

THE MYTH OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALIST VIOLENCE

Bill Donohue

As a sociologist and a Catholic advocate, I am quite interested in the left-wing accusation that Christian nationalists are a violent-ridden threat to America. Those who make this charge are mostly academics and activists. I was skeptical about their claim, so I decided to fact check their work.

I am no longer skeptical: I am convinced these people are not only frauds—their goal is to demonize conservative Christian activists.

Christian nationalists are defined by their critics as those who seek to integrate Christianity and American civic life.

Perhaps the most prominent person floating this charge is Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC) and lead organizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism. A while ago I read the testimony she gave in October, 2023 before the U.S. House Oversight Committee's Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs.

This prompted me to email Christians Against Christian Nationalism, asking them to provide me with the evidence that Christian nationalism “inspires acts of violence and intimidation.”

They wrote back referencing Tyler's October 25, 2023 testimony and her written testimony on December 13, 2022 before the House Oversight Committee's Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties.

The following analysis is based on the two testimonials.

In Tyler's testimony in 2023, she says, "The greatest threat to religious liberty in the United States today...is Christian nationalism." Such a sweeping statement would ordinarily be peppered with one example after another. She provides none. She simply makes an assertion, providing no evidence.

Her testimony in 2022 offers some examples to support her thesis about the violence of Christian nationalists.

The first example she mentions occurred in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. Dylann Storm Roof shot and killed 9 people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. By all accounts, he was a seriously disturbed neo-Nazi who wanted to start a race war. But there is no evidence that he was a Christian nationalist.

Roof came from a troubled home. When he was born, his divorced parents got back together for a while, but it didn't last. His father remarried and allegedly beat his new wife, before getting divorced once again.

Roof dropped out of school, spending most of his time taking drugs, getting drunk and playing video games. He was busted twice for narcotics. He was also known for burning the American flag.

No one doubts he was a racist. But no one ever accused him of being a Christian nationalist.

The second example cited by Tyler was the tragic Tree of Life Synagogue mass shooting in Pittsburgh in 2018. Robert Gregory Bowers killed 11 people and wounded six. It was the deadliest attack on any Jewish community in the nation's history.

His parents divorced when he was a year old. His father committed suicide while awaiting trial on a rape charge. Like Roof, Bowers was a disturbed racist and a right-wing nut. But

no one who knew him ever said he was a Christian nationalist.

The third and fourth incidents mentioned by Tyler took place at Christchurch mosque in New Zealand on March 15, 2019. Brenton Harrison Tarrant was charged with 51 counts of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder, and one count of committing a terrorist act.

His parents separated when he was a young boy and his home was destroyed by a fire. When his mother remarried, he went to live with her and her husband. The new husband beat her (Brenton's mom), Brenton, and his sister.

Brenton left home and went to live with his father. That didn't work out: Brenton found his father dead by suicide. Those who knew him, which were only a few, said he was disturbed but none ever described him as a Christian nationalist.

The fifth example cited was a shooting that took place in 2019 at Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, California. John Timothy Earnest shot and killed one woman and injured three other persons. In an open letter that he wrote prior to the shooting, he said Jews were plotting to kill the European race.

Earnest was an evangelical. Church members were split on whether his religious beliefs had anything to do with his shooting rampage. There is no evidence that he identified as a Christian nationalist, nor is there evidence that he was branded as such by those who knew him.

The sixth killing spree took place at Tops Supermarket in Buffalo, New York in 2022; it is located in a predominantly black neighborhood. Payton S. Gendron shot and killed 10 black people.

He was a classic loner. His father was an alcoholic and a drug addict for 40 years, resulting in the demise of two marriages.

Gendron had no friends and was known to wear a hazmet suit in the classroom.

He was fascinated by violence, even to the point of bragging how he stabbed his own cat and then smashed the animal's head on concrete. He finished the cat with a hatchet.

Not only was he not a Christian nationalist, he wasn't even a Christian. Tyler concedes this point but nonetheless lists him as a Christian nationalist. This proves how desperate she is to make her case.

The seventh and last incident—the January 6, 2021 Capitol debacle—is labeled by Tyler as “an insurrection.” It was not. Insurrections involve the overthrow of the government. This was a rally that turned into a riot. The only person killed that day was an unarmed female veteran, shot by a cop. Security were shown on camera opening the doors of the Capitol to the protesters. Not exactly standard insurrectionist fare.

Most of Tyler's claims were just that—assertions. They were not evidentiary. Her central thesis is that “The greatest threat to religious liberty in the United States today...is Christian nationalism.”

“Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection” is a report sponsored by BJC and the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), a notorious anti-Christian atheist organization. It was published in 2022.

There are seven chapters in the Report, all supposedly chock full of evidence that the riot was a Christian nationalist event. Yet the first three chapters are merely a commentary on Christian nationalism, and don't even attempt to tie the violence at the Capitol to it. Of the other four chapters, two were written by Andrew Seidel, an attorney who works for FFRF.

Katherine Stewart is an author and investigative journalist. Here is the first sentence in her chapter: “By now, most

Americans understand that Christian nationalism played a role in last year's violent attack on the Capitol." She cites not a single source. It is simply an unsupported assertion. This is the extent of her "evidence."

Seidel wrote chapters five and six. Chapter five covers events leading up to January 6, and chapter 6 claims to provide evidence that the riot was of Christian nationalist origin.

Chapter five says there were two violent Christian nationalist episodes leading up to January 6: one occurred on November 14, 2020; the other occurred on December 12, 2020.

Seidel argues that after supporters of President Trump rallied on November 14, "violence erupted in D.C." It did. But the source he cites from the *Washington Post* simply says that Trump supporters clashed with counterdemonstrators. So what? The news story says not a word about Christian anything.

The December 12 incident saw another nighttime clash between the two factions. The source he cites notes that the Proud Boys, a right-wing group that supports Trump, was involved. They were. What Seidel doesn't mention is that four of them were stabbed.

Chapter six begins by saying that Paula White, one of Trump's spiritual advisors, delivered "an explicitly Christian nationalist and openly militant prayer." What was it? "Blessed is the nation whose God is Lord" (Psalm 33:12). That was it.

Other "evidence" that the riot was a Christian nationalist event include statements by Katrina Pierson, a Trump campaign spokesperson. She said, Trump "loves the United States of America. He loves God." Ergo, this is an invitation to Christian nationalist violence.

Seidel also says that some people carried a cross and a Christian flag, and some were even spotted singing "God Bless America." More evidence that this was a Christian nationalist

event was the sighting of men blowing shofars. A shofar is a Jewish musical instrument—not exactly a prop used by violent Christian nationalists.

Tyler wraps up the Report with similar “evidence.” Signs such as “In God We Trust” are considered proof that Christian nationalists were on a tear. She says that as the violence took place, something curious happened: Christian leaders who condemned it “for the most part did not name Christian nationalism as a contributing or driving factor.” I wonder why.

There are some positive signs that the false alarms about Christian nationalism are taking a toll on those responsible for sounding them.

In July, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley gave a speech before a friendly audience noting that “some will now say that I’m calling America a Christian nation.” With confidence, he said, “So I am.”

This was encouraging because Hawley sent a message to militant secular zealots that he will not be put on the defensive. Indeed, he is proud to defend the idea that America is rooted in the Christian faith, and that our society is best served by following its tenets.

We can have a nation based on secular values or Christian values. The former celebrates the perverse notion that everyone is entitled to his own sense of morality. The latter maintains that without a moral consensus, ideally anchored in our Judeo-Christian heritage, we are ensuring that moral destitution rules the day.

At bottom critics of Christian nationalism have a problem with America. The Founding Fathers were adamant in their conviction that a free society was dependent on the kinds of values that inhere in Christianity. In 1892, the Supreme Court even acknowledged that “We are a Christian nation.” In 1952,

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, a liberal, wrote that "We are a religious people whose constitution presupposes a Supreme Being."

Were all these famous Americans out to shove Christian teachings down the throats of the masses? Only those who want to upend Christianity think this way.

No doubt there are crazies who fit the label "Christian nationalist." But if those who make a living off of selling the idea that Christian nationalists are a violent-ridden threat to America, and they can't provide convincing evidence, then they are frauds. Worse, accusing Christians of bomb threats and arson—absent any proof—makes *them* a bona fide threat to America.