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“This Is Our Nation, Not Theirs”

Survey all the rioters who’ve been rounded up since the attempted insurrection on January 6, 2021, and it’s unlikely that many would describe themselves as “Christian nationalists” let alone “*white* Christian nationalists.” Even the overtly Christian ones—the guy carrying a “Jesus saves” sign, or waving a Christian flag, or saying a prayer in Jesus’s name on the Senate floor—would probably reject these labels. Nor would many (if any) admit to being “white nationalists,” “conspiracy theorists,” “insurrectionists,” “white supremacists,” or any other label with such obviously negative connotations.

In interviews, most of the rioters have described themselves as something like “Christian patriots.” In his prayer on the Senate floor, for example, the so-called QAnon Shaman described his fellow insurrectionists as “patriots that love [God] and that love Christ,” defending “the American way” from “the tyrants, the communists, and the globalists” as well as “the traitors within our government,” sending a message that “this is our nation, not theirs.”¹ And if even the insurrectionists wouldn’t identify as white Christian nationalists, then we can be fairly certain most white conservative Christians would take offense at the label.

So, are we just peddling a slur? Are we throwing around a menacing name to demonize people with whom we disagree? Are we weaponizing vague buzzwords to silence conservative Christians who are just standing up for their values? Are we just mimicking reactionary leaders who smear progressives as “godless socialists” preaching “critical race theory” to the congregation of “wokeness”?

To each question, we answer “no.” We aim to define our terms carefully and back up our argument empirically.

We define white Christian nationalism and identify white Christian nationalists using a constellation of beliefs. These are beliefs that, we argue, reflect a desire to restore and privilege the myths, values, identity, and authority of a particular ethnocultural tribe. These beliefs add up to a political vision that privileges that tribe. And they seek to put other tribes in their “proper” place.

White Christian nationalism is *nationalist* because it rejects pluralism and what many on the right call “globalism.” It expresses a desire for national unity and international power. But unity around what? And power for whom? Unity around what political scientist Eric Kaufmann calls “ethno-traditionalism,” a national myth that blurs distinctions between culture and race with talk of “Christian heritage and values.”² And power for whites. Because when some whites—many whites, in fact—hear the words “Christian” and “American,” they think of “people who look and think like us.” A *truly* Christian nation, in their view, would celebrate and privilege the sacred history, liberty, and rightful rule of white conservatives, tolerating “others” at best; enslaving, expelling, or exterminating them at worst. This is the root of the massive resistance of some whites to removing Confederate statues or to teaching about racism in American history—to impugn the racial history of the nation is to dispute the chosenness and fundamental goodness of white Christians.

When the QAnon Shaman thanked his Heavenly Father for “allowing us to send a message . . . that this is our nation, not theirs,” he was also issuing a warning: they were ready to use violence to take back “their” country. Far from being an empty smear or a slur against white religious conservatives, what we call “white Christian nationalism” represents a serious threat—a threat to American democracy, itself.

WHAT’S *CHRISTIAN* ABOUT CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?

In the next chapter we look at how the deep story of white Christian nationalism first came together and how it has evolved and changed over time. But first, in this chapter, we use survey data to document the political vision of white Christian nationalism and quantify its reach in contemporary America. We’ll mostly use data we collected ourselves in a nationally representative survey over multiple waves from 2019 through 2021. And we’ll occasionally supplement with reference to other sources.³

We use seven different indicators of Christian nationalism. Often, we’ll combine them together, but sometimes we use them in different combinations depending on which measures we have available. Each measure is a question asking Americans to indicate their level of agreement with various statements.

1. “I consider founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution to be divinely inspired.”
2. “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan.”

3. “The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.”
4. “The federal government should advocate Christian values.”
5. “The federal government should enforce a strict separation of church and state.”
6. “The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.”
7. “The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.”

When understood in the context of American religious and political history, each indicator tells us something about how Americans perceive the connection between Christianity and American civic life. Americans who agree at some level with the first two statements are affirming that God “inspired” the nation’s founding documents and that God has somehow orchestrated America’s prosperity and perhaps will do so in the future. At minimum, both statements imply that God has a special relationship with the United States.

The remaining five statements ask Americans to affirm what they think the government *should* do, reflecting their political theology. Formally declaring the United States a “Christian nation” would be the most explicit declaration of Christian nationalism. But also, believing the government should “advocate Christian values” at the very least indicates Americans think “Christian values” (whatever they may understand by that term) are worthwhile for the government to promote as policy. And regarding the “separation of church and state,” we pay attention to Americans who *disagree* with that statement, indicating they want church and state to have a closer relationship.

The last two statements may sound more innocuous. But both statements actually reference more explicit historical debates.

For example, the statement about religious symbols represents long-standing legal debates involving things like placing the Ten Commandments in courthouses or using crosses on state seals. And the last statement about prayer references a decades-long disagreement about earlier Supreme Court decisions prohibiting teacher-led prayer and Bible reading in public schools. In other words, while references to “religious symbols” or “prayer” in public spaces may sound rather harmless, they evoke contentious political debates.

Throughout the book we’ll combine responses to make a “Christian nationalism scale” ranging from 0–28 or 0–24 (The difference is because the question about the founding documents being divinely inspired hasn’t been asked in every survey).

Where is Christian nationalism most prevalent in the American population? While previous books have focused on a variety of religious and demographic characteristics associated with this ideology, here we pay closer attention to differences among Christian groups that cut across racial categories.⁴ This is where the “whiteness” of white Christian nationalism will come into play. As we’ll see, the link that connects the deep story and political vision of Christian nationalism is whiteness. When that link is missing, as it is among Black Americans who score high on our Christian nationalism measure, the connection to the political vision is broken.

Figure 1.1 presents average scores across two categories: narrower denominational groupings (e.g., Pentecostals or Baptists, in Panel A) and broader ethno-religious traditions (e.g., white evangelicals, in Panel B). We’ve arranged the scores from lowest to highest, starting from the left. Several findings immediately jump out. Among denominational groupings, theologically conservative Protestant groups score the highest, with those in the Pentecostal, Holiness, and Baptist traditions leading the way. Nondenominational Protestants, as political scientists like Ryan

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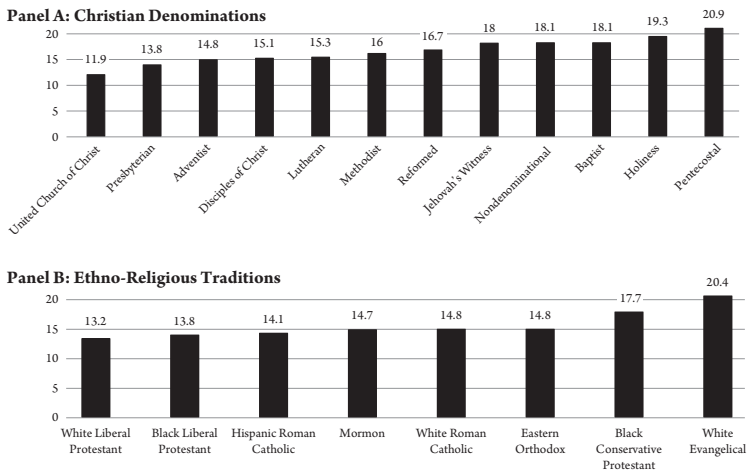


Figure 1.1. Average Christian Nationalism Score across Narrow and Broad Christian Traditions.

Note: Possible scores ranged 0–28. The labels “Evangelical,” “Conservative,” and “Liberal” are determined in response to a question about whether respondents consider themselves “born again or evangelical Christians.” Those who answered yes are considered evangelical or conservative, while those who answered no are considered more theologically “liberal.”

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 7; February 2021)*

Burge and Paul Djupe have pointed out, are overwhelmingly evangelical in their leanings.⁵ Mainline traditions tend to score lower on Christian nationalist ideology, likely reflecting both their theological and political liberalism compared to groups like Pentecostals and Baptists.⁶

In terms of broader ethno-religious traditions, white evangelicals unsurprisingly score the highest of all groups, with more liberal white Protestants scoring the lowest. Most other broad traditions including Eastern Orthodox Christians, Mormons, white and Hispanic Roman Catholics, and Black liberal Protestants score similarly to the white liberal Protestants.

Surprisingly, Black conservative Protestants score closer to white evangelicals than to Black liberal Protestants. Does this

finding contradict our argument that Christian nationalism is connected to white racial identity and even white supremacy? Not when we understand what religious language means in its political and historical context.

AMERICA'S MOST EFFECTIVE DOG WHISTLE

In her 2021 *Christian Post* article, “The Assault on ‘White America,’” Hedieh Mirahmadi writes, “[W]e must acknowledge the widespread assault on the conservative Christian community. I use the phrase ‘White America,’ though ironically we are comprised of all ethnicities and races but united in our stand for biblical and democratic values that are the foundation of our country.”⁷ Notice what the author is assuming. She states that conservative Christians are under attack, but she takes this as an assault on “white America.” She even acknowledges that the group under attack comprises multiple races and ethnicities, but what makes them “white” apparently is their united stand for America’s foundational biblical and democratic values. Mirahmadi’s rhetorical sleight-of-hand is not unusual. White Christian nationalists often use religion to hide race in this way. But it is a little clumsy. She gives away the game too easily.

White Christian nationalists did not always need to play this game though. Before the civil rights movement, white politicians who wanted to stir up their voters could just use racial slurs. After the civil rights movement, they had to find more subtle ways of invoking race. They invented code words that triggered the racial anxieties of white voters. On his deathbed, Republican strategist Lee Atwater confessed that when openly saying the N-word started to backfire and hurt politicians, he urged Nixon to adopt the language of “states’ rights” and “forced bussing.” Later, Reagan would use

phrases like “welfare queen” and “bucks” to vilify poor Blacks. More recent formulations included “super-predator,” “thugs,” “illegals,” and “terrorists.” Similarly, words like “communist” and “socialist” have been racially coded since the “red scares” of the 1920s and even more so since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Martin Luther King Jr. was often vilified as a “communist.”⁸ Like a high-pitched whistle that can only be heard by a dog, the code words were uniquely effective for those with prejudiced ears.

Dog whistles can be used to signal “us” as well as “them.” Since the Reagan era, white conservative Christianity has become increasingly synonymous with Republican politics and identity. As a result, the word “Christian” has increasingly taken on racial connotations in the minds of conservative whites. Even seemingly race-neutral phrases like “Christian heritage” or “Christian worldview” or “Christian values” now imply “conservative *white* values.”

How do we know this? Remember the indicators we use to measure Christian nationalism say absolutely nothing about race or ethnicity. So, whether someone agrees or disagrees with those statements should tell us very little about their racial attitudes, right? But if you’re a white American, they absolutely do.

Figure 1.2 shows how Black and white Americans score on a question about how much they think white and Black Americans will experience discrimination in the next year. We asked this question in February 2021, after Joe Biden had taken office. Lower scores indicate that respondents think whites or Blacks won’t experience much discrimination. We used a statistical model that allows us to track Americans’ responses while holding constant the influences of political party, political conservatism, religious characteristics, and other sociodemographic factors. We then plotted how the predicted values change across respondents’ average scores on our full Christian nationalism scale.

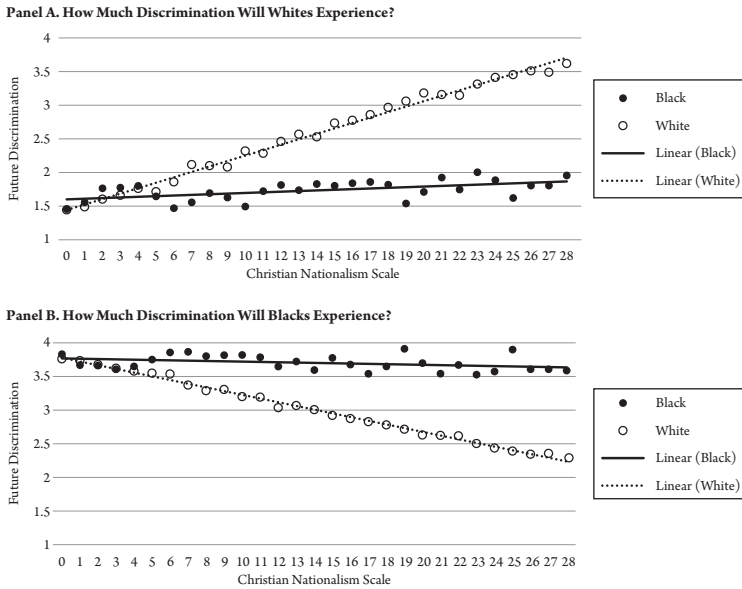


Figure 1.2. White and Black Americans indicating how much discrimination they think whites/Blacks will experience within the next year across Christian nationalism.

Note: Y-axis values: 1 = None at all; 2 = A little; 3 = Some; 4 = A lot. Ordinary least squares regression models including full Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, race, educational attainment, income, and region of the country. Significant interaction term between Christian nationalism × Black ($p < .01$).

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 7; February 2021)*

Look at Panel A first. The trend for Black Americans is essentially flat. What they think about America’s relationship to Christianity has basically no influence on their belief that white Americans will experience relatively little discrimination in the next year. Now look at white Americans. The higher white Americans score on our Christian nationalism scale, the more discrimination they believe whites will experience within the next year. And the trend is highly

linear, meaning that, for whites, Christian nationalism and belief in anti-white discrimination increase in lockstep with one another.

Panel B asks about how much discrimination respondents think Black Americans will experience in the next year. We now see a mirror image of the first pattern. Regardless of what Black Americans think about the place of Christianity in American politics, their belief that Black Americans will face some discrimination starts high and stays high. But for white Americans, the more strongly they adhere to Christian nationalism, the less likely they are to think Black Americans will face much discrimination at all. And here again, the association is highly linear.

How do we explain these divergent patterns? Is it because our Christian nationalism measure is really just measuring Republican identification or a conservative political orientation? No. Remember that we held those factors constant in our statistical model, along with religious tradition and commitment, age, education, and even region of the country. In fact, these same patterns hold for most political issues we've asked about in our various surveys. Indicators of Christian nationalism (in combination or included separately) are powerful predictors of ultra-conservatism for white Americans, especially on any issues involving race, discrimination, xenophobia, or justice. But they have very little influence on the attitudes of Black Americans. And often little influence on Hispanic Americans too.⁹ As noted earlier, whiteness is the hidden link that transforms the deep story of Christian nationalism into a political vision.

Is the era of dog whistle politics over? Perhaps. Though not in the way one might imagine. More and more, the quiet part is not just said out loud; it's shouted to the heavens. In July 2020, for example, evangelical activist Eric Metaxas tweeted, "Jesus was white. Did he have 'white privilege' even though he was without sin?" The

statement was absurd on its face. The idea of a “white race” did not even exist in Jesus’s time. But Metaxas’s message was clear enough: “Jesus was one of us. He was part of our tribe.”²¹ And, like him, we are without (racial) sin.

Black Americans are more likely to draw a far different connection between Christianity and whiteness, both in the present and within our nation’s history. As author James Baldwin famously wrote,

The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed the collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors.¹⁰

Baldwin explained that the white Americans who held these myths were “the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.” Fifty years on, Baldwin’s words still ring truer than many white Americans want to believe.

Christian pastors and politicians have played a central role in crafting and disseminating these myths. In his 2003 book, *What if America Were a Christian Nation Again?*, for example, the late pastor D. James Kennedy wrote that the “nation was founded by the Pilgrims and the Puritans,” and that “As late as 1775, 98 percent of the people were [evangelicals].” Former Speaker of the House and author of *Rediscovering God in America* Newt Gingrich once said on *Meet the Press*, “most people don’t realize it’s illegal to pray” in public schools. And former Governor of Alaska Sarah Palin once explained to Bill O’Reilly why “America is a Christian nation,” claiming, “You can just go to our Founding Fathers’ early documents and see how

they crafted a Declaration of Independence and a Constitution that allows that Judeo-Christian belief to be the foundation of our lives.” And she concludes the founding documents are “quite clear that we would create law based on the God of the Bible and the Ten Commandments.”¹¹

And these *are* myths: the United States was not founded by Pilgrims and Puritans. Ninety-eight percent of America’s inhabitants were not “evangelicals” at the founding. It has never been illegal to pray in public school. And the Constitution says absolutely nothing about God, the Bible, or the Ten Commandments.

Nor is this just a difference in “worldview.” It’s not that Christian nationalists have a different understanding of American history; it’s that they often have an *incorrect* understanding. But only if they are white. In one of our surveys, we gave respondents a short quiz that included five true/false statements about religion in American political history.

1. The 1st Amendment says Congress can’t restrict religious liberty, but Congress could make laws privileging Christianity. (False)
2. The U.S. Constitution references our country’s obligations to God several times. (False)
3. The phrase “In God We Trust” did not become the nation’s official motto until after 1950. (True)
4. The phrase “under God” was not added to the pledge of allegiance until after 1950. (True)
5. Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s made it illegal for students to pray or read their Bibles in public schools. (False)

Respondents could answer true, false, or don’t know. We then calculated the average percentage Americans got correct on the quiz.

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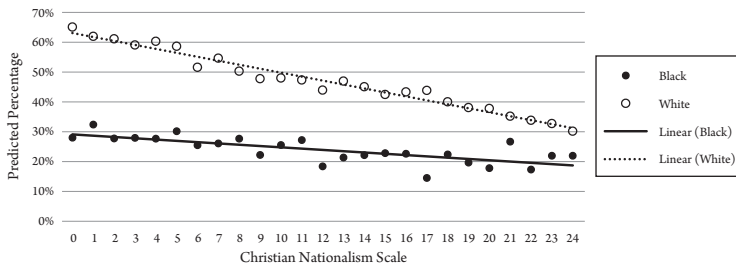


Figure 1.3. Average percentage correct on religion in American political history quiz by Christian nationalism and race.

Note: Ordinary least squares regression models including Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, race, educational attainment, income, and region of the country. Significant interaction term between Christian nationalism \times Black ($p < .05$).

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 4; August 2020)*

Figure 1.3 shows how scores change across adherence to Christian nationalism for both white and Black Americans. Black Americans tend to score lower than whites on the quiz, primarily because they are more likely to simply say they don't know. But there is no association between their scores on the test and their adherence to Christian nationalism. Not so with whites. The higher they score on Christian nationalism, the lower they score on the test. Why? Not because they don't give answers but because they give *wrong* answers.

Why are they so misinformed? In part, because there is a cottage industry that spreads historical misinformation. It includes amateur “historians” like David Barton and religious right organizations like Focus on the Family, WallBuilders, and even Donald Trump’s 1776 Commission. But if historical misinformation were the whole story, we’d expect these incorrect views about religion’s place in American political history to exhibit the same pattern among Black Americans. But they don’t.

And research suggests this isn't just plain old ignorance, either. When scholars assess religious conservatives' knowledge of many aspects of science (for example, atoms, lasers, viruses, or genes), they score well. It is only when they are asked about hotly contested culture-war topics (for example, evolution or the Big Bang) that they do poorly. This is why white Americans who more strongly affirm that America should be for "people like us" are more likely to answer questions about religion in America's political history in a way that elevates the preeminence and alleged persecution of Christianity. Not only may they have learned erroneous religious history, but the ideology of white Christian nationalism may incline white Americans to *re*interpret their history in ways that elevate their own group as heroes and victims.

We can see this sort of ideologically driven approach to history more directly when we see how Christian nationalism corresponds to whites' views about the Civil War and Confederate monuments. In August 2020, we asked Americans if they believed "historians debate whether slavery was a central cause of the Civil War" (an issue that is frankly of virtually no dispute among historians). We also asked them whether they would support the removal of Confederate monuments and statues of former slave owners—the vast majority of which were erected in the early 1900s to valorize the antebellum South—because of their racist legacy (see Figure 1.4). Even after holding other relevant characteristics constant, as white Americans more strongly affirm the centrality of Christianity to American civic life, the more likely they are to question the centrality of slavery to the Civil War and to oppose removing monuments to America's white supremacist past.

Knowing these patterns help us understand that white Christian nationalism is not just a set of conscious (if erroneous) beliefs about America's past. It is also a set of unconscious desires about America's

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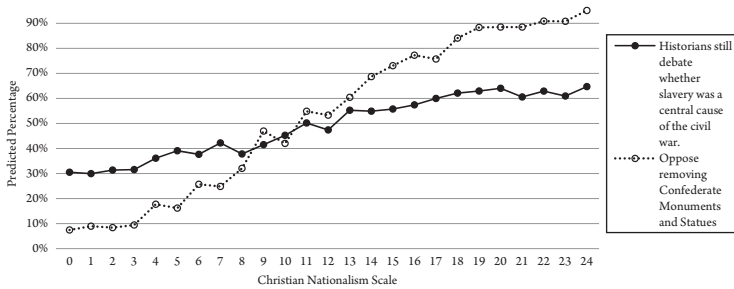


Figure 1.4. Predicted percentage of white Americans who question slavery’s centrality to the Civil War and oppose removing Confederate monuments and statues across Christian nationalism.

Note: Binary logistic regression models including Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, educational attainment, income, and region of the country.

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics (Wave 4; August 2020)*.

future. Our measures tap into how much Americans think the government *should* formally recognize the nation’s “Christian” identity or advocate “Christian values.” When we understand these as racialized terms, we can understand why white Americans who favor institutionalizing “Christianity” in American politics would fear that *whites* specifically will be threatened under a Democratic president. And why they worry Blacks will be given special treatment.

This is why we must be specific that the phenomenon we’re describing in this book is *white* Christian nationalism. At issue is not just religious nostalgia or even religious conservatism, as if such things transcended ethnic and racial identities. Rather, it is an acute strain of ethno-traditionalism in which “white” and “Christian” are conflated into a single identity—“white-Christian.”

Dog whistles are effective to the extent that the target population hears and understands their intended meaning, while most others remain oblivious. Even as it’s become riskier for mainstream

politicians to use negative dog whistles like “thug” or “welfare queen,” the word “Christian” remains the right’s most effective signal to white conservatives that “our values,” “our heritage,” “our way of life,” and “our influence” are under attack, and “we” must respond. Christianity and American-ness are both raced.

But what sort of response does the ethno-traditionalism of white Christian nationalism provoke among whites? The characteristics we link with white Christian nationalism could all be considered components of what’s commonly called “populism,” an orientation or ideology that pits corrupt “elites” against virtuous common folk. Its components are, among other things, scapegoating of minorities; distrust in science, the media, and “establishment” politicians; corresponding trust in strongman leaders; and conspiratorial thinking. White Christian nationalism unites all these elements. As a result, it is one of the strongest currents within American right-wing populism and one of the main drivers of political polarization.

Can that polarization be overcome?

WHY DIDN'T “THE ASTEROID” OF COVID-19 UNITE US?

Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has become one of America’s leading sources for understanding political polarization. His 2012 bestseller, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, presciently described the intensifying polarization that was both a cause and an effect of the Trump presidency. In the end, however, even Haidt’s diagnosis proved too sanguine. In a popular TED Talk that accompanied the 2012 book, Haidt mused that a common threat might restore common ground in American politics. If Americans learned that a large asteroid was on course

to strike earth within a few years, he speculated, they would surely throw aside their petty differences and come together to strategize, coordinate, and sacrifice so that humanity could survive.

And then that asteroid arrived in the form of COVID-19. And Americans did not come together. Instead they became more polarized than ever. To be sure, consistent information about how to stop the spread of COVID-19 was difficult to pin down during the first few months of 2020. But familiar fissures emerged in answers to questions like the following: Who is to blame? Whom do we trust? And what should we do? The populist impulse stoked by white Christian nationalism shaped answers to all three questions.

In the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, the media subjected President Trump to harsh criticism for minimizing the threat of the virus. As infections and deaths started to spiral upward, Trump and his allies sought to deflect the blame. As so often in American history, racial minorities were scapegoated. In this case, it was Chinese Americans and immigrants. It still is. Republican politicians and pundits such as Florida Gov. Ron De Santis and Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson were quick to blame the Delta variant on “illegal immigrants” crossing the Southern border.

Trump and many of his Republican surrogates or supporters repeatedly referred to the coronavirus as “the China Virus” or “the Kung-Flu” and suggested that the virus had either escaped or been deliberately released from a Chinese lab. In other words, the Trump administration was not to blame for the virus; China was. Trump would use the expression “Chinese virus” more than 20 times just in the latter half of March. A photographer snapped a picture of Trump’s notes for speech in which he’d crossed out the word “Corona” and inserted “Chinese.” Other times, Christian nationalist commentators curiously accused Mexican immigrants of worsening

the pandemic, despite the fact that Mexico had still been largely untouched by COVID-19 at that time. On March 10, 2020, when Mexico had seven total reported cases of COVID-19, Charlie Kirk, founder and president of Turning Point USA and former director of the now-defunct Falkirk Center at Liberty University, tweeted that “Now, more than ever, we need the wall. With China Virus spreading across the globe, the US stands a chance if we can control of [sic] our borders.” Trump reposted the tweet and added the comment, “Going up fast. We need the Wall more than ever.”

In May 2020, we asked Americans various questions related to race, immigration, and the pandemic. The responses were telling (see Figure 1.5). Our models took into account various factors that might lead white Americans to support Trump’s narrative scapegoating China, the Chinese, or Mexican immigrants such as conservative ideology, Republican identification, or education. Even after holding such factors constant, we found that as adherence to Christian nationalism increased, whites were more likely to feel that our lax immigration laws were partly to blame for the pandemic, to

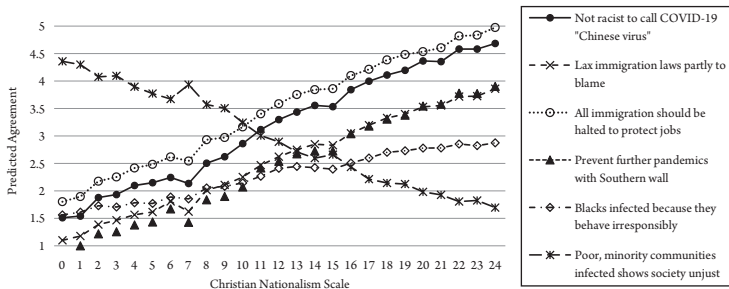


Figure 1.5. White Americans’ predicted agreement with questions connecting race and immigration to the COVID-19 pandemic across Christian nationalism. **Note:** Ordinary least squares regression models including Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, educational attainment, income, and region of the country.

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 3; May 2020)*

believe that immigration should be halted to protect American jobs, that we could thwart future pandemics by building the southern border wall, and that it wasn't racist to call COVID-19 “the Chinese virus.”

But white Christian nationalism wasn't just associated with blaming minorities *outside* of the country. It was also linked with whites blaming minorities *inside* the country for their disproportionate infection rates. Early on in the pandemic it became clear that poorer, minority communities were being infected with COVID-19 at higher rates. Public health scholars determined this was largely due to the fact that poorer minorities were more likely to work in situations where they couldn't safely distance (e.g., food service), have comorbidities, and live in areas with less access to health care.¹² However, we asked Americans how much they agreed with statements placing the blame for higher infection rates on Black Americans behaving irresponsibly or, conversely, on our unjust society (see Figure 1.5). As we might expect, the more that white Americans affirmed Christian nationalism, the more likely they were to blame Blacks themselves and disagree that their higher infection rates were a symptom of circumstance. These patterns make little sense unless we remember that, for whites, political theology also reflects racialized assumptions about civic belonging and worth.¹³

But because white Christian nationalism is ultimately about “us” (the good, decent Americans) versus “them” (the outsiders who wish to take what's rightfully ours), it also shaped who Americans trusted for information during the pandemic. In the same May 2020 survey, we provided a list of entities including Donald Trump, Republicans, Congress, religious communities, scientists, the Center for Disease Control (CDC), and other sources. We then asked respondents how much they trusted each group for information regarding COVID-19. Figure 1.6 shows the predicted percentage of white Americans

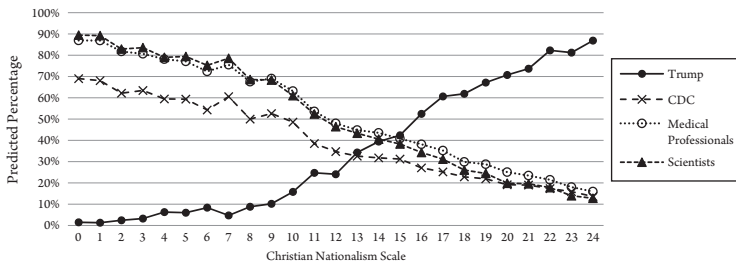


Figure 1.6. Predicted percentage of white Americans who express “a great deal” of trust in experts or Donald Trump during COVID-19 across Christian nationalism.

Note: Binary logistic regression models including Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, educational attainment, income, and region of the country.

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 3; May 2020)*

who trusted experts such as the CDC, medical professionals, or scientists, or Donald Trump “a great deal.” We plot the averages across whites’ adherence to Christian nationalism.

The differences are striking. Even after accounting for religious, political, and sociodemographic characteristics, as Christian nationalism increases, white Americans’ confidence in each expert group starts high and declines precipitously. And just the opposite for Trump. As Christian nationalism increases, trust for Donald Trump soars. The end result is that at extremely high levels of Christian nationalism, less than 20% of white Americans expressed “a great deal” of trust in experts, while over 85% reported a great deal of trust in Donald Trump.

Predictably, given the enormous trust white Christian nationalists place in Trump, we see a corresponding distrust in mainstream news media among white Americans who score higher on Christian nationalism. All presidents have complicated relationships with the free press. And this is how it should be. In

democracies, the press should be able to call “balls and strikes” on political leaders, fact-checking false claims and reporting on the real-world consequences of failed policies. But like no other president since Nixon, Donald Trump has famously excoriated “lamestream” news outlets as “fake news,” both leveraging and fueling populist distrust in mainstream media. His feud continued unabated during the pandemic. On February 26, 2020, for example, Trump tweeted, “Low Ratings Fake News MSDNC (Comcast) & CNN are doing everything possible to make the Caronavirus [sic] look as bad as possible, including panicking markets, if possible. Likewise their incompetent Do Nothing Democrat comrades are all talk, no action. USA in great shape!”

In this and other tweets, Trump assures his followers that media are actively working in cooperation with Democrats to exaggerate the threat of COVID-19, hoping to tank markets and make him look bad. It should be little surprise then, that when we asked Americans in May 2020 how much they trusted 10 different news sources, among white Americans, overall trust in all news outlets plummeted as their adherence to Christian nationalism increased. There were only two exceptions: Fox News and Breitbart. As Christian nationalism increased, white Americans’ trust in either of these news sources took off.

With such disparities in trust in medical experts and mainstream news, it comes as no surprise that white Christian nationalism powerfully predicted resistance to following the recommendations of health experts publicized through most news outlets during the early stages of the pandemic. When we asked Americans in May 2020 how frequently they followed recommended precautions for limiting the spread of COVID-19 such as wearing a mask in public or washing hands more frequently, white Americans who scored higher on Christian nationalism were much less likely to

take such precautions. In fact, they were more likely to engage in behavior that experts discouraged, such as meeting with large numbers of people, eating out in restaurants, or going shopping for nonessentials.¹⁴

These patterns have repeated themselves when it comes to COVID vaccine resistance. Polls taken in late 2020 and early 2021 found that white evangelical Protestants were the group most likely to say they didn't plan on taking the COVID-19 vaccine when it became available. While most journalists and scholars were quickly able to point out the combination of distrust and ignorance behind these patterns, few recognized the role of white Christian nationalism among the evangelical population. As we show in Figure 1.7, even after we account for other relevant factors in statistical models, in February 2021 only roughly 5% of white Americans who score the lowest on our full Christian nationalism scale indicated that they wouldn't get vaccinated. That percentage steadily climbs to 50% at the highest levels of Christian nationalism. By contrast, over 85% of white Americans who largely reject Christian nationalism

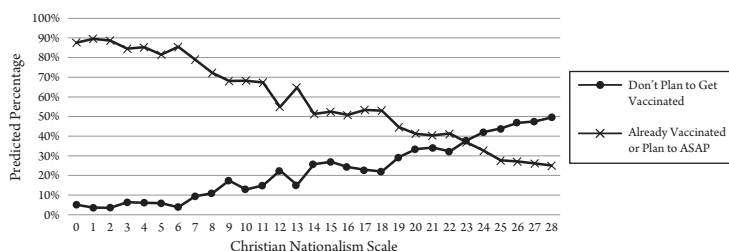


Figure 1.7. Predicted percentage of white Americans by COVID vaccine status across Christian nationalism.

Note: Binary logistic regression models including Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, educational attainment, income, and region of the country.

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 7; February 2021)*

indicated they'd either already been vaccinated by February 2021 or would do so as soon as possible. That percentage declined in a linear fashion to less than 30% among the most ardent supporters of Christian nationalist ideology.¹⁵

Part of Trump's resistance to the recommendations of experts, and specifically shutting down businesses and mandating shelter-in-place orders, involved the potential consequences for the economy. On multiple occasions, Trump repeated the phrase, “The cure cannot be worse than the disease,” stressing that it would ultimately be more damaging to keep the economy closed than to impose more restrictions in the hope of stopping the spread of the virus. At a White House press briefing in March 2020, Trump said decisions on how to handle the pandemic couldn't be left to medical experts: “If it were up to doctors, they may say, ‘Let's shut down the entire world.’ You know, we can't do that.” Right-wing pundits made similar statements on air or over social media. Fox News host Laura Ingraham said, “Doctors provide medical treatment and cures—they should not be the determinative voices in policy making.” Similarly, Charlie Kirk resented that, “The question we're not allowed to ask . . . is should the number of people who get sick be the only variable we factor into our ethical calculation? It's also impossible to dispute that the steps we are taking are destroying the American economy.” And overtly Christian nationalist pastor Lance Wallnau went even further to argue tanking the economy was the Democrats' whole ballgame: “The virus will touch just a fraction of the population,” he explained, “The Left wants the economy distressed because the crisis improves their chances of taking office.”

Other Trump supporters on the Christian right emphasized the threat to personal liberty posed by mask mandates and lockdown restrictions. Former Arkansas governor and Baptist minister Mike Huckabee, for example, said in mid-April 2020 that lockdown

enforcement was threatening Americans’ “civil liberties” and effectively “shredding the Constitution.” So too, pastor John MacArthur, who drew national criticism for reopening his megachurch during the pandemic and discouraging mask use, warned, “[J]ust terrify people that they might die and they’ll all roll over in complete compliance. They’ll give up their freedoms, they’ll put on silly masks . . . they’ll sit in their house for as long as you tell them to sit there. You can conquer an entire nation in fear.”

This resistance from Trump and others isn’t just the mindset of small-government, free-market conservatives who valorize free choice and prosperity as the panacea for society’s ills. It’s closely connected with white Christian nationalism. We’ll discuss this connection more in a moment, but for now we can see the link clearly in how white Christian nationalism shaped whites’ responses to mandated COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing orders (see Figure 1.8). The more strongly white

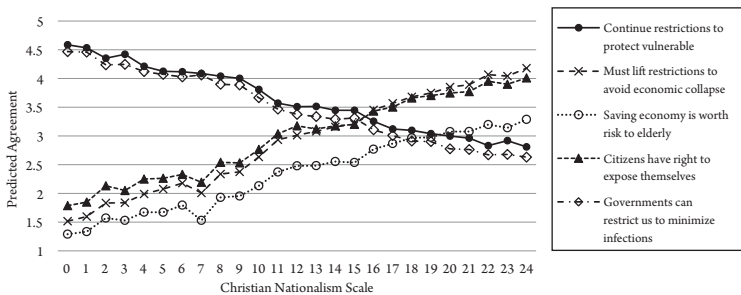


Figure 1.8. White Americans’ predicted agreement with statements prioritizing the economy, personal liberty, or the vulnerable in considering COVID-19 lockdowns across Christian nationalism.

Note: Ordinary least squares regression models including Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, educational attainment, income, and region of the country.

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 3; May 2020)*

Americans affirm Christian nationalism, the more likely they were to agree with statements stressing the need to protect individual liberty and the economy, even if it meant putting the elderly or the vulnerable at risk. Conversely, whites were less likely to prioritize the vulnerable the more they adhered to Christian nationalism.¹⁶

It is important to recognize how differently white Christian nationalism functions from “religious commitment” as social scientists traditionally measure it. As other studies have shown, white Christian nationalism and religious commitment are not the same, and often they move white Americans in different directions on issues of social justice and equality. In this case, white Christian nationalism goes in the opposite direction of religious commitment. That is to say, once we account for Christian nationalism in our statistical models, white Americans who attend church more often, pray more often, and consider religion more important are less likely to prioritize the economy or liberty over the vulnerable. Why is this the case? Because white Christian nationalism is about ethno-traditionalism and protecting the freedoms of a very narrowly defined “us.” Religious commitment, in contrast, can expand what philosopher Peter Singer calls the “circle of empathy,” our ability to put ourselves in others’ shoes.

But if white Christian nationalism narrows our circle of empathy, there’s another, closely connected ideology that helps justify *why* those outside the circle are so unworthy of help.

THE *OTHER* DOG WHISTLE

For white Americans who affirm Christian nationalist ideology, “true Americans” aren’t just natural-born white citizens who identify with

conservative Christianity on, say, issues like abortion or transgender rights. Rather there is another aspect of what it means to be “truly American” that gets entangled in the conservative Christian identity: libertarian, free-market capitalism. We’ll discuss the historical development and political impact of this strand of individualism extensively later. But here we want to introduce and demonstrate how they’re connected empirically, influencing both the economic policies white Christian nationalism promotes and the groups white Christian nationalism fears the most. Unsurprisingly, we also find that the love affair between Christian nationalism and libertarian free-market capitalism is a racialized one, found most powerfully among white Americans.

In November 2020, we asked Americans a series of questions about economic systems and policies. We added up how much Americans agreed with statements like “Free markets are the key to our national prosperity” and “We must not over-regulate businesses or we will stifle productivity,” along with others like “We need strong social safety nets to provide for those who cannot work,” and “The government should intervene to reduce economic inequality” to create a scale. We ordered the responses such that higher scores tell us how strong of a free-market capitalist Americans were. When we ran statistical models to assess which factors predicted Americans’ scores on the scale, we found that Christian nationalism was the second strongest factor in scoring higher, second only to political conservatism.

But what is just as interesting is that we found this connection between Christian nationalism and a strong preference for free-market ideals is exclusive to whites. Figure 1.9 shows the divergent patterns for white and Black Americans across Christian nationalism. As we’ve seen in previous figures, as scores on our Christian nationalism scale increase, Black Americans stay quite steady in

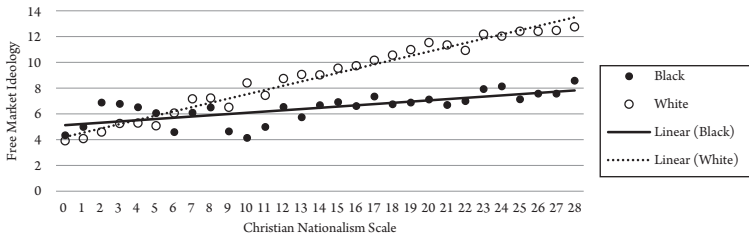


Figure 1.9. Predicted favorability toward free-market ideals by Christian nationalism and race.

Note: Ordinary least squares regression models including Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, race, educational attainment, income, and region of the country. Significant interaction term between Christian nationalism \times Black ($p = .001$).

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 6; November 2020)*

their approval of strong free-market attitudes. But white Americans increase tremendously in their support for markets unhindered by government intervention.

We should keep in mind that just as our Christian nationalism measures say nothing about race, neither do they mention anything about economics or markets. So why would we see such a powerful connection between Christian nationalism and a strong preference for unfettered capitalism? And why would this pattern be different for Black Americans?

There is a long history there that we’ll unpack soon. But put simply, the idea of a “Christian nation,” which was founded by people in favor of “our way of life” has not only become culturally inextricable from white Christian culture, but also from the “rugged individualism” that adherents associate with free-market capitalism. It is part of the whole identity. Economic self-interest and individualism are not just “rational” or “efficient,” they are what “real Americans” and “good Christians” value.

What do the bad people value? In her 2020 book *Socialists Don’t Sleep: Christians Must Rise or America Will Fall*, conservative opinion

writer Cheryl Chumley explains, “Here’s the real enemy: collectivism.” She goes on to say, “Far too many wolves run the church circuit these days, corrupting true biblical principles, undermining the actual Word of God, creating a chaotic message that advances a dangerous far-left ideology in a country where far-left ideologies have no right to exist. *Jesus wasn’t a socialist*” (italics hers).¹⁷ Think about the juxtaposition of terms there: “true biblical principles” and “the actual Word of God” versus a “dangerous far-left ideology” called socialism. To follow Jesus and love America is to love individualism and libertarian freedom, expressed in allegiance to capitalism and unequivocal rejection of socialism.

In his speech at the “Evangelicals for Trump” rally on January 3, 2020, Donald Trump warned his audience:

Our opponents want to shut out God from the public square so they can impose their extreme anti-religious and socialist agenda on America . . . The extreme left in America is trying to replace religion with government and replace God with socialism. That’s what’s happening . . . We resolve again today that America will never be a socialist country, ever. America was not built by religion-hating socialists. America was built by church-going, God-worshipping, freedom-loving patriots.

Similarly, in his 2020 book *United States of Socialism*, conservative provocateur Dinesh D’Souza explains that socialists “would still seek to demonize white males and push Christian symbols out of the public square.” D’Souza himself is not white and has no personal experience being targeted as a white Christian man. But it’s no coincidence that he references white men and Christians together. In his mind, and likely that of his readers, the socialist assault on one might as well be an assault on the other. And he exhorts his

readers in conclusion, “[W]e need a new generation of leaders who can assimilate the things that Trump does so effectively, fearlessly and gleefully. Trump has made it fun to beat the hell out of leftists and socialists, and even when Trump is gone, we must continue to enjoy the Trumpian experience of being a butt-kicking Republican, Christian, right-wing American capitalist.”¹⁸

The dog whistle character of “Christian” language is on full display here. We might all be inclined to ask, “What exactly is ‘Christian’ about the ‘Trumpian experience’ D’Souza describes?” But inserting “Christian” in with that list of identities makes perfect sense if D’Souza is appealing to what political scientist Lilliana Mason calls a “mega-identity” that merges the various individual identities that distinguish “people like us” from “people like them.”¹⁹ And in both Trump’s and D’Souza’s statements, being a faithful American is connected to *both* promoting Christianity in the public square and opposition to those who would replace “our” culture and prosperous free markets with totalitarian socialism. D’Souza fuses the ethnic and economic threats together in a phrase he uses frequently: “identity socialism.” Black Lives Matter? Democratic Socialists? Different names for the same enemy working to destroy “our” liberties.

In February 2021, we asked Americans how much they agreed that certain groups—conservative Christians, atheists, Muslims, and socialists—hold values that are morally inferior to those of people like them, want to limit the personal freedoms of people like them, and endanger the physical safety of people like them. We then added these up to make a scale measuring antipathy and fear toward each group. Unsurprisingly, white Americans who scored higher on white Christian nationalism thought conservative Christians were just fine, and they were more likely to hold prejudicial attitudes toward atheists, Muslims, and socialists. But here’s what surprised us: the strongest association wasn’t between white

Christian nationalism and antipathy or distrust toward atheists or Muslims. You might think that these groups pose the biggest threat to Americans who want a “*Christian nation*.” Instead, the strongest connection was between white Christian nationalism and antipathy toward socialists. It is *that* group, not atheists or Muslims, that white Christian nationalism finds the most threatening.

Given this connection, it was unsurprising that when we ran regression models to assess which factors predicted higher scores on our anti-socialism scale, Christian nationalism was the biggest factor by a mile, even above conservative political ideology or partisan identification. It’s what we call a “monster” in the model. This would immediately suggest that “socialists” appear to be most threatening, not necessarily for Republicans or those who are politically conservative per se, but principally for Americans who have merged the idea of Christian national identity with free-market capitalism.

But there’s more. As we can see in Figure 1.10, the pattern exists among white Americans but not among Blacks. Black Americans’ negative views toward socialists do not increase steadily no matter how high they score on our Christian nationalism scale. But white Americans nearly span the entire measure of antipathy and fear toward socialists as they increase in their adherence to Christian nationalism.

Thus it is not Americans in general who equate the idea of a Christian nation with free-market capitalism, but *white* Americans specifically.

We’ve explained that the term “Christian,” because it has taken on an ethnic connotation in the minds of many whites, has become an invaluable dog whistle on the right to rally white conservatives to the defense of “our way of life,” “our heritage,” or

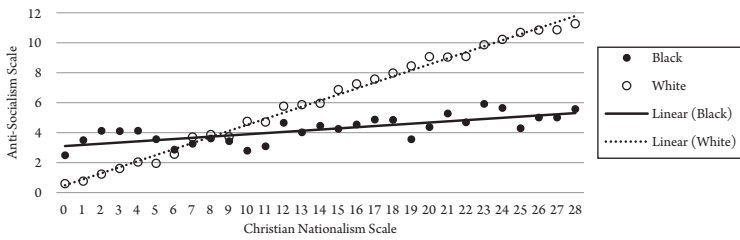


Figure 1.10. Predicted antipathy and fear toward socialists across Christian nationalism and race.

Note: Ordinary least squares regression models including Christian nationalism scale, political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, age, gender, race, educational attainment, income, and region of the country. Significant interaction term between Christian nationalism \times Black ($p < .001$).

Source: *Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (Wave 7; February 2021)*

“our country.” But as Trump’s rhetoric and that of his Christian right surrogates has shown, the word “socialist” has also become a critical dog whistle for white Americans who adhere to Christian nationalist ideology, helping to identify the “them” who pose such a grave threat to “us.”

CONCLUSION

It bears repeating once more that our Christian nationalism measures say absolutely nothing about race or the economy. And yet, for white Americans, a desire to institutionalize Christian identity and values in the public square is strongly related to a host of other ideas.

White Christian nationalism is our term for the ethno-traditionalism among many white Americans that conflates racial, religious, and national identity (the deep story) and pines for cultural and political power that demographic and cultural shifts

have increasingly threatened (the vision). Though there have always been a variety of Christian groups and expressions, and we aren't simply "letting Christianity off the hook" here, the term "Christian" in white Christian nationalism is often far more akin to a dog whistle that calls out to an aggrieved tribe than a description of the content of one's faith. In Dinesh D'Souza's words, these days it means something like "butt-kicking Republican, Christian, right-wing American capitalist." Whiteness is often assumed in there.

As we've shown, the subtext of whiteness in the language of "Christian nation" and "Christian values" becomes obvious when we see how differently our Christian nationalism measures work for whites than for Black Americans. For Black Americans, adherence to Christian nationalism has little if any correlation with their views about racial discrimination, American religious history, COVID-19 issues, or views on the economy. And though we didn't show it here, it also has little bearing on Blacks' attitudes toward racial inequality, immigration, Islamophobia, or gun control once we account for other relevant characteristics.

But for white Americans, adherence to Christian nationalism is among the strongest predictors of ultraconservative stances on every contentious political issue. The ethno-traditionalism of white Christian nationalism then fosters white populism. We can see this when we consider which Americans were more likely to blame immigrants, the Chinese, or Blacks for the COVID-19 pandemic; which Americans trusted Donald Trump and Breitbart rather than experts and mainstream news for COVID-19 information; and which Americans prioritized personal liberty and economic prosperity over protecting vulnerable lives.

That connection between white Christian nationalism, personal liberty, and economic prosperity does much to shape our contemporary political landscape. How did these connections between whiteness, Christianity, and allegiance to libertarian free-market ideals first emerge and develop? The history goes back a lot further than you think.