

Book Reviews

Pamela Cooper-White. *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn in and How to Talk across the Divide*. Fortress Press, 2022. Pp. 190.

As someone trained in psychology and currently pursuing counselling work, I approached Pamela Cooper-White's *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn in and How to Talk Across the Divide* with both intellectual curiosity and a quiet sense of urgency. This is not simply a book about politics or religion. It is a book about people; it's about fear, belonging, identity, and the powerful psychological currents that can pull individuals and communities toward increasingly rigid and dangerous belief systems. Cooper-White writes at the intersection of pastoral care, psychoanalytic theory, and Religious Studies, and that interdisciplinary grounding makes the book feel especially resonant for readers who think clinically about human behaviour, while remaining attentive to the moral and relational dimensions of harm.

The book is framed around three core questions: what Christian nationalism is and how it functions socially and historically, why people are drawn into extremist belief systems cloaked in religious language, and whether it is possible to talk across the deep divides such ideologies create. What distinguishes Cooper-White's work from more polemical treatments of Christian nationalism is her outright refusal to flatten the humanity of those caught up in it. Even as she names the violence, racism, and authoritarianism embedded within the movement, she insists on understanding psychological motivation in a way that does not excuse harm. This is deeply aligned with therapeutic ethics.

Cooper-White grounds her analysis in the events of January 6, 2021, treating the Capitol insurrection as a crystallization of long-standing dynamics rather than an isolated rupture. The religious imagery present that day, including crosses, Christian flags, public prayer, and appeals to Jesus, coexisting alongside threats of violence, serves as a haunting and harrowing entry point into the book's central concern: how religious symbolism can be mobilized to sanctify systems of domination. As a student of psychology, I was struck by how clearly these images reflect classic group processes such as fusion, moral splitting, and the projection of evil onto perceived enemies, all playing out on a very public, very national stage.

Cooper-White's psychological framework becomes especially vivid when applied to the visual archive of Christian nationalist imagery documented on sites such as uncivilreligion.org. These images do not merely reflect belief; they actively construct and reinforce a particular emotional and psychological world. Through Cooper-White's lens, they can be read as tools of identity fusion, projection, and moral absolutism. For example, images of the Christian cross merged with American flags, rifles, or military aesthetics function psychologically as what Cooper-White calls sacralized dominance. The cross, traditionally associated with vulnerability, suffering, and humility, is visually repurposed as a symbol of strength, entitlement, and conquest. This symbolic inversion aligns with Cooper-White's claim that Christian nationalism relies on a defensive masculinity that seeks divine justification for power and control. The imagery reassures viewers that domination is not only permissible, but holy.

Similarly, photographs from January 6 depicting public prayer circles, *shofars*, and raised hands outside the Capitol illustrate what Cooper-White identifies as group fusion. In these moments, individual identity dissolves into a collective religious body that experiences itself as morally unified and divinely authorized. From a psychological standpoint, this fusion reduces internal doubt and amplifies certainty. Political action becomes framed not as a choice or strategy, but as obedience to God. Violence, when it appears alongside these rituals, is psychologically insulated from moral scrutiny because it is embedded within sacred performance.

Other images cataloged on uncivilreligion.org, such as slogans invoking spiritual warfare or apocalyptic struggle, visually enact Cooper-White's discussion of projection and moral splitting. The world is divided into the righteous and the corrupt, the saved and the enemy. Anxiety, shame, and fear are displaced onto external targets, such as liberals, immigrants, and secular institutions, allowing adherents to preserve a sense of innocence and moral superiority. Cooper-White's insight that Christian nationalism offers emotional regulation through certainty is especially evident here: these images do the regulating work before any argument is made.

By attending to these images through Cooper-White's psychological lens, Christian nationalism becomes legible not just as an ideology but as an affective system. The power of these visuals lies in their ability to bypass critical reflection and speak directly to unconscious longings for belonging, authority, and protection. This is precisely why Cooper-White insists that understanding Christian nationalism requires more than theological or political critique. It requires attention to how symbols work on the psyche, shaping both perception and behaviour long before dialogue ever begins.

One of the book's most compelling frameworks is its careful distinction between Christianity as a faith tradition and Christian nationalism as a cultural and psychological phenomenon. Drawing on sociological research, particularly the work of Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, Cooper-White defines Christian nationalism not as a measure of personal piety or merely church attendance, but instead as a symbolic system that fuses American identity with a narrow, exclusionary vision of Christianity. This framing feels clinically astute. It explains how individuals who may rarely engage in reflective theological practice can nonetheless feel profoundly religious and righteous in their political convictions. What is being defended is not an opinion, but instead an identity.

The psychological heart of the book lies in Cooper-White's exploration of why extremist beliefs are so emotionally compelling. In the second chapter, she draws on psychoanalytic theory, Freud's work on group psychology, and contemporary insights into conspiracy thinking to illuminate both conscious and unconscious motivations. Economic insecurity, perceived loss of cultural dominance, and defensive masculinity are named as conscious drivers, while unconscious longings for certainty, authority, and belonging operate beneath the surface. Reading this section as someone trained to listen for what is unspoken, I appreciated how Cooper-White attends to fear and shame without centring them as sympathetic excuses. Instead, they are treated as psychological realities that, when left unexamined, can be easily manipulated by charismatic leaders and absolutist narratives.

Her discussion of paranoia and conspiracy thinking is especially poignant. Rather than portraying belief in conspiracy theories as an individual pathology, Cooper-White situates these beliefs within relational and social contexts that reward certainty and punish doubt. Christian nationalism offers what many people long for in times of disorientation: a coherent, black-and-white story about who is good, who is evil, and how order can be restored. From a counselling perspective, this reads as a kind of collective defence mechanism, one that protects against anxiety but does so at tremendous cost to empathy, truth, and democratic life.

What makes the book particularly meaningful, especially for those in helping professions, is its final turn toward dialogue. Cooper-White does not offer simplistic prescriptions for healing the divide, nor does she romanticize conversation as inherently virtuous. Instead, she proposes a triage approach that feels both ethically grounded and clinically realistic. Some relationships may be safe enough for careful engagement, while others are not. Timing, power, and emotional capacity matter.

Her guidance for dialogue, when it is possible, prioritizes relationship over persuasion. She emphasizes listening that does not collapse into agreement, curiosity that does not abandon moral clarity,

and the importance of regulating one's own emotional responses. For someone training in counselling, this section feels especially familiar and affirming. It acknowledges that change rarely happens through confrontation alone, and that transformation, when it occurs, is often slow, nonlinear, and relational. At the same time, Cooper-White is clear that dialogue should never be demanded of those who are harmed by Christian nationalism. She explicitly rejects calls for unity that bypass justice or ask marginalized people to absorb further injury for the sake of civility. This balance between compassion and accountability, understanding and resistance, is one of the book's greatest strengths.

Ultimately, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism* reads as both an analysis and a moral offering. Cooper-White invites readers to hold complexity without surrendering clarity, to understand psychological vulnerability without normalizing violence, and to remain committed to justice even when dialogue fails. For those of us entering counselling and mental health fields, the book offers a powerful reminder that psychological insight is not politically neutral. How we understand belief, fear, and identity matters not only in the therapy room, but also in the collective life we are helping to shape.

– Colene Belmont, *Adams State University*