CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IN THE NEW (NEW) WORLD: THE POLITICAL ARCHITECTS BEHIND PUBLIC EDUCATION REFORM

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This thesis studies the development of a political ideology beholden to an extreme form of Christianity. The work has been prompted by an increased expression of American exceptionalism and Christian nationalism in contemporary politics. In short, the objective of this thesis is to gain more insight into why there are so many Americans who adhere to this ideology today and how this affects the political culture of the twenty-first century, specifically its effects on public education. The thesis is broken up into two parts. Sections 1 and 2 of Part 1 detail what exactly Christian nationalism stands for in American society and how the ideology transformed between the 1690s and the present day. Section 3 and 4 of Part 1 illustrates why exactly this ideology is so persuasive to many Americans, briefly discussing the attraction to the ideology in contemporary American society. Section 5 concludes Part 1 by making connections between the ideology of Christian nationalism and extreme conspiratorial styles of politics. Sections 1 and 2 of Part 2 examine how the ideology became a useful tool in a powerful political movement and touches upon the early iterations of the Christian nationalist movement. Sections 3 and 4 of Part 2 delve into the unique financial backing of the movement in contemporary society as well as the role the movement has played in shaping public education reform. Finally, Sections 5 and 6 of Part 2 explore how the contemporary assault on public education has been fortified with the added advocacy from Republican politicians. This thesis adds to the study of the Christian nationalist movement’s attempt
to undermine a democratic system of governance and its political utility-alliance with Republicans.
Preface and Acknowledgements

I became engrossed by this matter of Christian nationalism after taking Professor Andrew Ward’s course on the rise of Christian nationalism in my junior year at Tulane. His class was unlike any other I have ever taken. Professor Ward invited us to question and second-guess every feature of American society. We were repeatedly encouraged to scout out any examples of Christian nationalist influence and with eyes shed wide open, I grew unable to go a day without noticing at least one trace of the movement. Professor Ward began the first day of the course by asking the class if we believe America to be a Christian nation. I believe my response was something along the lines of *I think, but I don’t know much about religion, let alone Christianity.* Later, I learned that I was very wrong, my response, I can only assume, was a product of the environment in which I grew up. Additionally, I came to discover that it didn’t matter much at all if I *knew* anything about Christianity. Professor Ward’s course prompted me to reflect on my own experiences, particularly of those growing up in a heavily white and Christian town.

While going back and forth about what aspect of Christian nationalism I wanted to focus on for this thesis, I came across something that immediately sparked my interest. With a faint memory of a lawsuit being filed against my school district, I dug around for a bit until I found it. Instantly, I knew I had to write about the Christian nationalist movement’s infiltration into public schools.

In 2018, there was a federal lawsuit filed against the middle school in my hometown in New Jersey. A mother whose child attended Chatham middle school filed a civil rights complaint, insisting that school officials had forced her son to watch Islamic conversion videos and ignored the study of Christianity and Judaism. The mother, Libby
Hilsenrath, reported that her son “had suffered irreparable harm which warrants declaratory and injunctive relief as well as nominal damages for the loss of constitutional rights” (Pries, 2018). Hilsenrath stated in the lawsuit that in the World Cultures and Geography course, teachers required students “under the coercive threat of lower grades and failed assignments” to read the material posted on the Google Classroom—materials which she saw as threatening to religious liberties (Pries, 2018). According to the lawsuit, the teachings of Islam were “presented not as beliefs, but as facts” (Pries, 2018). The lawsuit also cites that assigned videos portray “Christians and Jews as ‘infidels’ and (praises) Muhammad in gruesome detail for slaughtering them” (Pries, 2018). Hilsenrath and another parent from Chatham appeared on Fox News Channel’s Tucker Carlson in February of 2017, discussing what had become a highly publicized “civil rights” issue.

Hilsenrath was represented by attorney Michael Hyrack, an affiliate of the Thomas More Law Center (TMLC), a national nonprofit conservative Christian law firm funded primarily by contributions from individuals, foundations, and corporations (Pries, 2018). As read on the firm’s website, Thomas More Law Center “defends and promotes America’s Judeo-Christian heritage and moral values” (TMLC, 2018). Additionally, “it supports a strong national defense and an independent and sovereign United States of America” (TMLC, 2018). And conveniently, the services provided by this center are free of charge.

Hyrack publicly proclaimed that the Chatham Board of Education was “waging a war” against religion. The President and Chief Counsel for Thomas More, Richard Thompson, added that “Chatham Middle School made a mockery of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause” (TMLC, 2018). Furthermore, a statement produced
by TMLC described Chatham’s curriculum as “propaganda” and that the public-school lessons violated the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (TMLC, 2018). Adding, “students at Chatham Middle School were forced to endure Islamic propaganda and an explicit call to convert to Islam through a disturbing set of videos” (TMLC, 2018). The center also went on to say that the Chatham middle schoolers were given “a sugarcoated, false depiction of Islam” (TMLC, 2018). The lessons did not include “kidnappings, beheadings, slave-trading, massacres, and persecution of non-Muslims, nor the repression of women—all done in the name of Islam” (TMLC, 2018).

Precisely what I have been studying had been occurring right under my nose before I could even know what it was. Although hard to believe by most, the sentiments of Hilsrenth and the counsel of Thomas More are shared by a substantial number of Americans. There are more Hilsrenths in the country than would be thought. And there are more Thomas Mores to fight their fight for them. I felt compelled to share the story about my experience in Chatham and share more stories about Christian nationalism. It is a powerful (and dangerous) force that should not go unnoticed.

I would like to cordially thank my thesis director, Professor Martyn Thompson, for his relentless support and guidance throughout this process. Professor Thompson challenged me and encouraged me to approach this thesis in ways that I had never thought of previously. I am particularly appreciative of his expertise and knowledge in the field of political philosophy. I would also like to thank my second reader, Professor Andrew Ward. Without Professor Ward, this thesis would not exist. I am grateful to him for introducing me to the topic of Christian nationalism. I admire his dedication to studying the Christian nationalist movement, he is certainly a pioneer in this
field. Finally, I would like to thank my third reader, Professor Michele Adams. I am appreciative of Professor Adams’ enthusiasm for this thesis topic and her excitement about joining this project.

I also owe special thanks to my dear friend Lydia Garrett-Metz for pushing me during this process. Many long nights in Howard Tilton were spent together working on our theses. I would not have been able to do it without Lydia’s enthusiastic support.
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INTRODUCTION

The United States, for several reasons, is a global leader. Individuals across the world set the country on a pedestal because America offers what many countries cannot—equality, equity, freedom of speech, freedom to love whomever, and freedom to be whomever we like. Or so the story goes. American life is attractive because it is founded on egalitarian ideals of justice. Additionally, the U.S. has been viewed as the home for the prosperous. The nation is known for being the land of opportunity and success. It provides perhaps unparalleled potential for progress through the trope of the American Dream. However, I set out this thesis with the assumption that the “American Dream” is more often than not a myth. Additionally, I say “trope” because, although many people come to the United States in hopes of achieving this, they often cannot. Outside of the prototypical white American, the ideal of the American Dream is often a fable. The thought is that through hard work and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, anyone can achieve success. Even the poorest people can become wealthy in America. Yet, this is usually not the case. Americans born into lower-class homes tend to stay in the lower-class bracket (Hargreaves, 2013). Moreover, immigrants coming to the country never quite get the opportunity to “climb the ladder” like white Americans do. There is too much economic inequality in America for the American Dream to be universally attainable for outsiders. It may be the case, however, that some Americans don’t necessarily want it to be attainable for these individuals. Many white Americans don’t include immigrants or racial others in the list of people who should be able to attain progress in America. To some Americans, the U.S. should close its borders to these
foreigners, or interlopers, who infiltrate the country and take opportunities from the “true” Americans.

Many individuals in the country adopt an identity that is enveloped with assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, xenophobia, bigotry, and stringent faithism. To many Americans, to be American means to be white and Christian. These same individuals are fearful of immigrants who come to the country in pursuit of the American Dream. They are in common with those individuals who felt contempt for the Mexicans and Asians who ostensibly disrupted the expansion of the frontier during the era of Manifest Destiny. In the nineteenth century, immigrants disturbed the settlers project to expand American exceptionalism and Romantic nationalism¹ into the west. The idea of Manifest Destiny still exists today, but now Americans aspire for individual progress; and politicians aspire for political power. And as history tends to repeat itself, there are new villains of this modern conceptualization of Manifest Destiny (or what we now call the American Dream). In contemporary American society, religious and racial others stand in the way of the “true” heirs of individual progress and political power. The cultural others are affecting progress and the hegemonic status of the “real” Americans—the white Christians. Even worse, the federal government seems to sympathize with these enemies.

Christian nationalists espouse this sentiment. They don’t want others to achieve progress in America because that means that they will have to fight for opportunities. Sociologists, Andrew Whitehead, and Samuel Perry (2020) find that although Christian nationalism holds these assumptions of white supremacy and nativism, there is a surprising number of Black Americans who sympathize with the ideology. For example,

¹ Romantic nationalism is a form of nationalism by which a state claims political legitimacy through those who govern it. This includes factors of race, culture, ethnicity, and religion.
the authors term those who are altogether accepting of Christian nationalism as “Ambassadors.” Ambassadors hold many beliefs found within the value system of Christian nationalism. For instance, they believe that the health of the nation is tied “to our heritage of obedience to God’s commandments” (Whitehead & Perry, 2020, 78). Additionally, they maintain that the U.S. government should declare the country a Christian nation. Ambassadors also advocate for prayer and Bible study in public schools. It shouldn’t come as a surprise that 70 percent of these ambassadors are white; however, what is compelling is that 11 percent of this group are black (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Additionally, sixty-five percent of African Americans support Christian nationalism in general (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Therefore, we must acknowledge that black Christian nationalist exist. However, for the purposes of this paper I will be focusing mainly on the white ambassadors of Christian nationalism. In this thesis, Christian nationalism should be taken as synonymous to white Christian nationalism. This is because the thesis will be tracing the development of the ideology and how it came to privilege specifically white Americans. Additionally, the individuals within the Christian nationalist movement that are discussed in this thesis are all white Americans.

Christian nationalism manifests itself in American society in many ways, this expression of disdain toward outsiders seeking American progress is just one example. This element crucially encompasses the development of the ideology. However, this thesis focuses particularly on how Christian nationalism manifests itself through efforts to undermine trust in the American public education system. This expression, nevertheless, is also tied to the xenophobia and nativism aforementioned.
Thus, to understand how these ideals developed to ground Christian nationalism, the thesis begins by tracing the ideology’s evolution. Christian nationalism is an ideology deeply embedded into the hearts and minds of many Americans. In tracing the historical underpinnings of the ideology, I develop a conceptual framework of Christian nationalism exposing why exactly so many Americans are attracted to it or sympathize with it. Essentially, the focus of Part 1 of the thesis is on connecting the past to the present and future. I begin with the grievances of Christian nationalists, exposing how a sense of marginalization is a motive to adopt the ideology. To further illustrate how this ideology is so persuasive, I provide a simulated account of what contemporary America looks like to the Christian nationalist follower. It is polarizing, to say the least. The conclusion of Part 1 consists of drawing parallels between Christian nationalism and other forms of extreme ideologies. For instance, I suggest that Christian nationalism is an example of a paranoid style of politics. Additionally, I illustrate common threads between fascism and Christian nationalism. This is all to better encapsulate what a Christian nationalist movement in contemporary society looks like.

In Part 2, the thesis focuses on the evolution of the Christian nationalist ideology into a political tool, and further, a political movement. I clear up some false views about the Christian nationalist movement. For instance, although grounded around an extreme form of Christianity, the movement is not, in essence, cultural, or religious like many believe. The ideology and the Christian nationalist movement is much more a political mechanism to gain power and control than anything else. Additionally, the Christian nationalist movement is not a grassroots movement. It is guided by a powerful group of elites. The leaders of the Christian nationalist movement mobilize supporters through
grassroots alliances; however, the intentions of the movement are set by these leaders, not the followers. Powerful elites exploit the ideology to concentrate power in their hands, and they target a constituency by appealing to perceptions of victimhood. Furthermore, Part 2 briefly discusses the history of Christian nationalism as a political movement in the late 1970s. I emphasize the unique role a powerful group of elites played in the advent of this coalition. This ties in the next discussion about the movement in contemporary politics. Much like the older version of the Christian nationalist movement, the movement in contemporary society survives and flourishes with the support of a handful of powerful beneficiaries. These groups and individuals have personal goals and agendas.

This thesis discusses, in depth, one agenda in particular—undermining public education. The Christian nationalist movement has pursued an agenda that attacks public education. The leaders are behind the expansion of voucher programs, the institution of bible studies and school-led prayer in schools, and the anti-Critical Race Theory legislation. Part 2 concludes by introducing a unique element of the Christian nationalist movement in contemporary politics. In recent years, as I illustrate, more Republican politicians have been seen exploiting the symbols of Christian nationalism. I explore why this is the case. I investigate why Republicans have deepened hostility toward public education that Christian nationalists previously set. There has been a symbolic welding between the values of modern republicanism and Christian nationalism. Republicans are crucial to the success of the Christian nationalist movement. However, the Christian nationalists assist in the goals of the Republicans as well.
PART 1: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AS AN IDEOLOGY

Section 1: The Ideology of Christian Nationalism

Christian nationalism has been defined by many different academics. Katherine Stewart (2019), for one, defines it as a “political ideology” that promotes a myth that America is a Christian nation and asserts that “legitimate government rests…on adherence to the doctrines of a specific religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage” (12). Sociologists, Andrew Whitehead, and Samuel Perry (2020), define Christian nationalism as a “cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life” (38). Additionally, they highlight that the “Christian” in Christian nationalism focuses not on religion but on an identity that is conflated with “assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism” (Whitehead & Perry, 2020, 31). Furthermore, in their book The Flag and The Cross, Phillip Gorski, and Samuel Perry (2022) present Christian nationalism as an ideology that seeks to “restore and privilege” the “authority of a particular ethnocultural tribe” (30).

The common thread between all these scholars’ definitions is that Christian nationalism is best defined as an ideology. The ideological roots of Christian nationalism cherish and privilege white Christian capitalist Americans. Additionally, the scholars all agree that this ideology can be traced back to a particular myth of American exceptionalism. Specifically, Arlie Hochschild (2016) and Gorski and Perry (2022)
contend that this ideology is grounded in a “deep story” about America’s past and its future. The deep story behind Christian nationalism follows as such:

America was founded as a Christian nation by (white) men who were “traditional” Christians, who based the nation’s founding documents on “Christian principles.” The United States is blessed by God, which is why it has been so successful; and the nation has a special role to play in God’s plan for humanity. But these blessings are threatened by cultural degradation from “un-American” influences both inside and outside our borders. (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 18)

The ideology of Christian nationalism upholds racial ideals denoting white, Christian Americans as the “true” image of Americanism. And it views advocates for a “pluralist, multiracial, equitable democracy” as “Marxists, communists, and even pedophiles” (Wiinikka-Lydon, 2022). Fear is deeply sown into the ideology of Christian nationalism. As Christian nationalists see it, America was founded as a Christian nation. However, America is being threatened by non-white, non-Christian peoples. The ideology conflates race and religion with national identity and strives for political power to silence these “non-Americans” who threaten a Christian nation (Gorski & Perry, 2022).
Section 2: Historical Origins of the Ideology

Christian nationalism is often looked at as a “fringe” issue that has no real momentum or influence in contemporary politics (Gorski & Perry, 2022). Additionally, oftentimes people think of Christian nationalism as a recent ideology that was formed as a response to a “liberal indoctrination” and “secularization” of American society in the late 1900s. Yet, both are misconceptions. Although Christian nationalism might go unnoticed by many Americans, it stands to be “one of the oldest and most powerful currents in American politics” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 14). Christian nationalism has a long history, and it has turned into a powerful political tool, perpetuating a narrative about America's past and its destined future. In contemporary society, the ideology manifests itself in multiple ways. Its violent force was illustrated, for instance, by the Capitol insurrection on January 6th. The storming of the Capitol was an expression of an accumulation of grievances grounded in an ideology of Christian nationalism. There are more subtle expressions of Christian nationalism as well. As the director of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC), Amanda Tyler (2022), suggests there are manifestations such as “state legislative efforts to promote the teaching of the Bible in public schools.” The appearance of both January 6th and public-school reform are two examples of an ideology that has been implanted in American society and identity for decades coming to the surface. Unbeknownst to many, the fight for Christian power in America has endured for centuries, dating back to America’s founding.

Gorski and Perry (2022) illustrate that the ideas behind Christian nationalism originated in the 1600s. The authors trace the development of Christian nationalism in five stages, beginning in colonial America. Each stage represents a conflict between two
interpretations of the past—Christian nationalism’s notion of Godly intervention on behalf of the whites and the more mainstream one of secular colonization. Christian nationalism interprets the past as a story of religious heroes who have come to build Jerusalem in the New World. Their prejudices against and mistreatment of cultural and racial others are justified by a “Divine Plan” to conquer the “Promised Land” of America.

According to Gorski and Perry (2022), 1690 was a flagship year for the development of the ideology. During this period of Christian nationalism referred to as “White Puritan New Englandism,” threads of “racism, apocalypticism, and nationalism” came together to form an identity for the Puritans who came to America (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 76). Desperate to escape early modern English Protestantism, the Puritans left for the “Promised Land” of New England (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 81). During this transition, indigenous lands were destroyed for the sake of Puritan settlement. The extermination of the natives was justified as a “righteous sacrifice to an angry God” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 82). For example, the Puritans’ war with the natives was glorified as a “repeat of the Israelites’ war with the Canaanites” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 82). The Puritans were viewed as the force of Christ and the natives were seen as the Antichrist. As Gorski and Perry simply put it, the first trace of this ideology began with the assumption that there would be “white control over non-white bodies, indigenous lands, and all political institutions” (82). The story that carried on through the decades was not one about the inhumane settlement on behalf of the Puritans, but rather a narrow interpretation of the past that honored the Puritans for following God’s instructions. Yet, as the reader will soon learn, at this point, the story of the developing ideology was just beginning.
The next stage of Christian nationalism, “White Protestant Britishism,” fleshed out the racial ideals that the Puritans’ values were previously hinting at in the ideology. The move from the first to the second phase transformed the definition of liberty into racial terms. Freedom was no longer based on religion alone as it was during the 1690s—added into the mix was a model of freedom specified as white freedom. This was largely due to economic demands in the colonies. A shortage of white labor grew in the colonies, and to keep up, Black enslavement was adopted. In addition, there was the arrival of the British Royal African Company and the Dutch West India Company—sparking the Atlantic slave market. However, an issue cropped up as the system of slavery steadfastly grew. As the Christian slave owners mingled with the slaves, children inherited both slavery and Christianity from their mothers. As a result, theologians struggled to justify Christians enslaving other Christians. Nevertheless, the theologians supplied a racist theology to the colonists. It claimed that there was a curse, “Noah’s Curse,” put on Canaan,\(^2\) that had “condemned his offspring to perpetual servitude” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 86). Thus, the ideology of Christian nationalism continued to evolve to justify its power over non-whites through religious terms.

The transition to the next stage of Christian nationalism, “White Protestant Americanism,” occurred during the period of the Revolutionary War. At this point in its development, the ideology first became embedded with an idea of freedom linked to white male violence. It was also the stage in which Christian nationalism was “Americanized.” It produced a national identity of what true Americanism is. The colonists struggled to adopt the term “American,” for the title had always been associated

\(^2\) The father of the Canaanites.
with the “savagery of the Natives” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 91). Thus, the first emblem of Americanism became the “scout.” A symbol of “white American masculinity,” the scout was the “frontiersman who ventured into the wild, learned the ways of the ‘Indian,’ and absorbed a bit of ‘savagery in the process’” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 91). During this period of development, the ideals behind Christian nationalism combined to form a national identity characterized by an assembly of freedom, racial order, and violence (Gorski & Perry, 2022). This violence implanted in the ideology and its related national identity similarly reveals itself in contemporary manifestations of Christian nationalism like the events on January 6th.

The closing of the American Frontier and the beginning of the American Empire exacerbated the development of “WASP Imperialism,” the next stage of development for Christian nationalism. The ideology evolved to adopt a narrative in which racial order must be enforced. As the American frontier expanded, non-white people started to become incorporated into the country. Following the Mexican American War, Mexicans who were found on American soil (Texas and California) joined the country. Additionally, during the California gold rush in 1848, the country saw a large influx of Chinese and Japanese immigrants (Gorski & Perry, 2022). Two new colors were added to the mix: “brown” and “yellow.” And a new hierarchy based on shades of whiteness followed accordingly. In the pursuit of Manifest Destiny, thus, militias and “vigilante justice were critical means of moving the frontier westward and establishing white freedom” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 96). Christian nationalism evolved to describe the pursuits of violent white men to enforce the “racial order” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 96). The face of Christian nationalism in America transformed even further during the
nation’s Reconstruction era. The arrival of newly emancipated Blacks who could vote exacerbated issues for those who wanted to maintain a racial order. These individuals “developed a whitewashed account of the Civil War, the myth of the ‘Lost Cause’” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 97). The new narrative described the Civil War as the “War of Northern Aggression” in which the abolitionist Republicans’ goal was to strip the rights of states for the sake of “Negro misrule” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 97).

Finally, it was during the 1980s that the ideology evolved to enter the conservative political landscape. The 1980s marked the “rightward turn of white evangelicals” and the advent of the “Religious Right” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 104). The catalyst for the Religious Right of this era was *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Because of their opposition to racial integration, white evangelicals were drawn away from the Democratic Party and toward the newly segregationist Republicans. During the later end of this period, white evangelicals made important changes to their political dogma. White supremacy transitioned into colorblindness (a form of anti-anti racism). White evangelicals saw racism as a personal problem, not a social one. To position it this way was to deflect any “demands for racial justice” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 107). Furthermore, the value of family and the immorality of sex was emphasized. The focus was put on maintaining the “nuclear family” and sex was seen as the most heinous sin. Finally, the new “Armageddon” was abroad—the communists.

Gorski and Perry’s (2022) account illustrates how the Christian nationalist’s version of American history formed. It illuminates how the mythic version of the past from which the ideology draws its strength originated. The ideology developed to specify freedom as white freedom and it justified the mistreatment of cultural outsiders by
appealing to a Divine Plan. It also created a hierarchy of superiority in which white
Christians were the only “true Americans,” and everyone else was deemed a “heathen,”
posing a threat to the nation’s Christian heritage. The indigenous people were killed for
the sake of attaining the “Promised Land,” the enslavement of Blacks was justified
through a racist theology, and to fulfill the Divine Plan of Manifest Destiny, Asian
Americans “were derided as an inferior race…unfit for citizenship in a ‘Christian
Republic’” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 96). Essentially, the ideology developed to portray
white men as “hero-protagonists” acting against cultural and racial others to protect the
Christian nation (Gorski & Perry, 2022, 96).
Section 3: Why the Ideology is so Persuasive

Christian nationalism is an extreme political ideology that promotes a controversial and white-washed narrative of America. Such zealotry is often observed as an isolated and a feeble attempt, by a few individuals, to disrupt the socio-political realm. Constitutional attorney Andrew Seidel (2019) claims that the ideology of Christian nationalism is supposedly weak because it is based on a false interpretation of the past. However, it is a very powerful tool in contemporary politics, and it is more widely adopted than some may believe. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, 60% of adults say that the founders of the United States intended for it to be a Christian nation, a third say that it is a Christian nation, and 45% say the country should be a Christian nation (Smith et al., 2022). Additionally, around thirty-two percent of the U.S. population “believe it is very important to be Christian to be considered truly American” (Seidel, 2021, 39). Certainly then, many Americans find the ideology behind Christian nationalism extremely persuasive. This thesis argues that what makes it so persuasive to people is the story that the ideology tells. The ideology is based on a very one-sided interpretation of history, but it has been widely adopted because followers of Christian nationalism can point to this version of the past to rationalize the ideology itself. And further, use it to justify their grievances (Section 4).

For instance, western expansion—more specifically, Manifest Destiny—has been continually framed as a Divine Plan. John Gast’s painting, American Progress, for instance, is a portrayal of an enlarged white angel-like figure progressing westward. Trampled beneath her feet are the natives who are also moving westward. The natives are painted under dark storm clouds. Whereas the angel is cast under a bright light as the sun
follows her footsteps. Manifest Destiny was a “racial doctrine of white supremacy,” however it wasn’t just a “cloak for American imperialism and a justification for America’s territorial ambition” (Scott, n.d.). It was also used to symbolize America’s unique destiny; it represents the belief that “America is a nation called to a special destiny by God” (Scott, n.d.). Thus, American progress, to an onlooker, is framed as progress only for those who are white and Christian.

Figure 1: American Progress by John Gast, 1872
Additionally, this narrative of America’s past construes a very narrow image of what it means to be a real American. This first symbol of Americanism was the “scout.” The American identity as the scout portrayed Americanism as individualistic and fierce. Following King Philip's War, the American identity was shaped by a selective framing of the assault on the natives. The colonists' “accounts of the damage caused by the war, including descriptions of mutilated bodies, maimed animals, and ravaged property sharpened their identity as Anglo-American colonists and laid the foundation on which they would build American nationalism” (Rubertone, 1999, 1548). The narrative illustrated the natives as the cruel actors of the war, further portraying them as savages and the scout as a hero of Americanism. It sharpened the line between white Americans and cultural others. They set themselves apart from the Natives and the American identity became one that championed individual freedom for the “non-savages.” One might think that following the American Revolution, the American identity would be committed to ideals of equality and liberty. However, this was not the case. The American identity transformed throughout the following decades, but it was never devoid of remnants of this white supremacy defined during the era of the scout.

Furthermore, Christian nationalists can draw upon historical resources that appear to them to justify this hugely important belief that America was founded as a Christian nation. As illustrated by its proliferation in political, academic, and entertainment realms, this notion that America was founded on Christian principles is a widely held belief. Former Representative of Iowa, Steve King, for instance, declared that America “was founded on Judeo-Christian principles, which means we need less law enforcement than anybody else in the world” (2010, H3865). Additionally, former Fox News host Bill
O’Reilly openly advocated for the teaching of the Christian tradition in public schools because, as he saw it, that is “what the country’s philosophy is based on…because that’s what forged the Constitution” (O’Reilly, 2014). And the former United States Ambassador to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and professor, Michael Novak, saw the law of Moses as the “font and spring of constitutional government” (Novak, 2000, 7). Indistinguishable from the sentiments of the staunchest Christian nationalists are those of former President Donald Trump. During his presidency, Trump insisted that “the pilgrims at Plymouth were religious and prayed” and that “Benjamin Franklin reminded his colleagues at the Constitutional Convention to begin by bowing their heads in prayer” (Trump, 2017).

The message conveyed by all these individuals is clear: America is a Christian-founded nation and thus, to be American means to be Christian. However, many scholars claim that the charge that America was founded as a Christian nation is a myth (Whitehead, 2020; Perry, 2020; Gorski, 2022; Stewart, 2019; Seidel, 2019). The scholarly literature suggests that Christian nationalist leaders fabricate or manipulate words spoken by the Founding Fathers to display false depictions of the country’s founding doctrine. For instance, David Barton—the founder of the Wall Builders which promotes pseudohistory about the religious founding of America. To support the claim that America was founded on Christian principles, “Barton reproduced an alleged quote from James Madison to the effect that the Ten Commandments are the foundation of American civilization” (Stewart, 2019, 182-183). This went on to be “recycled” by multiple Christian activists including Rush Limbaugh and it became “a fixture of Christian nationalist ideology” (Stewart, 2019, 183). However, there has been no
authenticated evidence to support that Madison ever expressed such thoughts (Stewart, 2019).

Additionally, other scholars argue that America has never been a Christian nation as a matter of law. Most noteworthy against this charge of a Christian nation is the Treaty of Tripoli. In 1791, it was declared that the “government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion” (Chemerinsky, 2021, 404). In terms of legality, the country could not be fabricated to favor one religion over the other, for “it is firmly established that the government violates the Establishment Clause if it discriminates among religious groups” (Chemerinsky, 2021, 406). Furthermore, when the Constitution was being written, the framers “were deeply aware of the religious strife in other countries” (Chemerinsky, 2021, 407). Their intention to avoid such conflict influenced a dealignment between government and religion. As the framers saw it, the government was not to impose a singular religion on the people. Secularization was key as was the “toleration of diverse religious practitioners” (Chemerinsky, 2021, 407). Such sentiments were illustrated by the non-allowance of references to a higher being in the Constitution, and “a prohibition against religious tests for office” (Chemerinsky, 2021, 407-408). Also, to the dismay of the Christian nationalists, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson “engaged in a lengthy campaign for religious freedom in Virginia” (Chemerinsky, 2021, 411). They advocated for the Virginia Act for Religious Freedom. Additionally, Madison drafted “Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessment.” Its contents confirmed that the religion “of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man” (Chemerinsky, 2021, 411).
On the other hand, some academics have illustrated that there was some ambiguity in the relations between religion and politics during America’s founding. This suggests that there could be some legitimacy to Christian nationalism’s interpretation of America’s past and its justifications for its present grievance that the nation is faced with un-American threats. For instance, in his book, *The Natural Rights and the New Republicanism*, Michael P. Zuckert (1998) explains how something significant happened in the history of natural law that allows for the possibility that there were dynamically opposed views grounded in the Declaration of Independence. Whig politics—which inspired the Founding Fathers—was grounded in a rational version of natural law. However, natural law originated as a moral doctrine governed by God and a particular sect of religions.

The early view of natural law is “tied to a scriptural interpretation of virtue” (Mazola, 2016, 13). For instance, an early interpreter of natural law, John Milton, viewed law based strictly on religion. Milton saw “natural law and the existence of the Divine” as “intimately connected” (Mazola, 2016, 13). The political philosopher saw that “an unwritten natural law based on reason and virtue rejects the imposition of the laws of the Anglican Church government” (Mazola, 2016, 13). He believed in church governance above all else. However, Zuckert (1998) explains how beginning in the eighteenth century, a rational interpretation of natural law was adopted by the Whigs. Inspired by the Lockean rational conception of natural law, the Whigs saw that the key characteristic of natural law was an understanding that it prescribed human beings an innate moral impetus. Locke saw morality as inherent in us, immoral actions are those that interfere with God’s will, and this moral compass is what governs the natural law. According to
Locke, this law of nature is rationally accessible to us, for men are “the workmanship of one omnipotence and infinitely wise maker” (Locke, 1823, 107). Meaning, we are His property, and “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possession” because it would be against God’s will (Locke, 1823, 107).

Zuckert (1998) explains how in the eighteenth century, natural law transitioned away from its religious underpinnings as the post-Restoration Whigs approached it rationally. It moved away from the “Miltononian” conceptualization and toward the Lockeian interpretation. The emphasis on God changed in natural law, and the Whig interpretation set it as rational principles of law. Human beings were seen as rational actors and their cohabitation in a society was conditioned on laws that were immediately accessible to them. The natural laws were inherent because not following them would end in mutual destruction. In other words, the law prescribed that people treat others as God treats them. God, in this context, was less involved in human affairs. God was cited as the principle means in which the natural laws were intrinsic and were used for moral guidance. However, a particular religion was not the basis for following the natural laws. Zuckert contends that “In appealing to natural law and natural reason—that is, to rational principles—the post-Restoration Whigs certainly approached much more closely to the kind of thought Locke and the American Declaration of Independence represented” (98). The thought of Locke and the American Declaration of Independence reflected a law of nature and of nature’s God, but not the “law or principles of Scripture as understood by one or another Christian sect” (Zuckert, 1998, 98).

Even though the Whigs and the Founding Fathers adopted a rationalist interpretation of natural law, it was never devoid of the Godly inspiration of its origins.
Although the Whigs provided a rationalist interpretation and inspiration of natural law to the Declaration of Independence, there were still references to God within it. There were still remnants of Milton’s early conception of natural law that focuses on Divinity. In other words, references to God in natural law and the Declaration of Independence were still there, but in Zuckert's (1998) view, they had been subordinated.

The argument in favor of Christian nationalism, thus, deals with whether the Founding Fathers were inspired by this future of rationalization or an older interpretation that emphasized theology. There might be some evidence that there are remnants of the latter within the Founding Fathers' beliefs. For instance, James Madison’s faith led him to support a governmental system of separated powers and federalism. Religion taught Madison that “humans were sinful” (Hall, 2011, 9) And in Federalist No. 51 he wrote “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary” (Hall, 2011, 9). Because humans are inherently sinful, a check on their power is necessary. This directly contradicts the Lockean account of natural law, for this interpretation denotes that humans have a divinely gifted moral compass that guides them in following laws.

Additionally, James Wilson, among other founders, believed in the order of the natural law by which “the author of Law is God himself” (Bayer, 2018). Wilson believed that moral laws, those which “God ordained,” took “precedence over [the] human laws” to which Locke and the Whigs pointed at (Hall, 2011, 9).

To further the contention of Christian nationalists, it may even be the case that the Founding Fathers, themselves, were in alignment with important parts of the ideology. The Founding Fathers never really did believe in racial equality. The justification for
separation from England, according to Thomas Jefferson’s writings “comes from natural law and from God, the author of such natural law” (Fea, 2011, 131). Within this decree of natural law is the supposition that “all men are created equal.” Author Alex Graham (2018) contends that “All men are created equal” is often cited “in defense of racial egalitarianism.” However, he suggests that this was not Jefferson’s intention and further, that it is a “myth that America was founded upon the principles of racial egalitarianism and hyper-individualism” (Graham, 2018). For instance, Jefferson stated in Notes on the State of Virginia that “the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (Jefferson, 1787). Additionally, he asserted that one can “excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as Nature has formed them” (Jefferson, 1787). Jefferson believed that homogeneity was necessary to “cohabitare harmoniously.” If the Founding Fathers shared this view, it suggests that America really was “made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever” (Graham, 2018).
Section 4: What Cultural America looks like for the Contemporary Christian Nationalist

To better illustrate how so many individuals have been persuaded to adopt at least major parts of this ideology, Section 4 of this thesis demonstrates what America currently looks like for Christian nationalists. For those who subscribe to this Christian nationalist version of the past, it looks like modern America is under attack. As the Yale Institution for Social and Policy Studies (Yale ISPS) (2022) explains Christian nationalism “bubbles up during periods when white Christians feel threatened by outside forces—amplified by war, heightened immigration, or period of economic instability.” It is a reaction to a perceived “liberalization” and “secularization” of the nation.

The shift away from a “Christian” nation and toward a multiracial and multicultural one began in the late 1900s and this change has advanced further in contemporary society. Therefore, the Christian nationalists have responded with heightened fears. The quick demographic and cultural changes during the 1960s, for instance, left many Americans feeling not only “bewildered,” but also “like they have become a marginalized cultural minority” (Stroope et al., 2021, 408). As Hochschild (2016) explains, in the 1960s and 1970s the country and the government “had opened cultural doors previously closed to blacks and women, even immigrants and refugees seemed to be sailing past the Statue of Liberty into a diminishing supply of good jobs” (Hochschild, 2016, 149). Additionally, when President Lyndon B. Johnson issued the executive order for Affirmative Action in 1965 Americans watched as non-white and non-Christians were “being given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches” (Hochschild, 2016, 143).
Furthermore, in 2008 government welfare programs were put in place and Christian nationalists watched as their money was left to run “through a liberal sympathy sieve” (Hochschild, 2016, 143). Progress, in the eyes of the white Americans, was halted for them so it could be achieved for cultural and racial others who were not the “true” Americans.

America today poses an even greater threat to the established order that Christian nationalists so eagerly pine after. The nation in recent years has seen even more demographic and cultural changes, leaving many white Americans unsettled. For instance, the United States is progressing toward a “majority-minority” nation. The U.S. Census Bureau (USCB) (2015) reported that between 2040 and 2060, the percentage of nonwhite Americans in the U.S. will be larger than that of white Americans. The Census projects that the minority population will rise to fifty-six percent in 2060, as opposed to the thirty-eight percent it was in 2014 (USCB, 2015). This demographic switch is likely to trigger “cultural threats” for white Americans, “such as the concern that whites will no longer represent the prototypical ‘American’” (Craig et al., 2018, 5).

This shift toward a white-minority nation is perceived by white Americans as a “threat to their racial group’s societal status” (Craig & Richeson, 2014, 1190). The perception of “group threat” for white Americans intensifies when a minority population increases and their claim to a superior status is tested (Knowles & Tropp, 2018, 275). White Americans are threatened by racial minority populations because of the potential for them to take away their resources and “engage in large-scale political mobilization” (Knowles & Tropp, 2018, 276). Additionally, the rise of a majority-minority America threatens “white Americans’ sense of dominant group status” and encourages animosity
toward racial others (Mutz, 2018). As an almost immediate result of this demographic shift, there has been an increase in the number of Americans reporting that “anti-white discrimination is a problem” (Stroope et al., 2021, 409).

The national shift toward a white minority in America isn’t the only change that seems to threaten white Americans. In addition to this change in demographic status, there have been “departures from traditional forms of marriage, intimate relationships, and sexuality have become more prevalent” (Stroope et al., 2021, 409). The 2015 Supreme Court ruling that affirmed marriage equality was especially concerning for traditional Americans “whose views have quickly become at odds with not only public opinion but also U.S. law” (Stroope et al., 2021, 409). Furthermore, there has been an organized secularization of society. According to the Pew Research Center, “Self-identified Christians make up 63% of the U.S. population in 2021, down from 75% a decade ago” (Smith, 2021). This trend toward secularization shows no signs of slowing down as well (Smith, 2021). It is reasonable to assume, thus, that many Americans feel marginalized because they express traditional values of marriage, sexuality, and gender identity that are now widely rejected by the public. Many Americans feel victimized by “changing demographic and cultural dynamics” (Stroope et al., 2021, 409). As such, Christian nationalism “appeals to many who feel marginalized, regardless of whether they practice religion personally” (Stroope et al., 2021, 409).

Essentially, the ideology of Christian nationalism has been crystallized into a national identity that more Americans adopt as the country sees increased fluctuations in cultures and races. The ideology purports that the real Americans belong to a particular traditional white tribe. It is a constituency of individuals who cherish a past that
privileges power for white Americans over non-whites that embrace this national identity. Thus, Christian nationalism isn’t simply about devotion to Christianity. Christian nationalism is an “expression of American traditionalism and exceptionalism” that is linked to anti “Muslim animus, nativism, and conservative racial attitudes” (Stroope et al., 2021, 409). Alliance with the ideology doesn’t simply follow waves of secularization. Individuals refer to the mythic past embedded in the ideology when they feel threatened by changes in the racial and cultural makeup of the country. Therefore, the popularity of Christian nationalism is an “aspect of a larger populist ethos of victimization, embattlement, and resentment” (Stroope et al., 2021, 409).

Provided the rapid cultural and demographic transformations in American society, the symbols of Christian nationalism have played a crucial role for many Americans. White Americans feel disparaged, marginalized, and stripped of their dominant status in the country. The rise of white Christian nationalism in American politics, thus, is best described as a response to a “structural squeeze” (Hochschild, 2016, 152). The grassroots-oriented, self-starter, evangelical white man, for instance, only wants what his father and his father’s father once were striving for. He wants to attain the American Dream, yet he and his friends feel held back. White Americans feel as though they are being stripped of opportunities that once only belonged to them.

Hence, Christian nationalism as a traceable and long-enduring ideology is extremely attractive to many Americans. The ideology gives them a tool to restore an order that privileges them. White Americans can refer to the Christian nationalist version of history to justify their grievances. Additionally, this version of history allows them to reinforce their superiority and rationalize their discrimination toward others. What is
unique about Christian nationalism is its ability to cloak the mistreatment of others under the guise of religious restoration and under myths of true Americanism. For instance, Christian nationalism can be “used to veil racial and anti-LGBT bias behind a language whose words are race and sexuality neutral, but whose meanings may not be” (Stroope et al., 2021, 409). Additionally, Americans use the ideology to both make claims about others and refute claims made about themselves. For instance, when Christian nationalists make claims about other Americans—the Native Americans or Mexican Americans, for instance—they do so in the name of national unity, solidarity, or religion. Yet, when racial and religious others make claims about Christian nationalists those claims are refuted in the name of individual rights.

The reader can look at the difference in former President Donald Trump’s response to the Black Lives Matter Movement to that of the violence in Washington on January 6th for an example of this dichotomy. Following the death of George Floyd in May of 2020, Trump referred to those protesting police brutality as “thugs” on his personal Twitter account (Ali, 2020). Although the Black Lives Matter demonstrations were peaceful, the President’s response was a call for violent enforcement of the law. Trump called for military violence to write a narrative that would “delegitimize racial protest movements” (Ali, 2020). He even likened the behavior of those protesting to take down Confederate statues to those of “totalitarians and dictators and people who don’t love our country” (Holland, 2020). Trump conveyed that those protesting racial injustice “hate our history…They hate our values, and they hate everything we prize as Americans” (Holland, 2020). On the other hand, Trump honored those who stormed The Capitol on January 6th, declaring them patriotic Americans. In a Tweet, he called the
Capitol rioters “great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long” (Watson, 2021). The discrepancy between Trump’s responses is illustrative of his and his constituents' effort to maintain a racial order through “righteous” violence. Trump and Christian nationalists delegitimize those who threaten the power of the hegemonic class by exploiting the ideals of Christian nationalism that are based on a reworked version of America’s past.
Section 5: Traces of a Paranoid Style of Politics and Fascism in Christian Nationalism

The common thread among individuals who adopt the ideology of Christian nationalism is a perceived sense of victimhood. Many white Americans are laden with fear—they are fearful of the changing values, and the racial, religious, and cultural makeup of the nation. They feel threatened because their dominant position in society has become uncertain due to outside forces. Suddenly, they feel marginalized in their “own” nation. This fear is critical for political actors who want to amass political power or push for institutional change. Fear is easily exploited by elites to mobilize a constituency based on grievances. Political elites even persuade individuals that they are overlooked in society “even in the absence of interpersonal experiences of marginalization and scorn” (Braunstein, 2018, 177). Manufacturing fear and implanting the perception of victimhood in individuals is a means of political mobilization that is not unique to Christian nationalism. Forming grievance-based alliances to galvanize individuals is emblematic, for instance, of paranoid styles of politics and fascism (Hofstadter, 1964; Stanley, 2018).

Paranoid styles of politics are similarly rooted in victimhood and a constant resurgence of fear. Richard Hofstadter (1964) characterizes paranoid styles of politics as having “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” running throughout them. Paranoid styles employ conspiracy and promote propaganda to undermine governmental authority. The political architects of a paranoid style form grievance-based alliances around some “looming threat” to subvert and change political institutions (Parten, 2021). Past looming threats exploited in American politics have included conspiracies about the “deep state,” Antifa and even international pedophile
rings (Parten, 2021). These conspiratorial fantasies have been employed by Republican politicians to sow doubt in the federal bureaucracy. For instance, former President Donald Trump alleged that the White House colluded with the deep state—a network of officials that covertly plot to sway government policy—to “thwart” his presidency (Hirschfeld, 2017). Trump claimed that his administration was being undermined within the walls of the federal government.

Nevertheless, a paranoid style of politics is revealed as not only being characteristic of this new iteration of Republicanism in the twentieth-first century. The anti-Masonry movement during the mid-1800s is an ancillary example of this expression of political conspiracy and propaganda. Affiliated with the Republican and Whig Parties, the anti-Masonic movement professed stark opposition to Freemasonry. Freemasonry, a fraternal organization that promoted community advancement through brotherhood, was cited by the anti-masons as corrupt. The anti-masons viewed Masonry as “a standing conspiracy against the Republican government” (Hofstadter, 1964). Masonry was deemed an elitist society that sought to control the government in opposition to Republican principles. It was defined as a “fraternity of the privileged” by which its adherents were claimed to be loyal to a “separate imperium within the framework of federal and state government” (Hofstadter, 1964). In true paranoid style, the anti-masons expressed hostility and condemnation of Masonry through an “apocalyptic and absolutist framework” (Hofstadter, 1964). The anti-masons declared Freemasonry as “Hell’s masterpiece” and the “most dangerous institution that ever was imposed on man” (Hofstadter, 1964).
Trump, like the anti-masons, fed a populace with conspiratorial fantasies to manufacture doubt about an entity that stood in defiance of their values. Trump undercut trust in the federal government that he believed was too powerful through the guise of a looming threat (the deep state). As a nominal Republican, Trump claims the Federal Government power should be limited; thus, he used the deep state to sow fear into constituents to convince them that the government has too much power. Similarly, the anti-masons cited that the Freemasons were conspiring to corrupt the government. They attacked the organization as being secretive and selective. The initiative hidden beneath this propaganda was that the Masonry movement stood opposed to the Republican values that the anti-masons supported and believed the government should as well. An almost parallel comparison can be made between these two examples of a paranoid style of politics to Christian nationalism and the thereafter Christian nationalist movement. Christian nationalist leaders mobilize the masses by asserting that “true” Americans are under attack. The country is becoming secular, multiracial, and multireligious. Furthermore, America’s Christian heritage is being threatened and the white American has suddenly become marginalized. The Christian nationalist leaders take advantage of these “pre-existing societal cleavages to mobilize supporters, channeling their fears into resentments” (Yale ISPS, 2022). Christian nationalism asserts that “true” Americans must fight against the corrupt racial, and cultural others to save the country.

Christian nationalist leaders tactically guise social issues as being caused by non-Christians or the retreat away from a Christian nation. They conspire that any socio-political sickness is because the country and its institutions have been overrun by non-white, and non-Christians. For instance, under the looming threats of declining SAT
scores, and rising rates of divorce, teen pregnancy, and violent crime, Christian nationalist leaders asserted that something was wrong with public education. Evangelical Christian political activist and founder of WallBuilders, David Barton surmised that these social changes were all due to the Supreme Court taking “God out of America’s classrooms” (Stewart, 2019, 97). Barton saw how the declining SAT scores and rising rates of divorce, pregnancy, and crime occurred around the same time as the case *Engel v Vitale* (1962). This Supreme Court case concluded public school prayer is unconstitutional. Barton particularly pinned the blame for declining SAT scores on this court decision. However, what Barton chose to overlook was the “expansion of the school system to include previously excluded and disadvantaged groups of people,” which likely caused an increase in test-takers and thus, a decrease in score averages (Stewart, 2019, 98). Christian nationalists like Barton employ conspiratorial fantasies (i.e., God being stripped from the classroom is to blame for social issues) to undermine trust in institutions that defy their ethnocultural values. To Christian nationalists, the nation’s schools and other governmental institutions should “indoctrinate national or racial pride,” specifically national Christian and white pride (Stanley, 2018, 35).

Furthermore, Christian nationalist themes resemble those carried through fascist politics. It may well be that fascism, itself, is another example of a paranoid style of politics. However, poignant strands of fascism correlate more precisely to the Christian nationalism ideology than to the more general framework of the paranoid style. Thus, the focus at present will just be between the two, and more specifically Nazi fascism.

According to Stanley (2018), the most obvious characteristic of fascism is divisiveness. Fascist ideology deploys an “us” versus “them” division, “appealing [to]
ethnic religious, or racial distinction[s], and using this division to shape ideology and, ultimately, policy” (Stanley, 2018, 14-15). Certainly, Christian nationalism flourishes behind a division between the cultural and racial others and the pure, white, and Christian peoples (the false versus true Americans). The Christian nationalist leaders galvanize supporters behind this distinction that portrays racial and religious others as villains and white Americans as heroes. Christian nationalism is a story based on a moral distinction between the true Americans—the white Christians—and the racial and cultural outsiders. Elites exploit this moral distinction to gain support and use it to justify their discriminatory practices. For instance, the framing of natives as savages during the period of White Puritan New Englandism, or the portrayal of Asian Americans as heathens during WASP Imperialism (Section 2).

Moreover, to justify their sets of values, fascist politicians break down “a common sense of history” and replace it with a “mythic past to support their vision for the present” (Stanley, 2018, 15). In Nazi Germany, for instance, a mythic version of history discerned a patriarchal order where men were to enlist in the military and women were to strictly participate in motherhood (Stanley, 2018). The myth underlying Christian nationalism is about the Christian heritage of the nation. It is the scripted narration of the country as being founded on Christian principles. It is a story about American exceptionalism and about America being a gift from God.

Additionally, fascist movements promote “anti-intellectualism” and undermine “educational systems that might challenge their ideas” (Stanley, 2018, 15). Fascist politicians propagandize and rewrite reality. For instance, in Nazi Germany, the universities were cited as vehicles of “Jewish conspiracy” and of the developing feminist
movement (Stanley, 2018, 72). Nazi propaganda asserted that the German universities “subvert masculinity and undermine the traditional family by supporting gender studies” (Stanley, 2018, 72). Thus, through attacking intellectual systems Nazi fascism reinforced their mythic vision of patriarchal order and once it was a flourishing and accepted notion, used this same ideal to undermine the educational systems further—the key to subversion was cyclical reinforcement. Similarly, David Horowitz, a far-right activist has been targeting and undermining universities since the 1980s (Stanley, 2018). In 2013 he published *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, a book that details a list of “leftist and liberal professors” that Horowitz warns to be suspicious of. Horowitz, for instance, condemns Professor Bettina Aptheker for “inject[ing] a women-centered perspective” in her courses (Horowitz, 2006, 14). He similarly denounces Professor Lewis Gordon in the book for introducing “contributions from Africana and Eastern thought” in his courses (Horowitz, 2006, 200). Horowitz also founded Heterodoxy, a handbook that instructs students on how to survive liberal indoctrination in educational instructions. Additionally, according to Southern Poverty Law Center, Heterodoxy was used to target “university students whom Horowitz viewed as being indoctrinated by the entrenched Left in American academia” (David Horowitz | Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.).

Finally, fascist politics contains a paradigm that Christian nationalism, as already indicated (Sections 4 & 5), is familiar with—a sense of victimhood. Stanley (2018) confirms that any sort of advancement for minority groups in society “stokes feelings of victimhood” for fascist politicians who wish to assume control of the “dominant population” (16). Many white Americans in contemporary society believe that they are
the “most discriminated against racial group” (Stanley, 2018, 134). For instance, forty-five percent of Trump supporters share this sentiment, while fifty-four percent of his supporters believe that “Christians are the most persecuted religious group in America” (Stanley, 2018, 134).

This dynamic relationship between Trump and Christian nationalism tipoffs what is discussed in the next part of this thesis. It is interesting that, first, so many Americans believe that they are persecuted in the country for being white and Christian; and secondly, that there seems to be some correlation between holding these beliefs and supporting Trump. Why this may be the case is to be evaluated next. The second part of this project focuses on the Christian nationalist movement itself and how affluent Christian nationalist leaders and political actors exploit the ideology behind this mythic version of America.

It has already been established that the ideology is persuasive because it is grounded on a mythic past that individuals can invoke to justify their grievances. It has also been established that elites can use this ideology to perpetuate feelings of marginalization and mobilize followers. Furthermore, how exactly the symbols of Christian nationalism are exploited has been discussed. This discussion included how the perceived victimhood and conspiratorial fantasies of paranoid and fascist politics also work for Christian nationalism. What remains to examine is how Christian nationalism manifests itself as a political movement in contemporary politics. The specifics of the Christian nationalist movement need to be illustrated. What exactly is the modern Christian nationalist movement? What Christian leaders, think tanks, and politicians exploit the ideals of Christian nationalism and for which purposes? In answering these
questions, we can increase our understanding of the relationship between Trump support and the aforementioned Christian nationalist sentiments.
PART 2: CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

Section 1: The Christian Nationalist Movement: How an Ideology Developed into a Political Tool

As illustrated in Part 1, Christian nationalism is an attractive and persuasive ideology to many Americans who feel overlooked and even marginalized in a rapidly changing nation. The once cherished “melting pot” status of America has been resisted as it has come to threaten many Americans’ dominant position. Powerful elites have taken advantage of this perceived victimhood and have built a movement around it. These elites have been able to exploit Americans who cherish the Christian nationalist vision, mobilizing their support by forming grievance-based alliances. Christian nationalism as an ideology has evolved into a powerful tool in galvanizing support for a developing political movement.

There is a misconception that the Christian nationalist movement is a cultural one. Many Americans inaccurately believe it to be a movement “centered on a set of social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, preoccupied with symbolic conflicts over monuments and prayers” (Stewart, 2019, 11). However, the movement is political, and its goal is to gain political power. The deep story behind Christian nationalism (Part 1, Section 1)—that America is a Christian nation founded on Christian principles—has been exploited and the ideology has become a cog in a political machine. What is occurring today—especially in the realm of conservative politics—is a reactionary version of Christian nationalism. The ideology, more than ever, serves as a mechanism to achieve political power. As Linda Greenhouse (2023) explains, “Christianity has become an
instrument for the most politically, culturally, and theologically reactionary Americans” in contemporary politics. The Christian nationalist movement is one of apolitical nature that seeks to reach its goals through reviving traditional religious beliefs.

The leaders of the movement desire to replace America’s democratic principles and institutions “with a state grounded on a particular version of Christianity” (Stewart, 2019, 11). The leaders insist they are restoring a “biblical worldview,” however, such a view also “happens to serve the interest of its plutocratic funders and allied political leaders” (Stewart, 2019, 11). The ideology of Christian nationalism is manipulated and exploited by a powerful group of elites to mobilize individuals in America and concentrate power in the hands of these elites (Stewart, 2019). Essentially, the leaders of the movement use a guise of religious advocacy and restoration to accumulate power and influence.

Furthermore, the Christian nationalist movement is not, as many believe, a grassroots movement. Christian nationalism is such a powerful force because of its ideology that cherishes a mythic past that so many white Americans are attracted to. Christian nationalist leaders are so successful in mobilizing followers because they persuade disparaged white Americans to adopt this ideology by pointing to a version of history that Christian nationalists themselves have adopted. And although the movement is very successful in achieving its ends because of these foot soldiers, the strength of the movement resides in a small class of agents.

The movement has two faces: the grassroots alliance and the support of a powerful elite. However, the intentions of the elite group are widely different—as well as more powerful—than that of the grassroots followers. The foot soldiers of the movement
are those who are coerced into joining grievance-based alliances that perpetuate the “us” versus “them” attitude. They are the ones who “long for a bygone America characterized by community solidarity around cultural homogeneity—a Christian America” (Stroope et al., 2021, 419). However, less crucial to understanding this movement are these individuals. Rather, attention should be paid to the leaders of the movement who utilize “Christian language to provide moral legitimacy to [their] secular causes” (Stroope et al., 2021, 419). The leaders are the ones who set the goals of the movement and employ the rhetoric that attracts the foot soldiers.

It is essential to distinguish between the leaders and the followers of this movement. The followers provide the strength of the movement. They are the ones who “dutifully cast their votes for the movement’s favored politicians” (Stewart, 2019, 14). Amid uncertainty in an altering world, these followers find solidarity and a sense of identity within the movement. However, the ideas and goals of the movement do not come from the followers. The Christian nationalist movement has been defined as a “sophisticated power grab by a small number of wealthy individuals” as well as think tanks and advocacy groups (Coudert, 2021, 133). These leaders exploit the insecurities of Americans to promote an agenda of “neoliberal economics, white supremacy, anti-immigration politics, and the rejection of the rights of women and minorities” (Coudert, 2021, 133). The movement is composed of elites, organizations, and followers who push for an agenda under the facade of “family values” and “religious freedom” (Djupe et al., 2018, 911).
Section 2: Getting Started: The Advent of the New Right

The ideology of Christian nationalism first began to be exploited by a powerful group of elites for political gain in the 1970s. It was during this period that the “New Right” surfaced. As Jerome Himmelstein (1992) explains, the New Right refers to the coalition of multiple leaders and the “network of organizations they created” (80). The fundamentalist groups of the 1960s were not politicized at all, many of them consisted of unregistered voters. However, by 1978 a group of political actors viewed fundamentalist pastors as a “strategic element” to build a new coalition—the New Right (FitzGerald, 1981). These political organizers included Richard Viguerie, Howard Phillips, Terry Dolan, and Paul Weyrich.

Although the New Right developed in the late 1970s, Stewart (2019) suggests that the key issue around which the coalition was built dates to the 1950s. The New Right “drew its inspiration from the threat of the Internal Revenue Service to rescind the tax-exempt status of segregated private schools in the 1950s” (Coudert, 2021, 133). Stewart describes how the advent of the movement is falsely attributed to abortion becoming a constitutional right in the 1970s. In truth, the New Right did not come together because of the desire to protect life. The issue of abortion had little to do with religion, but rather all about politics. Abortion was used as a means of mobilizing votes. After Roe v. Wade (1973), Weyrich, among others, “seized on abortion not for moral reasons, but as a rallying cry to deny President Jimmy Carter a second term” (Stewart, 2019, 86). The reason was the crusade against abortion was more easily digestible than the movement’s true intention which was to protect the tax exemption for segregated schools. Instead of
vocally supporting discriminatory practices, the New Right leaders strategically chose the sanctity of life as the means to pursue their endeavors (maintain tax-exempt status’).

Furthermore, the issue of abortion and the advocacy of “pro-life” is arguably not even a Christian value. Stewart (2019) explains how even the Bible “has provided ample material to those who argue that abortion rights are compatible with Christian belief and practice” (93). Thus, the Christian nationalist movement, to circumvent the government-imposed taxes on segregated schools, had to reframe Christian principles. The leaders of the new movement had to purge religion of any ideals that were inconsistent with this “pro-life” stance. They were successful—the staunchest rival of abortion today is the religious right. However, most are unaware that this “modern pro-life religion that dominates America's conservative churches…is a political creation” (Stewart, 2019, 92-93).

The New Right was an extremely powerful force in conservative politics in the 1970s because of the influence its leaders had. Because of this group of elites, Christian nationalism became a monetized force in American politics. For instance, direct mail expert Richard Vigeurie was able to raise money for Republican candidates by writing letters to conservative voters. In 1979, he raised $6 million for Senator Jesse A. Helms of North Carolina, $5 million for segregationist former Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama, and $2 million for Representative Philip M. Crane of Illinois (Roberts, 1979). Additionally, Howard Phillips used The Conservative Caucus (TCC) to mobilize conservative strength in local government entities. Phillips, as the founder and chairman of TCC, hosted meetings in every U.S. Congressional District trying to mobilize grassroots activists to hold elected officials accountable. Moreover, Terry Nolan, as the
co-founder of the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC) was able to flood elections with money. For instance, in 1980 NCPAC used its influence to target six liberal senators, spending over $1.2 million on “fiercely negative campaign advertising” (Kastor, 1987). Finally, Paul Weyrich’s influence was tapped through the Heritage Foundation in which he was a co-founder. According to Influence Watch, the Foundation is a conservative think-tank that “researches and recommends policies such as free markets, limited government, a strong national defense, and courts that adhere to the original meaning of the U.S. Constitution” (Heritage Foundation, n.d.). Many of the policy recommendations created by the Foundation were adopted during the Reagan Administration.³

³ The Heritage Foundation, in the 1980s, published the “Mandate for Leadership” which was a list of policy recommendations. During his presidency, Reagan adopted or attempted to adopt 2,000 of these recommendations.
Section 3: The Unique Financial Backing of the Movement in Contemporary Politics

In the realm of contemporary politics, the Christian nationalist movement flourishes because of a similarly powerful group of elites who exploit the symbols of the ideology. Much like the influence of the New Right largely depended on a group of elites, and political organizations, the Christian nationalist movement in contemporary politics thrives on the monetary and political support of a narrow class of elites. What is distinctive of the contemporary Christian nationalist movement, however, is its unique financial backing by its respective groups and elites. The movement in contemporary politics has “come to depend critically on the wealth of a growing subset of America’s plutocratic class” (Stewart, 2019, 17). Without the millions of dollars in donations and immense influence from select individuals and foundations, the movement would not be where it is today. There is a long grocery list of foundations, families, and organizations that are essential allies of the Christian nationalist movement today. But to name just two, the Bradley Foundation and the National Christian Foundation (NCF) are important contributors.

The Bradley Foundation, founded by Lynde and Harry Bradley donates millions of dollars to organizations affiliated with the Christian right. The Bradley family built the Foundation intending to create a society that is “good” and “free.” To achieve this, the Foundation has contributed nearly one billion in grants to approximately 2,000 Christian-affiliated organizations or conservative Christian advocacy groups. According to the Bradley Foundation’s website, the foundation awarded $6,825,000 in grants to legislative organizations in 2021 (2021 Year in Review - The Bradley Foundation, n.d.). Some of
the top recipients of their donations include the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Conservative Partnership Institute (CPI), and the Institute for Free Speech (IFS).

The National Christian Foundation (NCF), additionally, is a “far-right evangelical” organization that offers its donors “expert guidance and creative giving solutions” (Kotch, 2019). According to Sludge, an online investigative journalism outlet, NCF donated over $19 million to anti-LGBT, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigration groups in 2017 (Kotch, 2019). The biggest recipient of NCF funds is Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), “a large network of Christian extremist lawyers who have supported criminalizing homosexuality, sterilizing transgender people, and claimed that gay men are pedophiles” (Kotch, 2019). Between the years 2015 and 2017, ADF received $40.2 million from NCF (Kotch, 2019). However, there are numerous other Christian advocacy organizations to which NCF provides donations. For instance, between 2015 and 2017, NCF donated $40,600 to the David Horowitz Freedom Center (See Part 1, Section 5), $511,289 to the Liberty Counsel, $612,326 to the American Family Association, and $5,337,724 to the Family Research Council (FRC) (Kotch, 2019). Most of the donors to NCF are largely unknown, however, there are a few that are public. For instance, Sludge reports that David Green, the founder of Hobby Lobby, is a donor. To provide some context about the donors of this foundation, during Barack Obama’s presidency, Hobby Lobby sued his administration for trying to force the business to pay for the costs of birth control for its employees under the Affordable Care Act. ADF defended and covered the costs of this lawsuit. An additional major public donor is the Maclellan Foundation. This family Foundation has gifted over $100 million to NCF (Kotch, 2019).
Furthermore, modern Christian nationalist leaders and organizations mirror the clever rhetorical dressings of their predecessors. The New Right employed grievance politics to garner support for their political cause amongst a particular Christian constituency. The political architects seized on abortion and the sanctity of life to amass political power. Similarly, the modern leaders of the movement have “reframed the Christian religion itself to suit their political objectives” (Stewart, 2019, 15). Political elites use religion to defend claims that they are justified in being owed special treatment. For example, Edgar Prince advanced his right-wing cause through “backhanded tactics” (Tabachnick, 2017). The Prince Foundation circumvented lobbying barriers by “reclassifying their lobbying efforts as ‘prayer warrior’ networks” (Tabachnick, 2017). Rather than actually lobbying policymakers, Prince asked them to “pray” for certain policies (Tabachnick, 2017).

Prince was also heavily involved in the creation of the Family Research Council (FRC), an anti-LGBT (hate) group, among other things (Tabachnick, 2017). The FRC is one of many powerful far-right advocacy groups. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the nonprofit specializes in working against “abortion and stem-cell research, fighting pornography and LGBTQ equality” by promoting “the Judeo-Christian worldview as the basis for a just, free, and stable society” (Family Research Council, n.d.). FRC’s website indicates that the Council seeks to “equip Christians with a biblical worldview and train them to advance and defend the faith in their families, communities, and the public square” (Family Research Council, n.d.). In truth, however, FRC “trains” Christians to defend a version of the faith that demonizes cultural outsiders. According to SPLC, for instance, one part of FRC’s strategy is to “emphasize the false claims that
LGBTQ people are more likely to sexually abuse children than heterosexual people” (Family Research Council, n.d.). This statement, as confirmed by the American Psychological Association (APA), was not only false, but research suggests that the opposite is more likely—children are at greater risk of abuse from heterosexual parents (McHugh et al., 1998).
Section 4: A Political Agenda: The Odds Stacked Against Public Education

With the backing of powerful and affluent elites, the Christian nationalist movement has been able to effect change in almost every socio-political sphere. Leaders of the movement situate themselves in every societal sphere of influence exploiting the symbols of Christian nationalism to control each domain and pursue their anti-democratic agenda. In 1976, Christian activists Bill Right and Loren Cunningham crafted a strategy for Christians to take over multiple spheres of influence. Named the “Seven Mountain Mandate,” it was created to reintroduce God into spheres or “mountains” of influence.

The seven mountains are business, education, the church, family, arts and entertainment, science, and government. Later, Christian activists, Lance Wallnau and Bill Johnson adopted this playbook. In their book, *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate*, Wallnau and Johnson (2013) declare that they (evangelical Christians) “have been given authority over this planet” by God, and thus, “there are seven realms of society that must come under the influence of the King and His Kingdom” (Wallnau & Johnson, 2013, 21-23). The Christian nationalist leaders advance this mandate, for as they see it, the spheres of influence have been taken over by liberal and anti-Christian ideals.

The leaders of this movement are extremely deliberate, they make it so easy for their followers to pursue this seven-mountain mandate. Christian advocacy groups educate and inform their constituency on how to precisely take over spheres of influence for the sake of God. The Family Research Council (FRC) even has a “Culture Impact Team Manual” that educates individuals on how to inform, equip, alert, and mobilize individuals toward their cause. The thirty-page manual starts with an introduction about who Christians are and what they are obliged to do. It writes:
Christians are dual citizens. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God by faith in Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20). We are also citizens of an earthly “kingdom.” Consequently, we have obligations in both realms. (Family Research Council (FRC), 2011)

Because of the alleged cultural and political sickness that plagues the modern liberal world, the manual was designed to equip concerned Christians and help them exert Christian influence in the public spheres. The manual asks to develop a mission, for instance, “To improve and enhance the witness of Jesus Christ in the area of government, politics, and social issues” (FRC, 2011). Then the reader is set out to mobilize. The manual encourages grassroots participation such as “involvement in pregnancy support centers, school board meetings, civil government gatherings, public office, service projects that show the love of Jesus in practical ways” (FRC, 2011).

The manual rallies for and against certain political causes, but projects these causes as advancing “Kingdom values” to “save the world” (FRC, 2011). It provides instructions on how to conduct voter registration and guides what candidates to vote for based on Biblical values. For instance, the manual asks: does the candidate protect the lives of “preborn children,” do they promote giving parents the choice to decide where their child should go to school, do they endorse the “homosexual movement,” or do they promote religious freedom (FRC, 2011)? The manual also warns the reader of opposition. Those that see their efforts as “unkind” because they “confront sinful behavior, policies, laws, politicians, etc.” (FRC, 2011). FRC asks individuals to devote themselves to God, and in doing so follow through with specific political agendas. They are amassing an army of foot soldiers to pursue their cause.
Recently, Christian nationalists have paid particular attention to one realm—education. As they see it, the education system of America, at one time, “unapologetically incorporated the Bible…and biblical values in every aspect of school life” (Generals International, n.d.). However, this is no longer the case. The public education system, they suggest, has grown to threaten their religious liberties. Supposedly, our nation’s children are “inundated with liberal ideologies, atheistic teaching, and postmodern principles in our public school” (Generals International, n.d.). As Christian nationalists see it, the public education sector “brainwashes” our children into a “Godless, leftist, socialist worldview” (Nelson, 2021). A worldview where prayer and Christmas are banned, and “political correctness reigns” (Nelson, 2021). Thus, the restoration of Biblical values in public education is necessary. There has been a call for the infiltration of the educational sphere.

This assault on public education by Christian nationalists, however, has existed for a long time. The New Right and the modern Christian nationalist movement “has been hostile to public education…since Jerry Falwell…called for an end to public school in 1979” (Stewart, 2019, 18). The leaders of the New Right first exploited the Christian nationalist ideology to defend school segregation. In fact, as previously detailed (Part 2, Section 2), public education was the match that lit the flame for the New Right coalition.

Falwell was a staunch segregationist, prioritizing the need for white homogeneity not only in religion but in schools. Bob Jones Sr., the founder of Bob Jones University, was an impassioned segregationist as well. Thus, following Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, “schools of choice” were promoted (Stewart, 2019, 84). To avoid sending their children to integrated schools, “segregation academies” were created (Stewart, 2019, 18).
Many of these academies, including Falwell’s, were affiliated with churches and thus, subject to tax exemptions. However, in the late 1970s, the IRS began to threaten the tax-exempt status of these segregated religious schools (Stewart, 2019). Nevertheless, Weyrich and other “Emerging leaders of the New Right were prepared to defend them” (Stewart, 2019, 84). Weyrich took advantage of the grievances of the segregationists and “saw the opportunity to found a movement” (Stewart, 2019, 21). The movement later was built under the guise of abortion; however, what ignited the movement were the grievances of a racist elite.

Following the desegregation of public schools, school vouchers became prominent “as a way to funnel state money to racially segregated religious academies” (Stewart, 2019, 224). Some school districts shut down public schools completely during this period, while others promoted school choice programs by which white students were given “tuition grants” to attend privatized, often religious, schools (Stewart, 2019, 244). From this perspective, the main initiative behind school voucher programs was to “eliminate nonsectarian education” (Stewart, 2019, 245). Public schools were viewed as “a deliberate program of de-Christianization” (Stewart, 2019, 247).
Section 5: Furthering the Fight Against “Indoctrination” (From School Vouchers to Bible Studies to School Prayer to Curriculum Reworking)

Section 5.1: School Voucher Programs

The Christian nationalist movement has brought this tradition of attacking public education into the realm of contemporary politics. And with growing numbers of support from wealthy elites, the impact the movement has on public education has been colossal. While still impassioned advocates of school voucher programs, the movement has added a hodgepodge of initiatives to reform public education, including reinstating Bible studies and school-led prayer in schools and the gutting of public-school curriculum.

Although a wholesale privatization of education would be the easiest way for Christian nationalists to achieve their goal of reinstating religion into schools, the leaders understand this is an almost unattainable aim. They see school voucher programs, however, as the next best bet. Thus, their campaign against public education necessarily includes supporting and advocating for the expansion of school voucher programs.

Currently, there are twenty-nine states in which school voucher programs exist (Fiddiman & Yin, 2019). However, many states have attempted to expand their programs. For instance, Pennsylvania legislators recently approved the biggest expansion of the state’s “Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program” (McShane, 2021). The Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program, according to Ed Choice, “offers tax credits for corporate contributions to…scholarship organizations (SOs), which provide private school scholarships” (EdChoice, n.d.). Similarly, New Hampshire legislators recently introduced a new Education Saving Account (ESA) program in the state’s
budget (McShane, 2021). This program allows students to use state-funded grants to choose where they attend school (Education Freedom Accounts, n.d.).

Furthermore, in Carson v. Makin (2022), the courts ruled that Maine couldn’t exclude religious private schools from receiving public funding because of their religious affiliation (Laats, 2022). Following this proceeding, the Temple Academy in Waterville, Maine indicated that it would invite its instructors to “integrate biblical principles with their teaching in every subject” (Liptak, 2022). Another school, Bangor Christian School, said it wishes to instill “within each student a Christian worldview and Christian philosophy of life” (Liptak, 2022). Similarly, in the case Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue (2020) the courts ruled that “states must allow religious schools to participate in programs that provide scholarships to students” (Liptak, 2022).

Moreover, in 2022 the federal Education Choice for Children Act (EECA) was passed. According to the Council for American Private Education (CAPE), this program offers “$10 billion in annual tax credits as a charitable donation incentive for individuals and businesses to fund scholarship awards for students” (Schuttloffel, 2023). The tax credit scholarship would allow donors to use their donations as a credit against “their tax liabilities” (Greene, 2022). Donors, in place of paying taxes, can contribute to private school funds.

The effort to expand voucher programs, both on the federal and local levels, has been assisted by powerful individuals and Christian advocacy groups behind the Christian nationalist movement. For instance, Betsy DeVos who “stands at the intersection of two family fortunes that helped to build the Christian right,” has offered unparalleled support for the school voucher scheme (Stewart, 2016). DeVos, in general,
has remarkably helped fund the religious right through a “network of family foundations” (Stewart, 2016). For instance, the Elsa and Edgar Prince Foundation, which DeVos sits on the board of, donated over $2.7 million to FRC between 1999 and 2009 (Tabachnick, 2017). Additionally, the Dick and Betsy DeVos Family Foundation donated $2.39 million to the Grand Rapids Christian High School Association, $652,000 to the Ada Christian School, and $458,000 to the Holland Christian School between the years of 1999 and 2014 (Rizga, 2017).

Furthermore, in 2008 the school-choice advocacy group run by DeVos, All Children Matter, was found to be illegally siphoning money into elections. All Children Matter lobbied for school-choice legislation, and “broke Ohio election law by funneling $870,000 in contributions through its nationwide PAC to its Ohio affiliate” (Wermund, 2016). The lobbying group was created in 2003 and has since grown to be “an influential political arm of the school choice movement” (McNeil, 2006). This largely has to do with it being financed by extremely affluent entrepreneurs such as the families of Amway Corp. and Walmart Stores (McNeil, 2006). In 2004 alone, All Children Matter raised $9.5 million from thirty-four affluent donors (McNeil, 2006). This money was then funneled into campaigns for candidates who support school vouchers.

Leaders of the movement like DeVos rhetorically dress school voucher programs as opening more choices for families and improving education. DeVos continuously “presents her plans as a way to improve public education and give families more choice” (Stewart, 2016). Similarly, many endorsers of EECA are well-known Christian advocacy groups that push for school voucher programs by declaring that they expand family choice and improve educational opportunities. One endorser, the Invest in Education
Coalition, for instance, argues that “expanding educational freedom” guarantees that “every child in America has access to a great education” (Invest in Education Foundation Education Reform, n.d.).

The claims that school voucher programs offer more choice and improve education are not only inaccurate, but they also do not reflect the true intention of those pushing this plan. School voucher programs are inherently discriminatory and promote the insertion of Christian values in education. Thus, the programs restrict rather than open more opportunities for families to have a choice. Under the First Amendment, “students attending public school are free to express their faith and may not be turned away from an education due to their religion” (Fiddiman & Yin, 2019). However, religious private schools can deny admission to students who don’t adhere to the same religious affiliation as the school. And because the “vast majority of schools participating in the state voucher programs fall under one religious group,” there becomes less freedom to choose as opposed to more (Fiddiman & Yin, 2019). Additionally, vouchers restrict freedom of choice by gutting the resources of public schools. By siphoning taxpayer money into private schools, these programs defund public schools. Installing and maintaining voucher plans are economically exhaustive. Levin and Driver (1997) estimate that the costs of voucher programs “could raise public educational costs by 25% or more” (265). The costs associated with vouchers include “accommodating additional students, record keeping, student transportation, information to parents, and dispute adjudication” (Carnoy, 2017). Thus, to accommodate these extra costs, voucher programs take taxpayer dollars away from public schools and redirect them toward private schools. Public schools are left with insufficient funds to build enlightening learning environments.
Therefore, students often are forced to enter religious schools regardless of their religious beliefs.

Additionally, the true reason that DeVos and other Christian activists support vouchers is not even because of this claim that they improve education. The DeVos family and other advocacy groups “support a far more expansive effort” (Stewart, 2016). For instance, DeVos herself said that school voucher programs should be instituted to “advance God’s Kingdom” (Stewart, 2019, 246). Thus, the Christian nationalist leaders appear to use a rhetorical dressing of school vouchers that isn’t even accurate—it does not improve education or provide more freedom of choice—to achieve a longstanding goal to reinstate religion into public education. Christian nationalists respond to the secularization of education with an “apocalyptic conviction that extreme measures are needed” (Stewart, 2016).

**Section 5.2: Bible Studies and School-led Prayer**

The Christian nationalist movement’s assault on education, however, does not stop at school voucher programs. School voucher programs represent only one fraction of the movement’s mugging of public education. The movement works earnestly to insert religion into education by introducing and backing bills that would legalize bible studies and school-led prayers in public schools. In 2023, Christian advocates, through coordinated practices with state legislators, helped multiple bills concerning bible studies and prayer in school get introduced in state legislatures.

In Texas, for example, TX HB4949 was filed on March 10th, 2023. This bill, if passed, would allow school boards to “adopt a policy requiring every campus of the district or school to provide students and employees with an opportunity to participate in
a period of prayer and Bible reading on each school day” (H.B. 4949, 2023).

Additionally, currently crossed over in the legislature of the state of Montana, is bill MT HB744. It was introduced to adjust laws to safeguard religious expression for students and teachers. If passed, the bill would allow “any teacher, principal, or superintendent” to open the school day with a prayer (H.B. 744, 2023). Furthermore, AL HB35, introduced to the legislature of Alabama on February 23rd, 2023, would “require a local board of education to provide certain school resources to students to facilitate student-led prayer” (H.B. 35, 2023). Also noteworthy is a bill introduced in Illinois on February 7th, 2023—IL HB2187. This bill would allow public schools to include a course “in the history and literature of the Old Testament era and a course in the history and literature of the New Testament era” within their curriculum (H.B. 2187, 2023).

Behind these legislative efforts are powerful Christian advocacy groups and leaders. These newly introduced bills are the product of a Christian right legislative campaign called Project Blitz. Founded by Randy Forbes, Project Blitz is an organization that aims toward “establishing the U.S. as a Christian nation” (Boston, 2020). The project drafts model bills for state legislators to help achieve its agenda “of codifying Christian Nationalism” under the nation’s radar (Clarkson, 2021). By drafting model bills that conspicuously insert religion in public schools, the campaign makes it easy for state legislatures to copy and paste them. In recent years, Republicans have lifted bills from this “well-funded Christian lobbying” organization (Gabbatt, 2021). The model bills of this lobbying group seek to “infuse religion into state politics” (Gabbatt, 2021). Some legislatures repeat the model bills “verbatim,” while others draw inspiration from Project
Blitz’s strategic rhetorical phrasing (Taylor, 2018). The bills cited above are some examples of bills that were modeled after Project Blitz.

For instance, IL HB2187 opens as follows:

The Bible has been of great influence in the history of the world and of the United States in the arts, music, literature, and laws, on civilization, and as part of the story of man’s struggles throughout history. (H.B. 2187, 2023)

The bill’s first paragraph is inspired by a model proclamation found in Project Blitz’s playbook. The proclamation, a recognition of the importance of the Bible in history, similarly declares: “Many of the great works of literature, art, and music in the past millennium were inspired by the Bible” (Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation, 2020).

Furthermore, these newly introduced bills only represent a fragment of Project Blitz’s legislative campaign. This Christian lobbying organization has appeared influential in state legislatures for multiple years, mounting to accrue more legislative influence. For instance, there were at least seventy-five bills that were introduced during the 2017-2018 legislative session in “more than 20 states…which appear to be modeled on or have similar objectives to the playbook” (Taylor, 2018). For instance, in the 2017/2018 Project Blitz Playbook, there was a bill drafted called the “National Motto Display Act” (Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation, 2017). The act was drafted to require “In God We Trust” to be displayed in public schools. Employing the rhetoric of the playbook, “In God We Trust” bills quickly became laws in Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, and Tennessee in 2017.
Project Blitz is especially adept at applying rhetorical dressings to model bills—a main reason why the organization is so successful in influencing state legislators. It mobilizes these legislators by claiming that their religious freedom is being violated and frames the bills in ways that toe the line between unconstitutionality and constitutionality. Project Blitz rallies state and federal legislators in what they call “prayer caucuses.” During these prayer caucuses, Christian nationalist leaders work with legislators to push “discriminatory bills contained within the Project Blitz guide” (BlitzWatch, n.d.). The National Prayer Caucus Foundation, for instance, works with government leaders to address the trends of ant-faith in legislation. However, during these meetings, legislators are advised “to cloak their religious mission in the guise of more secular intentions” (Clarkson, 2021).

Some examples of bills that Project Blitz has introduced that are intentionally cloaked with secular intentions include the Bible Literacy, Student Prayer Certification, Teacher Protections, and Preserving Religious Freedom in School acts. The Bible Literacy Act would require “school districts to offer an elective course on the Bible” (BlitzWatch, n.d.). Although this is not inherently unconstitutional, the Constitution imposes specific requirements for such elective courses, requirements that public schools are unlikely to uphold. Additionally, the Student Prayer Certification Act “would merely affirm that schools are in compliance with federal law regarding constitutionally protected student prayer” (BlitzWatch, n.d.). The Teacher Protection Act “would allow school districts or employees who are sued for inappropriately subjecting students to their religious beliefs to be provided with legal assistance from the state” (BlitzWatch, n.d.). The addition of legal assistance “adds protections designed to embolden schools to
inappropriately expose students to religious practices” (BlitzWatch, n.d.). Finally, the Preserving Religious Freedom in School Act restates the Free Exercise Clause, emphasizing the laws that uphold religious expression in public schools.

These bills manipulate the provisions of the First Amendment. They emphasize the rights awarded in the Free Exercise Clause but never acknowledge the provisions of the Establishment Clause. In other words, these bills are justified by the manipulation of the laws that restrict them. It is legally permissible to include religion in schoolwork; however, this expression “must be responsive to the assignment, and the school is required to prohibit any expression that infringes on the rights of other students” (BlitzWatch, n.d.). These bills cite the Free Exercise Clause to enforce the former further while ignoring the Establishment Clause to enfranchise the latter. Essentially, “these bills deliberately blur the line between two constitutional requirements to encourage students, teachers, and other school personnel to flout that line” (BlitzWatch, n.d.).

Section 5.3: Public School Curriculum

An additional way the movement seeks to undermine public education is by gutting the curriculum of public schools. Christian activists have worked tirelessly toward stripping public schools of ideals that conflict with the Christian nationalism ideology. The movement works toward rewriting public-school curriculum to cater to a Christian nationalist version of history.

For instance, in 2021 Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis introduced the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (W.O.K.E.) Act to ban the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT). DeSantis justified the ban by saying “We won’t allow Florida tax dollars to be spent teaching kids to hate our country or to hate each other” (Florida Governor
Staff, n.d.). He cited the teaching of Critical Race Theory as manipulative to students and a way to “indoctrinate” them into liberal “woke” culture. DeSantis justified the dissolution of teaching historical events for the sake of the “safety” of students. The Governor and other state officials favored by conservative evangelicals have made it their mission to “counter a ‘woke’ culture they believe has infiltrated public education” (Wingfield, 2022).

Critical Race Theory includes the “idea that racism is systemic in U.S. institutions and that they function to maintain the dominance of white people in society” (Farrington, 2022). Expelling the teaching of it in public schools reflects the goal of Christian nationalists to “suppress an accurate account of Black History” and maintain the racial patriarchal order that benefits them (Farrington, 2022). It is another example of the “codification of Christian nationalism” in public schools (Wingfield, 2022). DeSantis’ particular crusade against CRT reflects a growing trend against the teaching of racism in public schools across America. According to Chalk beat, there are now thirty-six states that “restrict education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics” (Imadalie, 2022). Additionally, according to Brookings, nine states—Idaho, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Arizona, and North Dakota—have passed legislation that bans any discussions about “conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression” (Ray & Gibbons, 2021).

In Idaho HB377 was signed into law in 2021. This law bans the teaching of CRT in all school districts, public schools, public charter schools, and publicly funded institutions of higher education. The bill reads:
The Idaho legislature finds that tenets…often found in “critical race theory…” exacerbate and inflame divisions on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, or other criteria in ways contrary to the unity of the nation and the well-being of the state of Idaho and its citizens. (H.B. 377, 2021)

Similarly, in Tennessee, an amendment was added to TN HB0580 to ban the teaching of CRT in local schools and public charter schools. And recently introduced in Pennsylvania was HB1532. This bill would prohibit the teaching of “racist and sexist” concepts in all school districts. According to the bill, an example of a racist or sexist concept could be:

An individual, by virtue of race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously. (H.B. 1532, 2021)

The legislation in these states has been influenced by model legislation that has been “promoted by conservative advocacy groups” including Citizens for Renewing America and the Alliance for Free Citizens (Graham, 2021). Thus, the infiltration of Christian nationalism in public schools can, once again, be traced back to the support of a narrow class of elite. Citizen for Renewing America, founded by Russel Vought—the former budget director of President Donald Trump—is a conservative advocacy group. A new non-profit, Citizens for Renewing America, according to Influence Watch, published a handbook for lawmakers opposed to critical race theory lessons in public schools (Citizens for Renewing America, n.d.). The handbook, titled “Combatting Critical Race Theory in Your Community” is a thirty-three-page book that provides an “A to Z guide” on how to stop teachings of critical race theory (Leach, 2021). The recently passed laws in Idaho and Tennessee “most closely match language used in Citizens for Renewing
The tenets outlined in section (1)(B), often found in “critical race theory,” undermine a free society and sound education and otherwise exacerbate and inflame divisions on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, or other criteria in ways contrary to the unity of the nation, the founding principles of the nation, and the well-being of the citizens of [insert local school board jurisdiction]. (Citizens For Renewing America, 2021)

The Alliance for Free Citizens, “an advocacy organization that pursues state legislation and litigation on a slate of issues,” similarly offered a model bill for anti-CRT legislation (Schwartz, 2021). Lawmakers in Pennsylvania have introduced this model bill that bans the promotion of “racist and sexist” topics in school legislation (Schwartz, 2021).

Furthermore, according to the National Education Association (NEA), many more groups are supporting this cultural rewriting of public-school curriculum. Graham (2021) of the NEA contends that there are multiple “advocacy groups working behind the scenes to help orchestrate these protests and limit the discussion about race in public schools.” He further adds that these groups are buttressed by a “web of dark money and right-wing operatives looking to exploit culture war grievances for political gain” (Graham, 2021). There are at least 165 local and national groups, for instance, working across the nation to remove the teachings on the history of racism and CRT from the curriculum in public schools. And these groups are supported by conservative think tanks and advocacy
groups that “amplify cultural grievances around education to galvanize voters” (Graham, 2021). Two groups, in particular, have been extremely impactful in this crusade against public education—No Left Turn in Education and Parents Defending Education (PDE). The two organizations appear to be grass-rooted advocacy groups; however, what makes both distinctive is their “deep-pocketed donors who are looking out for their own political needs” (Graham, 2021). Elana Yaron Fishbein founded No Left Turn in Education which has come to be “one of the largest groups targeting school boards” (Kingkade et al., 2021). Fishbein was encouraged to create this advocacy group when the public elementary schools in Philadelphia introduced lessons on racism and justice following the murder of George Floyd. No Left Turn provides “tools, resources, and form letters and petitions for activists looking” to expose liberal indoctrination in public schools (Graham, 2021). The group has grown tremendously, now having state chapters across the nation. For instance, in Maine Shawn Mcbrearity “grew increasingly disgruntled and soon connected with No Left Turn in Education” (Kingkade et al., 2021). Mcbrearity became the head of Maine’s No Left Turn chapter and the group targeted school boards and filed lawsuits claiming white discrimination.

Similarly, PDE is an organization based in Virginia that “purports to advocate on behalf of concerned parents and encourages activists” to expose “woke indoctrination” (Graham, 2021). The group also plays an active role in combating this “indoctrination.” For instance, PDE “filed civil rights complaints against schools in Massachusetts for creating an affinity space for students of color” (Kingkade et al., 2021). According to Source Watch, PDE filed similar complaints against multiple school districts in June of 2022. Some districts include the Hudson School District of Wisconsin, the Jackson Public
School District of Michigan, and the New York City Public Schools of New York. PDE is supported and led by many activists who are part of “conservative funding networks and right-wing media outlets that have been manufacturing outrage about CRT in public schools” (Graham, 2021). According to Media Matters, the group’s IRS filing reveals a “symbiotic relationship between right-wing media echo chambers and conservative political activists stoking a cultural panic” (Kleefeld, 2021). For instance, Edward Blum, one of the directors of PDE, has been associated with right-wing funding networks in the past. Blum has been a beneficiary “of millions of dollars funneled through Donors Trust” (Munoz, 2020). Donors Trust is known for steering “hundreds of millions of dollars to the most influential think tanks, foundations, and advocacy groups in the conservative movement” (Kroll, 2013).

Both groups—No Left Turn and PDE—conceal themselves as grassroots advocacy groups, but they are steered by their affluent conservative donors. There are parents and activists “on the ground” protesting and intimidating school boards; however, “Peeking behind the curtain shows that some of the biggest supporters of these groups are longtime conservative donors who have attempted for years to warp public education for their own purposes—from the Koch family and the DeVos family to former Trump officials and The Federalist Society” (Graham, 2021). For instance, PDE’s President, Nicole Neily is affiliated with the Koch network. According to Source Watch, Charles Koch, the founder of the Koch Industries, is a “key funder of the right-wing infrastructure, including the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and the State Policy Network (SPN)” (Source Watch, n.d.). Neily has worked closely with the Koch Industry, previously working for organizations within the Koch network—the
Franklin News Foundation and the Cato Institute, for instance. Additionally, No Left Turn is a “local collaborator” with Heritage Action which is “the advocacy group affiliated with the Heritage Foundation” (Sollenberger, 2021).
Section 6: The Symbolic Welding of Christian Nationalism and Modern Republicanism

Behind all the Christian advocacy groups and powerful leaders is unparalleled support from Republican politicians. Conservative politicians have taken advantage of the grievances of the Christian nationalists for a decade, tracing back to the late 1900s. In contemporary politics, their involvement has ceased to diminish. Now more than ever, Republican politicians are exploiting this ideology. And the Christian nationalist leaders and Republican politicians are working in tandem. Leaching off each other, the political actors have formed a symbiotic relationship. The religious right and the alt-right, according to Posner (2020) are “bonded together by shared grievances over a supposedly lost America in which Christians don’t have to bake cakes for gay couples and white people don’t have to bow to ‘multiculturalism’ or ‘political correctness’” (163). Christian nationalists turn to the Republican Party for support in reclaiming the nation as Christian and the Republican Party turns to Christian nationalists to amass enough political power to realize their policies.

In the past, public figures and politicians who embraced the rhetoric of Christian nationalism in their policies have denied the existence of the movement. However, recently politicians have been explicitly endorsing the Christian nationalist movement and its ideology. The leaders of the movement and their “political dependents in the Republican Party now state quite openly what before they whispered to one another over their prayer breakfasts” (Stewart, 2022). Additionally, the Republican Party has grown increasingly accepting of the Christian nationalist narrative.
One need not look further than the courts to see the adoption of Christian nationalism among Republicans. The courts, now more than ever before, reflect the sentiments of Christian nationalism. For instance, expanding religious rights has been a long-concerted effort of conservative Chief Justice Roberts. Chief Justice John Roberts wrote the majority opinion on *Carson v. Makin* (2022). The Maine State Legislature previously created a tuition program for students to use to attend public or private schools. Sectarian private schools were not initially approved to use this funding until *Carson v. Makin* (2022). In his opinion, Chief Justice Roberts wrote “Maine’s ‘nonsectarian’ requirement for its otherwise generally available tuition assistance payments violates the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment” (*Carson v. Makin*, 2022). Roberts has expressed alignment with Christian nationalist ideology in other cases. In *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (2020), he defended that a “provision of the state’s Constitution banning aid to schools run by churches ran afoul of the U.S. Constitution's protection of the free exercise of religion by discriminating against religious people and schools” (Liptak, 2022). The Chief Justice is known for ruling in favor of Christian organizations. And under the leadership of Roberts, the court has grown to support religion over 81 percent (Liptak, 2021).

U.S. Senators and state House Representatives have similarly seemed to join the Christian nationalist coalition. For example, U.S. Senator and co-sponsor of EECA, Bill Cassidy, adopts the sentiments of the Christian nationalist movement. Outside of introducing the federal act to expand school choice, he has relentlessly fed into the hostility against public education. In 2022, Cassidy released a statement after the National Parents and Families Engagement Council (Council) was disbanded. The
Senator called out the Council for having a “far-left and anti-school choice agenda” (Education Dept. Disbands Council after Cassidy, Colleagues Shine Light on Woke Agenda, 2022). In a letter to the Department of Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, Cassidy alongside his fellow Senators Mike Lee, Tim Scott, Richard Burr, and Mitt Romney spoke out about the Council’s “hyper-partisan makeup” (Cassidy, Colleagues Sound Alarm, Demand Transparency from Biden Administration on Far-Left Organizations Involved in New Education Council, 2022). The Senators conveyed their disapproval of the Council that is “seemingly prejudiced” (Cassidy, Colleagues Sound Alarm, Demand Transparency from Biden Administration on Far-Left Organizations Involved in New Education Council, 2022). They claimed that the Council limits the diversity of voices because its organizations are too narrowly progressive. The letter also mentions that the Council seems to have espoused policy positions unpopular with American parents, including the instruction of Critical Race Theory. Essentially, the Senators claimed that the Council is unrepresentative of the values and policy preferences of many American parents. They purported that it was unfairly tailored to the beliefs of the left.

Furthermore, Texas Representative and sponsor of TX HB4949, Briscoe Cain, similarly endorses the Christian nationalist vision. Cain’s platform focuses on faith and family values. On his campaign website, he declares that he will “lead the fight in Austin to ensure that traditional Christian values are restored and strengthened” (Issues – Briscoe Cain, n.d.). The founder of the Texas Freedom Caucus believes that religious liberty should be “reestablished wherein all individuals (including pastors, teachers, and government employees) are completely free at all times to freely express their religious
beliefs and practices” (Issues – Briscoe Cain, n.d.). In a press conference concerning education on April 3rd, 2023, Cain deepened the assault on public education. Cain spoke about “the bullying techniques” that the Texas Association of School Boards has used in trying to “monopolize our students” (Press Conference: Education, 2023). Additionally, he asserted that the Texas Association of School Boards has been manipulating laws to push a leftist agenda. For example, Cain suggests that the schools are providing trainings that are actually “leftist indoctrination camps” where school board members are trained to fight for social justice rather than “actually educate the next generation so that Texas is able to lead like they are called to do” (Press Conference: Education, 2023). During the conference, Cain honors a school board president who oversees Carroll Independent School District (CISD), a K-12 public education system in Texas that has led a fight against CRT and “indoctrinating kids in school” (Press Conference: Education, 2023).

Moreover, the sponsor of the Idaho House Bill 377 that bans the discussion of CRT in public schools, Representative Wendy Horman, has illustrated ideological alignment with the Christian nationalist movement. In 2021, Horman spoke out against public school budgets during a debate conducted in the 17th Legislative District. Referring to the teaching of CRT, the Idaho Representative argued before the Speaker of the House that “it is entirely appropriate for us to tie strings, the same way the federal government ties strings to our funding, to the use of the professional development dollars that they not be used in a discriminatory way” (Idaho Freedom TV, 2021).

Additionally remarkable is the proclivity of major Republican politicians to feed into a deeper hostility toward public education that Christian nationalist leaders have already set. Former President Donald Trump, for one, was not shy to vocalize his
opinions on the failure of the public education sector. Throughout his presidency, he was a staunch advocate of school choice programs. In 2020, he urged Congress to pass the Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunity Act which would make a $5 billion tax credit program to fund religious private schools (Strauss, 2020). Working in conjunction with his Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, the two painted “Government Schools” as “the enemy of education freedom” (Black, 2020). For instance, in a speech commemorating the Fourth of July in 2020, Trump spoke about his disapproval of public schools in America. Trump declared that the schools teach children to “‘hate their own country’ by exposing them to a distorted and overwhelmingly negative view of American history” (Ujifusa, 2020). The former President insisted that the schools in America should teach American exceptionalism and the “truth” of the Founding Fathers. Additionally, in 2023 Trump set out a new education plan as part of his campaign for presidential reelection. The policy includes cutting funding for schools that teach critical race theory and creating a credentialing body to “certify teachers who embrace patriotic values…and understand that their job is not to indoctrinate children” (Sonnier & Kamisar, 2023). The platform also involves firing Department of Education staff that are seen as “radical, zealots and Marxists,” and banning transgender students who identify as girls from playing girl sports (Sonnier & Kamisar, 2023).

Additionally, state governors across the country have promoted school choice programs and the removal of CRT teachings by proclaiming schools are for “education, not indoctrination.” The “education, not indoctrination” campaign has been useful in galvanizing support to push an agenda to undermine public education. At a campaign event in February 2023 Texas Governor Greg Abbott, for instance, suggested that schools
have been “pushing a social agenda” (Bradner, 2023). He indicated that he would extend the ban on CRT to include colleges, imploring “I don't want teachers in our colleges saying, ‘America is evil, and capitalism is bad, and socialism is better’” (Bradner, 2023).

Similarly, in 2022 Florida Governor Ron DeSantis spoke to Moms for Liberty—an organization that advocates for more parental control in schools—saying “Our school system is for educating kids, not indoctrinating kids” (Kuriloff, 2022). The pioneer of the Stop Woke Act and “Don't Say Gay” legislation simultaneously promotes freedom of education while limiting what could be discussed in classrooms. Similarly, Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin revealed an executive order just one day after he was elected in the 2022 midterm elections. As illustrated by this order, Youngkin’s directive is to “restore excellence in education by ending the use of divisive concepts, including Critical Race Theory, in public education” (Laughland, 2022). In fact, Youngkin’s campaign platform largely focused on undermining trust in public education. The issue of CRT was at the center of his campaign, the governor effectively “capitalized on a conservative backlash against the discipline and pledging to ban the teaching of it in Virginia’s schools” (Laughland, 2022). The GOP candidate for governor of Pennsylvania Doug Mastriano ran his campaign on a similar platform that focuses on public education. He proposed cutting the real estate tax entirely. Mastriano suggested that instead of funding public school systems through real estate taxes, the state could just fund individual students instead through school voucher programs. The candidate appeared to insist that school voucher programs would be less expensive than funding public school institutions themselves, thus real estate taxes could be relieved. His proposal would cut school funding by $12.75 billion (Laughland, 2022).
Republican senators, representatives, governors, and other politicians have symbolically welded a secular critique of public education suggesting it fosters discrimination and is insufficient in properly educating all students with a religious critique that asserts public education is devoid of the traditional values that the nation was founded upon. Is this occurring because all Republicans are Christian nationalists? Most likely not. They are exploiting the symbols of Christian nationalism to achieve political gain.

Politics, in many ways, revolves around the art of storytelling (Braunstein, 2018). Stories about a nation’s past and its future “are marshaled by politicians and social movements alike to mobilize people to action” (Braunstein, 2018, 176). Much like how the leaders of the Christian nationalist movement galvanize individuals behind a deep story, Republican politicians have been seen to influence citizens based on the same grievances. A person’s deep story profoundly shapes and influences how individuals act in the political world (Braunstein, 2018). Republican politicians are aware of this fact and take advantage of it.

Christian nationalist leaders easily persuade grass-rooted individuals who feel marginalized in a culturally convulsing society. These constituents might not know any better than to accept the Christian nationalist version of history, or perhaps choose to ignore anything that disconfirms it. Even if the latter is true it doesn’t matter—they can get away with blind obedience and ignorance. However, politicians are the leaders of the country, they are required to know how to distinguish facts from myths. It would be reasonable to assume that many of them do, being that most are highly educated. Thus, it seems that unscrupulous, but nonetheless intelligent, Republicans use the ideology to
persuade individuals who lack political sophistication but are very well-versed in the story of Christian nationalism.

According to the Public Religion Research Institute, more than half of Republicans are either adherents or sympathizers of Christian nationalism (PRRI Staff, n.d.). I suggest that being an enthusiastic supporter of the Christian nationalist ideology serves numerous unique purposes for Republican politicians. For many, exploitation of the Christian nationalist identity is used to garner more votes. For others, it is simply a means to acquire money and more political control.

In the 2022 primary elections, for instance, Mastriano campaigned that America is a Christian nation, and further, that the separation of church and state is a “myth” (Rouse & Telhami, 2022). The GOP candidate appealed to a Christian constituency during his campaign claiming that the Democrats were trying to strip “cherished symbols of American history” from public schools (Sokolove, 2022). Mastriano surpassed the expectations of most when he beat the more moderate Republican candidates in the primaries. The candidate ended up losing to Democratic candidate Josh Shapiro in the midterms; however, other Republican politicians have succeeded in winning elections by appealing to the symbols of Christian nationalism. Colorado Republican Representative, Lauren Boebert, shared similar remarks to Mastriano during the 2022 elections. She implored that “The church is supposed to direct the government, the government is not supposed to direct the church” (Tyler, 2022). The Representative declared this two days before her primary election victory in 2022. Boebert then went on to win reelection in the midterms.
Furthermore, Hollinger (2020) explains how the Christian nationalists were “an indispensable foundation for Donald Trump’s presidency.” Leading up to his presidential win he garnered the attention of a disparaged white Christian constituency who felt they were an oppressed group in America. Trump appealed to their fear of marginalization and promised them he would “cleanse the national body by purging it of ethnocultural pollutants and sealing it off against future penetrations” (Gorski, 2017, 348). His campaign focused on those who felt cheated in society, and he won over their votes by insisting he would echo the “refrain that the United States is abdicating its Christian heritage” (Whitehead et al., 2018, 151). For instance, in 2016 Trump spoke to Religious Right activists at Faith and Freedom Coalition’s Road to Majority Conference in Washington, D.C. During his speech, he assured the audience full of Religious Right activists that “he was a champion for their cause and that he would protect them from the supposed ‘assault’ he claimed they faced prior to his administration taking office” (Holt, 2019). Trump also declared to the crowd that “Our rights don’t come from politicians, they come from the creator” (Holt, 2019). His message properly aligned him with a larger voter base who were dubious about the government infringing on their religious rights.

A study conducted by Andrew Whitehead, Samuel Perry, and Joseph Baker (2018) illustrates that voting for Trump in the 2016 presidential election was for many Americans influenced by a “symbolic defense of the United States’ perceived Christian heritage” (147). Voting for Trump was encouraged by a perceived threat to their identity. The authors’ study concluded that there is “strong evidence that Christian nationalism played an important role in predicting which Americans voted for Donald Trump”
(Whitehead et al., 2018, 164). And further, that the surprising victory of Trump can in part be explained by the support of such constituents.

Additionally, Trump strategically took advantage of the tradition of Christian nationalists to undermine public education during his presidency. His education policy was likely aimed at getting more support from this constituency. According to a 2020 Gallup Poll, 82% of registered voters consider education to be important to their presidential vote (Brenan, 2020). Thus, Trump used his administrative power to weaken federal oversight of public education and attract more support from a Christian coalition. He also dedicated his education policy to “reversing Obama’s commitment to civil and student rights in public schools” (Wong, 2020). The Trump administration undercut the rights of transgender students by restricting their activity in school sports (Wong, 2020). Additionally, Trump introduced the Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunity Act to “‘rescue’ students ‘trapped in failing government schools’” (Rhim, 2020). The act was promoted as expanding options to parents by granting funds to students that could be used toward attending any school, including religious and private institutions.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned exploitation of Christian nationalist symbols serves another purpose outside of winning voters. For many Republican politicians, this tactic is all about manufacturing power and acquiring monetary gain. The goals of the Republican party and its constituents have remained fairly consistent throughout the years. For one, they wish to transfer public money into private hands. They want to privatize Medicare, Social Security, prisons—and now, public schools. They also desire government deregulation. Regulations cost wealthy corporations time and limit their profits. And finally, they want to reduce taxes for the wealthy. With all this considered,
their alliance with Christian nationalists and their assault on public education is exactly what is required for the goals that they aligned themselves with.

When the government is underfunded, it will not perform its function properly. This underperformance, in turn, is used to “demonize the underfunded government efforts, and then make arguments that public money should be diverted into the private sector instead” (Leonard, 2023). Thus, private investment becomes preferred over enforcing high taxes. This tactic is exactly what is being employed by major Republican politicians with concern to the public education sector. They are demonizing public schools, insisting that they need improvement—whether educationally or religiously. They are sowing doubt in governmentally funded public schools, arguing that they are not properly educating American students. Then they are providing a solution that injects tax dollars into the private education sector. School voucher plans, for instance, leave public schools underfunded by redirecting tax dollars to private institutions. The politicians are sowing doubt into the governmental institutions and are putting public money into private sectors that nearly have no regulation.
CONCLUSION

The ideology of Christian nationalism is so persuasive because of the version of history it promotes. This version of history affords credibility to the ideology and those who adopt it because the followers can refer to the past to justify their grievances. This ability is particularly vital for many Americans who feel persecuted and marginalized in contemporary society. The ideology gives many Americans a sense of solidarity, a sense of personhood. However, it also perpetuates nativism and bigotry. Nonetheless, this ideology and its underpinnings of perceived victimhood and threats of cultural chauvinism have been continuously exploited by both Christian nationalist leaders and Republican politicians to pursue political or social agendas. Christian nationalist leaders want to undermine trust in the institutional arms of the government to make their dominion over a “Christian nation” more attainable. Republican politicians, similarly, demonize the government to undermine its authority. They want a country with a free-market economy and little regulation for a wealthy plutocratic class. The symbolic welding of Christian nationalism and modern republicanism has produced a pertinent and formidable relationship that drives a political movement.

The reader must not confuse this synthesis of republicanism and Christian nationalism as a product of a “conservative” movement. Although Christian nationalist leaders and Republicans promote so-called conservative values, this conjunction best defines a “radical” movement. The Christian nationalist movement is not a conservative one, it is radical and so too are many of the Republicans who have latched onto it. A true conservative movement, as Stewart (2019) explains, would “seek to preserve institutions of value that have been crafted over centuries of American history” (13-14). Christian
nationalists and now some Republicans, pretend to preserve and revive the “traditional values” of America, however these values contradict the nation’s democratic norms. Additionally, a genuine conservative movement would emphasize the importance of public education, and “the values of tolerance and mutual respect that have sustained our pluralistic society” (Stewart, 2019, 14). Yet, the Christian nationalist movement does not. The leaders flout the basic democratic tenets of national integrity, accountability, or legitimacy. They help pack the Courts to get the rulings they want and encourage gerrymandering schemes to help Republicans secure disproportionate legislative control (Stewart, 2019). They also undermine the public education sector through anti-intellectualism campaigns. Principally, conservative movements attempt to establish legitimate governmental institutions, the Christian nationalist movement works to break down the legitimacy and trust of these same institutions.

Modern republicanism and Christian nationalism’s attack on public education is as strategic as it is dangerous. If the American youth are taught Christian nationalist values, they will grow up to be the new foot soldiers of this movement; they will be carriers of tribal and nativist traditions. Infiltrating the public education sphere ensures that the fight to secure unabated hegemonic status for an ethno-specific populace will be furthered. These children have the potential to grow up and continue to advance an undermining of the U.S. Democracy. For lack of a better phrase, the Christian nationalists are playing the “long-game” when it comes to public education.

Additionally, undermining intellectualism and education is a powerful way to erode trust in governmental authority and the democratic norms of America. Public education plays a crucial role in supporting true American Democracy. For instance,
Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford Janey (2016) contend that public education is essential in preparing citizens to be active participants in a democracy. A constitutional system of checks and balances, as proclaimed by the Founders, was needed for the establishment of a legitimate democracy. However, the Founders also understood that having an educated populace to understand these precepts was key (Kahlenberg & Janey, 2016). The Founders insisted that there needed to be educated and intelligent voters “in order to discern serious leaders of high character from con men” (Kahlenberg & Clifford, 2016). Additionally, public education was intended to instill admiration for a liberal democracy and respect for the separation of powers and the rights for minorities.

Kahlenberg and Clifford present two ways that public education systems encourage children to assume the ingenuity of democracy—by telling them “explicitly,” or showing them “implicitly.” For instance, public education curricula should adopt rigorous courses on history to portray how constituents have used democracy to improve the country. Additionally, public schools must address how they teach their students; necessarily including practicing critical thinking skills with students. They also must necessarily include values that assure they are racially and economically inclusive.

Recently, however, the approach to education has shifted toward a market-based framework; and its curricula are lacking in the historical teachings of democratic norms. The Republicans have pushed a “new marketplace theory” of public education with the adoption of school vouchers. Moving toward school voucher schemes and charter schools “illustrate the education reform community’s shift away from a focus on democracy toward an emphasis on market-based policy” (Kahlenberg & Clifford, 2016). School choice and vouchers undermine trust in the democratic principles of the government.
while also promoting free-market ideals. Kahlenberg and Clifford (2016) assert that “we are seeing the costs of an unbalanced approach to public education that focuses on markets far more than democracy: dangerously low levels of civic knowledge, and a reduced faith in democratic values among Americans.”

Essentially, undermining public education is mutually beneficial for Christian nationalists and Republicans. The Christian nationalists complain that education is devoid of religion. An easy fix: school voucher programs. The Republicans want to loosen government regulation and promote free-market ideals. Once again, school vouchers provide the solution. They undermine government schools by defunding them. Underfunded public schools is another win for the Christian nationalists. The children of this nation will be indoctrinated not by secular liberal values taught in public schools, but quasi-religious authoritarian ones for they cannot go to the underfunded public schools. Furthermore, Republican politicians want to gain power through winning elections. This is possible with an uneducated voter base that will blindly follow their lead as their grievances are exploited. These individuals are ill-educated on civic responsibility because the Christian nationalists have gutted the schools of prominent history curricula. They rewrite history to promote a narrow vision of America that is devoid of education about other races and cultures. Just like fascist politics, the strength of the Christian nationalist movement can be traced back to a cyclical reinforcement of values. However, Christian nationalists have an important ally: the Republicans. The Christian nationalist movement, with the support of Republican politicians, work to undermine the fabric that the American republic is built on—principles of democracy.
The urgent question to be addressed is how democracy can be reintroduced into
public education. More broadly, what can be done to combat the Christian nationalist
movement?

Kahlenberg and Clifford (2016) offer some recommendations for re-integrating
democratic principles in education. In brief, a robust history curriculum is critical. Public
schools must necessarily include an in-depth social studies curriculum that provides a
“full and honest teaching of the American story” and an “unvarnished account of what
life has been and is like in nondemocratic societies” (Kahlenberg & Clifford, 2016).
Additionally, public education must provide students equitable access to educational
opportunities. This would entail placing limits on school voucher programs. Kahlenberg
and Clifford assert that “One key principle undergirding American democracy is that we
all have not only an equal vote in elections but also an equal right to feel a part of the
nation’s democratic heritage.” All people, regardless of their race, religion, or gender,
should be taught that they have equal claim to opportunities through the equal access of
teachings about the democratic principles of the nation.

This idealistic approach to educational reform, however, is just a band-aid over
the wound. While we must be unwavering advocates for strong and reformed public
schools whose curricula reflect an accurate account of American history, we must also
trace the assault on education to the original perpetrators to counteract this trend. The
most viable path, in my opinion, to neutralizing the Christian nationalist movement is
engaging with the followers through compassion. In the closing remarks of The Battle for
God, Karen Armstrong (2011) suggests that we must approach Christian nationalists
“more empathetically to the fears, anxieties and needs” which they face (674).
The ideology of Christian nationalism is deeply imbedded in many of the identities of Americans. The ideological roots of Christian nationalism strengthened and evolved throughout decades between pre-colonial America and contemporary America; and the ideology has the potential to grow more powerful if it is ignored or suppressed. Christian nationalism flourish when it goes unnoticed; the movement is more dangerous cloaked than it is publicly branded. When it goes unacknowledged it can attract more followers and grow more influential. Additionally, people in the movement already feel ignored, and choosing to ignore and overlook them encourages them to dig their heels in further. The mythos of Christian nationalism has been transformed into logos for Christian nationalists; thus, when they face contradicting values that make up the modern worldview, a “sense of estrangement and alienation is only exacerbated” (Armstrong, 2011, 668-689). The longer they are ignored the more they will feel like a marginalized group in America. With heightened senses of victimhood comes more opportunities for political exploitation; and furthers the distinction between white Christian Americans and everyone else. Essentially, ignoring Christian nationalists will reinforce and vindicate their already well-established grievances.

Additionally, suppression can “lead to a backlash and can make fundamentalist…more extreme” (Armstrong, 2011, 669). The ideology of Christian nationalism, as we have seen, is rooted in fear. Christian nationalists view a liberal American society as continually conspiring against them. Their actions are representative of the terror of growing “extinct” (Armstrong, 2011). It is not possible “to reason such fear away” or to subdue them through conquest (Armstrong, 2011, 670). We must try to understand the depth of this fear to escape a constant “spiral of hostility” between the
liberals and the Christian nationalists (Armstrong, 2011, 711). We must extend compassion and empathy toward the Americans who feel left behind. We must not ignore or diminishes the experiences of those in the movement.

Finally, we must give quality care for coastal elites who work to uphold the democratic principles of the nation. The coastal elites of America must have an armory of knowledge about Christian nationalism (how it manifests itself) and further, they must acknowledge and share that the myths it is built on are exactly that—myths. Coastal elites must be equipped with the resources, including financial support, to deter legislation based on anti-democratic principles. Yet, we must also give these elites resources to help those who have gotten stuck in the rural enclaves of America. Educated and professional peoples must be advocates for these individuals; however, they must firmly impress onto them that the version of Christianity in Christian nationalism is not an accurate reflection of the intended traditions of the faith.
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