

Book review

The gloomy future of the United States

Maria Lindén, Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Book title

Gorski, P.S. and Perry, S.L. (2022) *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

When discussing the future of NATO, one cannot discount the threat that is looming in the horizon, namely the possibility of large-scale political destabilization of the United States. In *The Flag and the Cross*, authors Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry paint a vivid picture of the danger American liberal democracy is facing in the 2024 Presidential elections.

Many others have raised the alarm, such as Barbara Walter in her book *How Civil Wars Start*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in their article “How Democracy Could Die in 2024, and How to Save It”, and Richard Hasen in his essay “Identifying and Minimizing the Risk of Election Subversion and Stolen Elections in the Contemporary United States”. Where Gorski and Perry’s book differs from others is their framework of white Christian nationalism and their thoroughly researched explanation of the root causes underlying the precarious situation.

Gorski and Perry define white Christian nationalism in a precise manner using a set of beliefs that “reflect a desire to restore and privilege the myths, values, identity and authority of a particular ethnocultural tribe”. They argue that the beliefs in question “add up to a political vision that privileges that tribe” over others. According to the authors, white Christian nationalism expresses a desire for national unity but only for a select subset of the population. They argue that for many white Americans, the words “Christian” and “American” signify “people who look and think like us”, and when those people dream of making the United States a truly Christian nation, they wish in fact for a nation ruled by white conservatives.

The main argument of the book is that in the United States, white Christian nationalism poses a serious threat to liberal democracy. In seeking to revive a state ruled by conservative white protestants, white Christian nationalists are increasingly willing to make voting harder for perceived others, to exploit all existing mechanisms to retain power in the hands of their minority, and to attempt to create new mechanisms for doing so.

Gorski and Perry use nationally representative survey data they themselves have collected to examine whether white Christian nationalism predicts a number of political opinions and societal attitudes,

such as if Americans see a connection between immigration and pandemics, if they favor free-market capitalism, and if they feel it is too easy to vote. To do so, they give each respondent a rating on their Christian nationalist scale consisting of several indicators, such as agreement with the statements “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan” and “The federal government should advocate Christian values”. In their statistical model, they hold constant several potentially intertwining factors such as Republican identification, conservative political orientation, and religious tradition and commitment.

The authors show that for white respondents, Christian nationalism is a strong predictor of a large set of political opinions and societal attitudes, even after accounting for religious, political, and sociodemographic characteristics. The higher respondents score on the authors’ Christian nationalism scale, the more likely they are, for example, to trust Trump and doubt experts on COVID-19 related issues, to believe whites will face discrimination in the near future whereas blacks will not, to express a desire to halt immigration to protect jobs, to favor free-market ideals, to see socialists as a threat, and to view reactions to the attack on the Capitol as overblown compared to the “2020 race riots”.

Based on their survey results, Gorski and Perry argue that for white Christian nationalists, violence becomes acceptable when it is used by their ingroup against a perceived other to protect the ingroup’s freedom or to maintain the social order they benefit from. When perpetrated by a perceived other, however, white Christian nationalists see violence as “moral degradation and dystopian chaos”. Gorski and Perry conclude that debates over racial injustice, policing, gun violence, economic policy, media polarization, COVID-19, voting rights, and democracy are just manifestations of a deeper, existential debate over American identity.

Gorski and Perry find it unlikely that an American president would be able to turn the United States into an autocracy in the style of Russia, Turkey, or North Korea. Instead, the scenario they fear the most is that of Republican-controlled states

successfully restricting the exercise of power and suffrage to white conservatives and subjecting subordinate groups and political dissidents to legal discrimination, public humiliation, and vigilante violence. They envision such a regime enduring for decades, accelerating the trend of Americans self-sorting along ideological lines and possibly resulting eventually in civil war or the dissolution of the Union.

The dystopic vision is eye-opening, especially given that it is based on solid research, making the book highly recommended reading for anyone wishing to understand the past, present, and future of the United States and NATO.