

**White Christian Nationalism:  
The What, When, Who, How and Where.**

Written Testimony of:

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Prepared for:

Select Committee to Investigate the January 6<sup>th</sup> Attack on the United States Capitol  
U.S. House of Representatives

New Haven, CT  
February 24, 2022

White Christian Nationalism (WCN) first became visible to many Americans during the Capitol Insurrection on January 6, 2021. The riot that day was also a riot of symbols: wooden gallows and wooden crosses, Confederate flags and “Jesus Saves” signs, MAGA hats and militia gear. Where most secular observers saw apples and oranges, some religion scholars saw a familiar fruit cocktail: WCN.

This testimony will give a brief overview of WCN: what it is, when it emerged, whom it attracts, and where it’s headed. It will conclude with some thoughts about how WCN can best be countered.

## **WHAT IT IS**

WCN is perhaps best understood as a “deep story” about American history.<sup>1</sup> That story goes something like this: America was founded as a (white) Christian nation. Its founding documents are based on (Protestant) Christian principles. They may even be divinely inspired. America has been blessed by God and entrusted with a special mission. That is the source of its prosperity and power. But its special status is endangered by the presence of racial and religious others on American soil. It is vital that the nation be kept pious and pure, by whatever means necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> On the idea of the “deep story”, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

The protagonist in this story is a certain type of native-born, white Christian man. A man who prizes (his) freedom above all else. A man who stands for law and order. A man who is prepared to use violence to defend (his) freedom and (racial and religious) order. A man for whom “freedom, order and violence” are, in fact, a sort of holy trinity. The sort of man who broke into the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

What makes this story “deep” is that it is deeply rooted in the minds of many white Americans. So deeply rooted, in many cases, that it just seems like “common sense” to some, the way things always have been and always should be. Today, its polite form is “American Exceptionalism.” Its less polite form is now “MAGA.”

One reason it is so deeply rooted is because it is so old.

### **When It Arose.**

It is tempting to imagine that WCN is something new. It is not. It is older than the country. Its historical roots can be traced all the way back to the Colonial Era.<sup>2</sup> The deep story of WCN weaves together three different stories, all taken from a certain reading of Christian Scripture: Promised Land, End Times and Racial Curse. In the Promised Land story, America is a New Israel, the Colonists the new Chosen People, and the Natives the Canaanites or Amalekites, a

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of the historical origins and development of WCN, see especially: Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).Chapter 2.

people to be conquered or destroyed. This is how many Puritans thought of themselves and how they justified their wars with – and expropriation of -- the native peoples: they were simply taking back their promised land from a heathen people who were occupying it. In the End Times story, the Biblical prophecies of a final battle between the forces of good and evil, natural and supernatural, is not a metaphor or an allegory; it is a forecast of events to come. The Racial Curse story first took shape further South, in the Colony of Virginia. The most common version was the “Curse of Ham.” Ham’s offspring populated Africa, the story went, and God had condemned them to perpetual servitude. It was the Puritan theologian, Cotton Mather, who first wove the three strands together into one sturdy cord.

WCN is the American version of “blood and soil” nationalism. It is premised on racial hierarchy. It pits a righteous “us” against an evil “them.” It turns the nation into the property of one group and others into invaders. It is a deeply authoritarian and anti-democratic worldview.

### **Who They Are.**

Like some classic movies, this deep story has gone through many remakes, too many to recount in any detail. Over the centuries, the leading men have included scouts, cowboys and commandos. They have done battle with Natives and Blacks, Catholics and Jews, and Muslims and liberals. In books, comics and movies, and also in reality. But while the cast has changed, the plot has not: threats to (white) freedom and violations of (racial) order have to be put down with righteous violence. As on January 6, and so many times before.

So, just who are today's White Christian Nationalists?<sup>3</sup> It is tempting but incorrect to equate WCN with "conservative white evangelicals." There is a great deal of overlap, but it is far from complete. Many members of the evangelical elite – prominent pastors, theologians and intellectuals – vehemently reject WCN as un-Christian. So do a sizeable fraction of the evangelical "base." While most of their leaders stand firmly against it, many white Catholics and white mainline Protestants also embrace WCN. Increasingly, WCN also attracts many "secular evangelicals" and "cultural Christians", people who have few if any ties to organized religion but often style themselves as defenders of "Western culture" or "Judeo-Christian civilization." It is a more heterogeneous coalition than is often recognized.

Why does MAGA rhetoric appeal to this coalition? One way of understanding Trumpism is as a secularized version of WCN.<sup>4</sup> Trump did not allude to Scripture, but he did promise to say "Merry Christmas." He does not talk about apocalyptic battles between good and evil, but he does see life as a bare-knuckled fight between friend and foe. And he promised to return America to its rightful owners and expel all foreign bodies. For all these reasons, the MAGA worldview resonated and eventually merged with the WCN deep story. When Trump said "Make America Great Again", many of his most ardent followers heard "Make American White and Christian Again." In this way, MAGA appealed to some practicing Christians as well as to many cultural ones.

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<sup>3</sup> For a statistical profile, see especially: Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Philip Gorski, "Why evangelicals voted for Trump: A critical cultural sociology," in *Politics of Meaning/Meaning of Politics* (Springer, 2019); Philip Gorski, *American Babylon: Democracy and Christianity Before and After Trump* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020). Esp. Chapter 4.

## Where It's Going.

WCN has become one of the most virulently, anti-democratic movements in the contemporary United States. In this, as in other respects, it is important to distinguish it from Christianity as such, which is fully compatible with democracy, and has been for most of American history.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the great French sociologist, Alexis de Tocqueville, was astounded at the friendly and even complementary relationship between Christianity and democracy in the United States during the 1830s.<sup>6</sup> He was astounded because Christianity and democracy were at one another's throats in his native France. This in contrast to his native country, where Christianity and monarchy were allied against democracy. Today's America more nearly resembles Tocqueville's France.

What changed?

There are many reasons for the authoritarian turn within certain sectors of American Christianity. The most obvious is the changing racial and religious landscape.<sup>7</sup> Many white Christians instinctively feel that this is "their" country. They also understand that they are no longer in the majority. As a result, they have become increasingly uneasy with majority rule and

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<sup>5</sup> On the changing relationship between Christianity and democracy in the United States, see: Gorski, *American Babylon: Democracy and Christianity Before and After Trump*. Esp. Chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> A Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. I Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Robert P Jones, *The end of white Christian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).

“one person, one vote.” Confronted with a choice between tribal power and democratic government, many opt for the former.

Another less obvious reason – but one that Tocqueville would sure have appreciated – is the changing structure of Christian churches.<sup>8</sup> In Tocqueville’s time, American churches were small in size, and democratic in structure. As such, they were training grounds for republican citizenship. In our time, however, they are large in size and corporate in structure. They are often trainings grounds for authoritarian subjection. Having grown accustomed to passively following a charismatic pastor, some Christians are well-prepared to play follow the leader.

A third and related reason is the rapid growth of what might be called dis-embedded Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Until recently, pastors were embedded in a hierarchy, and the laity in a community. This made them accountable to a tradition of theology and to a community of believers. No longer. More and more churches are non-denominational. And more and more religion takes place outside of churches altogether in the form of rallies and revivals. Pseudo-religious entertainment is supplanting religious community. As a result, pastors pander to their audiences, and the boundary between religion, popular culture and partisan politics steadily dissolves.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Brad Christerson and Richard Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders are Changing the Religious Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

A fourth and final reason is the steady shrinkage of liberal religion.<sup>10</sup> For most of American history, liberal Protestantism was the dominant force in American Christianity, both institutionally and numerically. No longer. As a result, many Americans, especially younger Americans, now equate Christianity with conservatism and want nothing to do with either. This is the main reason for the rapid growth of the so-called “nones”, those who claim no religious affiliation.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the line between “liberal” and “conservative” increasingly coincides with the one between “secular” and “religious”, thereby turning partisan policy differences into cultural worldview differences.

### **What Can Be Done**

WCN was one of the key driving forces behind the Capitol Insurrection. It remains an important source of anti-democratic sentiment going forward. What can be done to counter it?

One deep story can only ever be countered by another. Fortunately, America has at least one other such story. Some call it America’s “civic creed”, others its “civil religion.”<sup>12</sup> In this story, America is, or aspires to be, a nation of nations and a people of peoples, a confederation of tribes. Its founding documents promise freedom and equality to all. That promise – that covenant – has often been broken, and right from the start. The path to multiracial democracy turns out to be a long, hard march, much longer and harder than the Founders realized. It is a

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<sup>10</sup> Mark AA Chaves, *American religion: Contemporary trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this civil religious tradition and how it differs from WCN, see: Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant*, 2 ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).



project that stretches across generations, a march that stretches many miles. Today, it includes marchers of every color, gender, religion, and party united by shared values of freedom, equality, unity and the common good. Liberals and conservatives who embrace this creed may disagree about what these values mean and how they are to be balanced against one another. But they also agree that these are the terms of the long argument about America is to be. The civic creed is not a partisan creed. There are liberal versions of this story that emphasize equality; and there are conservative ones that emphasize freedom.

There have always been some Americans who rejected the civic creed. But there has always been a broad middle that embraced it. Rebuilding this vital center will not be easy. It will require setting aside differences on policy for the defense of democracy, at least for a time. It will involve building bridges across some of the biggest fault lines in American society, including race but also religion. This will require work on both sides of the aisle.

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