The white Christian nationalist scam

Journalists Katherine Stewart and Anne Nelson unveil the mechanisms behind the rise of a movement.

by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove in the July 15, 2020 issue

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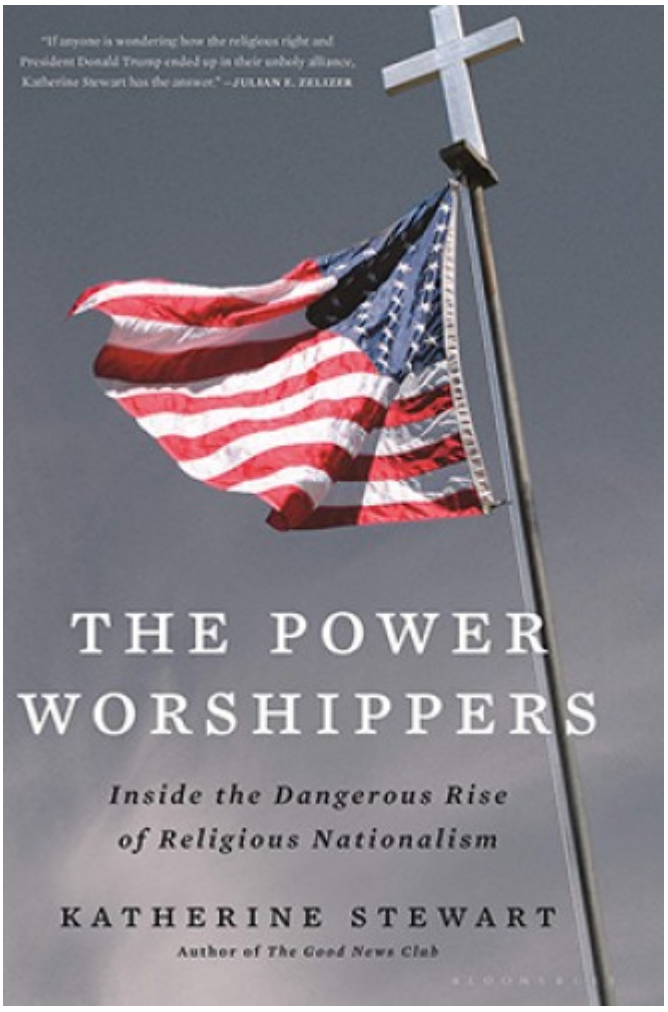
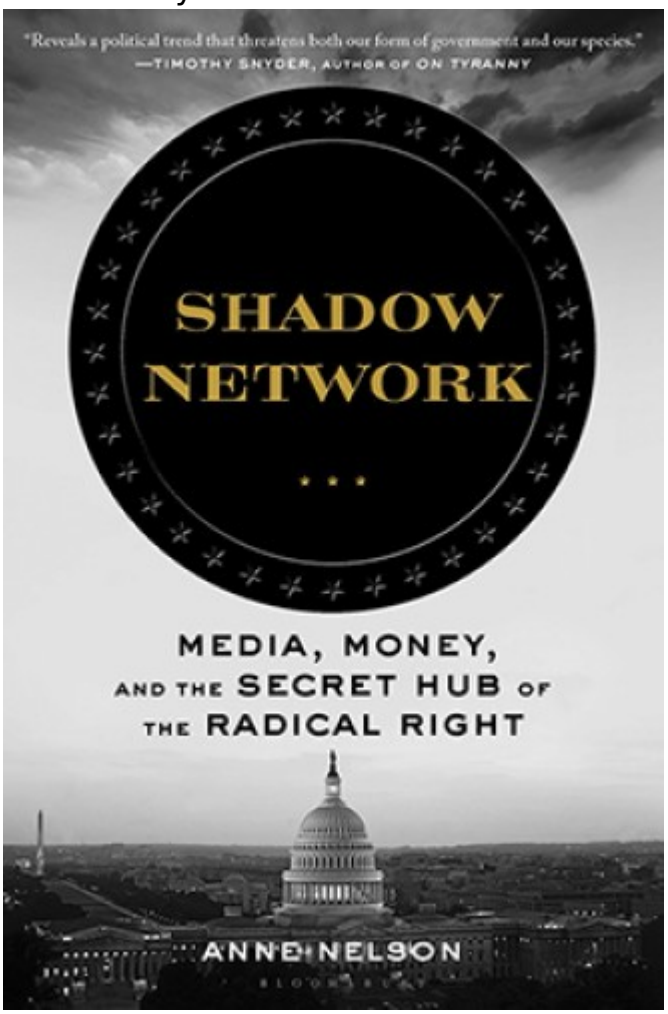


The Power Worshippers

Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism

By Katherine Stewart
Bloomsbury



Shadow Network

Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right

By Anne Nelson
Bloomsbury

Several years ago, an elderly deacon at a Baptist church in my hometown in rural North Carolina lost his beloved wife. The church rallied around him as he grieved, and everyone was encouraged when, after several solemn months, he showed signs of renewed joy. He had found new love online.

As younger people in the congregation listened to their elder's story, though, they realized that something wasn't quite right. Eventually some fellow deacons pulled him aside to explain: the woman he had been talking with online wasn't really interested in a relationship. She was part of a scam designed to exploit his grief as a way to his bank account.

New books by investigative journalists Katherine Stewart and Anne Nelson look into a different sort of scam that's targeting Christians—this one more widespread and long-standing. For the past 40 years, the corporately funded radical right in America has targeted the church, exploiting the language of Christians' faith in order to gain their political support.

Ever since the majority of white Christians in America voted for Donald Trump in 2016, there has been no shortage of articles—both within and beyond religious media—about why sincere Christians would support a candidate who was so obviously insincere in his commitment to the teachings of Christ. The more interesting of these pieces, in my view, have stepped back from the specter of Trump's moral turpitude and hourly tweets to ask what created the conditions in which his presidency was possible.

The Trump presidency will eventually end. But the movement that celebrates him as its champion has been with us for some time—and without a collective intervention, it will go on. This movement is best understood as Christian nationalism, Stewart explains, and it entails far more than the flag-waving and nostalgia for traditional values that many Christians have argued about since the 1980s.

Most Americans view Christian nationalism as "a cultural movement centered on a set of social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, preoccupied with symbolic conflicts over monuments and prayers," writes Stewart. But over decades "the religious right has become more focused and powerful even as it is arguably less representative. . . . It is a political movement, and its ultimate goal is power."

Stewart stumbled into an investigation of Christian nationalism when a parachurch ministry tried to start an afterschool Bible club at her child's school in Southern California more than a decade ago. The sponsoring organization, Child Evangelism Fellowship, turned down a better meeting space at the church next door, insisting that they'd rather meet at the school. Stewart became concerned about the separation of church and state and began to ask questions. Her questions turned

into a deep investigation of CEF's efforts to claim space in public schools for a nationalist form of Christianity. This investigation, which Stewart detailed in her 2017 book *The Good News Club*, is the starting point for *The Power Worshippers*.

In the course of her research, Stewart realized that CEF is one of many organizations within a larger network that shares language, ideology, donors, and databases. A minority movement, to be sure, Christian nationalism nevertheless unites a diverse cross section of American Christians—rural and suburban, middle class and super rich, black and white and brown (although it remains overwhelmingly white). Stewart wanted to understand what brought these people together and what makes them so distrustful of America's democratic traditions.

Stewart was not alone. Across the country, Nelson, who teaches at Columbia University, had launched her own investigation.

Nelson's questions began when she heard a radio talk show while visiting family in Oklahoma in 2004. The topic that day was gay marriage, standard fare for the culture wars. What caught Nelson's attention wasn't that a conservative talk radio host opposed gay marriage. It was that he made up facts to argue his case, and there was no one to hold him accountable. "John Kerry is threatening the sanctity of marriage, including yours. So you better get out and vote," the host told his listeners.

The combination of misinformation with political mobilization on the local airwaves led Nelson to look up the owner of the local station, Bott Radio. She followed the connections and found her way to the Council for National Policy, the secretive organization that connects Bott Radio's founder to other funders and activists of the religious right. CNP became the focus of Nelson's research and eventually the topic of *Shadow Network*.

Stewart and Nelson have not written the same book, although they shine a light on many of the same people and organizations. Both have done impressive archival and on-the-ground research. These books are two of the fullest accounts of Christian nationalism to date. But they differ in approach.

Shadow Network is an analysis from a central hub looking out, focused on the CNP and its expansive network of "donors and doers." *The Power Worshippers* looks at the impact of these coordinated efforts to manipulate religious voters, tracing it back to a shared ideology of Christian nationalism. Anyone interested in an

intervention on behalf of religious and democratic values in America would do well to read both.

Together, they paint a multidimensional portrait of the politicization of Christian faith that has neither a single source nor a majority of support among American Christians, despite its disproportionate impact. Christian nationalism, it turns out, is more like a virus whose spread has been facilitated by oil money than an ideology that is ready to defend itself in an open debate about the role of faith in public life.

Nelson and Stewart focus on Christian nationalism as it exists today, with its enthusiastic support for Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu's policies in Israel, the National Rifle Association, and "religious liberty" as a claim for the legal right to discriminate. But they also show how this movement grows out of ideas and struggles deeply embedded in American religious history.

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Stewart offers an especially insightful reading of the influence of Robert Lewis Dabney, the Confederate army chaplain who taught theology during and after the Civil War at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. In his postwar teaching, Dabney continued to use Christian faith, as slaveholders had before, to justify white supremacy.

Nelson looks to more recent history. She shows how the Southern Baptist Convention's takeover by radical conservatives in the 1970s was an important prelude to the way the religious right would exercise influence through the Republican Party. At issue were not only theological concerns about biblical inerrancy and the relationship between church and state but also "allegiance to states' rights" and opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As it turns out, some of the key players in the CNP cut their teeth on hostile takeovers in the church politics of the SBC.

When reading these accounts, it's easy to connect the ideas and institutions of 19th-century slaveholder religion to the Christian nationalism of today. Yet the vast majority of Christian nationalists do not see themselves as racist.

Stewart helpfully narrates how abortion became a rallying cry for Christian nationalists in the late 1970s as a way of holding onto a block of voters who had been united by racism before the civil rights movement. "From the very beginning,"

she writes, “the ‘abortion issue’ has never been just about abortion. It has also been about dividing and uniting to mobilize votes for the sake of amassing political power.” Focusing on how the early religious right used “pro-life” language to make a struggle for political power seem righteous, Stewart helps readers understand how the young women she talks to at the March for Life in Washington, D.C., see their activism as an extension of the civil rights movement. “Abortion is discrimination based on their age,” a woman from California asserts. She is convinced that if Martin Luther King Jr. were alive today, he would be marching with her.

For anyone not immersed in the culture of the religious right, this up-is-down rereading of American history and democratic values can feel bizarre. How could anyone actually believe this? It’s a question that has become increasingly familiar within churches, families, and communities in an era we often lament as uniquely polarized.

Nelson’s reporting from the inside of the CNP helps explain how a wraparound media culture was intentionally constructed to immerse whole communities in the Christian nationalist narrative. Oklahoma and Texas oilmen invested in independent TV and radio stations to challenge the authority of mainstream media and the academy while, at the same time, offering people religious reasons to trust alternative facts. This messaging was coordinated with leaders of the NRA, the Republican Party, conservative activist organizations, and a host of Christian ministries. Some of the people who were in the room, listening closely to these conversations, have become household names in the Trump administration—Steve Bannon, Kellyanne Conway, and Betsy DeVos, to name a few.

Both Stewart and Nelson make clear that it would be a mistake to write off the influence of Christian nationalism as something that has only impacted “those other Christians,” be they fundamentalist, Pentecostal, or white evangelical. The Institute on Religion and Democracy, which was started with money that flows through the same channels that fund many religious right organizations, has devoted itself to pushing the Christian nationalist narrative in mainline Protestant churches. Stewart reports that Watchmen on the Wall, an outreach to pastors by the Family Research Council, is heavily invested in outreach to African American and Latino pastors. It’s a movement with deep pockets and inflated ambitions, and there’s an effort to take its message almost everywhere.

Perhaps the most disturbing story in both of these books is the detailed reporting Stewart and Nelson each offer on the data operations of these networks, which are shared between political campaigns, advocacy organizations, and churches. With money from the Koch network of donors, a firm called i360 gathers more than 150 data points on 250 million Americans—practically every eligible voter in the country. When paired with publicly available voter data, i360 enables political campaigns to equip volunteers with an app that can tell them before they knock on a door what the potential voter is concerned about, afraid of, or interested in buying at Walmart. With its appeals custom-designed to speak directly to each voter, Christian nationalism aims to exploit gerrymandering and voter suppression to identify vulnerable districts, exploit narratives sown through faith networks and independent media, and secure the power of minority rule.

The millions of dollars and sophisticated strategies behind these efforts may feel overwhelming to those who hope to stop them. The operations that Stewart and Nelson chronicle span four decades and stretch around the world, uniting Christian nationalists in the US with religious nationalist movements on other continents.

As daunting as an intervention may seem, the enormity of this effort over such a long period of time may also be our greatest hope. After all, rich people do not put this much money into anything if they are not concerned. The fact that they have had to invest more and more suggests a law of diminishing returns. Even as Christian nationalists have achieved the power they so long sought through the Trump administration, the prospects of recruiting a new generation to vote their values seem bleak.

Nelson observes toward the end of *Shadow Network* that the CNP has staked its fortunes on exploiting people who think they will benefit from the policies of the politicians they are asked to vote for on the basis of Christian nationalism. “They are ripe for manipulation, even if the end result is detrimental to their health, their well-being, and the future of their children.”

When I read these words, I remembered that elderly deacon in my hometown who’d stumbled into an online scam after his wife died. I knew him in my youth, and when I first heard his story I felt bad for him. Yet I was encouraged to learn that, when he was targeted, his community circled around him, spoke the truth in love, and helped him find his way out of the mess he found himself in. When an intervention was needed, the church was there for him.

Stewart and Nelson make it clear that a similar intervention is needed now. In the face of a widespread campaign that has ensnared millions of Christians and threatens to destroy democracy, the church's responsibility is to rally around those who've been conned and help them see the truth about themselves and about our common life.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The Christian nationalist scam."