

THE DANGERS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

The threat to the church &
democracy

- ▶ “Our Christian faith is too expansive to be defined by any national identity – even a nation as beloved as America – and our embrace of American values of equality and inclusion are too profound to privilege any religion, even one as beloved as Christianity.”
- ▶ - *Bishop W. Darin Moore, Presiding Prelate, Mid-Atlantic Episcopal District of the AME Zion Church*

THE DANGER OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM



- ▶ “Christian nationalism is the single biggest threat to religious freedom in America.” – *Amanda Tyler, Executive Director, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Freedom*

THE DANGER OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM



- ▶ The founders ensured our freedom of religion in the First Amendment of the Constitution. They declared that our government cannot establish a religion, and that every religion can be freely exercised.

AMERICA'S PROMISE: FREEDOM OF RELIGION



- ▶ The First Amendment says that all religions are equal; the government has no favorites. Regardless of where people worship – in a cathedral, mosque, synagogue, church or temple – all religions enjoy the same status and protection in the eyes of the government.

AMERICA'S PROMISE: FREEDOM OF RELIGION

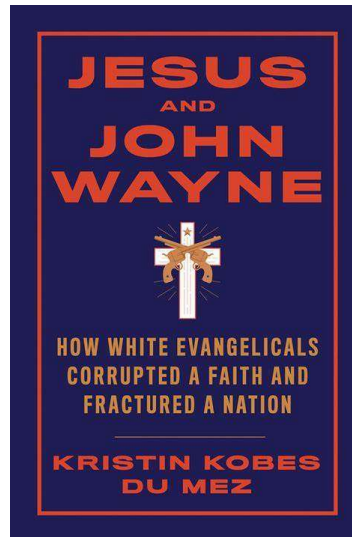
WHAT IS CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?

- ▶ Christian Nationalism is a movement whose followers advocate a particular brand of Christianity, which they believe is superior to other religions.



DIANA BUTLER BASS

▶ Christian Nationalism is a recurring ethic-religious crusade for white Protestants to maintain power and control over others.



A CERTAIN KIND OF MASCULINE DOMINANCE HOLDS THE HIGHEST PLACE IN THE HIERARCHY OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM (JOHN WAYNE)

- ▶ Ronald Reagan
- ▶ Oliver North
- ▶ Mel Gibson
- ▶ Duck Dynasty

America is God's
chosen nation

America was
established as a
Christian nation

Christianity is
woven into the
fabric of America

Governments
should make laws
to keep America
Christian

Christianity should
be privileged
above other
religions

Christian symbols
should be
dominant in
public places

KEY BELIEFS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

- ▶ A small minority of Christians, mostly white, hold these beliefs. Some of them decry the waning influence of their views on Christianity in American life and what they see as the increasing persecution of Christians.
- ▶ Some fear being outnumbered by non-white people.
- ▶ Christian nationalism gives extremist groups a license for bigotry and violence.
- ▶ Some politicians exploit its sentiments for political gain.
- ▶ For others, it is a genuine, heartfelt conviction.

FEAR-DRIVEN FAITH

What Bass refers to as “providential history” reinforces this understanding of America’s role in the world

Christian Nationalism intersects with:

- Capitalism
- Isolationism
- Populism
- Trumpism
- Far-right extremism
- Racism
- Antisemitism
- Islamophobia
- Homophobia
- Xenophobia
- misogyny

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM & ITS STRANGE BEDFELLOWS



- ▶ This mythic understanding of American history is grounded in the Protestant roots of the nation's founding
- ▶ Protestantism is grounded in the precepts of individual liberty, conscience, and morality
- ▶ Some have attempted to create Christian societies in America's history: The Puritans, the Mormons, liberal Protestants
- ▶ The impulse is part of America's spiritual DNA

ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

- ▶ The “Christian” in Christian Nationalism is anything but orthodoxy
- ▶ “Christian” in this context means an ethno-cultural and political identity that denotes:
 - ▶ A specific religious affiliation (evangelical Protestant)
 - ▶ Cultural values (conservative)
 - ▶ Race (white)
 - ▶ Nationality (American-born citizen)

FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

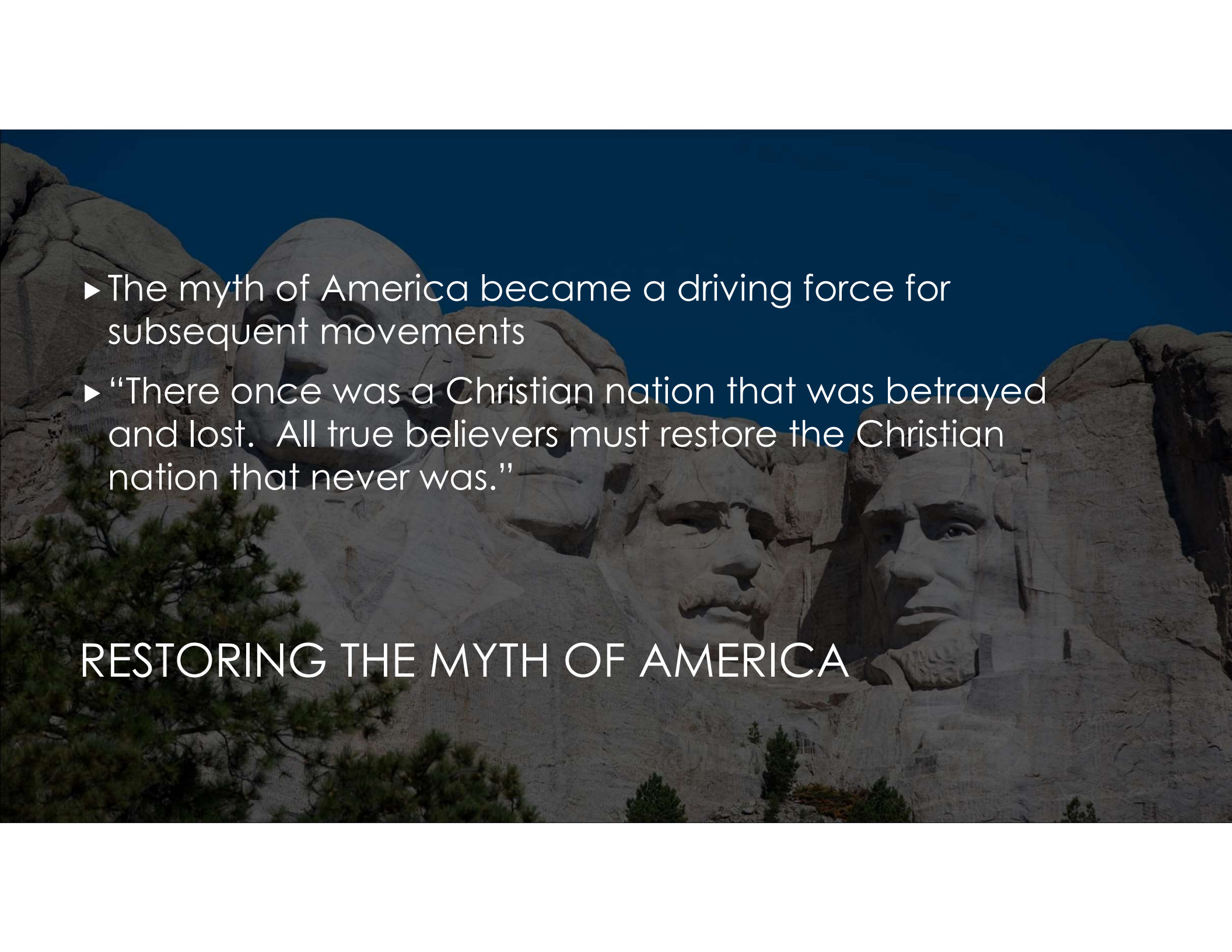
CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM WITH FASCIST POTENTIAL

- ▶ An ideology built on reference to a mythic past
- ▶ Populist support for strongman demagogues
- ▶ A culture of anti-intellectualism, anti-science, and anti-education
- ▶ An ideology that views social hierarchies as normal and necessary
- ▶ Idealization of patriarchal families
- ▶ Peace maintained by authoritarian “law & order” tactics
- ▶ Strongly pro-nativist/anti-pluralism
- ▶ Foments cultural anxiety about sexual deviance
- ▶ Pervasive victim mentality



- ▶ Gerald L. K. Smith (1898-1976) American clergyman, politician and organizer
- ▶ Known for his populist and far-right demagoguery
- ▶ Founded the Christian Nationalist Crusade in 1942
- ▶ Founded the America First Party in 1943
- ▶ Alleged KKK member
- ▶ A preeminent white supremacist and antisemite
- ▶ Built the Christ of the Ozarks statue in Eureka Springs, Arkansas
- ▶ In 1935 he told a reporter that he might “duplicate the feat of Adolph Hitler in Germany”

GERALD L. K. SMITH, FOUNDER OF MODERN CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

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- The background of the slide is a photograph of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. The four large granite faces of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln are visible against a clear blue sky. The image is slightly dimmed to allow the text to be read clearly.
- ▶ The myth of America became a driving force for subsequent movements
 - ▶ “There once was a Christian nation that was betrayed and lost. All true believers must restore the Christian nation that never was.”

RESTORING THE MYTH OF AMERICA



- ▶ Jemar Tisby writes that this world-view is all that most evangelicals in America know, referring to it as an “epistemological eco-system”
- ▶ This idea is reinforced in churches where U.S. flags grace the pulpit
- ▶ Pastors trained in conservative Bible colleges & seminaries
- ▶ Print materials from evangelical publishers, e.g., David Barton’s Wall Builders

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AMONG THE EVANGELICALS

- ▶ In the 1950s, Billy Graham began to conflate being a good Christian with being a good American
- ▶ In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement created questions about the nature of American society. The Civil Rights Movement also gave America's enemies, like the Soviet Union, ammunition to criticize American hypocrisy
- ▶ In the 1970s, evangelicals were reeling in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Labor Movement, the sexual revolution, the rise of feminism, the Vietnam War, and increasing social diversity
- ▶ Evangelicals felt once-Christian America was becoming Sodom and Gomorrah

RISE OF THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT





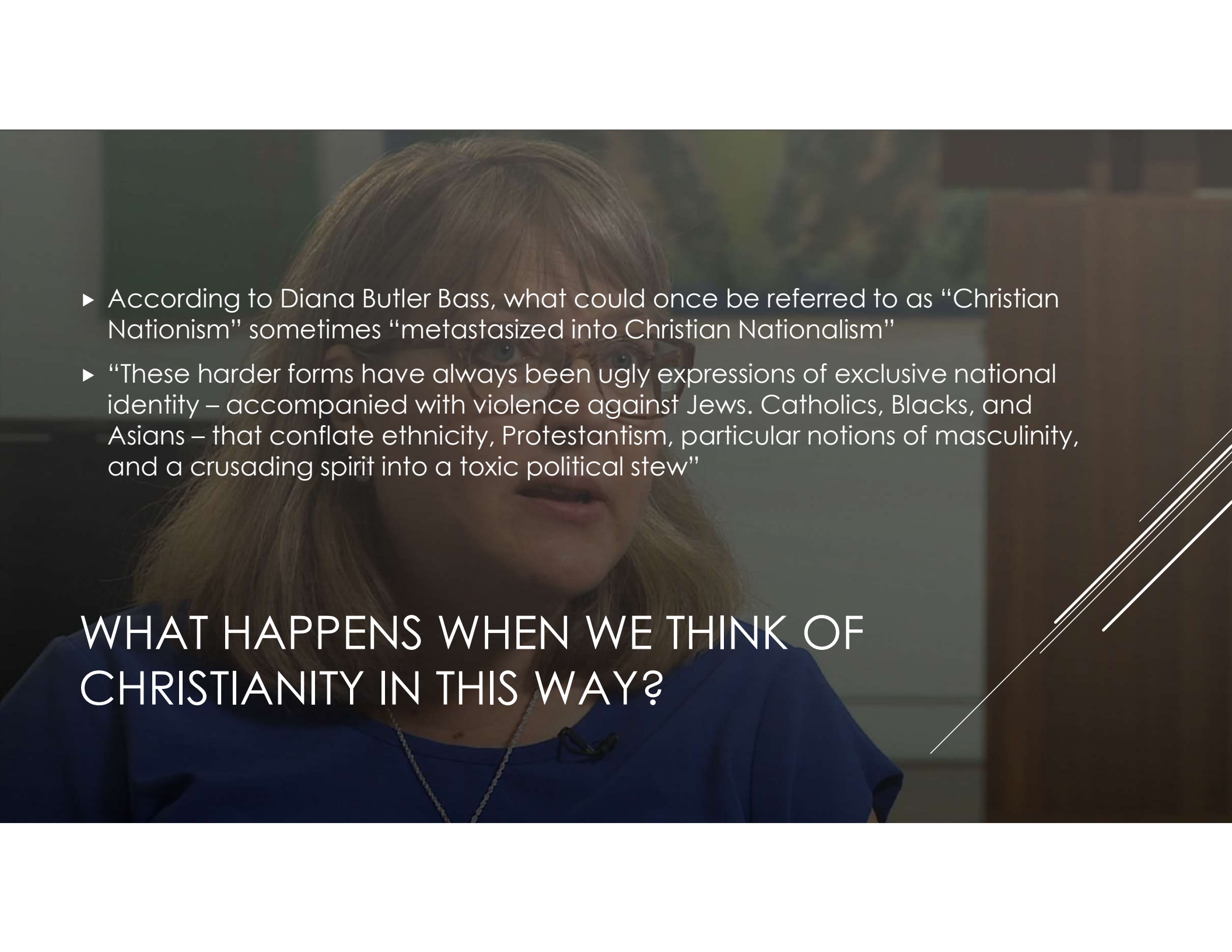
- ▶ These fears led to the rise of the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, and the Tea Party Movement
- ▶ “Traditional family values” became part of the coded language of religious and cultural exclusivity
- ▶ Fears increased in light of the “browning” of America
- ▶ Fears were seemingly confirmed with the election of the first African American President, Barack Obama

A CHANGING AMERICA



EVANGELICAL BACKLASH

- ▶ This angst among evangelicals and whites resulted in the election of Donald Trump in 2016
- ▶ Trump was seen as a champion of the white conservative right and by extension, of Christian Nationalism
- ▶ Trump openly courted white supremacists and far-right extremists
- ▶ He was uncritically endorsed by prominent evangelical leaders like Franklin Graham, Paula White, John MacArthur, and others

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- ▶ According to Diana Butler Bass, what could once be referred to as “Christian Nationism” sometimes “metastasized into Christian Nationalism”
 - ▶ “These harder forms have always been ugly expressions of exclusive national identity – accompanied with violence against Jews, Catholics, Blacks, and Asians – that conflate ethnicity, Protestantism, particular notions of masculinity, and a crusading spirit into a toxic political stew”

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE THINK OF
CHRISTIANITY IN THIS WAY?



BAD POLITICS, BAD THEOLOGY

- ▶ Baptist minister Marvin McMickle says, “Not only is Christian nationalism a bad political philosophy, but it is also faulty Christian theology asserting that God has some special bond with the United States”

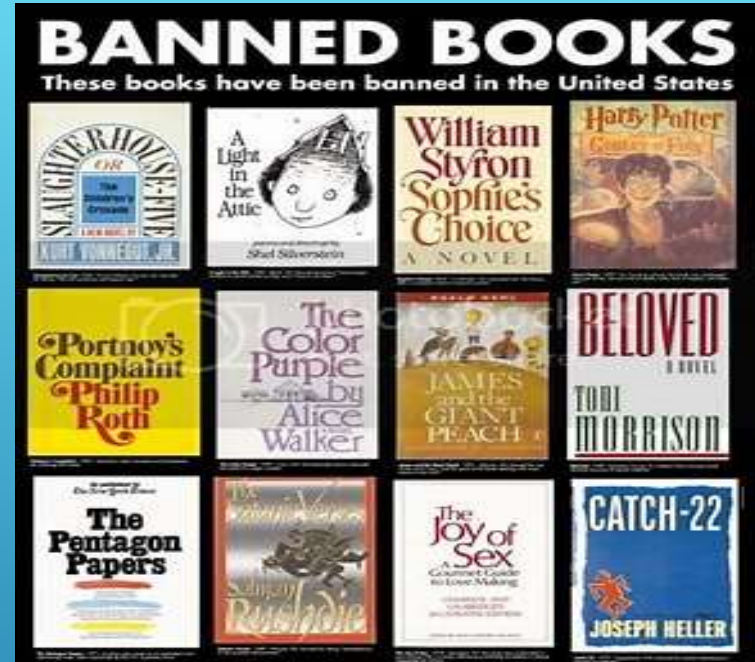
CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM THREATENS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BY:

- ▶ Eroding the principle of the separation of church and state
- ▶ Defying the First Amendment (establishment and free exercise clauses)
- ▶ Treating non-Christian religions and their members as second-class
- ▶ Restricting the rights of non-Christian religions
- ▶ Threatening to impose Christian nationalist policies on all U.S. citizens
- ▶ Overturning America's promise of religious pluralism, justice, and equality



- ▶ In my view, Christian nationalism compromises the identity and mission of the church, which H. Richard Niebuhr defined as “the increase of the love of God and neighbor”
- ▶ It distorts the faith into an endorser of a particular kind of religious view that is as much about sustaining a racial and cultural hegemony and imposing that vision on everyone else in the nation
- ▶ “Any time you wrap the cross in the flag, you deify the flag and obscure the cross, thus distorting the meaning of both” – Dr. David Jones

COMPROMISED CHRISTIANITY



HAVE WE SEEN THIS MOVIE BEFORE?

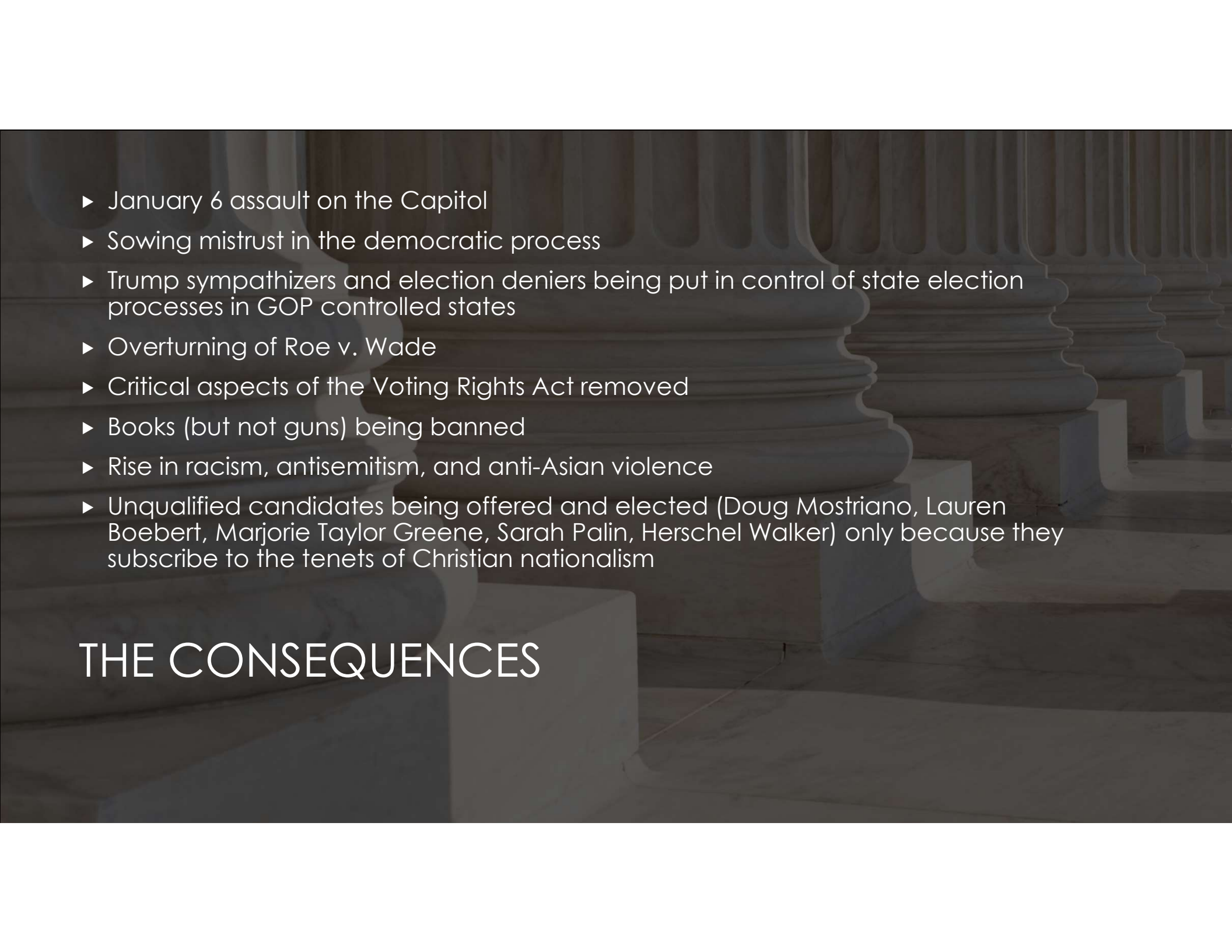


- ▶ In the 1970s, theologian Dorothee Soelle warned that “Christofascism” would be the logical conclusion of American fundamentalism
- ▶ Was she right?

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICA



A CHRISTIAN
AMERICA?

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- ▶ January 6 assault on the Capitol
 - ▶ Sowing mistrust in the democratic process
 - ▶ Trump sympathizers and election deniers being put in control of state election processes in GOP controlled states
 - ▶ Overturning of Roe v. Wade
 - ▶ Critical aspects of the Voting Rights Act removed
 - ▶ Books (but not guns) being banned
 - ▶ Rise in racism, antisemitism, and anti-Asian violence
 - ▶ Unqualified candidates being offered and elected (Doug Mostriano, Lauren Boebert, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Sarah Palin, Herschel Walker) only because they subscribe to the tenets of Christian nationalism

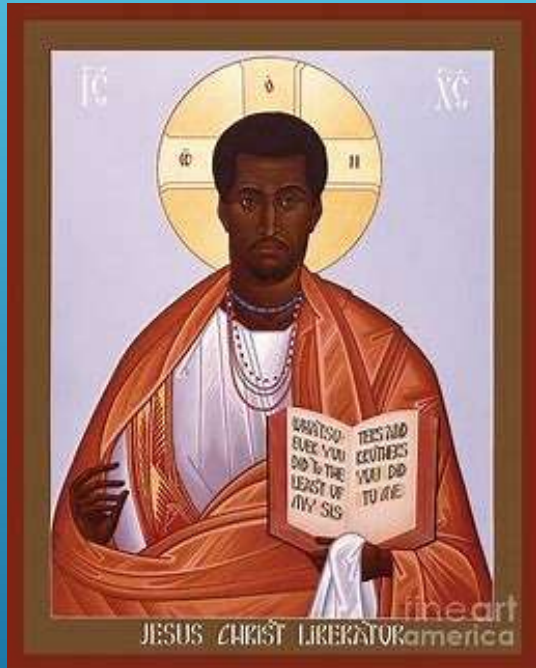
THE CONSEQUENCES



- ▶ Government would run much better if women were not allowed to vote or hold office – John Diggs
- ▶ “I’m sick of this separation of church and state junk” – Lauren Boebert
- ▶ “We don’t want to deport Jews or force conversions, but we do believe that Christians should be in control of the government” – Campaign manager for Doug Mostriano
- ▶ “Space lasers started a fire in California” – Marjorie Taylor Greene
- ▶ “The bad air from China came over here” – Herschel Walker

A CHRISTIAN NATION?

The real Jesus



The Christian Nationalist Jesus

Christian nationalists prize power, domination, and exclusion

Their American-made Jesus is militant, hardnosed, and domineering


He's a Jesus who carries a gun and the U.S. flag

The Jesus of the gospels rejected nationalism. He refused to retaliate. He preached love for enemies. He welcomed the stranger. He fed the hungry and healed the sick

Jesus invited everyone to the table: Jews and non-Jews, prostitutes and tax-collectors, outcasts and religious leaders

WHICH JESUS?

CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

- ▶ Christian nationalism is antithetical to the Gospel, which declares God's love for the entire world (John 3:16)
 - ▶ Christian nationalism is antithetical to the Constitution, which declares in Article VI, Section 3 that "no religious test shall ever be required as qualification to any public office or public trust under the United States."
 - ▶ To sway from that conviction is to undermine the very promise of America
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The primary teaching of every religion?

Christianity: In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Jesus, Matthew 7:12)



Zoroastrianism: Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself. (Shayast-na-Shayast 13.29)



Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. (Hillel, Talmud, Shabbat 31a)



Sikhism: I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all. (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1299)



Hinduism: This is the sum of duty; do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you. (Mahabharata 5:1517)



Jainism: One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated. (Mahavira, Sutrakritanga)



Islam: Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. (The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith)



Buddhism: Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. (Udana-Varga 5.18)



Taoism: Regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain, and your neighbour's loss as your own loss. (Tai Shang Kan Ying P'ien, 213-218)



HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE?

You think God might be trying to tell us something?

HE'S GOT
THE WHOLE WORLD
IN HIS HANDS



▶ “God’s favorite hymn is not *God Bless America*, it’s *He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands*.” – Marvin McMickle

THANK YOU!