

## OPINION

# Why Do Christian Nationalists Sound So Much Like the KKK?

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It's becoming increasingly obvious: Christian nationalists sound uncannily like the Ku Klux Klan. In a video compilation, *The Daily Show* spotlighted the nearly identical language and views of Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), Lauren Boebert (R-CO), Tucker Carlson, and former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke. America, they believe, is a Christian nation that must stop "white replacement."

And today's white Christian nationalism is just like yesterday's. Rachel Maddow recently shined a light on America First Party founder Gerald K. Smith, specifically his 1950s statement, "When a Christian is nationalist, he becomes necessarily a Christian nationalist." Similarly, in July of this year, Greene rallied Republicans, "We need to be the party of nationalism. And I'm a Christian, and I say it proudly. We should be Christian nationalists."

Maddow then revealed Smith's claims of a "highly organized campaign to substitute Jewish tradition for Christian tradition," of secretive forces trying to "enslave the white man" and "mongrelize our race" through "the intermixture of the black and white races."

Despite being informed of Smith's hate, Greene has only further embraced the "Christian nationalist" label. A few days after the Maddow segment aired, Greene released a "Proud Christian Nationalist" T-shirt. The accompanying ad shows her clenching her fists, eager to inflict violence—just as the Christian nationalist insurrectionists did on Jan. 6, 2021.

That same month, another self-proclaimed Christian nationalist, Andrew Torba (CEO of Gab and a former consultant for Republican gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano) said Jews aren't welcome in the GOP: "This is an explicitly Christian movement because this is an explicitly Christian country."

At its very core, Christian nationalism is a hateful, exclusionary ideology. It posits that America was, is, and must remain a Christian conservative nation, even if that means subjugating Jews, progressive Christians, atheists, Muslims, polytheists, and other groups white Christian nationalists place low in their hierarchy: people of color, LGBTQ people, women, and immigrants.

Torba, Greene, and Boebert are constantly saying this quiet part out loud, as they revel in their hate. Following a "white replacement" theory-inspired mass murder of 10 Black victims, Greene downplayed white supremacy as a problem. She even attended a white supremacist conference and, when challenged on it, doubled down. Boebert, for her part, engages in casual anti-Muslim and antisemitic bigotry, among other racist rhetoric. "Yes, there is definitely a replacement theory that's going on right now," she has said.

Meanwhile, the more secretive flank of the movement is panicking. They want to keep their immorality under wraps and are attempting damage control. On Oct. 12, the Christian nationalist Family Research Council (FRC) held a conference centered around the term "Christian nationalism"

and how it's making them look bad. Because that's what they care about: optics.

"Over the last year, for the first time, Christians have started coming out and embracing the label of 'Christian nationalist' — Marjorie Taylor Greene for one. We should not embrace it," George Fox University professor Mark David Hall said at the event. "We should just simply identify ourselves as Christians. We are Christians. We are followers of Christ."

It's unsurprising that FRC wants to avoid the expression, "Christian nationalist." This hate group constantly traffics in coded language; to them, the word "family" means anti-LGBTQ and "life" means anti-abortion. Tony Perkins, FRC's president, no longer associates—at least openly—with David Duke and the white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens, which inspired shooter Dylann Roof to kill nine Black churchgoers. Recently, Perkins' secretive organization declared itself a church to hide its finances and extremist donors from the public eye. They want to turn America into a theocracy from behind the scenes.

Just like FRC, disgraced Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, founder of a Christian nationalist militia camp, has bristled at the label. "A lot of people hear your rhetoric, and they say you are a Christian nationalist. Are you?" he was asked during an interview. "What is that? I'm an Irish Catholic. I'm a follower of Jesus," he responded, channeling Hall's words.

This isn't the first time white Christian nationalists have tried to rebrand as normal, everyday Christians. In 2018, extremist bills flooded state legislatures. Activists were wondering what was going on. That year, journalist Frederick Clarkson uncovered the Christian nationalist campaign Project Blitz and its model-bill guide on the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation's website. Immediately understanding this campaign's importance, he published his findings.

Just like Greene and Boebert, the masterminds of Project Blitz delight in white supremacist imagery. The Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation,

David Barton's Wallbuilders, and the National Legal Foundation were clearly thinking of Nazi Germany's Blitzkrieg when they came up with the campaign name. And, indeed, Project Blitz's goal has been to pump out as many state bills as possible at breakneck speed, preventing lawmakers and activists from opposing them all.

Project Blitz's guide instructs Christian nationalist lawmakers to ramp up in three phases:

1. Pass "religious heritage" bills—including mandatory "In God We Trust" school displays—which are expected to receive the least opposition;
2. Pass "religious history and freedom" bills—"Year of the Bible" and "Christian Heritage Week"—which purport that America was, is, and will always be a Christian nation;
3. Build off the momentum from the previous stages to pass bills that greenlight discrimination in the name of religion.

To fight Project Blitz's legislative playbook, a collection of secular, religious, LGBTQ, and reproductive rights organizations joined forces and formed the BlitzWatch Coalition.<sup>\*</sup> So much bad press kept following the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation that the organization scrubbed the campaign from its website and went underground. There was even an attempt at a rebranding to "Freedom for All," but this failed miserably; investigative journalists, organizations, and activists would not let it off the hook.

During the midterms, Project Blitz has found new relevance. Arizona gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake (R) tried to directly benefit from an "In God We Trust" bill. In 2018, Katie Hobbs (D) voted against SB 1289, which encourages schools to teach and post the Christian nationalist mottos "In God We Trust" and "*Ditat Deus*" ("God Enriches"). One would have expected Lake to portray her opponent as "anti-religion," as Christian nationalist politicians have done in the past. But unfortunately for her, she

misread the law and falsely claimed on social media, "[Hobbs] wants to purge the Pledge, Anthem & Constitution from our schools." Even the conservative *Washington Examiner* called her out.

A campaign like Project Blitz provides white Christian nationalists the opportunity to paint their opponents as "anti-faith" — without most people understanding the source of these bills and their intention: build momentum to eliminate church-state separation and overturn laws protecting equality for women, religious minorities, people of color, and LGBTQ people.

What do Project Blitz and FRC have in common? These are two of many shadowy groups pushing policies to erect a Christian state. They want to continue to operate under cover of darkness because that is the only way they can enact their deeply unpopular agenda.

Investigative journalists like Frederick Clarkson, Katherine Stewart, and Anne Nelson continue to monitor and report on these secretive groups. But the media as a whole must shine a brighter spotlight on this coordinated Christian nationalist network.

Sure, Greene might be more in your face. But these groups, left unaddressed, may prove even deadlier to our democracy. They're the ones pulling the strings in the background. As Clarkson has put it, "[S]unlight remains the best disinfectant.

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*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*