

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-smear-campaign-against-christian-nationalists-faith-freedom-f3954994>

OPINION COMMENTARY [Follow](#)

The Smear Campaign Against 'Christian Nationalists'

The label is 'assigned' to Americans who believe there is a link between faith and freedom.

By Ralph Reed

May 5, 2024 12:01 pm ET



ILLUSTRATION: DAVID GOTHARD

House Speaker Mike Johnson stared down anti-Israel protesters at Columbia University last month and affirmed the nation's support for Jewish students. His remarks were sharp and unequivocal, a welcome contrast with university officials' hand-wringing and the Biden administration's feeble response to the antisemitism sweeping across the states.

Yet rather than give him credit, Democrats and the press for months have fixated on Mr. Johnson's background as a "Christian nationalist." The New Republic claimed he'd been "groomed by the Christian right" in "secretive circles" to "rule the United States according to 'biblical values.'" Robert Jones, president of the Public Religion Research Institute, described Mr. Johnson as "the embodiment of white Christian nationalism in a tailored suit."

A survey by the PRRI in February found that "three in ten Americans qualify as Christian nationalism adherents or sympathizers." National Public Radio warned that what was once a "fringe viewpoint" has gained a "foothold in American politics." It is difficult to imagine a more benign constituency than people who work hard, read the Bible, pray regularly and attend church weekly. Yet according to the liberal

narrative, there are millions of them, faithful Christians, disposed toward authoritarianism and political violence.

The PRRI survey shows how the notion of “Christian nationalism” is constructed. It asked a series of questions about their views, then “assigned” each respondent “a composite score” and corresponding group—“adherent,” “sympathizer,” “skeptic” and “rejecter.”

One question was whether they believed “U.S. laws should be based on Christian values.” Thirty-nine percent of Americans and 99% of Christian nationalist “adherents” agreed. A 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that nearly half of Americans believe the Bible should have some influence on U.S. laws. Are they extremists for sympathizing with such values as helping the poor, showing compassion for immigrants, and reforming the criminal-justice system?

The PRRI survey asked if our nation could survive “if the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations.” A negative answer could qualify one as a Christian nationalist. Suddenly one’s belief in the value of orthodox religious faith—which social science has found is strongly correlated with positive behaviors like marriage, child-rearing, charitable giving and volunteerism—is classified a threat to social stability and our constitutional order.

One could dismiss this overreaction as crass politics by an unpopular party eager to eke out an election victory by demonizing churchgoing Americans. The Democrats’ strategy of forcing abortion to the center of the 2024 campaign certainly makes pro-lifers convenient bogeymen. Yet it also underscores that the modern Democratic Party—which in 1976 nominated as its standard-bearer Jimmy Carter, the most explicitly evangelical president since Woodrow Wilson—is now so captured by secular progressivism that it views religious folks as alien and dangerous to the American experience.

It strikes me, however, that the slandering of evangelical Christians is more than a campaign strategy or proof of secularism’s triumph. Stripped of its academic jargon and pretense, it is a fashionable but insidious bigotry that seeks to marginalize and disqualify from our civic discourse tens of millions of Americans who take their faith seriously.

That is a new ethic and wholly antithetical to our nation’s history. Social protest in America has always mixed civic action with moral fervor. The idea that man-made laws that violate God’s law are inherently unjust prevailed in the civil-rights movement and served as the central theme of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail.” The same can be said for today’s pro-life movement.

Nearly every social-reform movement in U.S. history has been animated by faith and fueled by a sense of right and wrong. As historian Bernard Bailyn documented, the church pulpits that flamed with rebellion during the American Revolution contributed to the ideology of independence. The antislavery movement blossomed in the “burned over” soil of the Second Great Awakening, its uproarious revivals winning converts to Christianity and abolitionism. The pious women who led the temperance and suffragist movements smashed saloons, marched on state capitols, and sought the right to vote as part of a spiritual mission to defend their families.

Like their forebears, today’s conservative Christians make Americans grapple with vexing moral issues. We’re a better nation for their doing so. These faithful men and women don’t threaten our constitutional republic; they play a vital role in its survival and renewal. Rabbi Joshua Haberman was right when he observed that “the Bible belt is America’s safety belt.” It has always been so, and always will be.

Mr. Reed is founder and chairman of the Faith and Freedom Coalition.

Appeared in the May 6, 2024, print edition as 'The Smear Campaign Against 'Christian Nationalists''.