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More than 230 people attended the conference "Signs of the Times: Interdisciplinary Responses to Religious Nationalism" March 20-22 at the University of Notre Dame. The panel "What is Christian Nationalism?" was moderated by conference organizer Margaret Pfeil, far left, of Notre Dame. Panelists included Anthea Butler, University of Pennsylvania; Ryan Burge of Eastern Illinois University; and Reggie Williams of St. Louis University. (Catherine M. Odell)



by Catherine M. Odell

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Although organizers for a University of Notre Dame conference on religious nationalism began planning 18 months ago, the three-day event was highly relevant in today's [political climate](#), where President Donald Trump's election has empowered white Christian nationalists to work toward reshaping the nation to reflect their values.

More than 230 participants from around the world attended "Signs of the Times: Interdisciplinary Responses to Religious Nationalism" March 20-22. In addition to addressing the situation in the United States, sessions focused on Christian nationalism in Latin America and the far right in Europe. The conference was also meant to celebrate the 60th anniversary of two Vatican II documents: *Gaudium et spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom).

Church historian Anthea Butler, in the conference's first panel, said White Christian nationalism is "the operational religion of the land and the belief that Christianity should be the foundation for how the nation develops its laws, principles and policies."

Butler is Geraldine R. Segal, Professor in American Social Thought and chair of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Pennsylvania. She wrote *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*.

"My training really helped me to understand what is happening right now," Butler said.

'This brand of Christian nationalism does not want a Christian world, nor does it want democracy. It wants power.'

—Anthea Butler

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Undocumented Latinos and others coming into the United States quickly understand the position that white Christian nationalists hold here, Butler said. "Native Americans, enslaved Africans and immigrants would accept and accede to this narrative of America as a Christian nation with white men as leaders," she said

The Trump administration's attacks on long-established DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) policies, she said, is related to religious nationalism. Among religious nationalists, the term "DEI" has also become a disparaging insult, "a codeword for the N word," said Butler, who is Black. "I can't tell you how many times I've gotten an email that ended with 'You're just a DEI hire.' "

"You need to understand," Butler said, "that this brand of Christian nationalism does not want a Christian world, nor does it want democracy. It wants power."

Ryan Burge, associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University, said a 2023 [Brookings Institute survey](#) on Christian nationalism found that about a third of the respondents hadn't heard the term. But 10% of the respondents were self-described Christian nationalism supporters who largely agreed that being Christian was part of being a true American. And 75% of Christian nationalists said that the U.S. government should declare itself a Christian nation.

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Burge shared graphs from 2007 and 2021 [Baylor surveys](#) which explored American attitudes about religious nationalism. The surveys showed that:

- In 2007, 55% of Americans said that "the Federal government should advance Christian values." In 2021, only 38% agreed.
- In 2007, 51% of respondents agreed that "the Federal government should enforce the strict separation of Church and state" That increased to 62% in 2021.
- Support for the federal government allowing prayer in public schools dropped from 70% in 2007 to 55% in 2021.

"From a purely empirical perspective," Burge said, "Christian nationalism has retreated just a bit when it comes to survey data."

Theologian Reggie Williams, an associate professor of theological studies at St. Louis University, said white Christian nationalism is "white nationalism, leaving out the qualifier — Christian. ... not because I don't believe that the movement is religious but because it is. But seeing it simply as white nationalism, we can see a number of things more clearly."

The speakers agreed that religious nationalism is hard to quantify, measure and define. But, Williams said, there is no doubt that "White Christian nationalism is upon us with nearly as great a force as at any time in U.S. history. This is the most important conversation that we could be having today."