

**White Christian Nationalism**  
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*This paper was presented by Carter Lindberg as part of a Current Events series, at the retirement community in Shrewsbury, MA where Carter and his wife, Alice, resided. Sadly, both Alice and Carter died only months apart in the spring of 2024. Dr. Carter Lindberg was Professor Emeritus of Church History, Boston University School of Theology. His academic interest was Reformation Studies with particular focus on Luther's contributions to overcoming poverty through the creation of a more just and equitable economy.*

*White Christian Nationalism might seem to be a relatively new phenomenon but, as these public remarks by Carter Lindberg make clear, its inner dynamic is as old as recorded time. He paints an almost whimsical historical sketch of the deadly earnest practice of calling on the divine to bestow its blessings on the demonic.*

**The Misuse of Religion: Justifying the Political Agenda**

From Stone Age seers hyping their clan's alpha male to the court evangelists blessing Donald Trump, religion has been used to legitimate political agendas, usually of the nefarious kind.

So, while our topic is listed as a "current event," which of course it is; our topic is also a "history of the universe" for which we'll toss in a couple of examples. A glance at Greek epic poems shows the political-military importance of divine support. And the Bible praises God for victory over the Canaanites, and thus for their land. In turn early modern Europeans invaded and expropriated lands and people in Africa and the New World supported by that biblical ideology and its 15<sup>th</sup>-century papal codifications known as the "Doctrine of Discovery" authored by Popes Nicholas V and Alexander VI (Nicholas V, "Dum diversas," 1452 & "Romanus Pontifex," 1455, and Alexander VI, "Inter caetera," 1493); a doctrine only recently repudiated by Pope Francis (March 2023).

The "Doctrine of Discovery" legitimated and sanctified racism and "perpetual slavery" for those in lands discovered outside the Christian world. One of the immediate consequences of the Doctrine of Discovery, therefore, was the African slave trade by Prince Henry (d. 1460) of Portugal, designated by the pope as an agent of God. The first African captives taken into slavery by Portuguese explorers were brought to Portugal in 1441 (*Unsettling Truths*, pp. 17-18). Just in case there might

have been any queasiness about the slave trade, the Noah story served to justify it. The Noah story (Genesis 9:18-27), in currency from the Bible to today(!), describes the curse of Canaan (not Ham) to be forever a slave. “Canaan”, of course, was the divinely promised land; the name also connotes “Black” and was associated with Egypt and North Africa. The “icing on the cake” (vanilla!) so to speak was the rationale that slavery was a blessing because it introduced Africans to Christianity (Whitford, *The Curse of Ham . . .*, 2009, 133-4). A recent variation on this theme is the claim in the Florida education program that slavery benefitted Blacks by teaching them marketable skills.

On a more positive note, the classical Hebrew prophets spent their lives exposing and critiquing “Hebrew nationalism.” Their reward as you know was to get stoned – no, not getting high, but being rocked to sleep. The powerful then, as now, made it clear that “If you go after me, I am coming after you.” A more recent, and, thankfully, metaphorical example of the consequences of truth-telling, is Barack Obama’s Chicago pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright whose 2003 sermon on the peril of conflating God’s will and national politics – the “God bless America” syndrome – ended with “Not God bless America! God damn America!” (*The 1619 Project*, 518ff.).

Meanwhile history’s false prophets – forerunners of today’s white Christian nationalists – lived the high life. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robinson, et al., were not the first to realize the material profits of being a false prophet.

In the Bible the false prophets were known as court prophets because they were supported by the king. King Ahab is said to have had some 400 court prophets who assured him God was on his side to guarantee both the king’s agenda and his prosperity (see I Kings 22 as well as Jeremiah 6:13ff.; 14:13-16; 27-28; et al.). Today’s equivalents range from the Graham Association to the evangelical groups and “court evangelists” surrounding and blessing Donald Trump, Governor Abbot, Governor DeSantis, et al.

The trajectory from Israel’s false prophets to our own white Christian nationalism has a long pedigree developed through centuries of imperial Christianity beginning with the Roman emperor, Constantine. The story goes that as Constantine’s effort to gain the imperial title by invading Rome in 312 was faltering, he saw a cross in the sky with the words “in this sign conquer” (“in hoc signo vinces” – also used in our day on Pall Mall cigarette packs). Promptly painting the cross and motto on his army’s shields, Constantine won the battle and we’ve been singing variants of “Onward Christian Soldiers” ever since. Indeed, here is a root of the “macho Jesus” ideology (see the recent book *Jesus and John Wayne*, 2020).

## **Constantine and the Christianization of Culture**

As the new emperor, Constantine now favored the previously persecuted Christians and claimed divine approval for his political policies. All seemed to be going well for Constantine with this new construct except that the barbarians kept showing up at the gates of Rome, so he moved the capital to Byzantium which he humbly renamed for himself as Constantinople (now Istanbul – no songs please).

The only authority figures left to defend Rome were its bishops who brilliantly riffed on religion and politics to create the ideology of Christian nationalism tasked to “Christianize” culture. We don’t have time to provide details of this development but a few theological theories and events may be of interest. Pope Gelasius (d. 496) advanced the “Two Swords Theory” to make clear that “the sword” of papal power & authority stands above that of royal power. This form of Christian nationalism worked well enough that it almost impeded the election of JFK a millenium and a half later.

In the year 800, Charlemagne, ruler of most of what we now call Europe, went to Rome to support Pope Leo III (d. 816) in his struggles with Roman nobles. During the Christmas mass at St. Peter’s while Charlemagne was kneeling at the altar, Leo came up behind him and crowned him Roman Emperor, a new “Caesar” – in German, “Kaiser.” Thus began the Holy Roman Empire (which Voltaire, d. 1778, said was none of the above). In crowning Charlemagne, Pope Leo established that if the pope “makes” the emperor, that is, if the pope gives the Imperial crown, he can also take it away. That is why when Napoleon Bonaparte was to be crowned by Pope Pius VII in 1804, Napoleon took the crown from the pope and crowned himself. But in spite of Napoleon, heads of state want religious support. As King James I stated in 1604, “no bishop, no crown;” a sentiment apparently approved by King Charles III’s recent crowning by “his” Archbishop. Even Donald Trump, who certainly cannot be accused of being a Christian, relishes evangelical support.

In the Eastern half of the Roman Empire, known as Byzantium, Constantine initiated a variation on this theoretical framework for “Christendom.” Known as Caesaro-papism, it posits that the role of the Church is to bless and support the ruler. This version of the Roman Empire continued with the Russian “Caesars,” i.e., Tsars, when the Prince of Moscovy, Ivan III (1462-1505) married Zoë Paleologus, the last

Byzantine Princess, and Moscow came to be known as “the Third Rome.” The exciting thing as you know is that since both Russia and America each thinks it is *the* Christian nation, it sees the other as the “evil empire” – a designation employed by both Reagan and Putin. The problem is that when politics is elevated to cosmic value judgments there is no possibility for compromise. The bright side (literally!) of this conflict of God and Satan is of course the nuclear apocalypse to usher in the reign of Christ. That’s why Pat Boone urged Reagan to make the first nuclear strike.

On the other hand, an alternative to this Armageddon scenario is the White Christian Nationalist ecumenism developing among the followers of Putin, Orbán, Bolsonaro, and Trump; a global Christian Right that posits absorption of Ukraine into the reconstituted Russian Empire with universal prohibition of LGBTQ, abortion, and immigration rights, and promotion of unlimited plutocracy. Thus Franklin Graham praises Putin for “protecting traditional Christianity;” Bryan Fischer, until 2015 the spokesperson for the American Family Association, praised Putin as “the lion of Christianity;” and the World Congress of Families named Russia as “the hope of the world.”

In the early centuries of the “Christianization” process it became apparent that not everyone from the Atlantic to Asia and from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea was privy to the imperial scheme to make them all “Christians.” To help these benighted folks, the papacy developed Constantine’s insight of “militant Christianity” into crusades. As Pope Urban II pointed out at the Synod of Clermont in 1095, the benefits of a crusade included not only murder, rape, and plunder but redirection of local feuds toward the common enemy of Islam and, best of all, plenary indulgences for all your sins. After a couple of centuries ransacking the East, including Christian Constantinople in 1244, the papacy directed this militant energy to the Baltic to “Christianize” Prussians and Poles by the sword. And as already noted, Putin too has his own “Christian nationalism” through the Orthodox Patriarch Kyril who has blessed the wholesale murder, rape, and destruction of Ukraine, promising that Russians fighting Ukraine will have their sins “washed away” (*Boston Globe* 24 July 2023, A4).

In America, the crusade ideal sparked the imagination of a white “masculine” militant Christianity ranging from sports teams and the YMCA to the Knights of Columbus to the riders of the KKK to the religious-political campaigns of Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan led by Billy Graham who termed them crusades. The claims of exceptionalist entitlement and Christian nationalism have long infected our nation. The ideology of “God and country” may once have appeared benign as expressed by Scout groups and by American flags placed besides church

altars, but its idolatrous dark side has appeared in countless other ways from political attacks on “godless Communist” countries to attacks on immigrants, LGBTQ folks, and anyone considered “woke” or a handy scapegoat. White Christian Nationalism is no longer just “ceremonial deism” when Texas advances legislation to post the “Ten Commandments” in every classroom, and Louisiana requires all classrooms to display the motto “In God We Trust.”

### **American Exceptionalism and January 6**

It is often argued that American exceptionalist self-righteousness was nurtured by a distorted Calvinism and frontier mentality that saw the New World as the “Promised Land,” the “New Israel.” The conflation of the Deuteronomic and Joshua narratives with American destiny were exploited to promote the heresy of White Christian Nationalism. Especially popular is the biblical image of “a city on a hill” that John Winthrop (d. 1649) referenced as the goal for his Puritan colonists. The phrase, as you know was coopted by Reagan as “a shining city on a hill,” even as he pursued the Republican “Southern Strategy” to prevent Blacks and “welfare queens” from living in it. The heirs of such Puritanism promoted a libertarian “Manifest Destiny,” a kind of social Darwinism, that equated success with righteousness and failure with moral flaws. This became increasingly Protestant mainstream with the business and evangelical resistance to FDR’s New Deal. Not just “atheistic Communism” became anathema, so did socialism of any sort, including even the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Social Gospel movement now framed as displacing personal salvation by the common good, i.e., the modern welfare state.

Evangelical Christian promotion of self-sufficiency – “God helps those who help themselves” – complemented by the conviction that charity is the role of the church not the state fueled the evangelical criticism of Roosevelt’s social programs. An evangelical refrain became: Too many people are trusting the government instead of God. And so the oil tycoons stepped up to “save” the nation. Rockefeller built his “Chapel” at the U. of Chicago, and Lyman Stewart, founder of Union Oil, arguably went one better by publishing *The Fundamentals: A testimony to the Truth* between 1910 and 1915. This 12-volume set was distributed free to over 3 million religious leaders.

Fundamentalism stressed patriotism, “American values,” prayer in schools, and personal holiness over the social concerns of the ecumenical churches. This “gospel” of free enterprise or Christian libertarianism dovetailed with the issues advanced in the 1930s and ‘40s by corporate and industrial leaders to “save” free enterprise and thus big business from government control. “In a forceful rejection

of the public service themes of the Social Gospel, they [evangelicals and CEOs] argued that the central tenet of Christianity remained the salvation of the individual. If any political and economic system fit with the religious teachings of Christ, it would have to be rooted in a similarly individualistic ethos. Nothing better exemplified such values, they insisted, than the capitalistic system of free enterprise” (Kruse, 7). In short, as Gordon Gecko proclaimed in the movie “Wall Street,” “greed is good.”

All of which was endorsed by the rising star of revivalism, Billy Graham, who promoted prayer as the avenue to profitable business. In 1951 he dedicated the Chicago & Southwest Airline with a worship service while circling over Memphis; and years later at a convention of hotel owners he prayed “God bless the Holiday Inns.” The other side of the coin, so to speak, was Graham’s public antagonism to labor unions and their leaders whom he labeled “snakes in the Garden of Eden.” Equally sinful in Graham’s view were “government restrictions” of free enterprise that lead to communism, socialism, and dictatorship (Kruse, 37-38).

Thus, it may be argued that the development of White Christian Nationalism in America rooted in the Constantinian vision of God-endorsed politics, is shaped by evangelical responses to modern social issues. As President Eisenhower (in)famously declared: “Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.”

It was just in the 1950s that the “National Day of Prayer” (1952) was approved by Congress; that “E Pluribus Unum” was replaced (1957) on our currency with “In God We Trust” (everyone else pays cash); that “one nation under God” was inserted in the Pledge of Allegiance (1954); that national prayer breakfasts began in the White House (1953), and there began the omnipresence of The Ten Commandments and its movie version with a macho Moses, Charlton Heston, designed to conflate civil law with the Bible and theocratic claims. The new motto “In God We Trust” also appeared on postage stamps, and “confirmed a role for capitalism . . . . Since then, every act of buying and selling in America has occurred through a currency that proudly praises God” (Kruse,125).

Billy Graham and his Association continued their crusades with Richard Nixon and then Ronald Reagan. In the process, Graham declaimed on national economics – rollback welfare (the needy don’t need housing, food, and medicine – they need Christ). Now, not only socialism but government itself is the problem. President George W. Bush’s solution was to promote a “compassionate conservatism” that

replaced the government programs that created “welfare queens” with “faith-based charities.” Evangelicals endorsed the symbiosis of faith and free enterprise.

The racist part of white Christian nationalism was expertly exploited by the “Southern Strategy” of the Nixon-Reagan-Bush presidential campaigns and then more blatantly advanced by Trump. “Dog whistles” are no longer necessary when the Christian flag and the Confederate flag wave together and Jesus is invoked on 6 January to invade the Capitol.

A concluding comment: Anything once even vaguely considered “Christian” in White Christian Nationalism has been purged and displaced by white grievance. The remaining “Caesaro-papism” no longer depicts a ruler endorsed by a church, but rather an unrestrained “Caesar” or “Kaiser” or “Tsar.” In short, this nationalism is increasingly bare-bones white grievance and leadership principle – the basic ingredients of historical fascism.

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