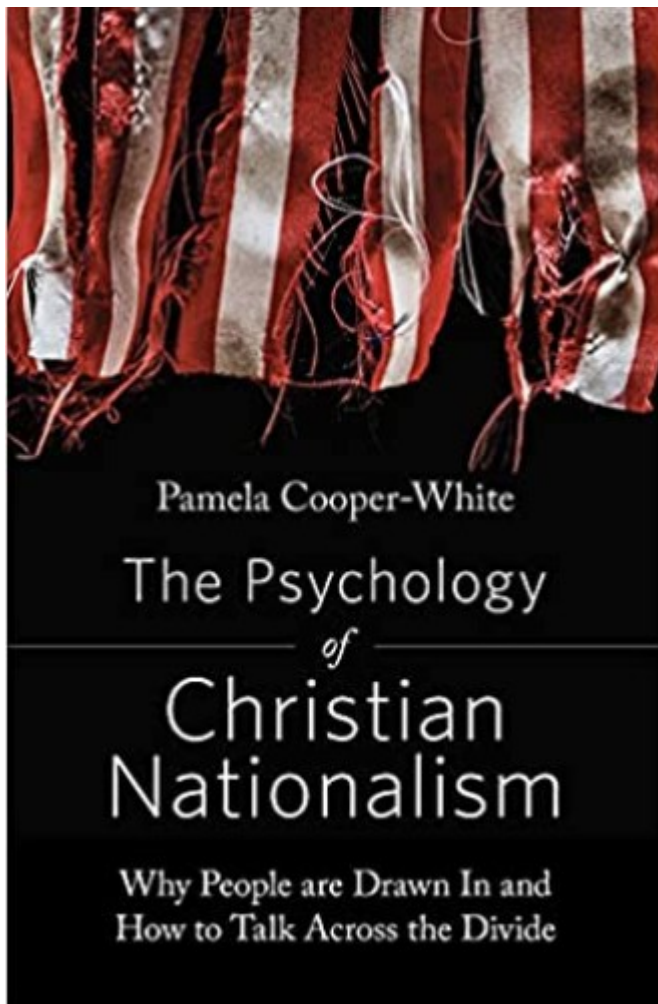


What Christian nationalism is and what to do about it

Pamela Cooper-White details best practices for difficult conversations that privilege listening, reflexivity, curiosity, and care.

by [Cynthia G. Lindner](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

In Review



The Psychology of Christian Nationalism

Why People Are Drawn In, and How to Talk across the Divide

By Pamela Cooper-White

Fortress Press

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Pamela Cooper-White, an Episcopal priest, pastoral psychotherapist, and professor at Union Theological Seminary, is known for research and writing that navigates the fraught intersections of theology, psychotherapy, and social justice with courage and care. Her work is deeply rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition but decidedly not root-bound, as her earlier writings on relational psychology and multiplicity demonstrate (*Braided Selves*); nor is she reluctant to bring psychoanalytic sensibilities to bear on systemic evils, such as violence against women (*The Cry of Tamar; Gender, Violence, and Justice*) and the antisemitic impulses at the origins of psychoanalysis itself (*Old and Dirty Gods*).

In her new book, Cooper-White continues her practice of theoretically informed truth telling in the face of some of the most confounding and complicated maladies of our present moment: the polarization of American society and the dangerous ascendancy of Christian nationalism. Readers who want to look away from the disease that is currently ravaging our body politic, those seeking a diverting beach read or a soothing affirmation of their own biases, will do well to choose a different companion.

The book's slim profile—only three chapters and less than 200 pages—belies its range and intensity. In the opening chapter, the author packs a mere 30 pages with an unflinching social analysis of the “unholy alliances” that have joined forces in our present moment. She assembles a hard-hitting account of Christian nationalism that begins with narratives of the January 6 attack on the Capitol building and the prominence of Christian symbols there; presents data from large-scale statistical studies of social attitudes and beliefs by sociologists of religion to identify the tenets of Christian nationalism and its adherents; traces the heritage of the movement in books and articles by pastors identified with Christian nationalism as well as those of their historical evangelical forbears; and points to broader social injustices that have fueled the movement's popularity such as racism, xenophobia, classism, and sexism.

Following this brief exposition of the who, what, and when of Christian nationalism, a second chapter, as brief and as multifocal as the first, explores the question of why and how people are drawn into extremist ideologies and communities. Citing both social theorists and experts on evangelism, Cooper-White situates the allure of such movements in the basic human need for belonging. She references the social unrest and reforms of the 1960s to locate the patriarchal backlash, toxic masculinity, and conspiracy theories that have festered for decades, surfacing with deadly force in our time. Voices from classic psychoanalysis sit alongside contemporary inheritors such as Margaret Singer and Robert Lifton, adding their attestation to descriptions of the unconscious forces that fuel our culture's epidemic of fear and resentment, groupthink, and passionate devotion to narcissistic leaders.

As its title promises, the book's final chapter takes a constructive turn, proposing strategies for "how to talk across the divide"—that is, how (and when) to engage extreme differences, such as Christian nationalist opinions, in our encounters with others. Accordingly, this chapter's scope and pacing are noticeably more measured than the sweeping historical, social, and psychological bricolage of the previous chapters.

Cooper-White details best practices for difficult conversations that privilege listening, reflexivity, curiosity, and care. She advocates a triage strategy for evaluating the utility of such conversations, noting that some might be nonstarters, especially with people deeply embedded in Christian nationalist systems. Concerned individuals, she suggests, might best spend their resources and energies where they sense some openness in a conversation partner or where they have access to a platform for educating a wider public. Drawing on her own psychotherapeutic experience alongside the resources of such organizations as Braver Angels and Beyond Civility, Cooper-White offers 20 careful pages of considerations and specific tools for engaging in these conversations across differences.

Seldom do academicians apply their knowledge and skill with such immediacy, and rarely do social analysis, psychological perspective, and practical wisdom claim equal time in a single volume. That this small book has such an expansive vision—who, what, when, why, and how—while addressing such a broad audience (there is little theological or theoretical jargon to confound a general public) is enviable, admirable, and urgently useful.

At the same time, that ambitious reach leaves many unanswered questions and much more work to do. Neither the history, scope, and current manifestation of Christian nationalism nor its manifold spiritual and psychological causes can be fully researched in such a brief span of time, nor rendered exhaustively in the short space that this volume allows. Occasionally an unevenness in writing style or a few fragmented sentences betray the haste that urgency seems to demand. At several junctures, readers might question the seeming overstatement of an interpretation or characterization—or seek a fuller account of evangelical commitments, greater clarity about various political alliances, or a deeper understanding of the implications of quantitative research studies.

As if in anticipation of these questions, the final quarter of the book offers 500 endnotes—many of them quite detailed—and several generous pages of reading suggestions. These additional sources and voices function not simply as academic authentication; they also remind us of our responsibility as citizens and as people of faith to be well-informed, even when the subject matter is disorienting, distasteful, or disheartening to engage.

Readers who know themselves to be formed in manifold ways by Christian thought and practices might wish for more robust explorations of the spiritual roots of Christian nationalism and thoroughgoing theological responses to its damage that are beyond the scope of this book. Much more could be said about the liabilities and distortions of Christian monotheistic sensibilities and the seeds of racism, sexism, and nationalism that lie therein. Those of us who are entrusted with the care and feeding of Christian communities—and not only those whose politics or theologies lean to the right—will want to examine our own practices, teachings, and attitudes to ensure that our actions, relationships, and rhetoric do not feed the fires of intolerance and hatred in our already traumatized political imaginary. Instead, we can recognize our common capacity for good and evil alike, take responsibility for what we can, and hold together religion's dual commitments to love and justice, in our listening and in our speaking.