

Preaching about Christian Nationalism: Two Books

Pamela Cooper-White. *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022. 190 pages. \$21.00

Carter Heyward. *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022. 275 pages. \$34.00

In 2013, Dean G. Stroud released the edited volume, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans). At the time, the book seemed to be merely a quaint study of preaching in a historical era that had little to do with the context of contemporary U.S. preaching. Fast forward three years to the beginning of the Trump era, and Stroud's book was, unfortunately, both prescient and necessary. His introduction alone raises a chilling recognition of the parallels between the "Positive Christianity" of Nazi Germany and the rise of white Christian Nationalism in the U.S. today. The thirteen sermons from preachers such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Helmut Gollwitzer, and Gerhard Ebeling offer a glimpse into the ways in which ministers of the Confessing Church spoke out against Hitler's regime that had co-opted and contorted Christianity in the service of fascism.

After the election of President Joseph Biden in the fall of 2020, many hoped that the country would move on from the disastrous dance between the government and extremist, right-wing, fundamentalist Christianity. But the attempted insurrection of January 6, 2021, revealed just how infectious Christian Nationalism has become to the body politic and how deep and wide its cultish tentacles reach. Theocratic extremism undergirds the corrupted, hard-right ideology of the Supreme Court, hundreds of voter suppression laws passed in recent years, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and women's rights, and local elected officials attacking human rights across the board. All of this points to the need for more resources to equip preachers for resisting Christian authoritarianism and strengthening their congregations in the fight for justice on behalf of the vulnerable.

Two books published in 2022 offer preachers exactly the kinds of resources needed for this era of violent, virulent Christian Nationalism in the U.S. One is *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* by Pamela Cooper-White, an expert in the field of psychology and religion. She wrote the book to help readers "understand who comprises the Christian nationalist movement and what they believe, to examine how people get drawn into this movement" (5). With this understanding, she offers recommendations on how to talk with Christian nationalist-leaning people. She includes a helpful set of strategies using a "red light, yellow light, green light" metaphor based on levels of risk and safety, openness to conversation, and possibilities for building relationship.

The book is divided into three chapters, the first explaining what Christian Nationalism is, what undergirds its ideology, and how it has found purchase in the U.S. government in its pursuit of political power. The second describes the allure of religious extremism and how it attracts disaffected whites in the U.S. with promises of belonging, purpose, status, secret knowledge (conspiracy theories), and a restoration of patriarchal authority. The third chapter offers useful suggestions and recommendations for "creating human ties across (extreme) difference," (100). Cooper-White asserts that dialogue across political divides "requires honesty, and a commitment to the truth – the whole truth, including both the ideals of America at its best and the shameful

realities of the past and present,” (136). This is difficult, painful, but necessary work if we are to heal the “psychological splitting, both at the larger national and structural/institutional level and also at the level of the interpersonal” (136).

Ministers and preachers will find Cooper-White’s approach helpful when dealing with those who lean toward Christian Nationalism in their own congregations or have friends and family members with whom they are estranged because of the toxicity of the movement. They can use this book to inform their approaches to pastoral conversations, sermons, and education with youth and adults alike. Thoroughly researched with a deep understanding of the nature of cults and how they overtake “good people,” *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism* provides a way forward to overcome polarization while advocating for justice in the midst of radical religious extremism.

The second book is *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action* by Carter Heyward, an American feminist theologian and priest in the Episcopal Church. In 1974, she was one of the Philadelphia Eleven, women whose ordinations eventually paved the way for the recognition of women as priests in the Episcopal Church. As a professor, theologian, activist, and writer, Heyward has been a pioneer in the areas of feminist liberation theology and the theology of sexuality. In this, her eighteenth book, she takes on the “unholy trinity” of “Christianity, capitalism, and the GOP” by calling for Christian Americans to take on the urgent moral work of confronting religious authoritarianism and speaking out “on behalf of a God of justice, love, and peace” (4).

The book is divided into three parts, starting with Heyward’s personal intersection with the roots of what Dorothee Soelle called “christofascism.” She gives an explanation of White Christian Nationalism, tracing its origins, history, spiritual and economic motives, as well as key Supreme Court decisions in the early twenty-first century that shifted the relationship between church and state. These shifts gave legal cover and justification for White Christian Nationalism to take hold.

In part two, she describes the seven deadly sins of White Christian Nationalism: lust for omnipotence, entitlement, white supremacy, misogyny, capitalist spirituality, domination of the earth and its creatures, and violence. Part three counters these deadly sins with seven corresponding calls to action: empowering one another; embodying humility; approaching the blackness of God; empowering women, celebrating sexuality, affirming gender diversity; transforming capitalism; belonging with earth and animals; and breaking the spiral of violence. Each chapter ends with discussion questions, making it an ideal book for discussion group. Heyward’s book is also a powerful source for preaching ideas and could be the basis of a combined book study and sermon series in a congregation.

Heyward begins and ends her book with a story of her exchange with Desmond Tutu and her friend Sue who was dying of cancer. As Tutu and Heyward were leaving, Sue said to him, “You give me hope that the truth will go on” (ix, 230). Both Cooper-White’s and Heyward’s books give *us* hope that the truth will go on.

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