

# *Framing Christian Privilege in Schools in an Age of Christian Nationalism*

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In a formative article, Blumenfeld (2006) provided a framework for recognizing and analyzing Christian privilege and normativity in educational spaces. Since then, Christian nationalism has surged in the US impacting all aspects of society, including schools and classrooms (Stewart, 2017, 2018). This research takes Blumenfeld's work as a starting point and examines the injection of Christianity in schools in a time of rising Christian nationalism.

## *Sociocultural Underpinnings*

Rising Christian nationalism has led to the reification of Christian privilege and an increase in the oppression of minoritized communities in schools.<sup>1</sup> Christian privilege and nationalism in schools is at a fundamental crossroads. Former Trump lawyer Jenna Ellis declared, "what it really means to truly be America first, what it truly means to pursue happiness, what it truly means to be a Christian nation are all actually the same thing" (Dias, 2022).<sup>2</sup>

*Christian Privilege and Normativity.* Drawing on Young (1990), Blumenfeld highlights the ways a majoritarian Christian population actively benefits from their status,<sup>3</sup> similar to how white Americans benefit from white supremacy (McIntosh, 2019). Christian privilege, normativity (Sumerau, 2017), and hegemony (Kivel, 2013, 2017) allow Christian identities to "fade into the background" (Coston & Kimmel, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

*Christian Nationalism.* A baseline definition of Christian nationalism is the assertion that the US is and always has been Christian (Whitehead & Perry, 2020), allowing Christians to dominate "democratic" discourse (Stewart, 2020a). Christian nationalists are analogous to white nationalists (Feldman, 2021; Gorski, 2021). The roots of Christian nationalism can be found within Christianity itself (Ingersoll, 2015; Leviter, 2020; Stroop, 2021a).

Using an understanding of white nationalist ideology and strategies as a guide, there are three interwoven Christian nationalist identity groups: 1) *Outsider Accelerationists*: Seeking to realize a Christian nation by any means, including terror and violence.<sup>5</sup> 2) *Insider Incrementalists*: Working within institutions and government to magnify the Christian status quo through law, policy, and personnel.<sup>6</sup> 3) *Normies*: Benefiting from Christian privilege but still "casual" Christian nationalists (Nagle, 2017; Paul, 2021).<sup>7</sup>

## *Methods and Modes of Inquiry*

This research utilizes frame analysis (Goffman, 1974; Jameson, 1976). Framing is a strategic tool employed to create a desired reality, particularly within

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<sup>1</sup> Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, the LGBTQIA+ community, and emergent overlapping identities.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, President George Washington (1790) provided a consequential statement supporting pluralism in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, RI: "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights."

<sup>3</sup> Powerlessness, Exploitation, Marginalization, Cultural Imperialism, and Violence.

<sup>4</sup> This backgrounding of Christian identities and foregrounding of "the other" is a necessary scaffold for Christian nationalism.

<sup>5</sup> Outsider Accelerationists are frequently aligned with the alt-right.

<sup>6</sup> This work has been made possible by shifting the focus of the First Amendment of the US Constitution from the Establishment Clause to the Free Expression Clause (Stewart, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Active nationalists in the first two groups rely upon the third group to remain idle to allow them to do their work unimpeded.

the context of politics and media. The goal of frame analysis as a method is to identify and elucidate those frames within their contexts (Evers, 2016; Scheff, 2005). This research utilizes a holistic and recursive frame analysis approach (David et al., 2011; Keeney & Keeney, 2012), oriented to building trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability (Anfara et al., 2002).

## Findings

Much of the activity that directly impacts schools emanates from the Insider Incrementalists, although the intrusion of Outside Accelerationists in schools is real (Frenkel, 2021; Henry, 2021). Both “red” and “blue” states experience similar activities (Harris & Alter, 2022).

*Curriculum.* Although increasingly school curriculum is being set at the state, rather than local level, Christian nationalism has shaped curriculum in two ways. The first way is by allowing credit to be granted for learning completed at religious institutions.<sup>8</sup> The second way is by setting the content of the curriculum, from removal, such as the graphic novel *Maus* based on modesty grounds (Boyette, 2022),<sup>9</sup> to replacement, such as the Hillsdale College civics curriculum being promoted in Florida and Classical Charter Schools around the country.<sup>10</sup>

*Culture and Climate.* The impact on culture and climate in schools is also emerging primarily from Inside Incrementalists. One examples is the Florida “Don’t Say Gay” measure (Diaz, 2022; Wall, 2022), disallowing any LGBTQIA+ staff or student from being themselves in schools (Diaz, 2022).<sup>11</sup> The second is the SCOTUS ruling reifying prayer by school employees with students (de Vogue et al., 2022), openly distinguishing those who pray as Christians and those who don’t.<sup>12</sup>

## Discussion/Conclusions

Frames of tension require negotiation by Christians if resistance to Christian privilege and nationalism in education is to be sustainable: 1) *Moral Panics vs Apologetics*: Christian nationalist arguments are rooted in moral panics<sup>13</sup> (Airriess, 2015; Stewart, 2020b; Stroop, 2021c). Approaches include condemning performativity<sup>14</sup> and awareness of invoking “Christian Innocence” which reinforces Christian privilege and therefore nationalism (Leviter, 2020; Stroop, 2021d). 2) *Material Resistance vs Zero Sum*: Resistance to Christian nationalism requires ongoing material resistance and being accountable for outcomes (National Council of Churches, 2021) while addressing pervasive assumptions around zero sum mechanisms (McGhee, 2021).<sup>15</sup> 3) *Universalism vs Pluralism*: Christianity is a universalist religion (Edwards, 2022; Suarsana, 2021) as a main premise is to convert others to Christianity. This assumption is projected onto communities which do *not* seek to convert, setting up condations that are at odds with a pluralistic US.

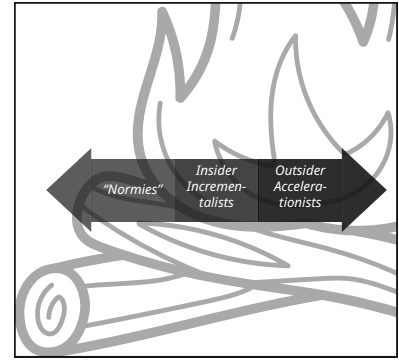


Figure 1: A representation of the spectrum of Christian nationalism. The steadily burning “embers” of the Normies keep the hotter flames of the Inside Incrementalists and Outside Accelerationists going.

<sup>8</sup> Efforts like Indiana SB 373 (Academic Credits for Religious Instruction, 2019) blur the line between church and schools.

<sup>9</sup> This forced removal reflects a Christian code of modesty and removes the need for non-Jews to face the trauma of the Holocaust (Guzman, 2022; Wexler, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Hillsdale College is a Christian nationalist institution (Tolentino, 2022) that created a civics curriculum that positions the US as a Christian nation and absolves white Christians of responsibility for oppression (Ceballos & Brugal, 2022a, 2022b).

<sup>11</sup> This is a disposition rooted in Christian nationalist gender normativity sensibilities.

<sup>12</sup> This distinction can mean differential treatment by a teacher or coach based on participation in prayer, openly reifying Christian power (Michaelson, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Moral panics are disproportionate and volatile hostility towards difference (Cricher, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> See Lamott (2022) for an example.

<sup>15</sup> A zero sum perspective would assert that conditions worsen for Christians as conditions improve for others.