

# The MAGA Formula Is Getting Darker and Darker



By [Thomas B. Edsall](#)

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The chilling amalgam of Christian nationalism, white replacement theory and conspiratorial zeal — from [QAnon](#) to the “[stolen](#)” 2020 election — has attracted a substantial constituency in the United States, thanks in large part to the efforts of Donald Trump and his advisers. By some estimates, adherents of these overlapping movements make up as much as a quarter or even a third of the electorate. Whatever the scale, they are determined to restore what they see as the original racial and religious foundation of America.

“While these elements are not new,” [Robert Jones](#), chief executive of the Public Religion Research Institute, wrote by email, “Donald Trump wove them together and brought them out into the open. Indeed, the MAGA formula — the stoking of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment while making nativist appeals to the Christian right — could accurately be described as a white Christian nationalist strategy from the beginning.”

I asked [Katherine Stewart](#), the author of “[The Power Worshipers](#): Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism,” how much Christian nationalism and the great replacement theory intersect. “The answer is complex,” Stewart said. “There is definitely a wing of the Christian nationalist movement that overlaps with the Great Replacement theory and demographic paranoia in general.”

At the same time, however, she continued, “there are other wings of the movement that depend less on explicitly racialized thinking and whose concerns are centered more on religious and cultural paranoia. Christian nationalism is making significant inroads among some Latino communities, for example, and there the argument is not that a preferred racial group is being replaced but that a preferred religious and cultural value system (with supposed economic implications) is under threat.”

Instead of Christian nationalism, Stewart prefers the use of “religious nationalism,” which she describes as

a reactionary, authoritarian ideology that centers its grievances on a narrative of lost national greatness and believes in the indispensability of the “right” religion in recovering that lost greatness. This mind-set always involves a narrative of unjust persecution at the hands of alien or “un-American” groups. The specific targets may shift. Some focus their fears on the “homosexual agenda”; others target Americans of color or nonwhite immigrant groups; still others identify the menace with religious minorities such as Muslims, Jews and secular “elites,” or perceived threats against gender hierarchy and sexual order. And of course, many take an all-of-the-above approach.

According to some scholars, there are two versions of Christian nationalism, one more threatening to the social order than the other.

[Ruth Braunstein](#), a professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut and the author of the 2021 paper “[The ‘Right’ History](#): Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America,” wrote by email that Christian nationalism can be described

as adherence to a mythical vision of the United States as a “Christian nation” that must be protected and preserved. This mythology has two dimensions: it offers an account of American history that frames the country’s founding as sacred and rooted in Christian (or Judeo-Christian) values; and it defines a “real” or “good” American today as someone committed to these same values.

Within that context, Braunstein continued:

We can see how the great replacement theory overlaps with Christian nationalism. Both view some specific population as “real” Americans, whether that is defined explicitly as white Christians or in the more vague and coded language of “real” or “native born” or “legacy” Americans. And both frame demographic change as threats to both that population and to the country’s essential character. Finally, although not all flavors of Christian nationalism include a conspiratorial element, some versions share with replacement theory an imagined cabal of nefarious elites — often Jews, communists/socialists, or globalists — who are intentionally promoting racial and/or religious diversity in order to diminish white Christian power.

Braunstein distinguishes between two variants of Christian nationalism. One she calls “white Christian nationalism” and the other “colorblind Judeo-Christian nationalism.”

The first, according to Braunstein, “explicitly fuses whiteness, Christianity, and Americanness,” leading to the conclusion that “white Christians alone embody the values

on which a healthy democracy rests; and as such, white Christians alone are suited to hold positions of social influence and political power.”

In contrast, she continued, colorblind Judeo-Christian nationalism

either ignores race or uses colorblind language to describe ideal Americanness. This has become the predominant form of Christian nationalism among mainstream conservatives. And for many conservatives, like members of the Tea Party that I studied for several years, the invocation of colorblind Judeo-Christian nationalism is intended to distinguish them from groups on the racist right.

Why have Christian nationalism and replacement theory moved so quickly to center stage? Robert Jones of P.R.R.I. suggested it was “twin shocks to the system” delivered during the first two decades of this century: “the election and re-election of our first Black president and the sea change of no longer being a majority-white Christian nation.” Both of these developments, Jones wrote,

happened simultaneously between 2008 and 2016. White Christians went from 54 percent to 47 percent in that period, down to 44 percent today. This set the stage for Trump and the emergence of full-throated white Christian nationalism. Trump exchanged the dog whistle for the megaphone.

Racial and ethnic resentment has grown far beyond the political fringes, Jones argued, citing levels of agreement in P.R.R.I. polling with the statement “Immigrants are invading our country and replacing our cultural and ethnic background.” Among all voters, according to Jones, 29 percent believe that immigrants are invading our country; among Republicans, it’s 60 percent; among Democrats, 11 percent; among QAnon believers, 65 percent; among white evangelicals, 50 percent; and among white non-college voters, as pollsters put it, 43 percent.

Not only that, Jones notes:

White Americans who agree that “God has granted America a special role in human history” (a softer measure of Christian nationalism) are more than twice as likely as those who disagree with that statement to believe that “true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country” (28 percent vs. 11 percent). And White Americans who agree that “God intended America to be a promised land for European Christians” (a harder measure of Christian nationalism) are four times as likely as those who disagree with that statement to believe that “true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country” (43 percent vs. 10 percent). And white Americans who believe that “Immigrants are invading our country and replacing our cultural and ethnic values” are more than five times as likely as those who disagree with

that statement to believe that “true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country” (45 percent vs. 8 percent).

In their January 2022 paper, “[Christian Nationalism and Political Violence](#): Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks,” [Miles T. Armaly](#) of the University of Mississippi and [David T. Buckley](#) and [Adam M. Enders](#), both of the University of Louisville, argue: “Religious ideologies like Christian nationalism should be associated with support for violence, conditional on several individual characteristics that can be inflamed by elite cues.” Those characteristics are “perceived victimhood, reinforcing racial and religious identities, and support for conspiratorial information sources.”

“It’s unlikely that a single orientation or one belief was promoting the type of violent action we witnessed in [Buffalo](#) or the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021,” Enders wrote by email. “It’s a toxic blend of extremist orientations, such as Christian nationalism, racism, some expressions of populism and conspiracism, for example, that edges individuals closer to supporting violence.”

Enders went on:

Christian nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, are all about identity conflict — who is morally virtuous and more deserving, who’s “normal” and even what it means to be an American. Each of these orientations is also characterized by an extreme disdain or fear of the “other.” One might look to Christianity for deeper ties between the orientations, but I think the reality is that conspiracy-minded individuals, like the accused Buffalo shooter, can find connections between anything. He saw America as a white, heterosexual, Christian country that was becoming less white, heterosexual, and Christian, thereby threatening (his perception of) the American way of life, which was his way of life. But, racism, sexism, etc. do not have any inherent connection to a desire to build a Christian nation-state.

In a [separate](#) paper, Enders wrote that he and other scholars [have found](#) that

conspiracy theories, of which great replacement theory is an example, are oftentimes undergirded by antisocial personality traits, such as the dark triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) and a predisposition toward conflict. If you combine all of these dispositions and traits and dial them up to 10, that’s when you’re most likely to find support for violence, which is correlated with (but not determinative of) behavioral violence.

Armaly wrote by email that “between 25-32 percent of white Americans support some Christian nationalist ideas. We use six questions to assess the degree to which one supports Christian nationalist ideals,” including agreement or disagreement with “the

federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation” and “the success of the United States is part of God’s plan.” Around 32 percent of respondents endorse at least four statements, Armaly wrote, “and 25 percent endorse at least five statements.”

Armaly noted that of “the major predictors of support for violence — perceived victimhood, attachment to one’s whiteness, racial animus toward blacks, support for authoritarianism, support for populism, and past or current military service — all, save for military service, are present in the accused Buffalo shooter’s [written statement](#).”

Buckley wrote by email that

6 percent of whites, 11.5 percent of white evangelicals, and 17.7 percent of white weekly churchgoers fall into the joint top quartile of justification of violence, Christian nationalist beliefs, perceived victimhood, white identity, and support for QAnon. That would represent millions of individuals. It also represents a far greater share of the white American population than surveys find when testing Muslim-American support for terrorism.

Christian nationalism, white replacement theory and conspiracy preoccupation overlap, although each has unique characteristics.

On May 9, The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research released an illuminating study, [“Immigration Attitudes and Conspiratorial Thinkers,”](#) based on 4,173 interviews with adults age 18 and over, which breaks down some of the components of hard-line thinking on the right.

The A.P. and NORC created two categories, “high conspiratorial thinkers” and “low conspiratorial thinkers,” based on agreement or disagreement with four statements:

1) events are the product of plots executed in secret, 2) events are directed by a small group of powerful people, 3) (those people) are unknown to voters and 4) (they) control the outcome of big events like wars, recessions, and elections. The top 25 percent were placed in the high conspiracy category and the remaining 75 percent in the low conspiracy category.

Comparison of the two categories of conspiratorial thinkers revealed sharp differences, according to the report:

Seven times as many high conspiratorial thinkers agree that our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places (85 percent vs. 11 percent) and that big events like wars and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people working in secret (89 percent vs. 13 percent) than their low conspiratorial counterparts.

High conspiratorial thinkers believe the people who run the country are not known to the voters at triple the rate of the rest of the general population (94 percent vs. 31 percent), and they are about twice as likely to agree that a few people will always run the country (96 percent vs. 48 percent).

Among those ranked high in conspiratorial thinking, 42 percent agreed that there is a group of people trying to replace native-born Americans and that native-born Americans are losing economic, political and cultural influence to immigrants, compared with 8 percent of low conspiracy thinkers.

In the case of white replacement theory, the report asked two questions: “There is a group of people in this country who are trying to replace native-born Americans with immigrants who agree with their political views” (agree or disagree), and “How concerned are you that native-born Americans are losing their economic, political, and cultural influence in this country because of the growing population of immigrants?”

The survey found significant patterns in cable news choice among those who believe in both the questions measuring Replacement Theory. Belief in Replacement Theory is much higher among OANN/Newsmax viewers (45 percent) and Fox News viewers (31 percent) than it is among CNN (13 percent) or MSNBC viewers (11 percent).

Who are the people who fall into the high conspiracy theory category? “Nearly 6 in 10 white high conspiratorial thinkers identify as Republicans,” the report says, “and more than half voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election.” Based on the racial resentment scale, the survey found that 55 percent of white high conspiratorial thinkers score in the top 25th percentile of racial resentment, compared with 21 percent of white low conspiratorial thinkers.

[Samuel Perry](#), a sociologist at the University of Oklahoma who has written extensively about Christian nationalism with [Andrew Whitehead](#), a sociologist at Indiana University, observed in an email that “there is tremendous overlap between Christian nationalism and The Great Replacement theory.”

Perry and Whitehead have found:

White Americans who affirm Christian nationalist views are quite concerned with whites losing their majority status in the United States. They are also very concerned with low birthrates and believe that we need to return to a day when Americans had more babies. This is related to their fears of immigration and cultural change. White Christian nationalism is also powerfully related with views that true patriots may need to resort to

physical violence to save the nation, because they believe the current situation has become so dire.

Whitehead elaborated in his own email:

Racism is intimately intertwined with white Christian nationalism, and so the great replacement theory is a part of that intersection. We find in study after study that when white Americans strongly embrace Christian nationalism — an ethno-religious political ideology that advocates a close fusion between a particular expression of Christianity and American civic life — they are more likely to (1) fear a time in the future where whites are no longer the majority, (2) oppose interracial marriage, (3) oppose transracial adoption, (4) assume Black Americans are biologically inferior, (5) believe police violence toward Black Americans is warranted, and (6) show more tolerance for “old-fashioned racists” compared to other stigmatized groups.

[Joseph Baker](#), a sociologist at East Tennessee State University who together with Perry and Whitehead wrote the paper “[Keep America Christian \(and White\)](#): Christian Nationalism, Fear of Ethnoracial Outsiders, and Intention to Vote for Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election,” noted:

Christian nationalist views and xenophobia are very highly [correlated](#) with one another. Specifically, when Americans score highly on a comprehensive measure of xenophobia that includes perceptions of racial, economic, criminal, and cultural threat from immigrants, they nearly always also scored highly on a measure of Christian nationalism.

Baker cited a [statement](#) issued in the summer of 2019 by [James Dobson](#), the founder of Focus on the Family, after Dobson visited the Mexican American border.

Dobson’s statement:

I can only report that without an overhaul of the law and the allocation of resources, millions of illegal immigrants will continue flooding to this great land from around the world. Many of them have no marketable skills. They are illiterate and unhealthy. Some are violent criminals. Their numbers will soon overwhelm the culture as we have known it, and it could bankrupt the nation. America has been a wonderfully generous and caring country since its founding. That is our Christian nature. But in this instance, we have met a worldwide wave of poverty that will take us down if we don’t deal with it. And it won’t take long for the inevitable consequences to happen.

Estimates of the number of Christian nationalists in this country vary widely. Baker wrote that “using a multi-item measure of whether people want to see Christianity privileged in political and public spheres, a [good estimate](#) is that about 20 percent of Americans are



Christian nationalists, and another 25 percent or so are at least sympathetic to some aspects of these views.”

Despite these high numbers, Baker argues, the percentage of [Christian nationalists is declining](#) as a proportion of the overall population, “along with white Protestantism more generally,” which may increase the likelihood of violent protests.

The decline, Baker wrote,

is helping to fuel the renewed fervor with which we are witnessing efforts to impose Christian nationalism. Because these views are necessarily rooted in perceptions of cultural threat, declining numbers further stoke the persecution complex that motivates Christian nationalism. So Christian nationalism’s numeric decline and cultural resurgence are, ironically, directly connected.

This “cultural resurgence” and the political clout that comes with it will do nothing to diminish their ambition to restore an imagined past, by any means necessary.