

REPORT

FROM THE

CAPITAL

BJC Magazine



How to End Christian Nationalism is in stores now

AMANDA TYLER discusses the work ahead after Election Day

HOLLY HOLLMAN on a positive court decision in Louisiana

Dr. John Compton examines the politics of secularization

Heading into 2025

There is always uncertainty as we head into a new administration and new Congress, but our commitment to religious freedom and the institutional separation of church and state remains the same. This is the time for our movement to meet the moment.

Are you looking for ways to take action? Page 9 offers some concrete ideas, including opportunities for creating new connections in your community and with us.

In this magazine, Amanda Tyler offers further reflections on the November elections on page 3, and you can read about her travels taking the message of her new book *How to End Christian Nationalism* to communities across the country on pages 6-8. Holly Holman reviews a recent court decision in Louisiana that strikes down the posting of the Ten Commandments in classrooms on page 5, and she shares what it means for our communities. We also share insight on the politics of secularization and what it means for various political parties, which was the focus of Dr. John Compton's presentations for the 20th annual Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State. Learn more about his findings on pages 12-15.

Thank you for your partnership in our ongoing work to protect faith freedom for all. We are in this together.

Supporting faith freedom and community impact



By Rev. Dr. Jonathan Davis
BJC Director of Development

As the year draws to a close, I continue to think about a poignant conversation I had at Violet Crown Church in Austin, Texas, where I had the privilege of preaching this fall.

A parent approached me after the service, sharing how that Sunday's focus on faith freedom profoundly impacted her family. "I never realized how much my children needed guidance on this topic," she said. "BJC helped me find the words to explain why faith should not be politicized and how to nurture my children's understanding of religious liberty." This anecdote highlights the meaningful impact our work has on families across the nation.

With the new year fast approaching and tax season on the horizon, I urge you to seize this moment and make a year-end contribution.

Your partnership with us is crucial — not just for BJC's legal and advocacy work but also for empowering families and commu-

nities to engage in vital dialogues about faith and freedom. The need for fostering understanding and respect for diverse beliefs has never been more urgent, especially in the wake of a particularly tense presidential election.

BJC staff and interns are tirelessly working to educate communities about the dangers of Christian nationalism while promoting a vision for our world that embraces freedom for all. Your financial support enables us to reach even more families, giving them the tools they need to foster discussions about religion and its role in public life.

This season, as you consider your charitable giving, we invite you to invest in a future where faith freedom is not just an ideal but a reality for all. Together, we can ensure that the values of respect, understanding and compassion continue to thrive in our communities.

Thank you for your continued support.

"BJC helped me find the words to explain why faith should not be politicized and how to nurture my children's understanding of religious liberty."

Your year-end gift propels BJC into 2025, prepared to meet the challenges ahead and offer a path forward.

You can also make your gift in memory or honor of someone — see page 16 for details.

Use the QR code or visit BJCOnline.org/give to make your tax-deductible gift before the end of the year.



Where do we go from here?

By Amanda Tyler, BJC Executive Director



The long and chaotic presidential election year is over. We are all left to consider what happened, how what nearly all journalists and pundits predicted would be a toss-up election won by a razor-thin majority by either candidate ended up being a decisive victory for Donald J. Trump.

The margin of victory assures that we will not have a repeat of January 6, 2021, when insurrectionists stormed the Capitol to interfere with the certification of the election results and tried to overturn the will of the people. We all can be grateful that we are not facing that kind of violence again.

But we are facing another kind of violence and harm with the second Trump administration. Americans just elected, through a free and fair election, a leader who has declared his authoritarian intentions. President-elect Trump has talked openly about “the enemy from within” and how he will use the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. military to go after his political enemies.

His top policy priority is a mass deportation of all immigrants living in the United States without proper documentation, without regard to how long they have been living here or how their removal would impact their families and communities. Accomplishing such an operation most likely means using large-scale raids and detention camps, as well as reviving archaic laws and, at times, suspending the due process of law. With both houses of Congress under Republican control and a conservative super-majority at the U.S. Supreme Court, there are very few checks at the federal level for President-elect Trump’s unquenchable thirst for power.

When facing this reality, we can respond in at least two different ways. One is a defeatist attitude, borne out of the exhaustion of the effort put into this election and the despair at seeing the results. Another is a position of hopeful resilience, aware of what is at stake with a renewed commitment to being involved in direct democracy to help protect those in our communities who are most vulnerable to discrimination,

exclusion and harm.

This fall, I have been on a national tour to discuss my new book *How to End Christian Nationalism* (read more on pages 6-8). I’ve met with hundreds of people in this country, from coast and coast and many locations in between. In events right after November 5, I noticed both despair and hope in people I met. There is a desire to be engaged in building the Beloved Community, but there also is a sense that the headwinds are so intense and the problem so immense that our efforts will be in vain.

These are exactly the kind of people for whom I wrote the book: people who are convinced of the dangers of Christian nationalism to our democracy and our Christian faith but are not sure where to begin in addressing the problem. The work of ending Christian nationalism is a continual effort — not one that will be finished next year, or even in my lifetime or yours. That doesn’t mean we don’t all have a responsibility now to do work to dismantle the ideology and to change the narrative around how people of faith can engage constructively in our constitutional democracy.

In the coming months, we at BJC will be focused on building partnerships with groups on the local level who are committed to this work. We will be introducing new ways for people of all faiths and no faith to engage directly with the work of Christians Against Christian Nationalism, through state and local advocacy opportunities and work in grassroots coalitions for change. We will continue our leadership in Washington, D.C., as we advocate for religious freedom for all in Congress, the U.S. Supreme Court and the executive branch. We will keep you informed about how you can make your voices heard to your elected representatives.

The response we need in this moment of crisis for many of our neighbors and our country is a recommitment to involvement in our democracy by every person. I am grateful to be in this struggle for freedom with each of you.

Voters soundly reject school voucher initiatives in multiple states

In this year's November election, voters once again said "no" to school vouchers in ballot initiatives in three different states. The results send a clear message: Americans do not want taxpayer dollars to fund private schools, including religious schools, especially not at the expense of public school funding.

In Kentucky, President-elect Donald Trump, a supporter of school choice initiatives, won handily; however — and fortunately for fans of religious freedom for all — a proposed state constitutional amendment that would have allowed lawmakers to divert tax dollars to private schools was defeated by the same margin, 65% to 35%. The measure was an attempt to overcome a decision by the Kentucky Supreme Court, which unanimously struck down a voucher program in 2022 enacted over Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear's veto. The court cited the state constitution's prohibition on funding non-public schools, leaving voucher proponents with amending the constitution as their only option. Voters in every one of the state's 120 counties rejected the proposal.

In Nebraska, voters repealed a program that was designed to send low-income families to private schools using public funds through tax credits. The "opportunity scholarship" program was enacted in 2023, sparking a voter petition to put the program on the state-wide ballot. In the November election, 57% of Nebraskans, including a majority in almost every county, voted to repeal the program.

Lastly, in Colorado, voters defeated an effort to amend the state's constitution by adding a "right to school choice." Opponents rightly warned that language may have created a right to attend private school using public funds, ushering in a statewide

voucher program. In the election, 48% of voters supported the amendment, but it required 55% to pass under state law.

Despite going 0 for 3 at the ballot box, vouchers and other school choice schemes continue to be promoted across the country. In Tennessee on the day after the election, Gov. Bill Lee proposed a new voucher program that would provide scholarships for students to attend private schools. They would offer 20,000 scholarships for the 2025-26 school year, a number set to increase annually. A similar measure failed to move forward in the Tennessee Legislature last year. This year's version promises — for one year — not to lower funding for public school districts that experience a decrease in enrollment.

School vouchers and other similar funding mechanisms run counter to religious freedom for all. That is why BJC has long fought against such initiatives. Opposing public funding for private and religious schools, as voters in three states did this election, is not about limiting choice. It is about protecting taxpayers and upholding our civic commitment to public education, where all students and parents deserve to know they belong, regardless of background, circumstance or religious belief.

For more on BJC's support of public schools and opposition to various types of school voucher schemes, check out episode 8 and episode 9 of Season 5 of BJC's *Respecting Religion* podcast.

"We certainly affirm the right people have to send their children to private religious schools if that's the education that they want their children to receive," BJC General Counsel Holly Hollman said on episode 8. "We just oppose the government having to fund private religious education."

—Don Byrd, BJC Researcher and Writer

Texas approves Bible-based curriculum

In November, the Texas State Board of Education narrowly approved the use of a troubling school curriculum that infuses Bible stories into language arts lessons, and now advocacy to protect religious freedom in public schools is shifting to the more than 1,200 school districts in Texas.

After this curriculum was first proposed, many — including BJC — raised concerns about its use of biblical teachings and presentations of faith claims as fact, as well as numerous factual errors and erroneous teaching about religious freedom in the Colonial and Founding Eras. The materials also ignore discussions of slavery before the Civil War, at one point noting that George Washington and Thomas Jefferson knew slavery was wrong without acknowledging that they enslaved hundreds of people.

BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler, North Texas Organizer

Lisa Jacob, and Development Director Jonathan Davis, all Texas residents, joined others to testify in person about the trouble with the curriculum earlier in September and again at a hearing in November.

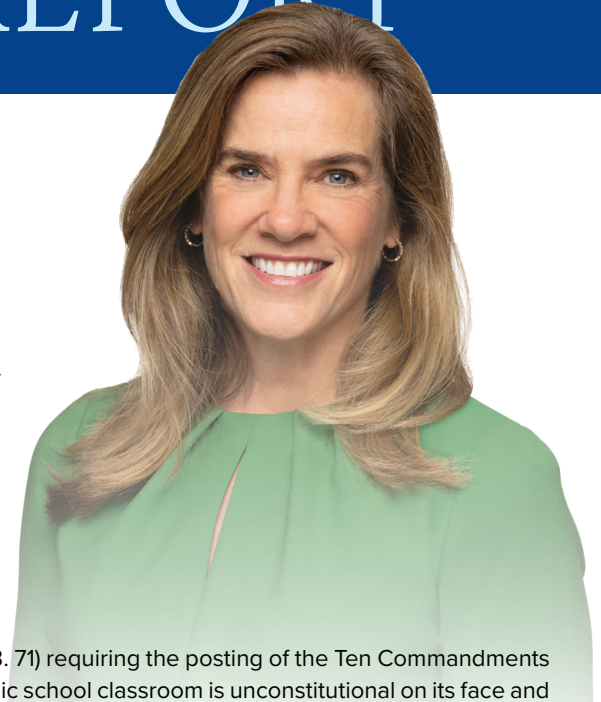
"While I am pleased that some of the factual errors have been corrected in the revised version of these instructional materials, the systemic issues of incorporating Bible stories into the reading and language arts curriculum in ways that are neither age- nor subject-matter-appropriate remain," Tyler said during her November testimony.

To get involved in the work to push back against the curriculum, be sure to sign up for advocacy alerts by joining the BJC email list at [BJCOnline.org/subscribe](https://www.bjconline.org/subscribe).

—BJC staff reports

Religious freedom on the ballot, in the courts and affecting your community

By Holly Hollman, BJC General Counsel



When constitutional standards shift, so do the tactics required to maintain a vision of faith freedom for all. The Religion Clauses of the First Amendment protect the free exercise of religion for everyone and against its establishment by the government, creating conditions for us to live with deep differences and come together for common purposes. But, the experience of religious liberty depends on all our efforts — not just in the courts, but in legislatures, state agencies, conversations and compromises in communities.

Recent developments concerning religion and education across the country illustrate how challenges are arising today, what is at stake, and how an all-hands-on-deck approach is needed.

It has been more than two decades since the U.S. Supreme Court narrowly upheld a Cleveland, Ohio, school voucher program against a federal constitutional challenge in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002), and it has been much longer since advocates began pushing for taxpayer-support for private schools, including religious schools. But the Court in *Zelman* did not suggest that vouchers were a good idea, nor did it immediately usher in voucher programs across the country. Other legal barriers existed, such as state constitutional provisions that are more stringent against such funding. Plus, vouchers tend to be controversial and lack widespread support.

Progress by proponents of “school choice” (another term for voucher programs) has been aided by more recent decisions of the Court, but vouchers remain unpopular in many states for reasons concerning costs, effectiveness and fairness, as well as raising religious concerns. Public funds should support public schools, and several states are making clear that is what they want as they reject voucher schemes at the ballot box. (Read about three states rejecting vouchers on page 4.)

Changes in legal standards for deciding cases by the U.S. Supreme Court also have encouraged misguided efforts to inject religion into public schools in problematic ways, such as through school curriculum with Christian nationalism themes and required postings of legislature-selected Scripture on classroom walls.

Fortunately, in a preliminary but thoroughly explained (177 page) decision, a federal district judge in Louisiana held that the state’s

new law (H.B. 71) requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom is unconstitutional on its face and unconstitutional in all applications. In other words, the constitutional flaws are abundant, violating both the federal Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause. The court found that the facts and circumstances were similar to those reviewed and found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *Stone v. Graham*, a 1980 decision striking a similar law in Kentucky. As the plaintiffs argued — and Louisiana could not refute at this point — *Stone* was squarely on point and settled the matter.

The decision includes the stories of the nine families from various religious and non-religious traditions who challenged the law. A part of the opinion that may be particularly helpful for future conversations in your community shows how the act is not a simple nod to moral encouragement but damaging to religious freedom. The court stated: “In short, the Act is coercive to students, and, for all practical purposes, they cannot opt out of viewing the Ten Commandments when they are displayed in every classroom, every day of the year, every year of their education. As the Supreme Court recognized in *Stone*, “[i]f the posted copies of the Ten Commandments are to have any effect at all, it will be to induce the schoolchildren to read, meditate upon, perhaps to venerate and obey, the Commandments[.]” and this is particularly true considering the “heightened concerns with protecting freedom of conscience from subtle coercive pressure in the elementary and secondary public schools.”

The litigation is not entirely over, but for now, Louisiana is prohibited from requiring that the Ten Commandments be posted in every public school classroom. There is more to this decision, including references to a report by Professor Steven K. Green, a law professor and legal historian, that refutes the claim that the Ten Commandments are the basis of the American legal system.

This decision is a big win for religious freedom and the importance of protecting individual students’ rights, and it is a warning of what may be ahead in other states, especially if the U.S. Supreme Court continues to water-down constitutional protections. It also demonstrates the importance of opposing such efforts and showing why they are harmful to communities.

Touring the country with ‘How to End Christian Nationalism’

Amanda Tyler’s book tour highlights local organizations making an impact

By Cherilyn Crowe Guy, BJC Content Strategy Director

“This threat of Christian nationalism has been described as the greatest threat to American democracy,” said Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif. “And I love the way Amanda Tyler — as a person of faith, as a Christian — is not afraid to talk about it as such.”

Rep. Huffman’s words came during a program at Book Passage in Corte Madera, Calif., as he introduced Tyler for a conversation about her new book that addresses the dangers of Christian nationalism.

Released October 22 by Broadleaf Books, *How to End Christian Nationalism* provides practical ways to counter Christian nationalism and protect faith freedom for all. It includes a look at the impact of Christian nationalism on our society and in our congregations, strategies for faith-rooted organiz-

ing and guidance for holding hard conversations with loved ones.

The book talks about how to distinguish Christian nationalism from the teachings of Jesus and to demonstrate how the former perpetuates white supremacy. The book also unpacks key truths: Patriotism is not the same as nationalism. Religious freedom means little if it’s not for everyone. Christians follow a gospel of love, not the idol of power.

“Because generations have let Christian nationalism fester, the ideology has grown deep roots, creating an underground system that makes it that much harder to extricate,” Tyler explained in her book. She said that ending Christian nationalism cannot be accomplished in our lifetimes; instead, it will take several generations to resolve.



Amanda Tyler speaks with Rev. Victoria Robb Powers for an event at Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas.

“Though my primary audience is white Christians who want to engage in this long-haul work of ending Christian nationalism, I hope this book will also be a helpful resource to people of color, people from other religious traditions, and people who are nonreligious who are part of or want to join the large movement to end Christian nationalism,” Tyler wrote in the introduction.

Instead of chapters, the book is broken into “steps,” leading readers through naming the threat of Christian nationalism, grounding themselves, denouncing violence and more. The end of each “step” contains Scripture and a short paragraph called “Reflect and Act” with ideas on putting concepts shared in the book into practice.

“I approached this project with humility, knowing that there is a vast community of organizers, advocates, activists, scholars, journalists, faith leaders, lawyers, and others engaged in this work. My hope is that my story, and the stories and wisdom of others I share in the book, will inspire an even larger group of people to join this cause,” Tyler said.

Already in its second printing, *How to End Christian Nationalism* continues to gain and maintain momentum in sales, with a healthy spread of orders at independent bookstores as well as through Amazon and Books-A-Million.

Tyler traversed the country this fall to talk about BJC’s work countering Christian nationalism and her new book, speaking at events in California, Texas, Iowa, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Virginia. Events often include a spotlight on a local organization doing important work, giving people there an opportunity to take action in their community.

Tyler’s conversation partner in Los Angeles was the Rev. Jennifer Gutierrez, who is the executive director of a faith-rooted organizing project called CLUE-LA. The organization brings together clergy and lay leaders with the marginalized, the unheard and the least protected — low-wage workers and immigrants — in the cause of a just economy that works for everyone, not just those at the top. At the event, the Rev. Gutierrez shared how those in attendance can take action, including responding to hateful policies around immigration with hospitality and centering the stories of the marginalized as a way to counter the narratives of Christian nationalism.

In Oklahoma City, the Rev. Dr. Shannon



Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., and Amanda Tyler at Book Passage in Corte Madera, Calif.



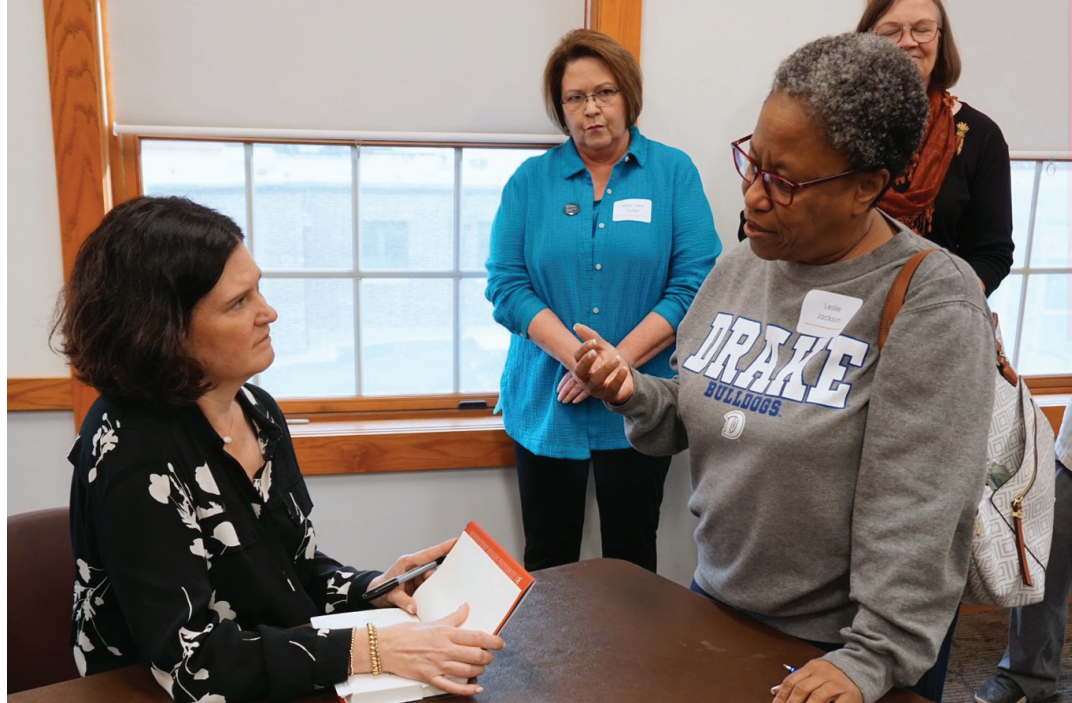
Rev. Dr. Bill Leonard and Amanda Tyler at Knollwood Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C.



Amanda Tyler at her book signing at Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas.



Amanda Tyler and Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay talk during a book event held at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church in Minneapolis, Minn.



Amanda Tyler at her book signing event at Plymouth Congregational Church in Des Moines, Iowa.

“Organizers might not use the phrase *countering Christian nationalism* to describe their work, but that might be a powerful outcome of the organizing they are doing.”

Fleck shared ways those in attendance could connect with the work of her organization, the Oklahoma Faith Network, a group known for organizing disaster response solutions, cooperating with government agencies to educate people on specific needs, and hosting events designed to inform and promote understanding and unity. They have a specific letter opposing Christian nationalism in Oklahoma that people can sign, and the Rev. Dr. Fleck noted the importance of preparing for work ahead during the state legislature’s upcoming session.

In Des Moines, Iowa, Connie Ryan, the executive director of Interfaith Alliance of Iowa, shared ways to connect with her organization, which convenes and leads diverse voices to challenge extremism, defend democracy, protect religious freedom and safeguard the rights of all Iowans. She also lifted up additional groups doing important work to help others who are impacted by policies inspired by Christian nationalism, including One Iowa, Iowa Trans Mutual Aid Fund, and Planned Parenthood Advocates of Iowa.

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, BJC Community and Partnership Manager Joy Pettigrew spoke to those in attendance about opportunities for action, including supporting the North STAR Act, which protects immigrants in the state of Minnesota by prohibiting state and local law enforcement from using state resources for the purpose of civil immigration

enforcement. It is expected to be reintroduced during the next legislative session, and it is a way Minnesotans can actively show their support for their neighbors. She also lifted up the work of Outfront Minnesota, which provides crisis intervention and other advocacy services for LGBTQ+ survivors of violence and harassment in the state.

“Organizers have been waging campaigns for voting rights, immigrant rights, economic justice, criminal justice reform, and many more for many decades,” Tyler wrote in the book. “Organizers might not use the phrase *countering Christian nationalism* to describe their work, but that might be a powerful outcome of the organizing they are doing.”

In the spring of 2025, the book tour will continue. For the full list of stops on the tour and links to order a book, you can visit EndChristianNationalism.com.

If you cannot attend an event but are interested in the conversations taking place, the Respecting Religion podcast shared a discussion between Tyler and the Rev. Dr. Bill Leonard, the founding dean at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity, held Oct. 29 in Winston-Salem, N.C. Listen to the dialogue from that event in episode 3 of season 6 of the podcast.

The next page provides additional ways that you can take action and connect with us as we work together to counter Christian nationalism.

CHRISTIANS AGAINST CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

With a new year and a new administration on the horizon, there is no better time to think about action steps you can take to create change and connect with others concerned about the dangers of Christian nationalism.

There are things you can do in this time. We invite you to join us — and join others — in this communal work. You do not have to identify as a Christian or be a signer of the statement to be part of efforts combating Christian nationalism, and you can start small. Here are opportunities for action and connection. Be encouraged by work happening across the country, and find ways you can take action and participate.

Host a meeting or discussion group

We invite you to use our curriculum resources in your church or community group. We have a 3-lesson curriculum on the dangers of Christian nationalism, a 10-part podcast series discussion guide, and a one-session discussion guide on the overlap between white supremacy and Christian nationalism. We also have a step-by-step toolkit available if you want to host a church or community meeting about Christian nationalism and collectively strategize ways you can make an impact where you are.

Get engaged with local organizations

During Amanda Tyler's book tour, each stop includes a way to connect with a local organization and take action. Look for organizations in your community who are doing important work, and get connected. Perhaps it's as simple as signing up for their email newsletter or seeing if they have opportunities for civic engagement. The more you connect with others in your community who are doing important and needed work, the more ways you can find to join forces communally to make a difference.

Connect us: We're looking for local partnerships to combat Christian nationalism and its impacts

Do you know of local organizations engaged in advocacy or community organizing around issues impacted by Christian nationalism? They do not have to use that term to be involved in these projects. **Joy Pettigrew**, our community partnership manager (meet her on page 27) would love to connect with groups addressing critical topics including book bans, public school board policies, LGBTQ+ and gender justice, bans on critical race theory, and the fight against misinformation and disinformation.

If you have any recommendations or ideas, please reach out to her at jpettigrew@BJCOnline.org and let her know! She welcomes any suggestion. Together, we can build a stronger network to stand for justice and religious freedom.

Stay connected

If you haven't signed or shared the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement, it's never too late! And, whether or not you signed the statement, you are invited to join our private Facebook group to share ideas, get new resources, and talk with others who are finding ways to have hard conversations and make an impact in their world. We also have webinars and other items to watch or share with others. Stay connected and find resources for you and your community at ChristiansAgainstChristianNationalism.org.

Updates from the North Texas chapter of Christians Against Christian Nationalism

We have an active group in the Dallas/Fort Worth area that works together to root out Christian nationalism. They are currently preparing for the Texas Legislature's upcoming session. School voucher proposals are expected to arise, and the group is brainstorming ways to effectively engage with lawmakers and oppose those problematic policies. Plus, this spring their church engagement group will be facilitating a series of conversations across various churches. Visit page 21 to read about their recent voter engagement initiatives.

Want to know more? Interested in connecting in North Texas?
Contact Lisa Jacob at ljacob@BJCOnline.org.

Apply to be a 2025 BJC Fellow

Young professionals have until March 3 to apply for our newest class



Applications are now available for the 2025 class of BJC Fellows, which brings together young professionals with an interest in and dedication to religious freedom.

The program kicks off with the BJC Fellows Seminar — an intensive educational program held at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, from **July 30 to August 3, 2025**. There, BJC Fellows will learn about religious liberty from BJC staff members and other experts. They will engage in conversations about history as well as the latest developments in the religious liberty landscape, all while sharing from their experiences and community contexts.

The BJC Fellows Program is open to individuals with diverse educational, cultural and professional experience. There is no religious requirement — people from any or no religious background are welcome. Applicants must be between the ages of 25 and 45, and they must commit to advocating for religious liberty. There is no cost to apply, and the program will cover your travel, room and board at Colonial Williamsburg.

BJC Fellows will serve as liaisons between BJC and their communities and will be expected to use their skills for public engagement, such as leading educational sessions, writing op-eds and using social media to advance the cause of protecting faith freedom for all throughout their careers.

Interested in learning more? Visit our website at BJCOnline.org/Fellows to see the members of previous classes and access the application, which is due **March 3, 2025**. The website also has information about joining a free, no-obligation informational session about the BJC Fellows Program on **Tuesday, January 21, 2025, at 4 p.m. Eastern Time**. The session will be open to anyone interested, and it will be held online.

Join our Faith•FULL Community

We are grateful for BJC's FaithFULL Community of recurring donors. A monthly donation of any amount helps BJC create partnerships and curate coalitions of individuals, churches and organizations nationwide. The gifts from our recurring donors offer sustainability and allow galvanized and empowered local communities to counter Christian nationalism.

Regardless of the size, monthly gifts help fulfill the inclusive vision of faith freedom for all.

Join our FaithFULL Community of monthly donors today. You can set up your gift on our website at BJCOnline.org/give-monthly, or you can contact BJC Associate Director of Development Danielle Tyler by email at dtyler@BJCOnline.org or by phone at 317-523-4076.



Respecting Religion returns

Join Amanda Tyler and Holly Hollman for season 6 of our award-winning podcast

This summer, Louisiana passed a bill that requires classrooms to post the Ten Commandments, Oklahoma Superintendent of schools Ryan Walters issued an edict that all public schools must include the Bible in their curriculum, and Texas is considering a language arts curriculum infused with Bible stories.

Do these developments respect religion?

No, according to BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler and General Counsel Holly Hollman's conversations on the Respecting Religion podcast. As Christians and lawyers with a specialty in constitutional law, they spend each episode diving into current issues at the intersection of religion and the law and the continuing rise of Christian nationalism.

"Our constitutional promise of religious freedom for all means you don't have to practice a certain religion or claim a certain religious identity or even be religious at all to be a full citizen in this country," Tyler said on the season 6 premiere episode.

"In fact, we call this 'Respecting Religion' because the word 'respecting' is in the First Amendment," Hollman said. "And what we're interested in is respect for religious freedom."

Season 6 began in October with a look at the current state of the Supreme Court, and episodes this season include conversations about troubling state laws, a stop on Tyler's book tour, and an episode taking stock of our country after this year's presidential election. During season 6, episodes are released twice a month.

Respecting Religion is available on your favorite podcast platform, and you can access show notes and transcripts of each episode by visiting our website at BJCOnline.org/RespectingReligion. Have a question for the show? Is there a topic you want to hear discussed? Contact us at RespectingReligion@BJCOnline.org.



Subscribe to Respecting Religion wherever you get your podcasts!

Compton: Rising secularism is problematic for democracy

A post-election lecture series shares research and sheds light on issues facing our nation

From BJC staff reports and reporting by Baptist News Global
Photos courtesy of Mercer University

An increase in the secularization of society does not minimize religious and political tensions; instead it contributes to the growth of political extremism, xenophobia and anti-democratic values, says Dr. John Compton.

He laid out these arguments and more during three lectures on the theme of the “politics of secularization,” presented for the 20th annual Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State. The 20th iteration of the annual BJC event was held Nov. 13-14 on the campuses of Mercer University in Atlanta and Macon, Ga.

Dr. Compton is professor of political science at Chapman University in Orange, Calif., and the author of several books, including *The Evangelical Origins of the Living Constitution* and *The End of Empathy: Why White Protestants Stopped Loving Their Neighbors*.

Dr. Compton’s first presentation examined how declining rates of religious belief and participation are likely to impact support for democratic values, such as tolerance of diversity, protection of civil liberties and the renunciation of political violence. Most would assume that secularization increases respect for democratic values.

“If religious believers are duty-bound to follow a set of divine commands, it may be difficult for them to compromise with, or even tolerate, fellow citizens who believe differently,” Dr. Compton said. “From this it follows that a decline in religiosity should

open the door to greater tolerance and understanding.”

But, that has not been the case. In fact, declining religiosity has in recent years been accompanied by an alarming rise in anti-democratic values, and there has been a spike in polarization, too, where Americans who identify with a political party dislike opposing partisans more intensely than in previous years, often for reasons that are only loosely related to policy disagreements, he noted.

While rates of individual belief remain high, religious authority has collapsed. Dr. Compton presented research showing that more than 30% of self-described “religious” Americans say they “never” attend worship services, as opposed to less than 10% in 1980. He shared that self-reported religiosity tends to be negatively correlated with democratic commitment, but organized religious participation seems to be positively correlated with a range of pro-democratic values and behaviors.

“All else being equal, believers who are active in religious congregations are more civically engaged than other citizens, and some studies have found that they are also more tolerant and more supportive of democratic norms,” Dr. Compton said.

He noted that the rise of untethered belief is often causing the rise in opposition to democratic norms. A growing number of Americans lack the structure of a real-world religious community, leaving them free to channel their moral indignation in whatever direction their preexisting





Dr. John Compton speaks on the campus of Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, Ga.

political commitments or prejudices may suggest.

“It is the process of secularization itself that is fueling threats to liberal democracy and church-state separation,” he said.

Dr. Compton’s second presentation focused on the relationship between religiosity, secularization and right-wing extremism, as well as what that means about our discussions of Christian nationalism.

He presented research from the 2024 Chapman Survey of American Fears, which — when examined for various factors — undercuts the theory that organized religious participation promotes political extremism.

Instead, the numbers show that, at least among Republicans, an increase in the population of “nones” — people who do not subscribe to a particular religious belief — seems more likely to promote extremism

“[W]hat we face is not so much a crisis of theology or democratic theory as much as a crisis of civil society.”

than to reduce it. In fact, the data provides reasons to suspect that believers are being driven to the far right by media and social media consumption more so than Sunday morning sermons.

“In recent years, hundreds of academic and popular articles and dozens of best-selling books have advanced the theory that a loosely connected set of beliefs or doctrines, collectively labeled ‘Christian nationalism,’ is fueling a rise in authoritarian and intolerant attitudes among white Christians,” Dr. Compton said. But, he noted that 56% of white Republicans who never attend religious services score high on the Christian nationalism scale, which should give someone pause before concluding that Christian nationalism is typically transmitted through organized religious participation.

“I am convinced that any successful effort to slow the growth of anti-democratic beliefs must begin by acknowledging that what we face is not so much a crisis of theology or democratic theory as much as a crisis of civil society,” Dr. Compton declared, sharing that untethered believers are the most likely Americans to hold extremist views on questions about immigration, religious minorities, racial and ethnic inclusion, and political violence.

He also noted the impact of this re-

search on discourse about Christian nationalism, pointing out that many of the articles on and preaching about the dangers of Christian nationalism are mostly just reaching those who already know the dangers.

Dr. Compton suggested a new path: instead of publishing more material on the threats, perhaps there should be a focus on ways to rebuild our broken civil society.

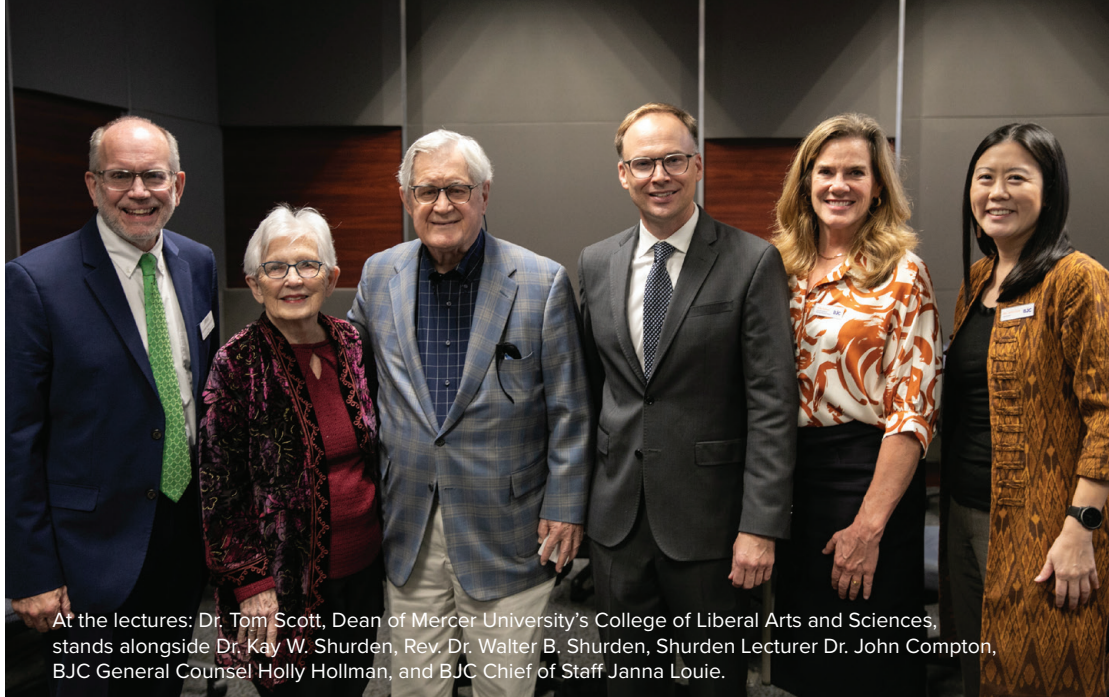
“Those of us blessed with ample opportunities for civic engagement might ask hard questions about why the same opportunities are not available to those on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder,” he said. “We might even consider whether popular framings of the current crisis of democratic authority are not alienating precisely the people they are supposed to reach.”

In the final of his three lectures, Dr. Compton laid out a case for how rising secularism contributes to the growth of political extremism, pointing out how flagging participation in faith traditions correlates to diminishing civic engagement. That finding holds significant consequences for the Democratic Party and progressive causes.

Dr. Compton cited a 2017 *New York Times* column by Ross Douthat urging liberals to return to Mainline churches as a step toward addressing the problem, which received a negative reaction online.



Dr. John Compton speaks at the Mercer University School of Law in Macon, Ga.



At the lectures: Dr. Tom Scott, Dean of Mercer University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, stands alongside Dr. Kay W. Shurden, Rev. Dr. Walter B. Shurden, Shurden Lecturer Dr. John Compton, BJC General Counsel Holly Hollman, and BJC Chief of Staff Janna Louie.

Dr. Compton noted that Douhat “pointed out that many of liberalism’s foundational tenets — its commitment to human equality, its concern for the marginalized, its faith in progress — were inherited from the nation’s rapidly fading Mainline Protestant denominations.”

Douhat’s column and the reaction itself illustrate the “religious blind spot” of American liberalism, Dr. Compton said.

“As left-leaning elites have become more secular, they have lost sight of religion’s critical supporting role in the major egalitarian reform movements of the 19th and 20th centuries,” Dr. Compton noted, sharing examples that include the abolition of slavery, the eradication of child labor, the creation of child and maternal health programs, and the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act. None of those reforms would have succeeded without grassroots ecumenical and denominational religious networks as well as biblical mandates to help the marginalized and oppressed in society, he assessed.

Dr. Compton said progressive elites tend to be oblivious to the fact that many non-white Democrats continue to view politics and party affiliation through a religious lens.

“Millions of Black Americans identify with the Democratic Party at least in part because they believe it embodies, or once embodied, core principles of the Black Protestant tradition,” Dr. Compton said. “If current secularizing trends continue, there is a real risk that the same Black Americans who are drifting away from organized religion will simultaneously drift away from the Democratic party.”

Dr. Compton noted that there is scant discussion of the fact that secularization is beginning to drive a wedge through the Democratic coalition. “Non-white Democrats are, on average, far more religious than white Democrats, and — perhaps for this reason — they tend to hold more conservative views on so-called culture war issues than white Democrats,” Dr. Compton shared.

While power and influence are increasingly concentrated in a handful of top-heavy interest groups, Dr. Compton said there is one group in American society where religion continues to provide support for progressive causes: Black Protestant churches.

“Those who identify with a traditional Black Protestant tradition, such as the AME [Church], are far more likely to be exposed to theological perspectives that link biblical values to egalitarian political projects and which stress the Democratic Party’s role as the traditional vehicle of progressive change in the U.S.”

Dr. Compton noted that Black voters’ levels of civic and political engagement are also influenced by religious participation and Protestant affiliation, but the problem for the Democratic Party is that traditional Black Protestant identification is trending downwards.

“Religion is threatening to drive a wedge through the Democratic coalition, as the party’s primarily white ‘donor class’ continues to secularize at a much faster rate than rank-and-file and nonwhite Democrats,” Dr. Compton said.

He cited research that shows Black and

“We might even consider whether popular framings of the current crisis of democratic authority are not alienating precisely the people they are supposed to reach.”

Hispanic Democrats register more conservative attitudes than white Democrats on a wide range of social and cultural issues.

The internal divide on religion and social issues is not new, and — until very recently — political scientists generally said it was unlikely to affect voting behavior, Dr. Compton continued. While there is no data available yet to see how far Republicans have cut into the traditionally Democratic share of the Black and Hispanic vote, there does appear to be meaningful movement in that direction during the most recent election.

“And in a closely divided, deeply polarized country, even small shifts in group voting patterns can have enormous repercussions,” Dr. Compton said.

When looking for hope and a better way forward, Dr. Compton pointed to the work of Eboo Patel. Patel delivered the 2020 Shurden Lectures, and he is the founder of Interfaith America, a nonprofit developing



Rev. Dr. David Gushee provides a response to the third lecture



Rev. Dr. Angela Parker provides a response to the third lecture

networks of religious communities capable of pursuing social justice reforms and delivering social services.

“Historically speaking, he points out religious groups are among the only social institutions that have succeeded, at least on occasion, in prompting citizens to sacrifice immediate gratification in the service of aiding the less fortunate, caring for the environment and promoting the well-being of future generations.”

While acknowledging the decline of progressive faith groups means fewer volunteers, lower morale and less money, Patel notes religious communities have proved capable of reinventing themselves in the face of insurmountable odds, Dr. Compton said.

“In short, he’s enough of an optimist not to scoff at the idea that American liberals might one day go back to church.”

Two professors at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology offered their responses and insight after Dr. Compton’s third lecture.

The Rev. Dr. David Gushee, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology, said his own research and writing confirm the negative effect a lack of religious belief and belonging can have on democracy.

The Rev. Dr. Gushee noted that Dr. Compton is engaging the question about the relationship of religion to the erosion of democracy. “But, rather than accepting the paradigm that the problem is primarily what has been called ‘white Christian nationalism,’ you are at least pursuing the hypothesis

that the problem is secularization,” he said, noting that secularization is both an erosion of a belief in God and the decline of religious participation in churches.

In his book *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies*, the Rev. Dr. Gushee said he found those who have “fallen for the authoritarian, reactionary politics of the MAGA type” are “very thinly connected, if at all, to anything resembling practicing Christian communities or orthodox Christian belief.”

That conclusion “dovetails very nicely with your finding that people who still actually participate in organized religious communities are less rather than more likely to fall prey to anti-democratic, extremist or pro-violence politics,” he said. “In other words, they have a tradition that sets some boundaries on how they think about politics, whereas I think the true believers on the MAGA side oftentimes are building a religion on the fly.”

Rather than dissecting the voting patterns or declining religious participation of Black Americans, Dr. Compton and other scholars should focus more closely on the influence of white supremacy and white privilege in undermining democracy and dividing progressive movements, said the Rev. Dr. Angela Parker, associate professor of New Testament and Greek at McAfee.

“The concept of church has been hijacked by white Christian nationalism in the Republican Party,” the Rev. Dr. Parker said. “Instead of looking at the small shifts in polling data, we should be looking at the larger shifts toward white supremacy that we have seen

in this election.”

She also discussed the data and popular assumptions that nonwhite Democrats who are religious are automatically more conservative, but she said that’s not true.

“I’m standing right here in front of you: nonwhite Democrat, religious and progressive,” she said.

The Rev. Dr. Parker noted that 93% of Black women and 81% of Black men voted for Kamala Harris, the two highest demographics that turned out for the 2024 Democratic presidential ticket, but they only represent 13.6% of the country as a whole.

“I argue that it is unfair to focus attention on the population that represents 13.6% of the nation when we represent very little of the power dynamics of this nation,” the Rev. Dr. Parker declared. “Which is why I focus on whiteness and white supremacy in the first place. In my conversations with Black men and Black women over this past week, we’ve tapped out. We’re not coming to your marches anymore. We’re tired of you focusing on us. You need to get your own houses in order.”

The Rev. Dr. Parker suggested that, if liberals and progressives want to return to church, she suggested going to the Black Church, where white Christians can encounter their privilege and racism and develop the empathy that white Christianity is missing.

The Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State were established in 2004. Learn more and watch the full presentations online at BJCOnline.org/ShurdenLectures.

Honorary and memorial gifts

Any gift you make to a BJC-related program can be in honor of or in memory of someone. You can make a gift to **BJC**, a gift designated to the work of the **BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation** or a gift directly to the **Christians Against Christian Nationalism** campaign.

Simply send a note with your check or specify who the gift should recognize when you give online at BJCOnline.org/give, BJCOnline.org/Center or ChristiansAgainstChristianNationalism.org/give.

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Honor the memory or celebrate the life of a cherished friend, family member or influential figure in your life with a meaningful tribute gift. Your generous contribution not only pays tribute to those who have made an impact but also reinforces our commitment to fostering faith and freedom across the nation.

When you make your gift online in honor or in memoriam, you now have the opportunity to send a customized E-card, beautifully designed to notify those who are being honored or remembered. This heartfelt gesture adds a personal touch, allowing you to share the significance of your gift with loved ones. Whether you choose to send a note with your check or specify the honoree during your online donation, know that your tribute will be recognized and celebrated in our next magazine.

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Matching gifts



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ACH transfer



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(DAFs)



Payroll deduction



Stock transfers



Property deed
transfers



IRA and 401(k)
contributions

Opposition Mounting Against Suit To Overturn Politicking Ban

By Fred Stokeld for Tax Notes, Oct. 8, 2024

... BJC claims that the section 501(c)(3) political activity prohibition, commonly known as the Johnson Amendment, has strong support from religious groups, secular groups, and faith leaders in its argument against the lawsuit challenging the tax code provision.

“There are plenty of places in our culture to engage in partisan campaigns, and most people I know don’t want church to be one of those places,” Holly Hollman of the BJC told *Tax Notes*.

The Johnson Amendment protects the integrity and independence of churches and the nonprofit sector, Hollman said. It doesn’t prevent members of the clergy or nonprofit leaders in their individual capacities from endorsing or opposing political candidates, donating to political campaigns, or running for office themselves, she added. ...

MSNBC’s AYMAN

Ayman Mohyeldin invited BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler into his studio on Oct. 27, 2024, for a segment on the AYMAN show about Christian nationalism, MAGA politics and her new book.



AMANDA TYLER: I think we really can look back through all of the Trump years as a place of rising tide of Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is not a new ideology; it has been around, really, since before the founding of the United States, and looking through history we can see prior high tides of Christian nationalism in the early 20th century in the 1950s with McCarthyism.

But, over the last several years, we have seen this growing movement of Christian nationalism moving us closer to authoritarianism and fascism and away from a pluralistic democracy towards a theocracy.

I think we can really look back to January 6, 2021, as a place where Christian nationalism was used as a permission structure for violence to try to overturn free and fair elections. Over the last four years, we have seen that movement gain more and more force. We have seen a normalization of Christian nationalism with people like Marjorie Taylor Greene saying the Republican Party should be the party of Christian nationalism and not having pushback to that idea.

Now, today, we see — openly — calls like “Jesus is King!” at rallies, Jesus used as a mascot, the Bible used as a prop, and all in service of trying to gain power at all costs and hold on to that power in this push toward authoritarianism.

Texas lawmakers set to take up fight over Ten Commandments in public schools

By Andrew Schneider for Houston Public Media, Nov. 14, 2024

... Proponents of the idea [to require posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms] say American society is rooted in Christianity, and there should be more moral and ethical teachings in schools, while others say forcing students to see and learn the Ten Commandments would infringe upon their religious freedom and blur the lines between church and state. ...

The Ten Commandments monument on the grounds of the Texas Capitol has as much do with recent history as it does with ancient history. Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC), noted that such monuments, which use a translation from the King James Bible, were placed around the country around the time of Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 biblical epic, *The Ten Commandments*.

“That particular monument on the Texas State Capitol grounds was challenged as an unconstitutional establishment of religion back in the early 2000s, and the Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality because of the context in which it was placed,” Tyler said. “And so, I think some of the drafters and backers of this particular legislation assume that because the Supreme Court upheld ... the constitutionality of the monument, that they must uphold the constitutionality of this law.” ...



BJC Board of Directors meets in Washington

People across the country representing BJC's supporting bodies gathered in Washington, D.C., for the annual meeting of the BJC Board of Directors, held October 7-8.

The board's convening includes time to hear from BJC staff as well as working together to discuss threats to religious freedom — both on a national level and in local communities. This year's meeting included a conversation about BJC's history in the 1980s and 1990s, presentations from various working groups, and time for board members to gather in small groups for in-depth discussions on ways religious freedom impacts various elements of life in our world today.

The Rev. Anyra Cano, representing the Religious Liberty Council, serves as the chair of the BJC Board. She is in the second year of her two-year leadership term, as are her fellow officers: Vice Chair Sofi Hersher Andorsky, Treasurer the Rev. Emily Hull McGee, and Secretary the Rev. Dr. Christopher The.

The BJC Board of Directors is composed of individuals representing BJC's various member bodies. You can read biographies of each board member and learn more about them at BJCOnline.org/bjcboard. Hear more from a few of our board members about this year's meeting on the next page.



BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler addresses the BJC Board of Directors.



Board member Dr. Keisha McKenzie (right) joins BJC's Dr. Sabrina E. Dent to update the board on the upcoming Religious Freedom Immersion Experience.

In such a time as this, the BJC Board came together in great anticipation of how our communities can best support the mission of faith freedom for all. As we see the explicit rise of and push for Christian nationalism, it is clear that BJC’s work and advocacy need to continue to be done in collaboration and partnership with and among diverse groups without disregarding our Baptist principles of religious liberty for all. I am encouraged to witness how much BJC has changed in the past five years alone. It has embraced a more richly diverse leadership encompassing various professional backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, and theological perspectives.



Rev. Anyra Cano
BJC Board Chair

The staff invited us to help them think about the future of BJC. Over the past several months, Amanda Tyler worked with Cherilyn Crowe Guy and Dr. Sabrina Dent to conduct oral history interviews with some of the people who were on BJC’s board and staff in the 1980s and 1990s. Together, these interviews provided insight into how the organization has shifted its focus over the years based on internal fractures within Baptist life. As a leader, Amanda is committed to thinking about how the past can inform how we prepare ourselves for the future, and she herself represents a needed shift in BJC. As the first woman to lead BJC, she has allowed the organization to think more overtly about women’s long-standing roles in helping institutions consider their futures in more inclusive, creative, and boundary-shifting ways.



Rev. Dr. Jaimie Crumley
Representative of the Religious Liberty Council

In a presentation I gave during the meeting, I said that we seem to be at an “inflection point,” organizationally, societally, and culturally. With this year’s meeting, we seem to be asking, even more fully, new questions, and even asking existing questions in new ways. This is exciting. I’m grateful that BJC isn’t shying away from the challenges. Recent years have added to our numbers new colleagues who bring the perspectives that I believe will enable us to respond to the challenges of our day in venturesome and free ways.



Rev. Dr. Philip Thompson
Representative of North American Baptist Conference

The collective spirit and dedication on display at this year’s BJC Board meeting left me profoundly energized. I was thrilled to participate in timely discussions about critical issues, including democracy, gender and sexuality rights, election security, economic justice, immigration, and more. At a time when such topics are marked by a special urgency, their place on the agenda demonstrated BJC’s continued leadership and vision. This board meeting reaffirmed BJC’s commitment to religious freedom for every person and the separation of church and state, two essential foundations of true freedom for all.



Katie Moore
Representative of the Religious Liberty Council

What's next?



By Jaziah Masters
Research Fellow
BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation



As you read this article, you know the next president will be Donald Trump, and you know who will represent you in Congress, as well as your state legislature, city council and school board. Plus, there were various ballot initiatives in states and cities decided across the country. Are you satisfied with the results? Why or why not?

Regardless of the results, one of the largest voting blocs were people who did not cast a ballot in the 2024 elections. Voter turnout has steadily increased over the years and, according to Pew Research, the 2020 presidential election saw the highest turnout rate for any national election since 1900. Notably, that turnout was only 66% of eligible voters, meaning about one out of every three eligible voters in the United States did not cast a ballot. This is to say nothing of the midterm elections, where we often see even lower voter turnout. The 2022 midterm turnout exceeded every midterm since 1970, and only 46% of eligible voters cast a ballot.

Believe it or not, U.S. voter turnout trails many global peers. The turnout for the 2020 U.S. election placed us 31st out of 49 other highly developed and mostly democratic countries, according to Pew Research. (We were right between Colombia and Greece, falling far behind Uruguay, Turkey and Peru, which claimed the top spots.)

Why do people not vote? It is a question that vexes the minds of campaigns, politicians and civic-minded citizens everywhere. In a previous edition of this magazine, I outlined some of the voter suppression efforts enacted to prevent people from casting a ballot. But, there are so many more.

This reality loomed large in a conversation I moderated in September on voter suppression. Rachel Carter of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Nomi Joyrich of Jews for a Secular Democracy, and Monica Spencer of VoteRiders joined me to discuss the issue and explain ways Christian nationalism contributes to many efforts designed to prevent individuals from voting.

Admittedly, the connection wasn't always straightforward to me. Christian nationalism is a political ideology and cultural framework that conflates American and

“The ideology of Christian nationalism is not going away, and voter suppression efforts are not going away.”

Christian identities, distorting both in the process. How does this interact with voter suppression? During the webinar, I laid out three points to show how these two problems are connected:

- Christian nationalism holds that to be a true American, one must be a Christian. But that “Christian” identity is tied to and provides cover for privilege, white supremacy and racial subjugation. Only a “select few” have the right and responsibility to engage in the public square.
- But that public square is made up of more than a privileged few. That public square is made up of all of us. Voting is a key element of civic engagement. It allows us to elect representatives of many interests and hold our elected officials accountable.
- Christian nationalism works to undermine the electoral system by targeting specific voters who do not align with its exclusionary tenets. The result? Targeted barriers to the ballot box aimed at historically marginalized communities.

The panel discussion was part of an event that included a screening of the short film “Suppressed and Sabotaged 2024: The Fight to Vote.” The film tells personal stories of voter suppression and election subversion that took place in recent election cycles. It illustrates how the people disproportionately affected by voter suppression are older adults; first-time voters; college-aged students; Black, Indigenous, and people of color; and people with disabilities.

Connect us!

Do you know local organizations engaged in advocacy or community organizing around issues impacted by Christian nationalism? We'd love to connect with them. Contact Joy Pettigrew, BJC's community partnership manager, to share your ideas for collaboration: jpettigrew@BJCOnline.org.

Tuesday, November 5, 2024, loomed large in our minds. That day has come and gone. What lies before us? The truth is, there are no easy answers. One person alone cannot fix it. The work continues no matter the outcome of any election.

The ideology of Christian nationalism is not going away, and voter suppression efforts are not going away.

The day after any election — and every day thereafter — we still see manifestations of Christian nationalism firmly entrenched in our society. Voter suppression measures are still firmly entrenched, too. Measures to ban books are still being enacted. Unlicensed chaplains are still allowed in some public schools. Advocates are still pushing the mandated display of the Ten Commandments (while others fight it in the courts). What does this mean?

Voting is not enough to end Christian nationalism, but

voting is one tool in a broader movement. To win this fight, we must love, care for and organize our communities. As we prepare for 2025, let us dedicate ourselves to working in community and solidarity. The lingering question is, how? Coming full circle, that is why I think it was so important to hear the voices of Rachel Carter, Nomi Joyrich and Monica Spencer during the panel discussion. They all serve organizations that encourage voter participation, but that is not their sole focus. These groups — and many others — are involved in various initiatives, including offering *pro bono* legal assistance, providing financial assistance to students attending institutions of higher learning, and advocating for greater federal workplace protections. The causes they champion continue, and the work is not done yet.

Who won your local elections? Do they know you? Do you know them? What organizations are prominent in your community? Are you a member? What causes do you care about? Meeting your representatives and finding answers to these specific questions might inform what comes next for you and give you ways to take action.

Throughout this year, the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation spotlighted the evolution of voting rights in our country and the importance of protecting them, providing reflections and timelines in the spring, summer and fall 2024 editions of this magazine. Read those articles and access additional information at BJCOnline.org/Center.

This is what advocacy looks like

Leading up to Election Day, the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation and the North Texas Organizing Project of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism Campaign spotlighted voter engagement initiatives and got involved.

In September, the two groups hosted a screening of the documentary "Suppressed and Sabotaged 2024: The Fight to Vote," and Jaziah Masters moderated a panel afterward to examine the intersection of voter suppression and Christian nationalism (read more on these two pages).

In October, members of the North Texas Coalition engaged in advocacy by writing letters to hundreds of low-turnout voters in Texas, encouraging them to make their voices heard at the ballot box. Lisa Jacob, the North Texas Organizer for the Christians Against Christian Nationalism Campaign, is pictured with some of the letters and letter-writers. Members of the coalition also participated in training with the Legal Defense Fund to be poll monitors for Election Day. Visit page 9 for more on the North Texas Organizing Project and how you can connect with them.





As part of its work to excavate the roots of injustice and white supremacy in our nation, communities, and congregations, the Alliance of Baptists led a trip to Montgomery, Alabama, in September to visit the Equal Justice Initiative's three legacy sites: the Legacy Museum, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park. The Legacy Sites invite visitors to reckon with the history of racial injustice in places where that history was lived, offering visitors a powerful opportunity to engage with history and begin an era of truth-telling. The Alliance of Baptists is a supporting body of BJC, and Amy Lewis offered her reflection on attending the experience.

Pilgrimage to Montgomery



By Amy Lewis

Photos by Jai'Lyn Lover of Unfiltered Photography

I am longing to be set free by the truth. Sly and overt intentions to erase our country's history are spreading like toxic fertilizers. As false narratives swirl in our public and private conversations, museums have become spiritual public spaces of truth-telling. The Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery are sacred places of personal and collective transformation in our country.

Bryan Stevenson founded a nonprofit civil rights law office in 1989, the Equal Justice Initiative. EJI has supported and sometimes exonerated people who face inhumane prison sentences, brought to light the terror of confinement in prisons, and made the public aware of racial bias woven into the criminal legal system. From decades of work, EJI was called to create the Legacy Museum, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama. The three Legacy Sites are sacred spaces that are changing lives, narratives, and potentially culture.

Taking the pilgrimage from my home in Decatur, Ga., to be at the Legacy Sites with the group of people from the Alliance of Baptists felt like a spiritual pilgrimage that I



desire to experience again and again. On the first day, we gathered for study and preparation with in-depth, compelling lectures and conversations led by staff members of the Alliance of Baptists: the Rev. Dr. Alexis Tardy, who serves as the THRIVE coordinator, and the Rev. Dr. Elijah Zehyoue, who serves as co-director of the Alliance of Baptists. There was so much to think about, explore further, and continue to absorb over time. I am grateful to Alexis and Elijah for wading into the challenges of empire, organized abandonment, the technology of incarceration, and the wisdom of Prathia Hall, M. Shawn Copeland, and Delores Williams. Alexis reminded us that we are not called to safety, but we are called to witness.

On the second day, we came together in three circles to set intentions for the day. Each circle was thoughtfully facilitated by two facilitators from the Radical Optimist Collective, a skilled team of professionals who work with groups who visit the Legacy Sites. Because the work and discipline of seeing the truth can be incredibly challenging, I was very thankful for the people around me in the museum. There were new and old Alliance friends, people I did not know, people living in Black bodies and people living in white bodies, and the museum staff who hold the space for those gathered to witness the historic and present truths of slavery



in America.

With all of the support and community, there also was plenty of space and understanding for solitude and reflection. Options were available to shuttle or walk between sites. The day concluded with a gathering in the three circles. The Radical Optimist Collective facilitators guided us through a time of sharing experiences that came up during the day, followed by a series of questions that helped connect the Museum and Memorial to our faith, life, work, churches, and commitments in the days and years to come.

My takeaway was to journal more, and that is a mindfulness bell for me to be true to the commitment I made to myself and to the work of ending white-body supremacy. This was my third visit to the

Museum and Memorial. There is always a new insight and new ways of understanding. During this visit, two things stood out to me in the Museum: the impact of narrative and accountability.

One section in the Legacy Museum had a quote that emphasized the influence and power of words: “Slavery evolved. The enslavement of Black people in the U.S. lasted for more than two centuries and was justified by an elaborate narrative of racial hierarchy. This ideology has endured beyond the formal abolition of American Slavery.” History proves that words and stories create beliefs and terrifying systems of racism that have stood the test of time. This truth calls us to get creative and bold and tell new stories and old stories.





For someone who sometimes has a really hard time putting things into words, I am feeling called to spend more time testing out new narratives — in writing, in art, and in conversation. Perhaps we can do this together, in a spirit of love and truth, allowing for mistakes, growth, self-awareness, and genuine relationships alongside “oops” and “ouches” occasionally. We are called to speak up, speak out, find our voice, disrupt, and spread the truth in new narratives.

Accountability was the second understanding that touched my soul in the Legacy Museum: “Accountability would make a difference in the lives of Black people.” Succinctly put. I appreciate so much how this line shines light on an obscure necessity: accountability of white-bodied people. I hope we will have more and more conversations about what it means to be accountable, to accept the charge of accountability for ourselves, our community, our white ancestors, and generations of white-bodied people to come. Could our acceptance of accountability make a difference in the lives of Black people? I believe accountability would lead to spiritual transformation in our lives as white-bodied people.

I hope we can continue to have robust conversations that lead to rituals and routines we can take to the streets that embody the act of witnessing our history, creating and amplifying new narratives, embodying accountability, and being in authentic relationships with our siblings living in Black, Brown, Asian, and Indig-

enous bodies.

For another time, I also have hope that through antiracism embodiment practices, those of us living in white bodies can begin to notice what is happening in our own bodies regarding racism, which we so often ignore — both our bodies and

racism. By witnessing our full selves, just as we are being called upon to witness our full history, perhaps bringing the truth into the light will begin to transform our nervous systems and begin to end white-body supremacy.

May it be so.

Amy Lewis, centered in personal and collective antiracism embodiment practices, facilitates Trauma Sensitive Yoga Sessions and partners with organizations and communities as a consultant and facilitator.

A version of this reflection originally appeared on the blog of the Alliance of Baptists, and it is reprinted here with permission.



BJC in the world

BJC staff members travel the country to share about our work defending and extending religious freedom for all, and we welcome student groups to our office in Washington, D.C., throughout the year. Here are a few recent events — learn how you can invite a speaker to your community or visit our office at BJCOnline.org/visit-bjc or BJCOnline.org/invite-bjc-to-your-community.



Dr. Sabrina E. Dent (center), director of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation, discussed the intersection of voting rights and religious freedom in a presentation for Public Theology Fellows at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.



BJC General Counsel Holly Hollman spoke at Immanuel Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., leading a Sunday school class on Christian nationalism and participating in a conversation during worship with the Rev. Steven Meriwether in October.



During the Baptist General Association of Virginia Annual Meeting, BJC interns and staff hosted a Christians Against Christian Nationalism Action Center and connected with friends and partners. Pictured at left is BJC fall intern Natalie Johnson-Abbott with BJC's Danielle Tyler at the action center, and at right is BJC's Jonathan Davis with friends and colleagues from the Baptist World Alliance.



Dr. Sabrina E. Dent spoke on a panel about interfaith organizing and election preparedness during the Interfaith Summit on Countering Hate, held in Montgomery, Ala., in September. Her fellow panelists are Lida Azim of America Indivisible (center) and Cassandra Lawrence of Shoulder to Shoulder (right).

Mark your 2025 calendar

January 21: Online informational seminar about the BJC Fellows Program (see page 10)

February 11: Amanda Tyler's book tour comes to Greenville, S.C.

March 1: Deadline to apply for a summer internship with BJC. For details and information, visit BJCOnline.org/internships.

March 3: Deadline for young professionals to apply for the BJC Fellows Program. Applications are available at BJCOnline.org/Fellows.

For more upcoming events, visit our website at BJCOnline.org/calendar.

BJC names community partnership manager

JOY PETTIGREW is the community partnership manager at BJC, deepening and cultivating partnerships with BJC's long-standing supporters and our growing Christians Against Christian Nationalism network across the country.

Originally from Hong Kong, she seeks to uplift the stories of Asian American Christians and empower them toward civic engagement. Pettigrew is driven by her desire to see Asian American Christians activated for collective liberation and civic involvement. Out of this commitment, she is a founding member of an emerging Chicago chapter of a coalition for Asian American Christian churches.

As a movement builder, speaker and community advocate, her professional career includes significant experience with a faith-based nonprofit, where she focused on developing college students in areas of identity, faith and leadership. Additionally, she continues to lead learning cohorts for Asian Americans on themes of faith and civic engagement and has moderated forums exploring AAPI racial identity, Christianity and politics.

Her undergraduate degree is in education and sociology, and she has lived in the Chicagoland area for the past 13 years. You can contact her at jpettigrew@BJCOnline.org.



Have you included BJC in your estate plans?

If you believe in faith freedom for everyone, consider including BJC in your will, trust, retirement accounts or insurance policy, and also consider creating a donor-advised fund or qualified charitable distribution. A planned gift of any size advances BJC's work to end Christian nationalism and uphold faith freedom for all for years to come.

The Rev. Dr. James M. Dunn was executive director of BJC from 1981 to 1999. In retirement, he continued to raise funds for BJC to create a lasting financial legacy, supporting religious liberty long into the future. The Rev. Dr. Dunn believed in sharing the vision of religious freedom with future generations, especially students and young professionals. His dedication led him to make a planned gift to BJC that continues to attract talented young people to work with BJC to reach future advocates for faith freedom. Today, the **James Dunn Legacy Circle** honors those who create a planned gift that will benefit BJC in the future.

For more information about creating a legacy gift to BJC and joining the James Dunn Legacy Circle, contact Danielle Tyler, associate director of development, at dtyler@BJCOnline.org.

New resource available: Black Religious Liberty Curriculum

"Why Black Religious Liberty?"

This is a question that the Law, Rights & Religion Project at Columbia Law School explores with the launch of the new Black Religious Liberty Curriculum (BRLC). Conversations about African Americans and Religious Freedom are not new, but this 12-part video series is a resource for expanding, reframing and diversifying the public conversation on "religious liberty." It features 24 interdisciplinary scholars in conversation on topics at the intersection of race, religion and the law, taking a deeper look at the experiences of Black people who have been treated differently when it comes to the law and religious freedom.

During the launch event on Sept. 24, Dr. Sabrina E. Dent, director of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation, joined religion scholar Dr. Judith Weisenfeld and attorney Rahmah Abdulal-eem to discuss this important issue in a conversation moderated by Liz Reiner Platt, the director of the Law, Rights & Religion Project. The panelists emphasized how race has always played a critical role in determining who has the right to fully practice their religious or nonreligious expression or simply to be human. The curriculum's 12-part series also features Dr. Corey D.B. Walker and Dr. Keisha McKenzie, two members of the Advisory Council for the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation. You can learn more and access the Black Religious Liberty Curriculum by visiting lawrightsreligion.org/our-work/brlc.

For additional resources from BJC and our many partners, visit BJCOnline.org/resources.



Update your information with us

BJC is now using a system called EveryAction to keep up with our donors and constituents. If you are a BJC donor or a subscriber to our email list, you can easily update your contact information, including your credit card or ACH account details if you give to us on a recurring basis. Simply scan this QR code to securely access your account and ensure your information is current. If you aren't a subscriber, join us at BJCOnline.org/subscribe.

Keeping your details up to date helps us stay connected and enhances your experience with BJC. Thank you for your continued support!



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We are attorneys, Capitol Hill insiders, ministers, mobilizers and scholars. We file briefs in pivotal Supreme Court cases, advocate for and against legislation, testify in Congress and unite with others across faiths to ensure that all Americans have, and will always have, the right to follow their spiritual beliefs.

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REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

Amanda Tyler EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Cherilyn Crowe Guy EDITOR

MORE FROM BJC



The politics of secularization

Dr. John Compton discussed rising secularism's impact on democracy during the 20th annual Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures. Read more on pages 12-15.



A pilgrimage to Montgomery

The Alliance of Baptists organized a visit to the Legacy Sites in Montgomery, Ala., to reckon with the history of racial injustice. Read a reflection on pages 22-25.