

REPORT

FROM THE

CAPITAL

BJC Magazine

AMANDA TYLER returns to Congress to testify on Christian nationalism

HOLLY HOLLMAN on the 30th anniversary of RFRA

Black Church leaders and Black nontheists reimagine the religious landscape

60th anniversary of the March on Washington

Pivotal days for faith freedom

As strife erupts around the world and our country heads toward an election year, we're continuing to stand firm in our foundation of faith freedom for all. Here are a few items of note in this year-end edition of the magazine.

Amanda Tyler looks at the perilous state of our world and the calling to be **EXTREMISTS FOR JUSTICE** on page 3.

Tyler also returned to Capitol Hill to **TESTIFY BEFORE CONGRESS** about the dangers of Christian nationalism and the importance of confronting domestic threats to religious freedom so the United States can continue to advocate for freedom around the world. Read about her appearance before a congressional subcommittee on pages 6-8.

As the landmark Religious Freedom Restoration Act turns 30, Holly Hollman reviews this element of the complex legal landscape that involves religious exemptions. Read about the **INTENTIONS AND IMPACT OF RFRA** on page 5.

Black Church leaders and Black nontheists came together for a "family conversation" focused on a simple question: What do we as Black Americans believe? Read a **REFLECTION ON (DIS)BELIEF** on pages 10-13.

People across racial, cultural and generational lines gathered in August to mark the **60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON**. See photos from that day on pages 20-23.

Also, don't miss your chance to apply to be a **BJC FELLOW** (page 9), enter our **SCHOLARSHIP CONTEST** (page 31), get an update on BJC's work against a **PROBLEMATIC BILL IN TEXAS** (page 24-25), meet the leaders of the **BJC BOARD OF DIRECTORS** (pages 14-15) and see **BJC IN THE WORLD** (pages 26-29).

Your support of BJC plays a pivotal role in the success of the organization. Take a brief look at **WHAT WE DID TOGETHER** this past year on pages 18-19, and join us in our work.

Your partnership is crucial

In a time when religion is too often used as a tool for conflict and division, BJC works to secure faith freedom for all people. Your donations before the end of 2023 are an investment in religious liberty and a statement of your commitment to this critical cause. Together, we are building a brighter future for religious freedom in America.

We celebrate and thank the individuals, groups, churches, organizations and foundations who generously gave to BJC this past year. More than 1,900 donors donated to support religious freedom, and 243 donors give on a monthly or recurring basis. Thank you.

As 2023 comes to a close, we want to remind you of the difference you are making when you invest in the work of BJC. Pages 18-19 lists just a few highlights of how we protect and extend religious liberty.

Would you consider giving generously again before the end of the year to protect everyone's religious liberty? Your contribution is more than just a donation; it's an investment in the institutional separation of church and state, as well as the expansion of faith freedom for all.

You can donate by check or through an online gift. You can also give through stock, bonds or your Donor-Advised Fund.

Make a gift online by visiting a special website: give.bjconline.org/Report.

If you want to mail your donation to us, it just needs to be postmarked by December 31 in order to count as one of your charitable contributions for 2023. Mail your check to us at:

Baptist Joint Committee
200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Suite 301
Washington, DC 20002

Contact Dan Hamil, director of strategic partnerships, at dhamil@BJCOnline.org if you have any questions on investing in the work of BJC.



Extremists for justice

By Amanda Tyler, BJC Executive Director

Our world is in a perilous place. My heart breaks for the many thousands of people — many of them civilians — who have been killed in the war in Ukraine and in the war between Israel and Hamas. The terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7 was a brutal, unconscionable and despicable act of depravity. The brutal way that Israel has waged war has resulted in a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, leaving the people there without food, water or necessary medical care and supplies.

In response to the conflict, we have witnessed an alarming rise in Islamophobia and antisemitism in the United States, including on college and university campuses. A six-year-old boy was murdered by his neighbor for being Palestinian-American. While we have the freedom to protest government policies, our discourse and our actions should always remain nonviolent and devoid of hate. We must resist the urge to associate all people with the actions of their governments.

We are also on the cusp of 2024, a year that will contain the most consequential presidential election of my lifetime. This fall, I spoke at the Democracy360 Conference hosted by the Karsh Institute of Democracy at the University of Virginia (see photos on page 29). While my panel explored the threat of Christian nationalism to democracy, I listened to and learned from people from a variety of perspectives about the precarious nature of our constitutional republic and the challenges to our free and democratic society.

One of the most frightening aspects of our current situation is the degree to which the peaceful transfer of power itself is no longer an assured outcome after an election. We must consider that the events of January 6, 2021, were not an aberration but a warning of what we may expect in the future. In a report issued this fall, PRRI reported:

Disturbingly, support for political violence has increased over the last two years. Today, nearly a quarter of Americans (23%) agree that “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country,” up from 15% in 2021. PRRI has asked this question in eight separate surveys since March 2021. This

is the first time support for political violence has peaked above 20%.

With current events in mind, I recently re-read the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s magnificent Letter from Birmingham Jail. In it, Dr. King is responding to a statement from eight white clergymen calling on Black citizens to “withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham.” They went on to write: “We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.”

Dr. King, responding from his solitary confinement cell where he was jailed on Good Friday 1963, penned a 7,000 word masterpiece on scraps of newspaper, sandwich wrappers and even toilet paper. He was writing at a time — not unlike this moment — when those on the side of injustice and inequality were using extreme and violent measures to hold onto their power.

The letter is a lesson in nonviolent direct action taken to effect change, but it is also a prophetic word about how, when faced with extreme injustice and inequality, moderation, waiting or “keeping the peace” is often not what God desires:

Was not Jesus an extremist in love? -- “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.” Was not Amos an extremist for justice? -- “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ? -- “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” ... So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice -- or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?

We live in an extreme moment — one that calls us to be extremists: extremists for justice, extremists for love.



Reaction to Speaker of the House election

Relatively unknown on the national stage, Rep. Mike Johnson, R-La., was elected Speaker of the House on Oct. 25. Now that his record is coming under scrutiny, the extent to which he embraces Christian nationalism has become clear. Amanda and Holly discuss his record in episode 4 of this season's Respecting Religion podcast, and BJC also spoke with the media.

Mike Johnson Uses Bible to Justify 'Aggression,' Urges Christians to Fight by Nick Mordowanec for *Newsweek*

... On the same day that Johnson received his 220 votes, Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and lead organizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism, testified before Congress about global religious freedom and how the movement to reject such nationalism must begin domestically.

She called it "the single greatest threat" to religious liberty in the United States, describing it as a political ideology and cultural framework that forces others to adhere to their particular set of beliefs.

"A growing number of Christians, and I am one of them, feel a religious imperative to stand against Christian nationalism Conflating religious authority with political authority is idolatrous."

Tyler told *Newsweek* on Thursday that she is concerned about Johnson further pushing the U.S. in that direction based on his "long track record" of arguing against the institutional separation of church and state.

"In his first act as speaker, Johnson claimed God gave each member of the U.S. House authority," Tyler said. "As a Christian, I reject Christian lawmakers using language that alienates and excludes lawmakers and Americans of different faiths from the political process."

"While it is common for people of faith to feel called to their vocations, Americans dedicated to religious freedom for all are understandably alarmed by elected officials claiming to be God's chosen." ...

Texas activist David Barton wants to end separation of church and state. He has the ear of the new U.S. House speaker. by Robert Downen for *The Texas Tribune*

... Tyler said that Johnson's views are particularly concerning because of his background as both a Southern Baptist and as a constitutional lawyer. Baptists, she noted, have a long history of advocacy for strong church-state separations because of the persecution they faced during the country's founding — a stance that she said Johnson has betrayed throughout his legal and political career.

"He has worked actively for these principles that further Christian nationalism," Tyler said. "I am also a Baptist, and to see someone who is a Baptist really reject foundational concepts of religious freedom for all — concepts which are really core to what it means to be a Baptist — is also very disheartening." ...

Christian conservatives cheer one of their own as Mike Johnson assumes Congress' most powerful seat by Peter Smith for the Associated Press

... [Tyler said] that Johnson "has an obligation to serve all Americans," those of all faiths and none.

"Johnson's brand of Christian nationalism is bad American history and a betrayal of the historic Baptist commitment to religious freedom," Tyler added.

Religious liberty cases could land on Supreme Court docket this term

By Pamela Manson for UPI, Oct. 2, 2023

... The Supreme Court has not granted review for any religion case but the justices can continue to add to its docket, said Holly Hollman, general counsel and associate executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

"After several terms in which the court's docket has reflected an increased interest in religion cases, this is an unusual state of play for the court," Hollman said. "In recent decisions, the court has changed standards for determining constitutional and statutory issues that affect religious liberty. We expect the impact of those decisions to become clearer as lower courts apply these recent cases to new controversies." ...

It's time to talk about Blacks who believe and Blacks who don't

By Dr. Sabrina E. Dent, director of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation, and Dr. Anthony Pinn, the Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University

Published by *OnlySky*, Oct. 12, 2023

... We've seen changes—from the Civil Rights Movement and the Movement for Black Lives, to name just two—reflecting a growing and vocal community of Black nonbelievers. But we've not given enough attention to the nature and meaning of these demographics and institutions. However, when we stop to reflect on them, the conclusion is somewhat obvious: they call for a re-evaluation of Black people's relationship to religion, as well as what religion is and how it functions. We can take seriously the growth of the Black "nones" and reframe Black identity accordingly, or we are doomed to repeat mistaken assumptions and misguided arguments that ignore the complex ways in which Black people have worked to make life meaningful. ...

Revisiting RFRA 30 years later

By Holly Hollman, BJC General Counsel



Thirty years ago — November 16, 1993 — President Bill Clinton signed into law landmark legislation called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, commonly known as “RFRA.” BJC led a broad coalition of dozens of religious and civil liberties organizations that built support and pushed for its passage. Dedicated to the Baptist and American ideals of religious freedom for all, BJC advocates for laws that reflect the proper relationship between the institutions of religion and government. Maintaining this relationship is central to our country’s commitment to religious liberty and to a just society.

RFRA was designed to provide protection for the exercise of religion when it is incidentally and unintentionally harmed by government regulations. It wasn’t written or intended to address any specific religious claim or to guarantee any specific result in a given case. It wasn’t written to assist any particular religion. The examples cited for its need were often small, minority religious groups — such as the Amish or Hmongs — whose practices may not be well-known and could be easily overlooked in the process of lawmaking. Importantly, RFRA excluded no particular kinds of claims; instead, it set a standard by which **all claims** for exemptions to laws would be evaluated.

Though the circumstances and scope of religious exemptions deserve debate, they have been associated with our country’s religious liberty tradition from its beginning. Exemptions for Quakers from oath-taking and military service come to mind. In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court seemingly altered that expectation in its decision in *Employment Division v. Smith*. In that decision denying the free exercise claim of Native Americans who were denied unemployment benefits under a state law because they ingested sacramental peyote, the Supreme Court shockingly said the First Amendment isn’t violated when neutral, generally applicable laws conflict with religious practices.

At the urging of the religious and civil liberties groups that came together to create the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion, Congress responded to the decision in *Smith* by passing RFRA. As its name suggests, the legislation was intended to restore protections for religious freedom. However, the extent to which RFRA **restored** prior law or established **new** protections was subject to debate.

Looking back, RFRA’s enactment marked an impressive coming together of diverse interest groups for a common purpose: creat-

ing a statutory right for citizens to challenge substantial government-imposed burdens on their religious exercise. RFRA requires the government to justify such burdens with compelling government interests. Democrats and Republicans were united in their support for the measure. In the Senate, the champions were Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., and Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah.

Anniversaries provide opportunities to review and reflect on significant events, take stock of achievements, acknowledge failures and reevaluate goals. The 30th anniversary of RFRA is an occasion to revisit and reimagine a shared commitment to religious freedom for all.

Since its passage, there have been many changes in the law and the culture affecting how RFRA and religious liberty, in general, are perceived. There have also been many applications that go unnoticed. RFRA (and state laws with the same name that were modeled on its standard) has been applied to claims by a wide variety of religious adherents, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, new religions and Native American religions. In these ways, the law appears to work as intended. RFRA is broadly applicable as a standard to aid religious exercise but is certainly not determinative in all cases.

Religious liberty advocates from the coalition in the 1990s have acknowledged in more recent years that while some RFRA-related disputes had been anticipated, others had not. One unexpected application of RFRA has been in disputes brought by large for-profit corporations (Hobby Lobby) and nonprofit religiously affiliated entities (Little Sisters of the Poor) to avoid providing or facilitating certain health care benefits to employees through employer-run health care plans. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, which certainly could not have been predicted, disputes over the application of vaccine mandates have dominated religious exemption discussions and made consensus about exemptions more difficult.

But as our country’s experiences with the pandemic should have shown us, there’s also a need to look out for each other, and there are some government interests that will be severely harmed by too readily granting exemptions. There are many criticisms lodged at RFRA and the assertion of religious exemptions in the law. Some propose amending the law to exclude certain claims; others suggest protections for conscience are not strong enough.

One part of the RFRA legacy that I believe the bipartisan, broad

continued on page 31



Tyler again warns of Christian nationalism in congressional testimony

By Jeff Brumley, Baptist News Global, with BJC staff reports

Amanda Tyler, executive director of BJC, warned members of Congress that attacks against faith freedom at home and abroad present a threat to national security and to American democracy.

“Religious freedom is at a crossroads today,” Tyler said Oct. 25 in sworn testimony before the U.S. House Oversight’s Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs. “Religious persecution around the world, coupled with a resurgence of Christian nationalism at home, means we must redouble our efforts to protect religious minorities and the non-religious — both domestically and globally,” Tyler said.

Tyler was one of four expert witnesses

called by the subcommittee to provide testimony at a hearing titled “Faith Under Fire: An Examination of Global Religious Persecution.”

Tyler repeatedly emphasized the importance of confronting threats to religious liberty domestically to provide a more effective example internationally.

“As we examine religious persecution globally, I hope we will also examine how well we are living up to this value at home. The single greatest threat to religious liberty in the United States today — and thus to our reputation as leaders in the fight for religious liberty to the rest of the world — is Christian nationalism,” said Tyler, lead organizer of the Christians Against Christian

Nationalism campaign.

She described Christian nationalism as a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to merge American and Christian identities in order to privilege Christians and Christianity in U.S. policy and law.

“To oppose Christian nationalism is not to oppose Christianity,” she said. “In fact, a growing number of Christians — and I am one of them — feel a religious imperative to stand against Christian nationalism.”

The hearing included witness testimony and comments from subcommittee members about the ongoing repression of minority faith groups in nations where governments are closely aligned with in-

“As a man of faith, I know that Christianity is not Christian nationalism. I oppose my faith being used to whitewash a racist, violent and dangerous ideology.”

Rep. Maxwell Frost



tolerant expressions of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Those situations should be a warning against creating an official religion in the United States, Tyler said.

“We see what happens when religious nationalism in a country is allowed to flourish and use the power of the state to attempt to force a set of religious beliefs or create only one accepted form of religious belief,” she said.

“It’s deeply alarming that a member of the U.S. House of Representatives openly identifies as a Christian nationalist,” Tyler continued, referring to statements made by Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga. “Yet all of us who care about religious freedom should be able to quickly and definitively reject Christian nationalism.”

Tyler praised the Biden administration’s 2021 overturning of President Donald Trump’s travel ban aimed at Muslim-majority countries, which the former president has vowed to reinstate if reelected. She also lamented overt expressions of American antisemitism and Islamophobia that have erupted since the beginning of the war between Israel and Hamas.

Policies like the Muslim travel ban are a stain on America’s long history of hospitality “and can have an impact on national security and our ability to advocate for religious freedom in other countries,” she said during questioning.

Rep. Maxwell Frost, D-Fla., said during the hearing that he is disturbed by Christian nationalism rhetoric in Congress and efforts to use Christian language and concepts to promote an anti-democracy agenda.

“I want to start off by saying I’m a man of faith. I was raised Southern Baptist. I love potlucks,” he said, also noting that he attended Awana — which is an evangelical club for children — and

that he was in youth band at one point. “This is a huge part of my life and part of the reason why I’m so passionate about it. As a man of faith, I know that Christianity is not Christian nationalism. I oppose my faith being used to whitewash a racist, violent and dangerous ideology.”

Rep. Frost asked Tyler to explain how religious extremism threatens the American way of life. Religious nationalism, she responded, can “be co-opted by those in power to enforce a certain religious viewpoint on everyone else, and that’s why it’s such an urgent threat to religious freedom.”

The ideology also poses a danger to Americans because it promotes the use of violence to achieve religious and political ends, she said. “We saw that on January 6, in the way that Christian nationalism was used as a permission structure and as a uniting ideology for people who were here at the Capitol that day in search of a political cause that was then infused with religious fervor.”

Christian nationalism also overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation “because the ‘Christian’ in Christian nationalism is not so much about theology as it is about an ethno-national identity,” Tyler continued.

Rep. Frost asked how incidents like the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh that targeted Jewish worshippers, the 2015 massacre of Black worshippers at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston and other mass killings are an expression of Christian nationalism.

“All those examples are what happens when this ideology of Christian nationalism is used by white supremacists who try to justify their violence,” Tyler responded. “It uses the symbols and the language of Christianity to try to justify what is indefensible.”



“The single greatest threat to religious liberty in the United States today — and thus to our reputation as leaders in the fight for religious liberty to the rest of the world — is Christian nationalism.”

Amanda Tyler

“To oppose Christian nationalism is not to oppose Christianity. In fact, a growing number of Christians — and I am one of them — feel a religious imperative to stand against Christian nationalism.”

And it turns their hatred into a religious cause and into something that they believe is ordained by God.”

Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., asked Tyler to elaborate on the portion of her opening remarks dedicated to BJC’s concerns about blasphemy laws around the world.

She explained that a third of the world’s nations have blasphemy or apostasy laws which, when used, stifle religious expression and violate human rights by fostering intolerance, discrimination and violence across religious traditions. “Blasphemy laws don’t only hurt the religious freedom of religious minorities in those countries, but also of co-religionists because they try to enforce a single view of religion.”

Rep. Dan Goldman, D-N.Y., asked what Congress can do to counter the trends Tyler presented to the subcommittee.

Tyler said the response must begin with improving the rhetoric used on Capitol Hill around contested issues and by defending the institutional separation of church and state.

“It’s important that we as a country live up to the values that we’ve established in our Constitution and also that we don’t use rhetoric that dehumanizes other people,” she said, adding that people shouldn’t claim that God is on any side of any war and civilians should not be equated with the governments of their countries.

Congress also should resist any effort to use religion to justify a particular form of government or specific policies. Otherwise, Tyler said hatred and violence will



Rep. Glenn Grothman, R-Wis., greets Amanda Tyler before her testimony. Rep. Grothman chairs the Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs.



continue to spread.

“Faith is indeed under fire around the world, and the best way that we can make a difference is by not adding more fuel to the fire of religious extremism and nationalism,” she said. “Instead, we should focus on being a role model to the world by ensuring the institutional separation of church and state which protects all of us.”

Other witnesses who provided testimony at the hearing were David Curry, president and CEO of Global Christian Relief; Dr. Eric Patterson, president of the Religious Freedom Institute; and Dr. Meghan Mobbs, senior fellow at the Inde-

pendent Women’s Forum.

This was the third time Tyler has testified before Congress. In an appearance in 2022, she became the first person to testify before Congress about the harms of Christian nationalism. She previously testified in 2018 before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on the Constitution at a hearing on “Threats to Religious Liberty Around the World.”

For more, listen to episode 4 of this season of Respecting Religion, where Tyler gave a behind-the-scenes look at the experience and her conversations with lawmakers.

Apply to be a 2024 BJC Fellow

Young professionals have until March 1 to apply for our newest class



Applications are now available for the 2024 class of BJC Fellows, which brings together ten people with an interest in and dedication to religious freedom.

The program kicks off with the BJC Fellows Seminar — an intensive educational program held at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, on **July 24-28, 2024**. There, BJC Fellows will learn about religious liberty from BJC staff members and other experts.

The BJC Fellows Program is open to individuals with diverse educational, cultural and professional experience. There is no religious requirement — people from any or no religious background are welcome. Applicants must be between the ages of 25 and 45, and they must commit to advocating for religious liberty. There is no cost to apply, and the program will cover your travel, room and board at Colonial Williamsburg.

BJC Fellows will serve as liaisons between BJC and their communities and will be expected to use their skills for public engagement, such as leading educational sessions, writing op-eds and using social media to advance the cause of protecting faith freedom for all throughout their careers.

Interested in learning more? Visit our website at BJCOnline.org/Fellows to see the members of previous classes and access the application. You can also learn how to join us for an informational session on the program, which takes place Tuesday, January 23, 2024, at 2 p.m. Eastern Time. The session will be open to anyone interested, and it will be held online.

Give to BJC through your Donor-Advised Fund

Contributing to BJC through a Donor-Advised Fund (DAF) is a powerful tool for those who share our commitment to defending religious liberty. It allows you to set aside funds in a dedicated charitable account, granting you the flexibility to recommend donations to organizations like BJC at your own pace.

If you have a Donor-Advised Fund through Fidelity, Schwab, Vanguard, or one of the hundreds of other providers, would you consider a special end-of-year gift to BJC?

We are grateful to our donors who utilize DAFs to advance BJC's mission, and we encourage all to explore this

impactful method of giving. Your support through a DAF helps BJC continue our essential work in protecting the precious principles of faith freedom for all.

DAFs provide valuable tax advantages, as contributions to the fund are typically tax-deductible in the year they are made. Whether you're considering an immediate gift or a long-term strategy for your donating, a DAF offers a versatile and tax-efficient way to ensure that your support empowers BJC in our vital work.

For additional questions, contact Dan Hamil, director of strategic partnerships, at dhamil@BJCOnline.org.

Reflections on ‘(Dis)belief’

Examining the impact of the Religious Freedom Mobile Institute’s conversations between Black Church leaders and Black nontheists, reimagining the religious landscape of Black America



By Jaziah Masters
Research Fellow
BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation

What are the things that make us human?

There are many answers to this age-old question and many ways to approach the subject of humanity. One way is the idea of belief. What do humans believe about themselves? Their world? And their God(s)?

When it comes to Black Americans, the answers to these questions are often wrapped in a tight singular narrative. People tend to think of it this way: Enslaved Africans merged the traditional beliefs and practices of their homeland with the religion of those who held them in bondage. The Black Church — with its emphasis on both worship of God and human dignity — emerged as a linchpin of the Black community. Facing racist attacks by the Ku Klux

Klan and other forces of white supremacy, the Black Church informed and sustained the advocacy work that won Black people equal standing under the law. Today, in a growing age of disillusionment with organized religion, Black people remain incredibly faithful. Sound familiar?

Black people, both church and unchurched, know that the story and history is much more complicated than that. What are the nuances that this oversimplified narrative overlooks?

This year’s Religious Freedom Mobile Institute created needed conversations to tell the story more clearly. “(Dis)Belief: Reimagining the Religious Landscape of Black America” is an example of what happens

when Black Church leaders and nontheists come together to talk, laugh and air out their grievances. For two days, Dr. Sabrina E. Dent of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation and Dr. Anthony Pinn of the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning at Rice University hosted a “family conversation” centered on a simple question: What do we as Black Americans believe and not believe?

The answer, which should come as no surprise, was “it’s complicated.”

Bringing together speakers from academia, the arts and the church, a consistent theme throughout the virtual symposium was a reminder that matters of faith are not black and white. Adherence to

“I would eventually leave ministry and the church, over time embracing a self-understanding as a secular humanist. But I am one who remained deeply aware of, sensitive to and determined to explore the nature and meaning of Black religion in all its various forms.”

Dr. Anthony Pinn

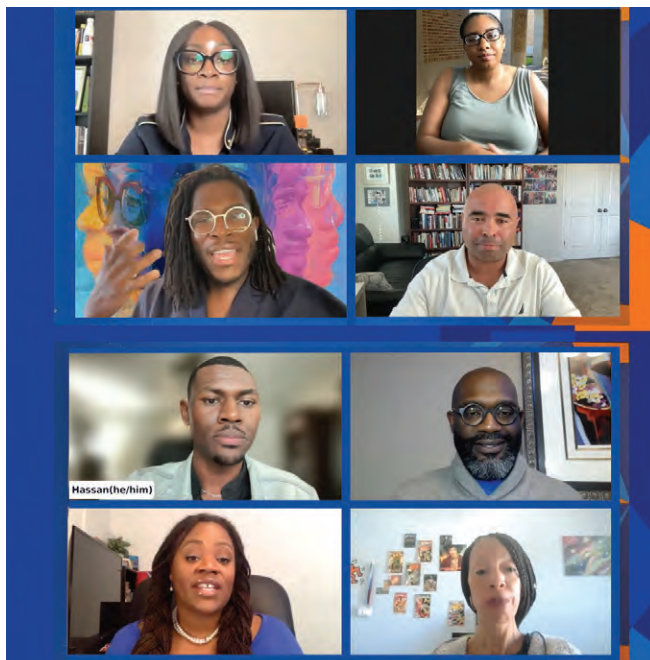


“Humans have a moral obligation to unapologetically advance religious freedom and justice for all.

That is why elevating the experiences of marginalized communities is what brings me to this moment.”

Dr. Sabrina E. Dent





religion — or not — belongs on a spectrum. Belief and disbelief exist and operate distinctly and, at times, overlap. There was such a richness in the discourse, hearing each presenter discuss the nuances of how they enter into conversations about (dis)belief and how it informs their being, their work and their Blackness. Each of the 12 presenters and four moderators addressed the following questions:

Is our current theological language sufficient to capture the thought and ethics of African Americans outside of Black churches?

Is the relationship between the Black Church and disbelief necessarily antagonistic?

Does the thriving of Black people in the United States require the presence of the Black Church? If yes, how might its role change and shift to address the complexities of the Black community? If not, what organizational forms and structures of thought and action might replace the Black Church?

At the center of these questions is a deep concern for humanity. Black humanity. Concern for the well-being of Black people has been an underreported issue, as many of the speakers pointed out. Black well-being concerns the soul, the body, mental health and even spiritual practices. The symposium brought forward all these experiences. When we see belief and disbelief in conversation together, we know that humanity — something long denied to Black people — is an ecosystem. All the components overlap, feed and depend on each

(Dis)Belief: Reimagining the Religious Landscape of Black America

The Religious Freedom Mobile Institute was a two-day virtual symposium, featuring the following presentations as panelists discussed, debated and reimagined the religious landscape of Black America:

Rev. Dr. Brianna Parker:
It's Tricky: Christian Identity & the Black Church

Dr. Christopher Cameron:
African American Secular Humanists: What We Believe

Dr. Teddy Reeves:
"It Can't All Be Bullsh*t:" Black Millennials and the Rising Tide of Disbelief

Dr. Sikivu Hutchinson:
Gen Z Humanists in the Hood

Rev. William H. Lamar IV:
Not Our Enemies

Candace Gorham:
Truce! Bridging Secular and Religious Communities to Address Black Mental Health

Rev. Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman:
Scorned: Faith, Gender, and the Aesthetics of Black Disbelief

Dr. Terrence Johnson:
Between the Shadows of Repression and Revolution: Black Religion, Freedom, and the Politics of Disbelief

Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart:
Do Black Lives Matter to God? How Black Theodicy Shapes Black Resistance

Dr. Kevin Cosby:
No Black Institutions, No Black America: What We Got Wrong About Integration

Dr. Yolanda Pierce:
Reimagining Rituals: Worship & Black (Un)Belief

Rev. Dr. Danté Quick:
Inside a Silent Tear...Carmen McRae as a Conduit to the Construction of Black Theological Cosmopolitan Conversations

If you missed the presentations, BJC's YouTube channel will have clips in the coming months.

“Black millennials are reconstituting their faith and spiritual practices in liminal space, this invisible space betwixt and between their traditional religious beliefs and nonbelief. In essence, the liminality experienced by many a Black millennial in this should be understood as a space for reconstruction of identity.”



Dr. Teddy Reeves

*‘It Can’t All Be Bullsh*t.’*

Black Millennials and the Rising Tide of Disbelief

other for the survival of the whole.

I believe that is why the lived experiences of Black youth were highlighted throughout the panels. We saw pictures of Black children winning awards and heard stories from Black children recounting their experiences of being told they were going to hell for not subscribing to a religious tradition. This storytelling was so important because the future of Black belief and disbelief belongs to these children. What are the stories they are telling? How do they situate themselves in the religious narratives that generations before hold on to? “(Dis)Belief” was a family conversation that asked, “Are the children okay?” The answer, again, was “it’s complicated.” Yet that uncomfortable ambiguity needs to be shared and acknowledged. Bringing these stories, both life-giving and heartbreaking, can start conversations about the ways our community falls short and, in doing so, embrace the nuances of the next generation.

The way that Black youth are approaching religion is worthy of further exploration. Several of the youth spotlighted during the

event reflected on the fact that, although they don’t adhere to any religious tradition and associate religion with negative experiences, they still approach religion and religious people with an open mind and heart. It is not that they are anti-religious, they said; it is that religion is simply not for them. They have chosen something else: disbelief, spiritual seeking, skepticism or none of the religions. But what is most important from their stories is the fact that all these views can coexist peacefully. They can still go to the movies, sit in the same classroom and perhaps even go to the same house of worship — all while still respecting each other’s humanity, their right to believe as they will and their religious liberty.

The term “religious liberty” at first may seem misplaced here in this conversation about disbelief. This is because, in our polarized and politically charged environment, many have taken the term to mean exclusion on religious terms or “Christian privilege.” Religious liberty is anything but exclusive. Religious liberty is the ability to believe as one sees fit without unnecessary interference from the government. The U.S. Constitution provides for the peaceful



“Unfortunately, there’s a tradition within the church that says that one should depend on prayer and faith to address physical and emotional illnesses. For example, when I was trying to get treatment for depression a number of years ago, I can think of three pastors who told me that I need to either pray more, have more faith or — yes — even get a demon cast out of me. That is not quality health care.”

Candace Gorham

Truce! Bridging Secular and Religious Communities to Address Black Mental Health



“We need to make space for theological consent. Do you believe this because you chose to? Because it is freeing in whatever way to you? Or because this was imposed upon you by the tradition? I love this move to community.”

Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart
Do Black Lives Matter to God?
How Black Theodicy Shapes Black Resistance

coexistence of many theological beliefs (and no belief) with all having the same access and ability to participate with dignity in the public square. Whether they know it or not, these young people are embodying religious liberty. In them, I see the makings of a religiously pluralistic society.

“When we see belief and disbelief in conversation together, we know that humanity — something long denied to Black people — is an ecosystem. All the components overlap, feed and depend on each other for the survival of the whole.”

—Jaziah Masters

The “(Dis)Belief” conversation is a call to action. It is a reminder that people are more similar than they are different. It models how to talk across differences. It allows for diversity of opinion and belief while letting us all know that, at the center of all walks of life, there is a commitment to respect humanity in ourselves and others. If our society is ever to achieve those lofty goals, we have to have more conversations about belief and disbelief.

Often, people leave conversations like these and expect an answer about what is next. I am increasingly learning that the answer to that question is — you might have guessed — “it’s complicated.”

Sometimes the next step is to drive home from work. Sometimes the next step is to say “hello” to someone at the grocery store who you might not have spoken to otherwise. Whatever the next step, I continue to think about how humanity was at the center of this conversation on belief.

What if the next step was to believe in humanity? What if the next step was to seek humanity in our everyday lives? What if the next step was to think about what it is we believe about humanity?

In a period of increasing global conflict, partisan rancor and outright disregard for humanity, I am inspired and proud of this program. Here is a conversation when everyone could bring their full selves to an honest discussion about the Black Church, an important cultural institution at a crossroads. Whether complimentary or critical, each perspective was welcome.

I believe that taking time to acknowledge our collective joy and pain is something worth honoring. I think people will never stop — and should never stop — dialoguing about what we believe and disbelieve about ourselves. I wonder how much of our current problems and predicaments are a result of the breakdown of human beings talking to each other about their shared humanity.

Regardless of our religious tradition, the symposium was a reminder that our shared humanity is something still worthy of believing in.



The Religious Freedom Mobile Institute included a screening of the documentary *gOD-Talk*, exploring the lives of seven Black Millennials and their challenges and discoveries with faith in the 21st century, providing a deeper understanding of the role of faith in shaping the African American experience and its impact on our world today. It’s the first feature film of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, produced in association with the Pew Research Center.

In addition to partnering with the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, the virtual Religious Freedom Mobile Institute was hosted jointly by the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation and the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning at Rice University. Learn more at BJCOnline.org/Center.



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BJC Board makes history with leadership elections

First Latina chair and first Jewish vice chair elected to lead BJC

For the first time, the BJC Board of Directors elected a Latina person to serve as chair and the first Jewish person (as well as the first non-Baptist leader) to serve as vice chair. The elections were held during the annual gathering of the board on Oct. 5-6 in Washington, D.C. The board meeting included updates from the staff, planning for the future, discussing new ways to collaborate, and an educational visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The Rev. Anyra Cano, the newly-elected chair of the BJC Board, is a Baptist minister who serves as programs and outreach director for Fellowship Southwest. Serving within the faith community, she has a long history of advocating for vulnerable children, immigrant families and global communities. She resides in Fort Worth, Texas.

"As the daughter of immigrants who care about democracy, I'm deeply honored and humbled to be elected to lead BJC," said the Rev. Cano. "This is a significant moment for both this organization and the broader Baptist community to expand our lens on religious liberty. I've witnessed BJC's vital work safeguarding the institutional separation of church and state in my home state of Texas, which has become a hotbed of Christian nationalism. The BJC staff and board members work tirelessly to make our mission of faith freedom for all real in diverse communities across the country."

Sofi Hersher Andorsky, the newly-elected vice chair of the BJC Board, is an accomplished social change leader who currently serves as vice president for strategy and communications at A More Perfect Union: The Jewish Partnership for Democracy. Andorsky, a member of the 2017 class of BJC Fellows, brings experience



The new BJC Board officers are: the Rev. Emily Hull McGee, treasurer; the Rev. Anyra Cano, chair; Sofi Hersher Andorsky, vice chair; the Rev. Dr. Christopher The, secretary.

working at the intersection of religion, technology and civic life to help shape BJC's work. She is currently relocating from Washington, D.C., to Denver, Colorado.

"Religious liberty is a fundamental value that impacts people of all faiths and the nonreligious," said Andorsky. "I have personally experienced the destructive and destabilizing impact of Christian nationalism, and I feel profound gratitude for the opportunity to support the Rev. Cano and the full BJC team as a Jewish woman and an organizer. You may be surprised to see a Jewish woman leading a Baptist organization, but I've found a home advocating for religious freedom in this unlikely place." You can read more

from Andorsky on page 16 of this magazine.

“Leading BJC as board chair at such a critical time for our country has reminded me how proud I am of this organization,” said the Rev. Dr. Lynn Brinkley, immediate past chair. “I’m glad to pass the baton to the new board leadership, and I know the organization is in great hands.”

The Rev. Dr. Christopher The and the Rev. Emily Hull McGee were elected to serve as the other two board officers, as secretary and treasurer, respectively.

“This marks a significant milestone in BJC’s history,” said BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler. “Our board leadership reflects the diversity of Baptist life and the reality that BJC’s work extends well beyond Baptist life. I welcome Anyra, Sofi, Christopher and Emily to their new roles and am glad that Lynn will continue to serve on the BJC Board.”

The meeting of the BJC Board of Directors began at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where they heard from Dr. Rebecca Carter-Chand, the museum’s Director of Programs on Religion, Ethics and the Holocaust.

During her remarks, Dr. Carter-Chand spoke about the various sins of commission and omission perpetrated by Christians during the Holocaust. She noted that Hitler spoke of “religious freedom” and promised churches that he would not interfere with them. But, discussions of “religious freedom” did not talk about the treatment of the Jewish people.

“At the time, it’s harder to see what is happening right in front of you, as opposed to hindsight,” she said.

Dr. Carter-Chand shared about Baptist engagement during this time in history, noting that many Baptists in the United States said critical words toward the German regime and the racial prejudice they saw in the country in the early 1930s, but the German Baptists were already aligning with the government at that time, finding themselves at odds with their co-religionists.

The board then visited the current museum exhibit titled “Americans and the Holocaust,” which shows how the Depression, isolationism, xenophobia, racism and antisemitism in the United States shaped American responses to Nazism and the Holocaust. The exhibit includes public opinion polling from the time as well as various public information that was available, such as newsreels and magazines. It also asks the audience to consider why accepting Jewish refugees did not become a priority for the country, except for a few individuals who took the risk to help. An online version of the exhibit is available on the museum’s website at ushmm.org.

The members of the board representing the Religious Liberty Council — composed of individuals who have made a financial donation to BJC in the past three years — also met together in Washington, D.C., to talk about upcoming projects, including the annual contest for high school students, which will have a video component for 2024. The Rev. Don Abram and Abigail Villagrana co-chair the Religious Liberty Council, and the Rev. Kyle Tubbs serves as the secretary.

The BJC Board of Directors also voted on BJC’s annual budget, attended a live taping of the Respecting Religion podcast (see page 17), and generated ideas for how Christians Against Christian Nationalism will engage in community organizing.

The board is composed of individuals representing BJC’s various member bodies. You can read biographies of each board member and learn more at BJCOnline.org/bjcboard.



The BJC Board hears from Dr. Rebecca Carter-Chand, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Director of Programs on Religion, Ethics and the Holocaust.



Religious freedom takes practice, not just legislation

By Sofi Hersher Andorsky



A few years ago, I met a woman who, upon seeing my Jewish star necklace, hastened to identify herself to me as a “soldier of Christ” in a tone that jolted my whole body.

Perhaps you know this tone or have heard it before. It is not overtly aggressive, but it is not entirely benign. There is mostly pride, but there is also a trace of menace. The interaction, although brief, left me gasping for air in a panic on the street corner. The violence of the metaphor literally took my breath away. She had me, in 2016, recounting the Crusades in my head.

I don’t bring this up to chastise. I bring it up to illustrate how religious freedom is just as much a culture we must cultivate as it is an area of law and policy.

Our founding narrative does little to inculcate this truth in Americans. We talk about religious freedom like it is a natural plot point in the moral arc of history — indeed, we are here because Christian nonconformists were willing to die to build the “city upon a hill” — and thus every person born or living on this land must know how to do it. In my opinion, that’s simply not true.

First, it belies our real story. We rarely talk about state-sponsored hangings of Quakers by Puritans in Massachusetts, mandatory Anglican church membership in Virginia to vote, or the countless religious justifications for massacring Native Americans and enslaved Africans. The reality is that while our founders left in search of religious liberty, they were not particularly good at creating it, nor humble in offering it.

We have a tendency as Americans to reduce religious freedom to a set of laws or even a single amendment. While laws regulating our government’s treatment of religion are imperative (and hard enough to balance with other rights), they are not the whole story. They create a framework for coexistence, but not for fellowship.

To achieve the latter, we must also treat religious freedom as a practice. Indeed, in an ideal state, it is a lived experience for those with and without the power of hegemony.

Practicing religious freedom requires radical humility. It requires us to accept that the beliefs and symbols that provide us the most comfort — light even in the darkest of days — are capable of inspiring trepidation, even fear, in others.

As a Jewish person, there have been times the sight of a Cross made me question my physical and emotional safety. I know this symbol brings hope to millions, spreading a message of love and sacrifice and kindness to many. Yet for me, it immediately marks me as an outsider, sometimes welcome, sometimes not, all at the whim of those around me.

I thought about this recently when I saw a Palestinian American physically recoil at the sight of a Magen David (Jewish star), a symbol that often brings me a sense of profound safety and relief. It is not helpful for me to pretend I don’t find this juxtaposition painful, or to punish myself for not knowing exactly what to do about it.

Practicing religious freedom also requires us to acknowledge

that when presented with all the same information and opportunity, our neighbors may not replicate our choices. Personally, I’ve been presented the case for becoming a Christian over and over my entire life. When I joined my college sorority, two girls cornered me to lament my inevitable entry into hell. A few years back, a male Uber driver in Texas pulled over on a quiet road to open the trunk and show me his Bible in case I was interested. The government was not infringing on my rights, and yet I did not feel particularly “free” in these moments.

And, finally, practicing religious freedom requires us to live alongside people, behaviors and preferences we do not understand or that make us uneasy.

There are, of course, some things we all can agree should be summarily condemned. As a child, two Christian white supremacists firebombed my synagogue. I stood and watched as a section of it burned to the ground. But those are the rare examples. More often, we are confronted with relatively minor confusions and discomforts, the need to make inconvenient accommodations and the challenge of doing so with patience. We have to pause and think about our words. In short, it requires us to do things that are really, really hard.

But here’s the good part: When we stop pretending this should come naturally, it can actually get easier. When we expect things to be hard, we know we have to work on or toward them. Hard things take practice. Take effort. Take grace.

Why should we not have language for this? Why should it be taboo to acknowledge? Because the Pilgrims came fleeing persecution? Because the founding generation passed the Bill of Rights? If our history teaches us anything, it’s that hurt people can hurt people, not that we come out of the womb knowing how to live in harmony.

As an officer of the board of directors of BJC and a BJC Fellow, I believe passionately we must fight for good new laws and inclusive interpretations of the ones we have. I also believe this work is necessary, but not sufficient. We also must reckon with and acknowledge the internal work of religious freedom and just how hard it is to pursue and practice toward each other. Perhaps then we will feel it is OK to practice, like we would anything else we find challenging at first.

To return to the woman I opened with, I do not believe she meant to scare me — indeed I believe she meant to be open, or at least authentic, in her way — but I do not believe she stopped to consider the impact of her chosen words or how to share space. Perhaps some practice would help.

Sofi Hersher Andorsky is vice chair of the BJC Board, a BJC Fellow, and vice president of strategy and communications at A More Perfect Union: The Jewish Partnership for Democracy.

Respecting Religion podcast launches season 5

Join us for new conversations on religion and the law in season 5 of the Respecting Religion podcast. Each week, Amanda Tyler and Holly Hollman talk about issues that are impacting all of us, from the actions of the Supreme Court and Congress to local government initiatives. This fall, they covered Amanda's recent testimony before Congress, troubling statements from Speaker Mike Johnson, the 30th anniversary of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and its ongoing impact, and much more.

Respecting Religion is available on all major podcasting providers, and we provide transcripts of each program. Go to RespectingReligion.org for a list. Here's a quick look at our first two episodes of this season.



Season 5, Episode 01: Live Q&A with Holly and Amanda

Is the Supreme Court immune from public pressure? What is the role of the government when it comes to nondiscrimination laws, gender identity, and posting Scripture? In our first episode of the season, Amanda and Holly answer questions during the BJC Board meeting on the Supreme Court, state laws and the role of government in our world today. They share what we can expect from this new Supreme Court term and look at how decisions are impacting our country at all levels.

Season 5, Episode 02: Southern Baptist Convention president, 'White Evangelical Racism' author, and Respecting Religion co-host discuss Christian nationalism

Our second episode includes portions of a panel conversation with the Rev. Dr. Bart Barber, Dr. Anthea Butler and Amanda Tyler. They talk about Christian nationalism's connection to the January 6 attack, Baptist history, American history, Christian citizenship and much more.



Subscribe to Respecting Religion wherever you get your podcasts!

Here's what we did together in 2023

You made a profound and lasting difference for religious freedom over the past year. Your generous giving played a pivotal role in the success of BJC.

Together, we achieved significant milestones and advanced our mission, strengthening the protection of religious freedom in our ever-changing world. Here are just a few successes from the past year:

Creating a community organizing pilot



The Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign is going deeper into local communities with our first community organizing project.

We're building on our relationships in North Texas to listen to concerns of those impacted by Christian nationalism directly and reorienting our work around their concerns. We kicked off this work with 50 local leaders joining us for a retreat in March, and our first field organizer started in November.



Launching the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation

BJC broke new ground this year with the launch of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation, a significant step forward in our mission to deepen understanding of religious liberty through a social justice lens. This initiative reinforces our commitment to cultivate a more inclusive application of religious freedom for all and addressing issues such as voting rights. This work requires the cultivation of diverse partnerships with universities, secular leaders and faith-based organizations.



Reimagining how our traditional religious liberty work fits into new priorities

We continue to invest in our work in the courts, Congress and other government institutions. We are reimagining how this work fits in with our priorities of learning about community organizing and setting priorities for the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation. We enlarged people's understanding of religious liberty through informative programs, including our Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures and the BJC Fellows Program. These initiatives empowered individuals with the knowledge and insight to speak more clearly for faith freedom.



Expanding our communication channels

In our ongoing commitment to champion religious liberty, BJC reached new audiences by expanding our podcast and reach of our social media channels. We had more than 35,000 downloads of our podcast, and our new TikTok channel (@endchristiannationalism) already has more than half a million likes. We are committed to informing and deepening conversations, especially with new generations of religious liberty advocates.



Equipping advocates

BJC continued leading and equipping advocacy work that protects everyone's faith freedom. We continue to work with partners in the religious freedom community to protect the sacred land of *Chi'chil B'itdagoteel* — loosely translated in English as "Oak Flat." And, we brought together more than 100 Texas chaplains to share why a proposal for school "chaplains" in Texas is a bad idea. These ongoing efforts ensure that no one's faith faces discrimination.



As we look forward to the challenges and opportunities in a new year, we ask for your continued support.

Your generosity is not only an investment in the defense of religious liberty, but it also protects the core values that define our nation's promise of freedom and justice for all. Please consider a gift before the end of the year to continue and expand our work. Make a gift at give.bjconline.org/Report, or scan the QR code.





60th anniversary of the March on Washington

Photos by Roderious Phillips for Baptist News Global

People across racial, cultural and generational lines gathered to continue the dream of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington.

The 2023 March was convened by the National Action Network, which is led by the Rev. Al Sharpton, and the Drum Major Institute, led by Martin Luther King III and Arndrea Waters King. In total, 60 national organizations came together to sponsor the historic event.

“Do we realize that it is we the people who can make changes?” asked King III on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 26, 2023. “But we need us all to be engaged.”

The chairman of the Drum Major Institute, King is the eldest son of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and he called the crowd to “preserve, protect and expand democracy.”

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, held August 28, 1963, was the backdrop for Dr. King’s “I have a dream” speech, and it is considered a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. These pages show images from the 2023 event, taken by Roderious Phillips for Baptist News Global. For videos of the speeches on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, visit C-SPAN’s website or the YouTube channel of ADL.

Editor’s note: When looking through copies of Report from the Capital in 1963 and 1964, I could not find one mention of the original March on Washington. We at BJC know that religious freedom is not possible without physical freedom. While it was not covered in this magazine at the time — even though Dr. King was a Baptist minister whose denominational home was the Progressive National Baptist Convention — we are grateful for his prophetic voice and and others who showed the world the need for freedom. As part of our ongoing Project on Race and Religious Freedom, we at BJC continue to take an honest look at our history and ask ourselves how well we listened to Black concerns for freedom, including during the March on Washington in 1963. The work is continuing, and we are committed to doing our part and working with others to ensure freedom for all. —Cherilyn Guy



During the 2023 March on Washington, leaders and advocates marched from the Lincoln Memorial to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. Pictured are Yolanda Renee King, the granddaughter of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; Martin Luther King III, the son of Dr. King; the Rev. Al Sharpton, founder and president of the National Action Network; and Jonathan Greenblatt, national director of ADL.



The March on Washington's 60th anniversary included advocacy related to ending racism, supporting women's rights, protecting LGBTQ+ families, stopping Asian hate, protecting voting rights, ending gun violence and more. During the rally at the Lincoln Memorial, the Rev. Al Sharpton said that, 60 years after Dr. King talked about a dream, those gathered were the dreamers today. But, they are facing schemers.

"The dreamers are fighting for voting rights. The schemers are changing voting regulations in states," the Rev. Sharpton said. "Black, white, Jewish, LGBTQ — we are the dreamers. We're the children of the dream."





Protestors across generations and backgrounds gathered for the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington, first gathering to listen to speakers on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and then marching together to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial.



"We must be unapologetic defenders of Black life, Black liberty and Black humanity," said civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump. He spoke alongside families who have been impacted by police brutality.



Sofie (middle left) and aalyah (middle right) hold up signs and pride flags during the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington. Visit the website of Baptist News Global for more photos from the event.

Texas chaplains are leading the fight against ‘chaplains’ replacing counselors in public schools

Texas school districts reject this misguided proposal

More than ten Texas school districts already rejected the option to replace public school counselors with “chaplains.” These districts stretch across the state, from El Paso to Tyler.

As of October, the districts rejecting the misguided proposal include Brownsboro ISD, Canutillo ISD, Edinburg CISD, Frisco ISD, Gainesville ISD, Godley ISD, Kerrville ISD, Lamar CISD, McKinney ISD, San Elizario ISD, and San Marcos CISD.

More than 170 Texas chaplains signed a letter urging school board members statewide to reject the new opportunity to let anyone who can pass a background check call themselves a “chaplain” and give them access to children in public schools “to provide support, services, and programs for students.”

The letter, organized by BJC, Interfaith Alliance and Texas Impact, received widespread media attention across the state and country.

“Texas school districts are right to defend religious freedom by rejecting the opportunity to replace counselors with untrained and unlicensed chaplains,” said Amanda Tyler, executive director of BJC and lead organizer of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign. “Make no mistake about it: this Texas law was pushed by a group wanting school chaplains to proselytize in public schools. Families of all faiths and none should feel confident that they

can send their children to school without school officials interfering with their decisions about religious instruction. As the parent of a child in a public school in Dallas, I hope more school districts will stop this government overreach into spiritual matters.”

“It’s not surprising that districts are rejecting this program. Trustees rightly are concerned that the expectations are vague, the risks are huge, and their constituents never asked for this in the first place,” said Bee Moorhead, executive director of Texas Impact.

“God has never left the public schools,” the Rev. Jennifer Hawks, BJC’s associate general counsel, told FOX 26 Houston. “As long as there are math tests, we will have prayer in schools.”

“Our public schools must be welcoming and safe places for all students, which is why Texas school districts — with overwhelming support from faith communities — are rejecting this dangerous bill,” said the Rev. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, president and CEO of Interfaith Alliance. “In defense of true religious freedom, democracy, and every child’s right to thrive in school, I urge districts statewide to follow their lead.”

Hear more on episode 5 of this season’s Respecting Religion podcast, and visit BJCOnline.org/publicschoolchaplains.

What can you do?

Visit BJCOnline.org/publicschoolchaplains for the latest information and links to the following ways you can take action:

If you are a chaplain living in or educated in Texas, sign the chaplain letter. It’s still open for signatures, and it continues to make an impact in local school board meetings across the state, often being read or referenced during debate.

If you are a person of faith living in Texas, sign a petition. It tells school board members in your state that these public school “chaplains” are different from the professional chaplaincy programs in the military, hospitals or prisons.

If you are a person of faith living anywhere in the United States, sign a petition to stop this problematic program from coming to your state!

School boards in Texas have until March 1 to vote on this issue. Contact our North Texas organizing team to volunteer or learn more at Texas@BJCOnline.org. Plus, we need you to watch out for similar efforts in your state — this idea is spreading.

Hear from those opposing this effort

News organizations across Texas and around the world are covering this issue, including *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, Baptist News Global, *Dallas Morning News*, the ABC affiliate in Austin, FOX 26 Houston, the NPR affiliate in Dallas, and *Baptist Standard* to name a few. Here are excerpts from stories and op-eds.



Opinion: New Texas law deprives families of religious liberty rights

By Amanda Tyler, published by CNN on Sept. 11, 2023

... Students are free to exercise their religion in ways that do not interfere with classroom instruction, but the school itself should not be in the business of propping up or denigrating anyone's religion. While there are good reasons for chaplains in certain settings where someone cannot freely access religious services, those circumstances are not present in the public school context.



But, more personally, as the parent of a child in a Texas elementary school, I have deep concerns about any move to religious indoctrination or instruction in the public schools. My husband, who is Jewish, and I are raising our son in an interfaith household. My son sits in the pew with me for worship most Sunday mornings at our Baptist church, and we'll soon celebrate the Jewish holidays together with our extended family at our Reform temple.

He is able to access both religious traditions as he develops his own sense of what it means to be human, and whatever questions my husband and I can't answer, we have a rich community of clergy and lay leaders to help in his religious education.

To me, this is the essence of what flourishing religious freedom means, free of government interference. I don't want government chaplains inserting themselves into my family's — or any family's — religious discernment. ...

Students need qualified counselors, not chaplains. The jobs are too different

By Britt Luby, BJC Fellow

published by The Fort Worth Star-Telegram on Sept. 1, 2023

... Explaining what I do as a chaplain is hard, and I often feel like the work is misunderstood. In light of what is coming out of the Texas Legislature, though, I must try.

It's because of my experience as a chaplain that I must voice my opposition to the half-baked idea to place unregulated chaplains in our public schools. Chaplains are not qualified to perform the work of school counselors, and putting us in this position would violate religious freedom protections for students and families.

I've joined more than 100 Texas chaplains in signing an open letter to our state's many school boards asking them to reject the opportunity to start a school chaplain program under a new law that takes effect Sept. 1. ...

The new law allows Texas schools to hire chaplains to perform the work of school counselors, but these employees or volunteers would not be required to have specific certification, training or experience. It is my extensive training and experience that makes me a good chaplain; I am able to walk into a room and meet a person exactly where he or she is in the moment, regardless of faith.

Our Texas school children are a vulnerable population, and they deserve well-trained school counselors and staff to meet their needs. ...

Do you want chaplains available for kids at school?

By Damali Keith, broadcast on FOX 26 Houston on Aug. 22, 2023



... "SB 763 is just a bad idea," says Rev. Jennifer Hawks with Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. ...

"Their parents and guardians should be the ones to influence who their spiritual advisors are while they're still minor children, and we shouldn't have the government coming in and overtaking that decision," adds Hawks whose group is sending a letter to every school board.

"We have more than 100 chaplains who have signed this letter to explain why chaplains would oppose this program," says Hawks.

Why are they opposed? "The program doesn't take chaplaincy seriously as a profession because the only requirement that the Texas state legislature required was that the person be able to pass a criminal background check," says Hawks. ...

BJC in the world

BJC continues to travel the country, sharing our work with new people and equipping others to make a difference. In the past few months, we've preached, taught, lectured and participated in events large and small. Here are just a few.

If you want to invite BJC to your community, visit our website at BJCOnline.org/invite-bjc-to-your-community. This photo is from a panel conversation at the annual convention of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Read more about this event and others on the next page.



BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler received the Champion of the First Amendment Award from the Freedom From Religion Foundation during their annual convention in Madison, Wisconsin. She is pictured here with Steven Hirtle, the chair of the board of directors of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF).

While at the convention, Tyler also spoke on a panel (pictured on the previous page) about the dangers of Christian nationalism alongside Dr. Samuel Perry, author and professor at the University of Oklahoma; and Andrew Seidel of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

BJC and FFRF worked together to create a report titled “Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021, Insurrection,” which is the most comprehensive account to date of Christian nationalism and its role in the attack on the Capitol.



Photo: Chris Line/FFRF



Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, BJC's director of communications, preached at Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, on October 15.

Preaching from Philippians 4:1-9, his “Disturb the City” sermon discussed how the separation of church and state is not meant to keep people of faith out of advocacy and activism. He also discussed the need to confront Christian nationalism, which he said is “one of so many ways to engage the world around us in pursuit of whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.” You can watch his sermon on BJC's YouTube channel.

At a “Theology on Tap” event in Greensboro, North Carolina, two members of the 2023 BJC Fellows class created an event with an impact. The Rev. Kari Baumann (pictured on the left) organized a presentation on the dangers of Christian nationalism, and a member of her BJC Fellows cohort, Maggie Clark (pictured on the right), came to help her facilitate conversations on the topic.

The Rev. Baumann adapted the free curriculum provided by Christians Against Christian Nationalism for her presentation. People who gathered at the event engaged in small group discussion, and everyone received a copy of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement so they could read it and consider signing it.



The Rev. Jennifer Hawks, BJC's associate general counsel, preached about biblical lessons for advocacy at the annual meeting of the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches in Seattle, Washington, on Oct. 13.

Focusing on the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel and Shiprah and Puah from Exodus, the Rev. Hawks encouraged everyone to use their networks and spheres of influence to help justice roll down freely and robustly. "Advocacy requires the ability to confront injustice whether it is within our community or outside of it," she said.

The Rev. Hawks is pictured below with the leadership of the Evergreen Association of Baptist Churches. From left to right: the Rev. Shavon Walker, the Rev. Hawks, the Rev. Douglas Avilesbernal, the Rev. Paul Schneider, and the Rev. Samuel Kim.



We continue to host student groups in our office, sharing about the Baptist commitment to religious liberty for all and how we live that out in the courts, in Congress and with the administration. Pictured is a group from SUNY New Palz who visited us this fall.

If you are interested in bringing a group to our office in Washington, D.C., for an educational session, visit our website at BJCOnline.org/visit-bjc.

Amanda Tyler spoke during a Sunday night event at First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, on Aug. 20. She shared about BJC's work leading the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign and how they can be advocates, making an impact in fighting this dangerous ideology in their state and local community.





Amanda Tyler spoke on a panel about how Christian nationalism impacts our country's system of government during the Democracy360 summit, hosted by the University of Virginia's Karsh Institute of Democracy in Charlottesville, Virginia. Pictured left to right are: Micah Schwartzman of the University of Virginia School of Law; Tyler; the Rev. Dr. Esau McCaulley of Wheaton College; the Rev. Dr. Walter Kim of the National Association of Evangelicals; and Dr. Philip Gorski of Yale University.



Photos: Sanjay Suchak/UVA's Karsh Institute of Democracy

Honorary and memorial gifts

Any gift you make to a BJC-related program can be in honor of or in memory of someone. You can make a gift to **BJC**, a gift designated to the work of the **BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation** or a gift directly to the **Christians Against Christian Nationalism** campaign.

Simply send a note with your check or specify who the gift should recognize when you give online at BJCOnline.org/give, BJCOnline.org/Center or ChristiansAgainstChristianNationalism.org.

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In honor of Paula Edens
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Maximize your charitable contribution at the end of this year

As 2023 comes to a close, consider the powerful impact you can make on religious liberty through a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) to support the work of BJC.

A QCD is a tax-savvy way to support our mission of protecting and extending faith freedom for all. If you are 70.5 years or older, you can directly transfer funds from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA) to BJC, which not only fulfills your required min-

imum distribution but might also offer significant tax benefits. As you plan your end-of-year giving, maximize your charitable contribution through a QCD if you qualify.

Please consult with your advisor, attorney and accountant, as appropriate, regarding specific financial advice. For more information about giving to BJC through a QCD, contact Dan Hamil, director of strategic partnerships, at dhamil@BJCOnline.org.

Scholarship contest has essay and video option in 2024

Students can submit an essay or a video to enter our 2024 Religious Liberty Scholarship Contest, with prizes available for each of the submission methods.

Open to all high school juniors and seniors, the 2024 contest asks students to illuminate the connection between Christian nationalism and book bans. Students can enter either with an essay or with a short TikTok-style video, and submissions are due March 15.

Additional details — including the full writing prompt and rules — are available on our website at BJCOnline.org/contest. Please share this opportunity with your community and networks!

Hollman Report *continued from page 5*

coalition that originally backed its passage can still agree on is the importance of individual religious practice and exemptions as a core value of religious freedom. The Constitution protects religion, both beliefs and exercise. RFRA provided a strong basis for individual claims for religious exemptions, protecting those who might not have protection otherwise. Yet its impact in contexts that tilt the balance in ways that cause harm to others — including customers and employees — has had the negative consequence of causing some to reject all exemptions.

RFRA is only part of the complex legal landscape that involves religious exemptions and provides the basis for courts weighing religious claims for relief from government burdens on religious exercise. Judges and justices alike look to individual state statutes that have the same high standard alongside the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act and recent Supreme Court decisions under the Free Exercise Clause of the U.S. Constitution. Numerous other laws provide for specific religious exemptions.

While deep political divisions can make finding common ground on religious liberty more difficult, the story of RFRA's creation and impact offers a reminder of the important role of religious exemptions. RFRA's chief aim — giving individual claims for religious exercise in the face of government-imposed burdens a chance to prevail — continues to be worthy of our shared commitment to each other.

Meet BJC's fall interns

DR. MURIEL KENNEDY is a 2023 graduate of Emory University's Candler School of Theology, earning a Master of Divinity degree with a Baptist Studies Certificate and a concentration in Justice, Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation. She previously earned an engineering degree from the University of South Carolina, and she earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at Howard University.

Dr. Kennedy is a member of the Georgia Army National Guard – Medical Detachment and an independent contractor with Safe Harbor Christian Counseling. She plans to continue working in the nonprofit sector in advancing the cause of social and racial justice.



JENNIFER KNOX, from Hudson Valley, New York, is a senior at SUNY New Paltz, majoring in political science. She has experience working on voter registration drives and grassroots activism to protect civil liberties. Those experiences inspired her to continue her education almost 20 years after graduating from high school.

Knox is married to Dennis Vittum, and she plans on attending law school after graduation.



DJ SCOTT is a senior at Baylor University, majoring in political science and minoring in philosophy. He has experience working with campus organizations on grassroots advocacy, including Texas Rising.

He is the child of Tanya and Deon Scott. After graduation, Scott plans on attending law school and pursuing a career in advocacy.



Mark your 2024 calendar

January 23: Online informational seminar about the BJC Fellows Program (see page 9)

February 19-22: The BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation attends the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference's clergy and lay leadership event in Chicago, serving as a sponsor and hosting a booth in the exhibit area

March 1: Deadline for young professionals to apply for the BJC Fellows Program

March 15: Deadline for high school juniors and seniors to enter the scholarship contest



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We are attorneys, Capitol Hill insiders, ministers, mobilizers and scholars. We file briefs in pivotal Supreme Court cases, advocate for and against legislation, testify in Congress and unite with others across faiths to ensure that all Americans have, and will always have, the right to follow their spiritual beliefs.

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REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

Amanda Tyler EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Cherilyn Crowe Guy EDITOR

MORE FROM BJC



Reimagine religious freedom

What happened when Black Church leaders and Black nontheists came together for two days of conversation? See pages 10-13.



Unlikely panel

Hear a conversation between BJC, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the author of *White Evangelical Racism* on our podcast. See page 17.