

Commentary: Christian nationalists provoked a pluralist resistance

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(RNS)—Christian nationalism—the idea that being Christian is core to the American identity—is nothing new, either in American religious culture or its politics. But it used to be a radical proposal, and holding Christian nationalist views disqualified politicians and even clergy from higher leadership.

Recently, however, it has been embraced as a badge of honor. A sitting member of Congress has sold [“Proud Christian Nationalist” T-shirts](#) on her website. [Books](#) defending Christian nationalism are given serious discussion. And according to a [recent survey from PRRI](#), nearly one-third of Americans now hold Christian nationalist attitudes.

These developments rightfully raise concern. But there is another, relatively untold, side of this story: The most recent rise of Christian nationalism has ignited a wave of resistance.

Rising resistance

According to PRRI, Americans who have heard of Christian nationalism are twice as likely to hold a negative than a positive view of the term. These Americans also reject the specific ideas associated with the ideology.

The 3 in 10 Americans PRRI found who align with Christian nationalism to some degree are opposed by nearly the same percentage (29 percent) who completely reject the ideas associated with Christian nationalism. Another

39 percent is skeptical.

Most importantly, these Americans are joining a growing movement I call the pluralist resistance. They are taking action through a diverse set of organizations that each tackles a different dimension of Christian nationalism's influence.

One pivotal front of this battle is in the nation's churches. Conservative Christians, lured by new online platforms and hyper-partisanship, have been sucked into a vortex of right-wing disinformation, conspiracy theories and fear.

These Christians are told repeatedly by right-wing influencers and politicians that Christians need to "take their country back." Mistrustful of outsiders, these believers can only be convinced of the threat Christian nationalism holds for our democracy and to Christianity itself if other Christians are doing the talking.

Christian resistance to Christian nationalism

[Christians Against Christian Nationalism](#) and [Vote Common Good](#) are the most visible of the groups attempting just that.

Amanda Tyler of the Baptist Joint Committee, which leads the Christians Against Christian Nationalism coalition, has been speaking around the country to raise alarms about the dangers of Christian nationalism. Last December, she [testified](#) before a U.S. House subcommittee about [the role Christian nationalism](#) played in the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection.

Vote Common Good recently completed a "March on Christian Nationalism" campaign, which builds on the group's year-round work to educate Christians about how to identify and confront Christian

Nationalism through podcasts, webinars and a state-of-the art training program, titled [“Confronting Christian Nationalism Curriculum,”](#) for faith community leaders and individuals.

Meanwhile, the [Poor People’s Campaign](#), a social movement led by Rev. William Barber II and Rev. Liz Theoharis, attacks Christian nationalism in the arena of policy and politics. The group has [identified](#) Christian nationalism as “a key pillar of injustice in America that provides cover for a host of other ills” and is leading a multiracial and multi-faith “moral movement” to confront it in the minutia of public policy, but also in demonstrations outside statehouses and the nation’s Capitol buildings.

In their policy fights, the Poor People’s Campaign challenges a Christian nationalist mythology of scarcity set against a mythologized past of plenty, but only for those who “belong.” Activists like Barber and Theoharis draw up a narrative in which patriotic citizens work together toward a more perfect, inclusive and abundant future that lives up to the country’s founding ideals.

Non-Christian resistance

Corporations, motivated by profit not politics, also recognize their influence over how we understand what it means to be an American. Over the objections of [right-wing critics](#), companies such as Coca-Cola use their advertising to promote an image of a racially and religiously diverse and thriving America [that is “beautiful.”](#)

[Americans United for Separation of Church and State](#) is among the legal nonprofits challenging demands for religious privilege under the guise of religious freedom, as Christian nationalist extremists seek to impose laws on abortion, public school curricula and other issues to force conformity with their religio-political worldview.

Finally, philanthropies, including one funding collective calling themselves “New Pluralists,” are taking the lead in helping local communities by funding projects that attempt to repair the frayed bonds of democracy.

Pluralism is not new. Since the early 1990s, Harvard’s Pluralism Project has tracked the country’s growing religious diversity and corresponding efforts to promote a pluralistic culture and politics.

But my research suggests projects to promote pluralism tend to emerge in waves, in response to different opportunities and threats, like rising religious diversity; the rise of Islamophobia after Sept. 11; and now ascendant Christian nationalism. Each wave builds on previous efforts, while also bringing new players into the fold.

What’s different about today’s wave of pluralist resistance is it has attracted greater numbers of white Christians to a field previously led by non-white Christians and people of other faiths. This is important, given the privileged position white Christians long have enjoyed in American politics and society.

Diverse response to Christian nationalism

Christian privilege is so baked into our society that it often is hard to recognize it, and it offers cover for some Christian nationalist arguments. But Christian privilege is rooted in demographic power, not divine right.

As demographic shifts change the face of power in America, we are able to imagine better what a truly pluralist culture might look like. The participation of a more racially and religiously diverse cohort of leaders in the current fight is helping all Americans to be more conscious of this historical barrier to pluralism.

Deep cultural and political change is never easy. But with a diverse majority of Americans on their side, these leaders are making inroads.

As Christian nationalists take advantage of a moment of political precarity to call for a turn toward authoritarian theocracy, the press should be paying attention to those rising up to preserve democracy in America. The leaders of the resistance are on the front lines of this war. They should be making headlines, too.

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