

# Research Notes

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

March 2021

## January 6 and White Christian Nationalism



*Photo of January 6, 2021 U.S. Capitol riot courtesy of Reuters.*

One of the most evident changes over the past two decades has been the dramatic increase in political partisanship. Such polarization has existed throughout U.S. history, with the 1960s an example within living memory. The hyper-partisanship of the 2020 election and its aftermath, especially in the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, provided us a unique opportunity to gauge its impact on local congregations and clergy.

We expected to see wide range of political opinions and different degrees of political participation by congregations, and we saw that range. What we did not expect was to witness a violent mob descending on the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, January 6. That event, drenched in religious symbolism, offered a rare opportunity to think about the role of white Christian nationalism as part of our polarized social environment.

Christian nationalism is currently being analyzed across academic disciplines, including our IUPUI colleague, sociologist Andrew Whitehead, the co-author with Samuel Perry (Baylor University) of *Taking Back America for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Whitehead and Perry assert that "Christian nationalists believe that the U.S. was founded as an explicitly Christian nation; that the country's success is in part a reflection of God's ultimate plan for the world; that prayer should be allowed in public schools; and that the federal government should declare the U.S. a Christian nation, advocate Christian values, and support religious displays in public places."



Capital police holding back the crowd during January 6 U.S. Capital Riot. Copyright: © 2021 Bloomberg Finance LP

The Christian nationalists' definition of 'Christianity' includes "assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious." It embraces a "desire to create boundaries of group membership around race and the right of white Americans to segregate themselves from minorities." This characterization finds support in books by Anthea Butler (*White Evangelical Racism*), Robert P. Jones (*White Too Long*), Kristin Kobes Du Mez (*Jesus and John Wayne*), among others.

We must be cautious not to blur all discussions of racism into the specific topic of white Christian nationalism. While white Christian nationalism *is* racist, it is not a complete definition of racism or its effects. However, the events of the last four years, the recent election, and the specific moment of January 6 provided a window on how congregations were responding either on social media or in their services.

Not surprisingly, we heard some very direct condemnation of the rioters and of President Trump. A Catholic priest referred to "ideological tribalism." An African American pastor said, "We witnessed the attack upon the Congress,

the seat of our government by a mob of people who allowed their identity to be compromised by a human personality, who had for some years, some months, some weeks and even for more than an hour before the attacks stirred and incited them."

At least one of the nine congregations we observed on January 10 used the precise term, "Christian Nationalism," to describe the ideology of the rioters. The symbolism of that day made the connection impossible to dispute. In one of our study congregations, the pastor offered a Twitter message of measured moral condemnation, followed immediately by a message from an associate pastor—himself an African American—that was more personal and more scathing.

Of course, not every congregation addressed the riots directly, either on social media or in their services. This is not too surprising. Many congregations hesitate to address immediate political events in the flow of worship. Some messages called for grace and mercy. Others referred to January 6 as a "disorientation," likening it to the disorientation caused by Covid-19 and encouraging members to keep their focus on spiritual goals. Yet another message focused on empathy rather than judgment.

It is easy enough to condemn the rioters, but the underlying topic is obviously a difficult one. For some of our congregations, preaching justice as a response to problems of systemic racial discrimination is hard-wired into the DNA of everything they do. In others, political events like this seem to be aberrations calling for justice, grace, and mercy.

In the next briefing, we will discuss the gradual shift in the American dialogue about race. For decades, sociologists and progressive pastors have framed racism





*Anti-racism protestors holding up signs.*

as a systemic issue rather than an issue of individual attitude or conscience. A pivot toward white Christian nationalism as a theme is, by definition, a pivot toward thinking of racism systemically. It is a challenge to (white) people who think of themselves as tolerant and open-minded, a criticism of white churches as institutions. Not surprisingly, it is hard thing for many to hear. Many pastors are understandably cautious.

As we reflect on our observations of responses to the January 6 riots, and to the issues of political polarization and Christian nationalism specifically, we ask you to help us frame our approach.

### *Questions*

1. Our focus is on how congregations respond to change, in this instance, the shift toward a more politically polarized society. How can we best measure or observe the impact on the congregations in our study? What questions should we be asking? Will parishioners (and/or key informants) be able and/or willing to respond to such questions candidly and forthrightly?
2. What role do clergy play—and what role can they play—in leading congregations on an issue such as political polarization in which their congregations may be sharply divided along party lines? What tensions do clergy experience on this issue? How difficult is it to “preach” the balance between mercy and accountability, between grace and justice?
3. What are the risks and rewards for acting prophetically from the pulpit? Is it possible, or advisable, to be prophetic or direct on social media? Are there risks in being too conciliatory in those same venues?
4. How do we gauge the role of faith traditions and denominational judicatories in shaping the response to hyper-partisanship and Christian nationalism?