

# Tackling the truths of a toxic movement

## A Three-Week Study Guide



offered by  
The Episcopal  
Diocese of  
Los Angeles

Engagement  
Across Difference Ministry



Pamela Cooper-White

# The Psychology of Christian Nationalism

Why People are Drawn In and  
How to Talk Across the Divide

# Tackling the Truths of a Toxic Movement

## A Study Guide in Three Sessions

Welcome to this three-session exploration of Christian Nationalism – a toxic distortion of the Good News of God in Christ Jesus permeating our national discourse and threatening to dismantle our constitutional democracy. Using Pamela Cooper-White's *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism* as our primary text, this study guide offers an opportunity to engage with the challenging issue of the rise of Christian Nationalism by focusing on these questions:

- **What** is Christian Nationalism.
- **Who** is drawn into the Christian Nationalist movement.
- **How** can we engage across the divide created by Christian Nationalism

Dr. Cooper-White describes that work in these words from the Introduction to the text:

*The goal of this book is to understand who comprises the Christian nationalist movement and what they believe, to examine how people get drawn into this movement and the overlapping groups that made up the due of insurrectionists on January 6 (and before and after) and to offer some recommendations for how to “triage” when it is possible to have a meaningful conversation with Christian-nationalist leaning people (including our own neighbors, friends and family members), when to go slow and when not to attempt dialogue but to turn our energy and focus on wider efforts at social justice reform and education.*

It is also summarized in [this feature in the online publication Ministry Matters](#).

The text is widely available and can be ordered online via [Fortress Press](#) and [Amazon](#).

**Pamela Cooper-White** is the Christiane Brooks Johnson Professor of Psychology and Religion at Union Theological Seminary in New York. She holds PhDs from Harvard University and the Institute for Clinical Social Work, Chicago, and is the author or coauthor of five books and over seventy scholarly and professional articles. An Episcopal priest and pastoral psychotherapist, Dr. Cooper-White is a certified clinical Fellow in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, a National Board-Certified Counselor, and a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor in the state of Illinois.

This study guide was compiled as part of the ongoing commitment to the work of engaging across difference by the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. For further information about that work or this resource, please reach out via email to [srussell@ladiocese.org](mailto:srussell@ladiocese.org). And thank you for your willingness to engage in this important and challenging issue.

Welcome!

The Reverend Canon Susan Russell  
Canon for Engagement Across Difference, Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles

# Week One:

## What is Christian Nationalism

### **Unholy Alliances: Christian Nationalism, White Supremacy, and the Pursuit of Power**

Chapter One of the Cooper-White text

### **What Is Christian Nationalism**

[Christianity Today Q&A by Paul D. Miller](#)

### **Bad History: Evangelical histories and the development of Christian nationalism**

[Essay by Diana Butler Bass](#)

### **True Religion vs Toxic Religiosity**

[Sermon by Susan Russell](#)

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### **INTRODUCTION TO SESSION ONE VIDEO: The Reverend Canon Susan Russell**

#### **Opening Prayer:**

*Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.*

#### **Scripture Reading:**

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil [who] took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" [Matthew 4]*

#### **Discussion Questions:**

*Patriotism, simply stated, is love for one's country, while nationalism is the identification of that country with historically dominant ethnic, cultural, and or religious group and a fierce loyalty to protecting that national identity ... Christian nationalism is significant because calls to "take America back for God" are not primarily about mobilizing the faithful toward religious ends [but rather] seeking to retain or gain power in the public sphere -- whether social political or religious. Christian nationalism, is therefore, ultimately about privilege: a "political idolatry dressed up as religious orthodoxy." [Cooper-White, pg. 36]*

1. What are the most significant differences that you see between Christianity and Christian nationalism? How do this week's readings inform your understanding of why people confuse the two?
2. Do you see parallels between the temptation of Jesus to choose the kingdoms of the world and the temptation of Christianity to choose privilege in the world?
3. How does knowing more about the history of Christian nationalism equip us to challenge it?

# Week Two:

## Who is drawn into the Christian nationalist movement

### Why Are People Drawn In by Extremist Beliefs: *Conscious Needs and Unconscious Lures*

Chapter Two of the Cooper-White text

### Say No to Christian Nationalism

[Evangelical Leaders Statement Condemning Christian Nationalism](#)

### A Letter to White leaders about White Supremacy and Christian Nationalism

[Brad M. Griffin, Fuller Youth Institute](#)

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### INTRODUCTION TO SESSION TWO VIDEO: *The Reverend Canon Susan Russell*

#### Opening Prayer:

*O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

#### Scripture Reading:

*Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. [Matthew 7:15-20]*

#### Discussion Questions:

*The deep need for belonging is a deep-seated human desire and certainly not unique to Christian nationalists as a group. Nevertheless, it is one of the motivating factors underlying people's attraction to Christian nationalism as a movement. In addition to providing the social connection, which is a basic human need, the movement combines two features that can initially draw people in and then hold them tight: first, a strong sense of spiritual purpose and, second a means of acting on that sense of purpose by engaging in a battle ... even a cosmic battle between good and evil. [Cooper-White, pg. 41]*

*All truth except 'biblical truth' becomes relative, and biblical truth is entwined with American history and national destiny. Democracy suffocates in this atmosphere, and space opens up for something else to supplant it. [Cooper-White, pg. 77]*

1. How have this week's readings informed your understanding of why people are drawn into Christian nationalism? Did anything surprise you?
2. How might the Church aspire to provide an alternative to the binary "all or nothing" mindset of Christian nationalism?
3. What particular gifts might the Episcopal Church have to offer to that work?

# Week Three: How can we engage across the divide?

## How to Talk Across the Divide: Creating Human Ties across (Extreme) Difference

Chapter Three of the Cooper-White text

### What if we called people in, rather than calling them out?

[Listen to Loretta J. Ross on NPR](#)

### We're Through the Looking Glass Now: Talking Deradicalization

[Interview with Dr. John Horgan](#)

### EPPN (Episcopal Public Policy Network)

[Paths to Deradicalization](#)

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### [INTRODUCTION TO SESSION THREE VIDEO: The Reverend Canon Susan Russell](#)

#### Opening Prayer:

*O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Scripture Reading:

*Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by [c]hrist Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ... If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. [1 Corinthians 12:12-19]*

#### Discussion Questions:

*The purpose of this chapter is by no means to suggest that efforts to talk across this increasingly toxic national divide are meant to create a false ‘unity’ forged by once again trying to quiet movements for justice and social change. [Cooper-White, Chapter 3]*

1. What are the “red light, yellow light, green light” contexts you are called into and how have this week’s readings equipped you to engage them in conversation?
2. How can we support each other in the Gospel work of standing for justice, righteousness and accountability while resisting the temptation to demonize and dismiss other members of our human family?
3. Cooper-White says “social activism is self-care.” What if any next steps do you feel called to take in response to what you’ve learned about Christian nationalism? What other kinds of self-care can we use to navigate these challenging times?