is slowly losing its privileged place in American society, and I understand that feels strange, but you should be far more concerned about the real-life religious extremism burbling up in your midst, causing many to cross the line from "God Bless America" Christian nationalists to ardent Christian supremacists.

Some of the most beautiful and treasured parts of American democracy—the equality of all citizens, the separation of church and state, and freedom to believe in and practice any (or no) religion—are the targets of the Christian supremacists, who seek not comity but domination, not peace but a sword. They are plotting the end of America as we know it. Openly.

Matthew D. Taylor is a senior scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies in Baltimore and is the author of the forthcoming book The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening

Our Democracy. *The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.*