

Capitol violence brewed from nationalism, conspiracies, and Jesus

[Jack Jenkins](#) in the [February 10, 2021](#) issue



Trump supporters gather outside the Capitol on January 6 in Washington, DC. (AP Photo / John Minchillo)

Moments before the assault on the US Capitol began on January 6, a mass of Trump supporters gathered at a northwest entrance. As throngs surged toward a barricade manned by a handful of police, a white flag appeared above the masses, flapping in the wind. It featured an ichthys—also known as a “Jesus fish”—painted with the colors of the American flag.

Above the symbol, the words: “Proud American Christian.”

It was one of several prominent examples of religious expression that occurred in and around the storming of the Capitol, which left five people dead. While not all participants were Christian, their rhetoric often reflected an aggressive, charismatic,

and hypermasculine form of Christian nationalism—a fusion of God and country that has lashed together disparate pieces of Donald Trump’s religious base.

“A mistake a lot of people have made over the past few years . . . is to suggest there is some fundamental conflict between evangelicalism and the kind of violence or threat of violence we’re seeing,” said Kristin Kobes Du Mez, a history professor at Calvin University and author of *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*.

“For decades now, evangelical devotional life, evangelical preaching, and evangelical teaching have found a space to promote this kind of militancy.”

Trump supporters who gathered in Washington the day before the attack were encouraged to march around the Capitol, shouting and blowing shofars as a protest against the 2020 presidential election results. The event was a Jericho March, named in reference to the Israelites’ siege of that city in the book of Joshua.

“Christian nationalism really tends to draw on an Old Testament narrative, a kind of blood purity and violence where the Christian nation needs to be defended against the outsiders,” said Andrew Whitehead, coauthor of the book *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, pointing to similar conclusions drawn by Yale sociologist Philip Gorski. “It really is identity-based and tribal, where there’s an us-versus-them.”

West Texas florist Jenny Cudd described in a Facebook video how she “charged the Capitol with patriots,” exclaiming, “f——— yes I’m proud of my actions.” She boasted about “break[ing] down” House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office door and praised other insurrectionists who attempted to overrun state capitols elsewhere.

She concluded her video with an outline of her religious beliefs.

“To me, God and country are tied—to me they’re one and the same,” she said. “We were founded as a Christian country. And we see how far we have come from that. . . . We are a godly country, and we are founded on godly principles. And if we do not have our country, nothing else matters.”

Whitehead said Cudd’s explicit fusion of God, country, and Trump is a “perfect” example of Christian nationalism but that those who invoked it while storming the Capitol are but an extremist subset of a much larger group—one that doesn’t stop at

the boundaries of evangelicalism.

“A little over half of Americans are favorable toward Christian nationalism to some extent,” Whitehead said. “Extremism of any form, whether it’s religious or not, can only really flourish if it’s allowed to. . . . [So this] creates a situation where those that want to take that view even further can do that.”

Some evangelicals have condemned the faith expressions seen at the attack. Hundreds of faculty and staff at Wheaton College have signed a statement decrying the “blasphemous abuses of Christian symbols.” Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said the displays reminded him of a “darker reality” at work.

But evangelicalism is a tree with many branches. Anthea Butler, associate professor of religion at the University of Pennsylvania, pointed to Jenna Ryan, a real estate broker from Frisco, Texas. Ryan drew widespread attention for posting images of herself on social media next to a broken window at the Capitol with the caption, “If the news doesn’t stop lying about us we’re going to come after their studios next.”

According to video obtained by *The Daily Mail*, Ryan also livestreamed herself entering the Capitol with other insurrectionists. As she crossed the threshold, she can be heard declaring, “Here we are, in the name of Jesus! In the name above all names!”

“To say ‘in the name of Jesus’—that’s calling protection, but it’s also calling power,” Butler said. “So in other words, ‘Jesus has given us the power to bust into the Capitol.’”

In another video posted on Twitter, a man is speaking to onlookers as hundreds stand atop the Capitol steps. While two Christian flags—white banners with red crosses in the corner—wave in front of him, he says, “Donald Trump coordinated it. We’re his surrogates. He fought for us and we have to fight for him.”

He then glances at the flags before adding what sounds like, “Jesus loves us.”

Du Mez said this kind of reverence for Trump is rooted in a similar affinity for masculinity that permeates many religious traditions, including evangelicalism.

As they approached the Capitol on January 6, the Proud Boys—a White nationalist group—paused for a moment of prayer.

As they knelt, a man with a bullhorn—his words captured on a livestream—prayed that God would “soften the hearts” of government officials who have “turned harshly away” from God, asking for “reformation and revival.”

He concluded: “We pray that you provide all of us with courage and strength to both represent you and represent our culture well.”

For Du Mez, the prayer was striking precisely because of how normal it seemed.

“It was an evangelical prayer,” she said. “It seemed perfectly natural to all of the Proud Boys in that circle to hear that prayer and to respond. It really signals this enmeshment of White nationalism, violence, and a kind of ordinary White evangelicalism.”

Whitehead agreed and warned that ignoring such dynamics can have dire consequences.

“Christian nationalism really is a threat to pluralistic democratic society, and everybody should take that threat seriously,” he said. “We’ve seen what happens where there’s no proof of voter fraud, yet people go and—under the guise of Christian symbols and symbolism—enact violence against their own country.”—Religion News Service