

**BJC PODCAST SERIES:
THE DANGERS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM**

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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BJC Podcast Series: THE DANGERS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Welcome to the discussion guide that accompanies the 10-episode podcast series on the dangers of Christian nationalism, available on the BJC Podcast and first released from July to October 2019. We hope these questions aid your personal or group reflection on each week's conversation between Amanda Tyler, BJC executive director, and her guest(s) exploring different aspects of or approaches to Christian nationalism.

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All episodes can be found here:

<https://soundcloud.com/bjcpodcast/sets/series-the-dangers-of>

FACILITATOR GUIDE

BJC Podcast Series: THE DANGERS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

This facilitator's guide is first and foremost a tool, not a mandate. There is no single "right" way to facilitate a discussion reflection. Every individual and group will have different learning styles, preferences, and needs. Each group leader should choose whichever approach works best for your group – don't be afraid to experiment with different styles or formats. If you have any questions, email BJC Education and Mobilization Assistant Jaziah Masters at jmasters@BJCOnline.org.

BEFORE THE DISCUSSION:

- 1. Prepare yourself:** Listen to the podcast episode one or two times beforehand. Set aside 15 minutes of quiet time to reflect on the questions and consider your own responses to the prompts. Write down any relevant notes or follow-up questions that you want to remember. Review the [FAQs](#) about the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement to prepare for potential follow-up questions.
- 2. Prepare your group:** Before you meet, send an email to the group with a link to the podcast and the discussion guide for the week. Encourage the group to note quotes or topics they may want to discuss that are not on the discussion guide. Even if you will listen to the podcast as a group, some may want to listen on their own to give them more time to reflect on the topic.
- 3. Prepare your space:** If leading an in-person group, make sure you have a room reserved and set up with chairs in a format that is conducive for your discussion. Bring writing materials, post-its, white boards, discussion guide printouts (if needed), or other relevant materials. If you are listening to the podcast together, make sure all audio equipment is set up and tested.

If leading a virtual group, test your online platform ahead of time to reduce last-minute technical difficulties. Let the group know (via email or another method) how to access the meeting, and note any password or additional steps to connect. Take advantage of the digital platform to share quotes, videos, or other visual content with the group. Offer a pre-meeting for those who may be uncomfortable with the digital format so that you can walk them through all they need to know (turn on camera, unmute microphone, raising hand, chat feature, screen sharing, etc.).

FACILITATOR GUIDE

BJC Podcast Series: THE DANGERS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

DURING THE DISCUSSION:

If the group has not listened to the podcast, make sure you do so before discussion

- 4. Start the discussion off right:** Begin with introducing yourself and your role as facilitator, allow group members to introduce themselves, restate the purpose and theme of the discussion, and establish ground rules that you or the group have determined. Some ground rules to consider are whether the group will listen to the podcast together, whether new people may be added each week, and how to make the group a place where hard questions can be pursued.
- 5. Keep the discussion going strong:** Set a strong example by actively listening and having an engaged and curious tone. Encourage and reward balanced participation by giving everyone a chance to speak and emphasizing the importance of listening before responding. Mix-up methods of discussion (individual written reflection, share in pairs, share in small groups, etc.) to support those with all types of learning and reflection styles.
- 6. Navigate the tricky spots:** Be prepared to diffuse conflict. The group should be debating ideas, not engaging in personal attacks. Reference the [FAQ page](#) for common hard questions that may come up. Some members may be hesitant to jump into a conversation, especially in the early weeks. Keep track of any voices not being heard, and find ways to include them without making them uncomfortable or putting them on the spot. Keep the discussion on track by having group members summarize key takeaways, and remember the reflection guide is a tool to focus you but not restrain you — feel free to adjust the script.
- 7. Finish strong:** End the discussion by providing your group with space to talk about overall reflections and key takeaways. Brainstorm next steps individually or collectively. Clarify any follow-up that needs to be done, and determine who will do it. Finally, thank everyone for attending, and invite them to return next week.

AFTER THE DISCUSSION:

- 8. Follow through with your group:** If there were specific follow-up actions assigned, let the group know (via email or other methods) and remind them of any future upcoming, related events.
- 9. Follow up with BJC:** We would love to hear from you about how it went, ways to improve the use of the podcast in a small group setting, and any key takeaways or follow-up your group chose to do. Be sure to post about your discussion on social media, tag us [@BJContheHill](#), and use the hashtag [#ChristianNationalism](#). You can let us know how it went or email any follow-up questions or thoughts to BJC Education and Mobilization Assistant Jaziah Masters at jmasters@BJCOnline.org.

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 1

Christian leaders on Christian nationalism

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guests: Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, Paul Baxley, Diane Randall, Sister Simone Campbell, & Jeffrey Haggray

Amanda Tyler speaks with five Christian leaders who are taking a stand against the dangerous ideology of Christian nationalism, and they share why opposing Christian nationalism matters to them.

1 At the beginning of the podcast, Amanda Tyler defines Christian nationalism as a political ideology that seeks to merge American and Christian identities. Had you heard of Christian nationalism before today? If Christian nationalism creates an “in” group of select Christians who are deemed “true Americans” and an “out” group of everyone else, what harm might this do to our faith or democracy?

2 Bishop Elizabeth Eaton reminds us **(9:20)** that “Diversity is in fact created by God and is beautiful and is not something to be rubbed out or erased. And I think that’s what makes our country strong. I hope that we understand that our true freedom rests in Christ and that no nation and no leader can guarantee the kind of freedom that we have as redeemed children of God.” What do you think about diversity and true freedom being gifts from God? How does Christian nationalism undercut these gifts?

3 The Rev. Dr. Paul Baxley discusses the African theologian Emmanuel Katongole’s view that, during the Rwanda genocide, “the blood of tribalism ran deeper than the water of baptism.” Baxley says it prompts a personal reflection of whether any allegiance is more influential than his commitment to Jesus Christ **(12:00)**. He also asserts **(13:52)**, “There are a lot of people who vote in different ways and hold different political convictions, but regardless of party affiliation, regardless of voting history, we ought to be able to recognize together as Christians that Christian nationalism takes us in really dangerous directions.” When have you seen instances of the blood of tribalism usurping the water of baptism? In what ways could a congregation or small group identify how or when an allegiance becomes more influential than their commitment to Jesus Christ? Why do you think it’s important to highlight that this campaign is not about political ideology or voting records but being inspired by our commitment to Christ to stand up against Christian nationalism?

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 1

EP. 01: Christian leaders on Christian nationalism

4

The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Haggray says unlike Christian nationalism **(24:20)**, “The religion of Jesus does not prioritize one nation or tribe or language or political ideology or racial group above another.” Both Diane Randall and Sister Simone Campbell believe part of the antidote to Christian nationalism is to follow the example of Jesus by engaging our neighbors through getting to know their hopes, fears, and dreams instead of following a script rooted in fear of others that Christian nationalism instills. How do you think engaging our neighbor who is different than us could combat Christian nationalism? What are theological examples of Jesus engaging and loving others different from himself?

5

The Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign is deliberately Christian-focused because, as Tyler states, “as Christians, this is our work to do” — to use our Christian voices to stand against Christian nationalism **(4:35)**. Based on what you’ve learned today, what are three reasons that fellow Christians should care about Christian nationalism and get involved in this campaign? Who can you share this series with?

IN THIS PODCAST



Amanda Tyler
Executive Director of BJC



Bishop Elizabeth Eaton
Presiding Bishop of the
Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America



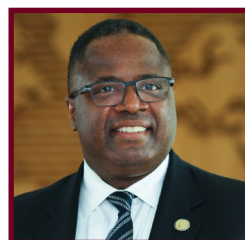
Rev. Dr. Paul Baxley
Executive Coordinator of
the Cooperative Baptist
Fellowship



Diane Randall
General Secretary of the
Friends Committee on
National Legislation



Sister Simone Campbell
Executive Director of
NETWORK



Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Haggray
Executive Director of
American Baptist Home
Mission Societies

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 2

Academic view of Christian nationalism

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guest: Andrew Whitehead

Amanda Tyler interviews Dr. Andrew Whitehead about what Christian nationalism is, how he and other researchers measure the ideology, how it affects the way individuals see the world, how it differs from religious practice, and the way it impacts all Americans.

1 Dr. Whitehead defines Christian nationalism as a “cultural framework or way that people understand and see the world, and they want to see American identity really interlaying with Christianity” **(7:55)**. Before listening to this podcast, how did you see American identity and Christian identity tied together? How have your civil and religious frameworks affected your views about whether the United States is a “Christian nation”?

2 Dr. Whitehead argues that Christianity and Christian nationalism are two very different things which operate in very different ways **(8:30)**. While Christianity is a religious tradition, Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that co-opts and melds aspects of Orthodox Christianity into layers of assumptions around what it means to be American, what Americans look like, how Americans think and act in the world, and how government should operate. Based on Dr. Whitehead’s definition and explanation of Christian nationalism vs. Christianity, what are the most significant differences that you see between Christianity and Christian nationalism? Why do you think people confuse the two?

3 In his new book *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, Dr. Whitehead argues that Christian nationalism is something we are all affected by in the United States whether we accept it, embrace it, or reject it. How have you seen the Christian nationalism framework affect your church or local community? If you had to classify your community as a place that happily embraces, tentatively accepts, or actively rejects Christian nationalism, how would you describe your community? Why?

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 2

Academic view of Christian nationalism

4

At the end of his interview, Dr. Whitehead points out that people often wrongly assume that devout Christians are more likely to see people from other religious traditions as a threat. Dr. Whitehead's research reveals the opposite. It is Christian nationalism, not the degree of religious practice of an individual, which causes people to see other religions as threatening **(23:12)**. Why do you think this distinction is important? What can it teach us about the importance of separating the effects of Christian nationalism vs. the effects of regular religious practice?

5

One of the first steps Christians can take to stand against Christian nationalism is to join thousands of other Christians in signing the statement found at ChristiansAgainstChristianNationalism.org. In addition to signing the statement, what are other steps our small group could take to stand against Christian nationalism?

IN THIS PODCAST



Amanda Tyler
Executive Director of BJC



Dr. Andrew Whitehead
Associate Professor of Sociology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and Director of the Association of Religion Data Archives; author of numerous articles and co-author of *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 3

Were we founded as a Christian nation?

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guests: Steven Green and Bill Leonard

Amanda Tyler interviews historians Dr. Steven Green and Dr. Bill Leonard about the political and religious history behind the idea that the United States was founded as a “Christian nation.”

1 Dr. Green states **(8:33)** that “This idea of us being a Christian nation is actually one of our chief founding myths, and I use the word ‘myth’ not in a pejorative sense, but in the sense that all nations and all peoples need to have some type of founding myth. And what founding myths are is that they basically explain the past in a way that is digestible and understandable to the present; but also, it has the aspirations of the present that are somehow then transferred back to the past. These founding myths create national identity.” Where have you noticed the narrative of “America was founded as a Christian nation”? How have such narratives shaped your understanding of America’s founding? Why do you think that myth is so persistent?

2 When trying to show the Founders’ religious intent to found America as a Christian nation, many people will pick out specific historical writings of early politicians using religious rhetoric. However, Dr. Green **(12:35)** explains that the founding generation’s religious devotion was fairly low, as church membership during the founding period is estimated at only 10-15%. Dr. Green explains that since the Bible was the most widely available book at the time, using biblical metaphors was a relatable way to rally people for causes such as the American Revolution (e.g. George Washington was compared to Moses delivering the colonists from the “pharaoh” King George). Do the reasons behind the use of biblical metaphors and passages matter for conversations about the Founding era? Does this understanding bolster or diminish the argument that the United States was founded as a “Christian nation”?

3 Dr. Green also debunks the myth that the Ten Commandments are the foundation for the American legal system **(17:45)**. This myth was not common in the founding period of our country. In fact, there are no mentions of the Ten Commandments as the foundation of our legal system until the middle of the 19th century. How does this myth tie into many local governments’ efforts to erect and maintain displays of the Ten Commandments? What larger message do you think this specific myth is trying to promote about our legal system, and why?

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 3

Were we founded as a Christian nation?

4

Dr. Leonard **(26:13)** teaches us that Baptists were some of the first dissenters against the colonial Protestant establishment. According to Dr. Leonard, Baptists' chief argument was that faith cannot be coerced, and all persons should be free to make their choices about faith. How does this narrative of Baptists being early advocates for religious liberty align with your perception of Baptists today? What do you think the role of Baptists and other Christians should be in combatting Christian nationalism today?

5

Historically, Protestant Christianity largely shaped American civil religion as the predominant religion, but now a plurality of religions is more normative in our culture at large. As a result, Dr. Leonard argues **(34:04)** that our country is experiencing the decline of Protestant privilege, and some Christians are confusing loss of privilege with the loss of religious liberty. Do you agree or disagree when Dr. Leonard argues that this work of teaching our children the Bible, funding our religious schools, or using phrases like "In God We Trust" is the work of the church and not the state? Why or why not? Why might it be important to distinguish between the loss of privilege and the loss of liberty?

IN THIS PODCAST



Amanda Tyler
Executive Director of BJC



Dr. Steven K. Green
Fred H. Paulus Professor of Law and Affiliated Professor of History and Religious Studies at Willamette University; author of several books, including *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding*



Dr. Bill Leonard
Founding Dean and Professor of Divinity Emeritus at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity; researcher who focuses on church history with particular attention to American religion and Baptist studies

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 4

Theological view of Christian nationalism with Walter Brueggemann

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guest: Walter Brueggemann

Amanda Tyler and Dr. Walter Brueggemann discuss the theological dangers of Christian nationalism, including what we can learn from the prophets, the importance of the narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection, and what the Bible says about oppression, hope, truth, and power.

1 At **6:19**, Dr. Brueggemann states, “Truth and power always have a tense, ambiguous relationship, but I have come to think that truth characteristically arises from below. And any time truth is forced upon us top down, it is distorted by the assumption and the exercise of power. ... Jesus is an exact embodiment of truth from below.” What are examples where we see Jesus embodying the “truth from below” concept? What implications does this concept have for us in terms of whose voices we listen to in our community, specifically when trying to learn about the effects of oppression or Christian nationalism?

2 In discussing Christian leaders today who are trying to be political power brokers, Dr. Brueggemann warns (**8:17**), “When our claims for Gospel Truth are attached to political and economic power, they are inevitably distorted and designed to maintain the privilege of the status quo ... Those of us who are entrusted with the Gospel are indeed entrusted with a critical edge that continues to point out the way in which power depends upon injustice for its maintenance of privilege.” When, in our history, have you seen Christian leaders trying to act as power brokers in politics? Do you agree with Dr. Brueggemann’s argument that those aligned with power lose the “subversive edge” of the Gospel? How does power depend on injustice to maintain itself? What implications does his reflection have for our own political engagement?

3 According to Dr. Brueggemann, the Old Testament is filled with stories about the intersection of religion and nationalism where political leaders are filled with “arrogant power that imagines that it is religiously legitimated” (**13:54**). He cites the story of Nebuchadnezzar (**13:37**) as such an example of the downfall of a prideful, unsustainable ruler whose Babylonian empire fails with its idolatrous religious ideology. He also describes the important role prophets played in calling out these rulers who believed they were not accountable to the Creator God. What lessons should these stories of biblical downfall try to teach Christians today? How can we be more like the prophets in our context?

4 A chief danger of Christian nationalism to Dr. Brueggemann is that it “makes God a captive and [it] domesticates God” and leads us into a politics of despair, in which we believe nothing good can happen (**15:27**). However, Dr. Brueggemann also states (**16:29**), “What the freedom of the Gospel God does is to permit us to imagine that there is hope and possibility that we will fashion new policies and new relationships that are beyond anyone’s particular vested interest.” What do you think Dr. Brueggemann means when he says Christian nationalism holds captive

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 4

Theological view of Christian nationalism with Walter Brueggemann

and “domesticates” God? When reflecting on these two ideas — the despair that comes from a domesticated God and the hope that comes from the Gospel God — which do you think has permeated your community the most? Why?

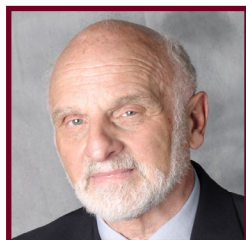
5 One of Dr. Brueggemann’s most passionate theological arguments in the podcast is around the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection narratives **(17:49)**. To him, Easter Sunday morning shows that the power of the Roman Empire was superseded by God’s power and that any nation or any empire has its limits and cannot defeat God’s intention for an alternative way in the world. He argues that too often we privatize the resurrection as a private, magic event rather than acknowledge the powerful public event it was in order to authorize our privilege, justify our greed, and adopt Christian nationalist views. By ignoring the powerful lessons of the public resurrection, Dr. Brueggemann argues we are now witnessing ourselves becoming devoured by greed that is grounded in fear and despair. How does Dr. Brueggemann’s framing of the resurrection differ or align with what you were taught? What lessons do you think the resurrection has to teach us about power? What would you say in response to his analysis of the greed we are witnessing today?

6 Dr. Brueggemann offers many ways we can speak truth to power and speak out against Christian nationalism **(21:40)**. He argues for efforts to reform the church so that the church becomes a place of truth-speaking and also encourages us to be politically active, protest in the streets, and “perform the truth” in whatever ways we are called and have the courage to do. What is one way you can speak truth to power in your community? How do you hope to inspire others in your community to recognize and speak out against Christian nationalism? What questions or reflections are you leaving here with today?

IN THIS PODCAST



Amanda Tyler
Executive Director of BJC



Dr. Walter Brueggemann
Scholar, theologian, and author of more than 100 books, including *The Prophetic Imagination*; William Marcellus McPheeters professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 5

Understanding Project Blitz

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guest: Frederick Clarkson

Amanda Tyler interviews Frederick Clarkson about Project Blitz, a coordinated effort to draft and pass bills informed by Christian nationalism in state legislatures.

1 At **4:27**, Frederick Clarkson talks about Project Blitz and its legislative influence on more than 35 state governments since 2015. According to Clarkson, one reason for Project Blitz's initial effectiveness was its ability to run under the radar. Before listening to this podcast, were you aware of Project Blitz? Did you see the efforts of Project Blitz in your state legislature through "In God We Trust" bills, Bible literacy bills, Religious Freedom Day resolutions, or other proposals? Why do you think they placed their playbook on their website?

2 In 1993, Congress designated January 16 as "Religious Freedom Day" in part to celebrate the enactment of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom from 1786. Clarkson argues, however, that Project Blitz's Religious Freedom Day proclamation uses a limited, revisionist history to argue America was founded as a Christian nation (**10:49**). Do you think Religious Freedom Day proclamations based on Project Blitz's recommendations are troubling? How do you think Thomas Jefferson or James Madison would respond to Project Blitz's type of Religious Freedom Day proclamations? What do you think would be an appropriate way for state legislatures to acknowledge and celebrate Religious Freedom Day?

3 Clarkson credits much of Project Blitz's effectiveness to its ability to drive the terms and language of the debate on issues, even when they lose. For instance, the Project Blitz manual is titled, "Report and Analysis on Religious Freedom Measures Impacting Prayer and Faith in America." Clarkson, however, categorizes its contents as really focused on three things: reinterpretation of church-state separation issues, LGBTQ issues, and abortion. He argues that by reframing these cultural issues in terms of a "religious freedom" argument, Project Blitz changes the nature of the discourse. Where have you seen the discourse change the most in recent years about the meaning and importance of "religious freedom"? How does framing these cultural issues as "religious freedom" issues complicate the discourse for those religious freedom advocates who are of different opinions?

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 5

Understanding Project Blitz

4

Clarkson states that the guiding force and driving energy behind Christian nationalism and Project Blitz is really “dominionism,” which is the idea that Christians must seek control over every aspect of culture, politics and government to fully infuse society with a Christian vision **(19:50)**. What are the dangers of dominionism? Which parts of America’s supposed “Christian founding” do you think Christian nationalists are trying to focus on? Is it more about regaining power or religious freedom?

5

While not in direct response to Project Blitz, the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign provides an alternative avenue for Christians to show that not all Christians believe the same way or want to promote such efforts. Going forward, how can Christians who oppose Project Blitz shape the narrative on the debate? What are steps Christians can take to resist such efforts, which often infringe upon the religious freedom of non-Christians?

IN THIS PODCAST



Amanda Tyler
Executive Director of BJC



Frederick Clarkson
Author and journalist; Senior
Research Analyst at Political
Research Associates

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 6

Standing against Project Blitz in a state legislature

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guest: John Marty

Amanda Tyler and Minnesota state Sen. John Marty discuss how his Christian faith influences his work defending the rights of all people, and he shares stories about the pushback and accusations he received as he worked to stand against the use of his faith to crush others.

1 With a career in politics spanning more than 30 years, Minnesota state Sen. John Marty tells us he got into politics because of Christianity's ethic of caring for others. He said, "I don't say people should leave their faith at the door when they get involved in politics, but they should be not promoting their faith. ... As a Christian, I've always felt my obligation is sharing and concern for others: other Christians, other people of other faiths, people of no faith" **(4:25)**. Do you think it's possible to draw a line, as Sen. Marty implies, between politicians being driven by the values of their faith and politicians promoting their religion? Does your answer change if your elected official is from a different faith (or no faith) tradition than you or if your elected official is from another political party?

2 The arguments presented to pass Minnesota's "In God We Trust" bill included that posting the motto in public schools would teach schoolchildren respect and that it would unify people **(8:10)**. Sen. Marty voted against the bill because he was concerned about the impact on kids of different faiths or of no faith. Despite his regular church attendance and long lineage of ministers in his family, Sen. Marty was accused of being un-American and anti-Christian in a smear campaign that included vitriolic calls to his home. How does Sen. Marty's experience influence your thoughts on the purpose of the bill? Do you think posting the national motto in public schools is problematic, not a big deal, or a positive step? Why? What if the motto was something from a religious or secular text with which you did not agree?

3 While on paper it may seem that Sen. Marty and Project Blitz both desire to protect "religious liberty," Sen. Marty argues Project Blitz only wants religious liberty for people of certain conservative Christian backgrounds **(15:45)**. What differences do you see between the religious liberty Sen. Marty is advocating for and what Project Blitz wants?

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 6

Standing against Project Blitz in a state legislature

4

One major theme that runs throughout the second half of this podcast is the importance of history, particularly the stories we tell about America's beginning and its ties to religious liberty. For instance, we learn that the Minnesota Prayer Caucus threatened the funding for the Minnesota Historical Society when they invited historian Steven Green (who was also a guest on episode 3 of this podcast series) to speak about America's religious liberty foundations **(21:06)**. Why would Project Blitz and other legislative groups resist such events by the Minnesota Historical Society? What is the importance of honoring and retelling religious liberty history in the fight against Christian nationalism? Before this podcast, were you more familiar with the narrative that America was founded as a "Christian nation" or that religious liberty was a vital principle for our Founders?

5

A role of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign is to provide a clear outlet for Christians from a variety of backgrounds to stand together and oppose Christian nationalism without being labeled as an "anti-Christian" individual. Sen. Marty believes such resistance is an obligation to both his Christian faith and his role as a political official, saying **(12:30)** "I think I, and others as Christians, have a particular obligation to speak out against those who try to use our beliefs to crush others." After listening to Sen. Marty, what obligation do Christians have to stand up against Christian nationalism? Besides signing the statement, what are other things you can do on a local, state, or national level to join Sen. Marty in ensuring religious liberty is maintained for all people? What can Christians do together as a group?

IN THIS PODCAST



Amanda Tyler
Executive Director of BJC



Sen. John Marty
Member of the Minnesota
Senate, representing District 66

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 7

Christian nationalism, race and white supremacy

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guest: Jemar Tisby

Amanda Tyler interviews Jemar Tisby about the history of white Christian nationalism in America, including how confluences of politics, race, and religion in our past continue to impact conversations today.

1

Jemar Tisby offers two definitions of racism at the beginning of the podcast. He says racism can be described as “a system of oppression based on race” or “prejudice plus power” **(5:54)**. Under his definitions, everyone can be prejudiced against another race, but fewer have the power to implement or enforce their prejudice through policies and systems that create and perpetuate inequality and inequity. How does Tisby’s framing of racism differ from your own understanding? How does separating the difference between prejudice and racism change your understanding of what is “racist”? What are examples of policies or systems that have created inequality between people based on race?

2

Tisby describes white supremacy as the pervasive story that a person’s worth is based on the amount of melanin in a person’s skin, and whiteness is considered superior or the central perspective **(6:52)**. White supremacy culture is pervasive, but often unrecognized. Consider his grocery store example of a racial description only being present on the “ethnic food aisle.” Because most grocery stores are designed from the standpoint of white people, the assumption is that most food is just “food” unless it’s from a non-white culture. Can you think of other examples where whiteness is the central perspective or assumed default in your community?

3

Tisby’s book looks at more than 400 years of history, and it is critical of almost all Christian denominations and major players. According to Tisby **(9:01)**: “the racist status quo in America could not have formed or been perpetuated without the cooperation oftentimes of the church.” Hearing Tisby’s argument, what thoughts or feelings first come up for you?

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 7

Christian nationalism, race and white supremacy

4

Most of the time when we think of racism, Tisby says we think of the extreme examples (such as the Ku Klux Klan), but by doing so, we overlook a massive group of more moderate white people who created a context of complicity. Tisby's chief argument (**9:47**) is that instead of courageously confronting racism, many white Christians chose complicity and compromise and – in so doing – created and perpetrated a racial caste system in the United States. Do you agree with Tisby's assertion that we typically only think of racism in the extreme terms and ignore the complicit majority? What are examples you can think of where churches were too quick to be complicit or to compromise instead of speaking out against racism?

5

In regard to history, at **14:10** Tisby says, "When we talk about white Christian nationalism, any information, any data that refutes the idea of American exceptionalism will be rejected, will be questioned, will be undermined." However, Tisby reminds of us the importance in making our historical past public and for people to understand that we still live with the legacy of enslavement. At **16:35**, he states, "[The legacy of slavery] is not just about the Antebellum period. It's not just about history up until 1865. It's about the continuing ramifications of subjugating an entire group of people and crafting a narrative of superiority and inferiority along racial lines to bolster that system of oppression." Where have you seen examples of the narrative of American exceptionalism in the retelling of American history? What are examples today of the legacy of slavery that Tisby describes?

6

Tisby talks about many different stories in his book that illustrate how white Christian nationalism has consistently involved famous American religious and political leaders throughout history. For instance, he discusses theologian Jonathan Edwards owning a young slave girl named Venus, the KKK burning a cross on Stone Mountain next to an altar of the American flag and a Bible, and President Woodrow Wilson — son of a Presbyterian minister — showing a KKK propaganda film called *Birth of a Nation* multiple times in the White House. Of all the stories Tisby shares, which story stood out to you the most? Which had you never heard before? Which did you find most disturbing? Why do you think these stories are important in remembering and retelling America's history of white Christian nationalism?

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 7

Christian nationalism, race and white supremacy

7

When asked by white people, “What can I do?” in their efforts to combat white Christian nationalism, Tisby offers an acronym: ARC, which stands for Awareness, Relationships, and Commitment **(28:50)**. He says people can educate themselves further about race, racism, its history, and how these things show up every day. Second, people can go out of their way to befriend the “other” or people of different races than them. Finally, people can commit to not only educating themselves or building relationships, but also committing for the long haul to fight for anti-racist policies which address issues like mass incarceration, education funding, and health care discrepancies. What are ways you can implement ARC in your own life?

IN THIS PODCAST



Amanda Tyler
Executive Director of BJC



Jemar Tisby
Writer, historian, speaker, and author of *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*; President of The Witness, a Black Christian collective that engages issues of religion, race, justice, and culture from a biblical perspective

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 8

Christian nationalism and white nationalism

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guest: Aidsand Wright-Riggins

Amanda Tyler interviews the Rev. Dr. Aidsand Wright-Riggins about race, reconciliation, religious liberty, Christian supremacy, and more in this wide-ranging conversation.

1

The relationship between race and religious liberty has a complex – and, at times, troublesome – history. We must know what we must repent of before we can take steps toward repentance or reconciliation in this country. For instance, Dr. Wright-Riggins discussed Founders such as Thomas Jefferson who were champions of religious liberty while holding people in bondage and chains. Instead of religious liberty, African Americans had to prioritize racial liberty and racial justice as they fought for their very survival. Why do you think it is important to acknowledge this complex history today? How has this racial history of religious liberty affected people's assumptions about who religious liberty is for? How can we be intentional now about framing religious liberty for everyone? How do you think further understanding our country's history moves us towards repentance and reconciliation?

2

Dr. Wright-Riggins argues that part of the difficulty in talking about these hard issues, such as race, religion, or gender, is that we all have privilege and blind spots in areas of which we are not aware. For instance, he discusses how his work during his college years was for the liberation of the Black man without him seeing the privilege Black men had over Black women. Have you had instances in your own life where you have later realized a privilege you have that has kept you from seeing other people or their struggles more fully? Why do you think it is so hard for us to learn about our privileges? Do you think it's our responsibility to work to shift benefits to oppressed groups once we acknowledge and recognize our privilege? If so, how do we begin to do that? What are examples we can draw on from history of that being done well?

3

Dr. Wright-Riggins discusses repentance, reconciliation, and reparations **(18:03)**. At **19:31**, he says, "I am not so much as interested in the handing out or the delivery of goods and services as much as I am concerned about how do we begin to rethink the structural narrative or the structures in this country that lead to the disparities in the first place." One of his examples was that for every \$5 in wealth he has as a

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 8

Christian nationalism and white nationalism

life-long employed black man who makes a decent income, his white neighbors in his community have access to thousands of dollars of wealth. Dr. Wright-Riggins argues that the conversation needs not to be simply the distribution of benefits to those having suffered, but it also needs to include changing the system to make it a more equal playing field going forward. How does Dr. Wright-Riggins' framing of reparations differ from what you may have heard about reparations before the podcast? What are other examples of structural inequality that you think Dr. Wright-Riggins may be referring to that need to be addressed? What do you think could be a first step towards reparations in your community?

4

At the end of the podcast, Dr. Wright-Riggins talks about his switch from traditional ministry to his work in the civil sector. He describes his work as mayor of Collegeville, Pennsylvania, as not traditional ministry, but “more ministry in the workplace as a lay person attempting through the exercise of my faith to try to authentically be transformative and bring civility and character to the civil order” **(23:10)**. What ways do you want to be authentically transformative in areas of life that you see as your ministry? How can promoting the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement be a part of that process?

IN THIS PODCAST



Amanda Tyler
Executive Director of BJC



Rev. Dr. Aidsand Wright-Riggins
Acting Executive Director of
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DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 9

Religious freedom, church-state law and Christian nationalism

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guests: Holly Hollman, Melissa Rogers, Rabbi David Saperstein

Amanda Tyler, Holly Hollman, Melissa Rogers, and Rabbi David Saperstein discuss the complexity in church-state law, the role of religion in public life, the dangers of government promotion of religion, the protections provided by the separation of church and state, and more.

1

The panel begins the discussion by talking about misperceptions people hold about religious liberty, including the idea that government sponsorship of one religion is not a problem for religious liberty. Melissa Rogers states that in addition to being harmful for minority faiths, government-sponsored religion is actually not good for the religion it endorses because the state tends to only magnify the elements of the religion it agrees with while suppressing the voices and perspectives of the faith that criticize the state. Rogers reflects that this leads to a “funhouse version of faith” versus an authentic version that holds our government accountable **(12:52)**. Prior to listening to this podcast, what were some of the misperceptions or narratives that you heard about religious liberty today? How do Rogers’ points counteract those assumptions? What are some examples of a “funhouse version” of Christianity that you see in our society?

2

Rabbi David Saperstein attests that some of the greatest abuses throughout history came from places where church and state were not separated. In fact, he argues that our wall of separation in the United States leads to far more people going to worship, believing in God, and holding religious values. At **15:47**, he says, “One of the greatneses of America was precisely separating church and state, and that protection of religion has allowed religion to flourish in America with a diversity and strength unmatched anywhere in the democratic world today.” Due to Article VI in the original Constitution (which prohibits any religious test for office) and the First Amendment, the United States is a model for religious freedom and has influenced important global documents, such as the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Why do you think the separation of church and state has allowed religion to flourish in the United States?

3

The first proclamation in the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement is, “People of all faiths and none have the right and responsibility to engage constructively in the public square” **(20:41)**. While unpacking this statement, Rogers discusses the important role that religious communities can play in public life by offering a conscience for the country. Holly Hollman adds that the power of their moral voice cannot happen if there is not separation between church and state that allows the church to both have the right to organize a protest like any other group and the right to criticize the state openly without being beholden to the state. What role do you think the church should play in the public square? Do religious groups have a responsibility to be a moral voice? Do you see that happening in your community?

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Religious freedom, church-state law and Christian nationalism

4

With more than 2,000 different religions, denominations, or sects in America alone, a key principle of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement is that “Government should not prefer one religion over another or religion over non-religion.” Melissa Rogers clarifies what that statement means. At **29:15**, she says, “For a person to say that the government should not favor one religion — my religion — over another religion does not mean that a person has to say that all religions are the same ... [or] there is no exclusive truth in my tradition.” This principle is about human dignity and giving everyone the same opportunity to follow the judgment of their own hearts and minds. What misperceptions do you think others may have about what this statement means? How do you interpret the statement, and why do you think it’s important for the United States, considering our religious diversity? Why would Christian nationalists push back against this statement? Should government ever favor a religion?

5

As a result of Project Blitz and other Christian nationalist efforts, Bible literacy bills have become increasingly popular the past few years. However, the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement says that “Religious instruction is best left to our houses of worship, other religious institutions and families” (**32:30**). Hollman argues that through the statement, “We’re not saying that there is no role for public schools to teach about religion or religious diversity or respect” (**33:55**). In fact, the panel argues that teaching about religious understanding, religious liberty, and religious diversity is needed both in the public schools and in places like the State Department. However, teaching about the role of religion is not the same as teaching religious tenets and practices. What responsibility do you think people of faith have to stand up to resist such Bible bills? How do you think a public school teaching about the role of religion differs from how religion is taught in your church?

IN THIS PODCAST



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Holly Hollman
BJC General Counsel and
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at-Large for International
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DISCUSSION GUIDE: EPISODE 10

Embracing civic pluralism

Host: Amanda Tyler

Guest: Eboo Patel

Amanda Tyler and Eboo Patel discuss the difference in religious and civic pluralism, the origins of the term “Judeo-Christian,” connections between anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-Catholic bigotry, and how we can create a “potluck nation,” where everyone brings their unique contributions to the table.

1

An antidote to Christian nationalism could be a full embrace of religious pluralism **(1:27)**. Referencing Dr. Diana Eck’s definitions of pluralism and diversity, Eboo Patel distinguishes “diversity,” a demographic fact where people with different identities are living in close proximity to one another **(4:30)**, from “pluralism,” a positive engagement that includes respect for diverse identities, positive relationships with diverse communities, and some type of commitment to the common good. He describes pluralism as a civic concept (with a theological dimension of positive interfaith cooperation) that suggests you do not have to agree with your neighbor on things like creation or salvation to serve alongside your neighbors or provide them aid **(6:50)**. Would you describe your community as diverse or pluralistic? Why do you think it’s important to distinguish between the two terms? What are some examples of where a community moved from diversity to pluralism? Why is pluralism so hard to find today?

2

Patel shares with us **(8:00)** that, for centuries, political philosophers believed that for democracy to succeed, societies must be religiously homogeneous. But, the Founders of the United States built something that no one else could imagine: a proactive, religiously diverse democracy. Patel reminds us that typically today when we think of a stranger, we think of their worst qualities first, but the Founders made a radical decision to create a religiously diverse democracy where strangers of other faiths could be welcomed. How does Patel’s telling of our Founders’ efforts to build a religiously diverse democracy differ from the narrative of America being founded as a “Christian nation”? Why do you think the Founders wanted to create such an accepting form of democracy? Despite the example of our Founders’ views towards religious liberty, why do you feel so much of our dialogue about people of other faiths today is still focused on their negative qualities?

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Embracing civic pluralism

3

Patel shares with us that he discovered the term “Judeo-Christian nation” was not something that originated from the times of Plymouth Rock but actually originated in the 1920s from the National Conference on Christians and Jews. Patel informs us that the council formed in the early 1900s to try to combat the large anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic sentiment that flooded the nation due to groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The council came up with the term as a way to shift Americans’ views of the country from just a Protestant nation to a broader Judeo-Christian nation. Because “Judeo-Christian” does not fully capture our country’s diverse religious history or demographics today, Patel argues that our challenge now is to create a new title of the chapter of America that we are in. He suggests titles such as “interfaith nation” or a “potluck nation” concept, which would symbolize that America is not a melting pot but a potluck, where everyone contributes by bringing their own dish, having a big welcoming table, and taking care of the needs of the people and the collective space. What was your prior understanding of the term “Judeo-Christian”? How does the term’s origin story change your perception of its purpose, particularly around interfaith acceptance? What do you think of Patel’s proposed phrases of “interfaith nation” or even “potluck nation” to update the narrative about America’s faith composition?

4

At **22:10**, Patel says, “America is America because we welcome the contributions of people from a range of backgrounds in both big and small ways.” He tells us that the anti-Muslim bias we see today is very similar to the anti-Catholic bias of the early 1900s. To show the interconnectedness of Muslims in our society, Patel tells us the story of a child cancer specialist, Dr. Ali, who was about to perform surgery on the child of a parent who uttered on the phone that Muslims should leave America. Dr. Ali overhears and responds to the parent by asking if he should leave before or after his child’s surgery. Were you surprised to hear the similarities between anti-Catholic sentiments of the late 1800s/early 1900s compared to anti-Muslim sentiments today? What do you think that historical comparison can teach us? Like Dr. Ali’s story, what are examples of businesses, nonprofits, schools, or professional services that wouldn’t exist in our community without the contributions of people from a faith tradition different than your own?

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Embracing civic pluralism

5

When asked what we can do to advance religious pluralism in America **(25:05)**, Patel recommends four steps: **1. Educate yourself** about America's history of being a deliberately religiously diverse democracy. **2. Pay attention** to the theology of interfaith cooperation within your own religion. **3. Learn things** that you appreciate and admire about (not necessarily agree with) other religious communities. **4. Try to organize** concrete interfaith projects, like interfaith service projects or a speaker series at various houses of worship. Looking at this list, which of the four steps would you be most interested in? Which step feels the most challenging?

IN THIS PODCAST



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