

BOOK REVIEW

The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn in and How to Talk Across the Divide, Pamela Cooper-White, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022, Paperback, 190 pp. \$21.00

Have you found yourself wondering in recent years: How did we get here? How did we arrive at a place where differences have become so pronounced that family and friend groups are divided and basic facts are debated? How is it that some people call the events of January 6 a violent insurrection thwarting the peaceful transfer of power and others call it 'legitimate political discourse'? How is it that thousands of government documents discovered at Mar-a-Lago are described by some as an unlawful retention of classified materials, possibly jeopardizing national security, while other see the taking of documents as simply a 'storage issue'? How is it that the religious language of some Christian nationalists seems to condone violent speech and behavior while those same people consider themselves followers of Jesus's message of mercy and compassion?

The Rev. Dr. Pamela Cooper-White tackles these and other thorny issues in her new book *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide*. As a pastoral psychotherapist and historian of psychoanalysis and religion, Cooper-White is uniquely qualified to provide a context for understanding the complex psychological dynamics of the Christian nationalist movement. The first part of her book provides an overview of Christian nationalism: its definition, prevalence, and association with white supremacy. She makes distinctions between the beliefs of White Christian nationalists and the meaning that Black Protestants make of Christian nationalism. One of the stellar aspects of Cooper-White's scholarship is the depth of research that serves as the basis of her work. This is demonstrated most clearly in her review of sociological research and public surveys which reveal the scope of Christian nationalism, specifically noting 'strong correspondences between white evangelical Christianity, conservative (even right-wing) nationalism, patriarchal 'family values,' and above all, white supremacy' (40).

The second section of the book will be most helpful for those seeking a deeper understanding of the conscious and unconscious motivations that lead people to identify with individuals or groups whose actions appear to be in opposition to their own cherished values. Cooper-White utilizes insights from the study of group psychology in ways that illuminate behaviors that might otherwise appear incomprehensible. Her lifetime of work studying and teaching psychoanalytic texts informs this section of the book. She probes the conscious (or close-to-the-surface) motivations that move people towards Christian nationalism: a need for belonging, the fear of the loss of white social status, the fear of the loss of patriarchal authority, and the irrational allure of conspiracy theories. Understanding these motivations helps to provide a clearer focus for some recent events in our country's history, such as the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017, which was marked by the chant 'Jews will not replace us.' The Great Replacement Theory, now a recurring theme on some right-wing media outlets, decries the shifting demographics and the perceived loss of status of Whites in this country, particularly White men. These inexorable changes fuel a sense of desperation and loss of status, especially given that the United States will be a majority non-white country by around 2042.

Cooper-White draws on the work of historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez in noting the prominent role that fear plays as a motivating force underlying the Christian nationalist agenda. The need to be in continual fight mode against an enemy—Blacks, women, socialists, LGBTQ people, Muslims—has prompted an entire movement among white evangelicals to masculinize Christianity. Donald Trump embodied that supposed masculine ideal in his take-no-prisoners approach and his authoritarian tendencies, signaling that he was in charge and had the answers to so-called American carnage.

The unconscious drivers of Christian nationalism are given extensive treatment in the text and it is here that Cooper-White's deep understandings of psychoanalysis, the psychology of group dynamics, and the allure of the narcissistic leader are on full display. The reader will come away with a fuller understanding of one of the basic tenets of psychoanalytic theory: 'that unconscious drives and our early childhood experiences of caregivers often prompt us to think, react and behave in ways that we ourselves find puzzling, even self-sabotaging' (83). Knowing the difference between healthy identification in early life, which enhances the capacity for forming good relationships later, and a more regressive form of identification is essential to understanding how individuals and groups become attached to the strong leader. Utilizing the research of cult experts Margaret Singer and Robert Lifton, Cooper-White provides a clear description of what is required for a group to become a cult and how the narcissistic leader functions in that context. She is especially insightful in her analysis of the way in which Trump's oratory, the cadence of his speeches, and his fantastical lies both hypnotize and desensitize his audience. This theoretical framework helps the reader understand what motivates people to engage in behaviors that seem antithetical to their value system. On a deeper level, one can see how identification with the strong, narcissistic leader who promises safety and security can be not only appealing but even compelling. These are the very things that the unreliable or absent caregiver failed to provide.

The question remains: what is to be done to bridge the conversational divide in a world as polarized as ours? Cooper-White does not shy away from stating her own opinions. She is clear in her conviction that

'White supremacy has been— and continues to be— the most repressed truth in American history. . . that hatred has been baked into all our systems and institutions since the first white settler killed a Native American for her land and brought a kidnapped African to our shores to be enslaved' (102).

This very statement is enough to silence conversation in some circles. To deal with this dilemma, Cooper-White offers concrete and usable tips for assessing a situation: when to stop the conversation, when to proceed with caution, when to go deeper. She reviews practices that facilitate empathetic listening, the fruit of her many years of teaching the skills of pastoral psychotherapy, and offers helpful suggestions for conversations with those whose views may be diametrically opposed to our own. Reviewing the psychological dynamics of 'splitting' and noting the temptation to turn conflictual issues into a cosmic battle between good and evil are helpful reminders as we attempt to talk across the divide.

The Psychology of Christian Nationalism is useful not only to clinicians, but to pastoral theologians in the classroom and spiritual care specialists as well. It stands in the tradition of other books published in recent decades in the field of pastoral theology that embrace a vision of care and community that extends beyond individual concerns. It recognizes the role that structures play in harming individuals, couples, and families. Cooper-White provides not only an analysis of unjust structures, but as noted, identifies dialogue as a concrete solution to systemic problems. Whether addressing gender or sexuality, racism or white privilege, she brings to the discussion a deep understanding of gospel values infused with

practical suggestions. Her understanding of congregational life, shaped by her lifelong membership in The Episcopal Church as well as her ordination in that denomination, gives her a particular window into the ethical and social dimensions of pastoral care.

It sometimes happens that a book meets the moment with a kind of clarity, depth of research, and ring of truth that sets it apart. Rev. Dr. Pamela Cooper-White's *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* is one of those books. It is an important text for the classroom and for all who are concerned with how we can speak with one another when it sometimes feels that we live in different worlds and speak different languages.

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