

Note on Work Sample

This is an essay from a theatre history course analyzing performances of white Christian nationalism.

Intersection of Racial & Religious Nationalism in Performance in Past & Present

The theatrical manifestation of religious and racial nationalism in nineteenth century Germany, Brazil, and the United States has numerous parallels with contemporary US expressions of white Christian nationalism (WCN) through religious ritual performance and film/media performance.

Though certainly ever prevalent throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well, nationalism reached a prominent peak globally during the nineteenth century, particularly in countries such as Brazil, the United States, and Germany. Richard Wagner exported a very specific brand of German nationalism that contributed significantly to the unification of Germany, and many areas of the Americas began to export a different “flavor” of liberal nationalism in response to their revolutionary efforts (McConachie 309-312). Racial and religious dynamics became prominent intertwined components of these nationalisms as well. In describing racial nationalism, McConachie notes how “racial nationalism exaggerates a major tenet of cultural nationalism; it proposes that the dominant cultural group in a nation is not only different from, it is also superior to minority groups” (309). It ties nationalism to blood, preventing assimilation as an option (McConachie 309). During Wagner’s career, he moved further in this direction when Bavarian King Ludwig “encouraged Wagner to shift his nationalism from a cultural toward a racial definition of the German people” (McConachie 310). Toward the end of his career, Wagner also began to introduce Christian iconography in shows such as *Parsifal* because of his idea that “Germanic nationalism should be understood as a mode of spiritual redemption” (312). In the nineteenth century, the United States also had many instances of racial and religious nationalism. For example, English Christianity and US

patriotism began to blend as a result of the “legacy of Puritanism, which preached that America might separate itself from the decadence of Europe and lead the world to salvation, reinforced American self-righteousness and the claim of moral exceptionalism” (316). Furthermore, racial nationalism began to grow as slavery became further reinforced as essential to the well-being of the nation, particularly through minstrel performances (316-317).

Today, there are many forms religious and racial nationalism alive in the United States, but perhaps one of the most popular (and insidious) has been termed white Christian nationalism (WCN). Christian nationalism scholars Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry offer a core definition for discussion of this phenomenon, noting that Christian nationalism (more broadly) holds that “America has been and should always be distinctively ‘Christian’” (though often this becomes much more cultural than religious) “from top to bottom—in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values, and public policies” (Whitehead and Perry 10). Black Christian scholars such as Anthea Butler and Jemar Tisby have emphasized the “white” component that specifies a particular brand of this Christian nationalism, emphasizing how often this nationalism becomes tied to ideals of whiteness and not-so-hidden dynamics of racism. Butler offered a definition of WCN at a conference on the topic, describing it as the idea that “Christianity is for white people, and, for everyone else, you need to accept the cultural components of that,” as well as the basic tenets of American patriotism as well. She also added that it promotes the idea of whiteness as “the driving force behind Christianity” and that the United States will “play a central role in the way Christianity is going to played out in prophecy.” The insurrection and attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 has often been cited as a terrifying and noteworthy example of the expression of WCN in

violence and an attempt to “‘take back the country’ from the outsiders and invaders...and restore it to its rightful owners: ‘real’ (that is, white, Christian) Americans” (Gorski).

Going a bit deeper, there also exists numerous fascinating elements of performances created to reinforce these nationalisms. Wagner’s works such as *The Ring of Nibelungen*, *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, and *Parsifal*, each showcased varying elements of religious and racial nationalism in nineteenth century Germany, often disparaging Jewish persons and emphasizing the supremacy of (German) Christianity and the “German race.” In the United States, minstrel shows occupy the premiere example of racial nationalism, with white performers playing in blackface. McConachie notes specifically that the “popular genre of Yankee theatre during the 1830s, which often featured a droll New England character in comic opposition to a free black figure (always played in blackface by a white actor), also increased racial nationalism” (317). Even works such as *The Octoroon* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—which to some extent included efforts to bring awareness to slavery and the importance of abolition—often ended up being twisted to reinforce racial nationalism in some spaces, either because their intentions did not prevent inadvertent racism and racial nationalism or because their work became co-opted by other artists seeking to legitimize racial stereotypes and racism (Boucicault; McConachie 321).

WCN appears a bit differently, through a variety of performance types, including religious ritual and the Christian film industry. Many elements of white Christian nationalism become evident in the religious services of predominantly white evangelical churches. The annual services in early July for US Independence Day offer perhaps the most evident example

of how church gatherings offer sites for often theatrical performances of WCN. In Texas, First Baptist Dallas pastored by Robert Jeffress and Prestonwood Baptist Church pastored by Jack Graham offer two examples of mega Southern Baptist churches that hold extravagant patriotic services every July. Both churches include performances of patriotic songs by their large choirs and large displays of American flags and other patriotic symbols, and they often include a sermon that explicitly links parts of Scripture toward patriotism or present-day happenings in US society. First Baptist Dallas goes as far as to refer to their event as some variation of “Freedom Sunday,” and their services include on-stage fireworks and the distribution of American flags to each individual attendee. All of this emphasizes how symbols, music, and other theatrical engagements allow church members to link their own unwavering patriotism (and, often, nationalism) to their religious ideas; it fosters an environment where the lines can be blurred, where they can each reinforce one another, and where the cultural religious ideals of true patriotism can be proclaimed and emphasized.

For many, the salute to the armed forces becomes the most anticipated event of the morning, with the choir and orchestra performing the songs for each branch of the military and a servicemember from each branch saluting the congregation from the stage. This event explicitly invites audience participation as well, encouraging veteran or current servicemembers to stand during their branch’s song. This song often becomes very emotional for audience members, and it often acts as a meaningful moment of celebration for veterans and their families. While positive impacts from this performance certainly exist in this vein, these moments of encouragement co-exist alongside reinforcement of religious nationalism. The performance of this song *in church* begins to mix the religious and the patriotic together, and it

also adds an additional militaristic dynamic by explicitly including salutes and men dressed in uniform. The collective performance and participation in this song also adds an element of ritual to the affair, almost implying a reaffirmed allegiance to God, to country, and to military—with lines blurred between all three. This theatrical event offers people to rehearse religious nationalism collectively and to reinforce the underlying ideals of WCN among congregants.

Additionally, in 2020, First Baptist Dallas's service also featured Mike Pence as a special guest speaker. This begins to more directly align the Christian nationalism of the service with the white nationalism of the Trump administration, leading to the divine virgin birth of white Christian nationalism in the church pews. By giving Mike Pence—vice president during a white nationalist presidency—a platform behind the pulpit—the same place where the pastor preaches from the Bible and gives authoritative interpretations of Scripture—the church has blurred the lines between Christianity and white nationalism. In some ways, Pence's speech acts as a site-specific performance as well as a rehearsal of white Christian nationalism in the church building as part of a broader performative religious ritual. The context of this performance—during the time of the large Black Lives Matter protests to which the Trump administration responded aggressively and militaristically—further links white Christian nationalism to the performative, interactive appearance of Vice President Pence.

Additionally, Jeffress's regular appearances on Fox News, and the fact that Graham and Jeffress both sat on former President Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board also makes it clear that that their patriotism might often be narrow and limited to pride in *people who hold similar conservative views* (Boston). This certainly places a limit on nationalism like racial and religious nationalism, even if the racial and religious components might be peripherally related to the

distinguishing factor (political ideology) rather than the explicit factor. Race and the emphasis on *white* in white Christian nationalism becomes more explicit in light of their disparaging comments against Black Lives Matter protestors (@jackngraham). In this sense, their sermons also become part of the performance event—their loud vocal tone, their performative gestures, and the audience interaction/call and response typical in Southern Baptist spaces conglomerate to create a theatrical dynamic and classify the sermon, to some extent, as a strain of the form of performance of white Christian nationalism.

The (notorious) Christian film industry presents another opportunity for assessing the intersection of white Christian nationalism and artistic performance. This film industry has exported a number of niche hits, including *The Passion of the Christ*, *Heaven is for Real*, and *God's Not Dead*. With notable exceptions, such as *War Room*, which centers a Black family, and *The Shack*, which held a relatively racially diverse cast (though it might be considered outside of a traditional conception of the Christian film industry), most of these movies have overwhelmingly white characters, and BIPOC performers who are present often become tokenized or still represented as “other.” *God's Not Dead*, for example, includes a bit more racial diversity, but the most prominent Black man represented in the movie is from Africa (and thus is not seen as explicitly “American”), and the brown people represented are Muslims, who are painted either as oppressive or as *liberated through conversion to Christianity* (and a conversion that includes cultural conversion and a Christianity where they are surrounded mostly by white people). Jesus, when he makes an appearance in these types of films, frequently has been portrayed by a white actor. Even films and series that have made strides toward more accurate racial representation of the historic people in the New Testament, such

as the current TV series *The Chosen*, have chosen to represent Jesus with a more light-skinned actor. This visual representation in Christian art carries a distinctly “white” undertone of what “Christian” ought to represent. It not only visually depicts the “ideal” Christians as people who are white, but it often portrays God himself as white, thus intertwining ideas of whiteness and divinity in a very visual manner through commercial film performance. When people of color do make an appearance, their appearance is distinctly identified as separate from the white, “American,” Christian norm. These dynamics converge to emphasize inseparable links between whiteness and Christian piety.

Furthermore, several of these movies also perpetuate ideals of Christian nationalism in addition to white Christianity, with the *God’s Not Dead* tetralogy taking center stage on this front. Each of the movies takes on a different situation where Christian characters come under legal or social attack from non-Christian entities. Most of the posters for the movies have clear US iconography, such as flags or buildings in Washington, DC, and they often carry a narrative that emphasizes that religious freedom and Christian values—ideas that are fundamentally patriotic and truly “American” despite how the country might be moving—are “under attack” and must be defended (presumably by God himself, as the title of the films invoke). They portray the attacks as not only harmful to the Christians but as, implicitly, un-American and subversive to the true religious freedom and Christian values from the nation’s founding. Though expressed more subtly, these ideas come straight from Christian nationalism—the idea that the US has been a Christian nation and should stay that way. The use of a creative film—a piece of artistic performance—to convey this message proves particularly effective in allowing the fiction to both create alarm in audience members about the struggles they could face and

to allow them to craft the details of a story however they would like. Furthermore, it allows the ideas to spread more easily through performance and storytelling, instilling a strange amalgamation of white Christian nationalism, faith in God, and a paradoxical combination of hope and fear (hope in the goodness of God and fear over how un-American Americans might try to harm Christians).

In comparing these present-day manifestations of white Christian nationalism with historic performances of racial and religious nationalism in the nineteenth century, numerous overlaps and points of divergence emerge. First, the racial nationalism in the WCN has often (but not always) become less overt. Minstrel performances very explicitly sought to perpetuate racial stereotypes and contrast Black and white people and “characteristics”; these performances elevated white people and disparaging Black people. In contrast, ritual and film performances of WCN focus less on disparaging Black people and more on legitimizing and “unknowingly” portraying white people as the ideal of a true American and a true Christian. In the Christian film industry, white people do not become centered because they are explicitly described as superior; instead, their centering is meant to go *unnoticed*. The main reinforcement of white nationalism in these performances is by avoiding recognition of race altogether—by reinforcing the idea that whiteness is the “normal” and that other things are deviations. This normalcy dynamic contrasts the very explicit hierarchical dynamic present in the disparaging elements of Wagner’s racialized works and the US’s overtly racist minstrel shows. In many ways, the performances of WCN must completely ignore race and white Christian nationalism as a topic in order to be successful.

Second, these WCN performances often seek to spread their ideas by painting themselves as the underdog rather than painting themselves as “better.” Films such as the *God’s Not Dead* tetralogy—which centers heavily on a persecution complex for Christians—and mentions of religious persecution during highly patriotic sermons both serve the purpose of subverting the deconstruction of oppressive racial structures by recentering (implicitly white) Christians as the ones who truly receive the most oppression. This allows WCN performance to become more acceptable, and it allows adherents to feel that they are on the side of justice for the oppressed, except they are the ones oppressed. By centering persecution complexes and nostalgia for a non-specific past when the US put higher emphasis on Christian virtues, the performances disrupt discourses on racism by re-centering the plights of white Christians. This tactic contrasts performances of German racial nationalism and the minstrel shows that, in some ways, sought to instill explicit racial prejudices. In the US, these minstrel shows sought to preserve the institution of slavery—a very overt racial oppression—and thus overt racial prejudice worked well in these performances; in contrast, current white Christian nationalism seeks not to reveal itself publicly as a racial force, and it recognizes that fighting for the oppressed has become more “popular,” so its performances seek to convince people of the oppression experienced by (white) Christians in the US in order to re-center themselves in the narrative and further distract from any acknowledgement of race.

Lastly, the racial and religious nationalism present within WCN creates an interesting blend of racial and cultural nationalism as described by McConachie. In contrast to their definition of racial nationalism (particularly the nationalism seen in German performances), white Christian nationalism *is* inclusive for those who choose to assimilate. As seen in the

positive representation of some people of color in the Christian film industry, people of color and non-Christians who choose to “convert” to Christianity (and specifically a nationalist Christianity that carries many white, colonial, and imperialistic values) can become readily accepted among the culture and as people who are Christian and American. That said, the nationalism of WCN still retains some elements of the racial nationalism in that the *ideals* of a “Christian” and an “American” still lie within confines related to race; the perfect ideal of both of these categories still often is explicitly or implicitly portrayed as white, whether through white representations of Jesus, the insistence that “converts” follow religious and cultural values related to white colonizers, and the parroting of racialized nationalism in ritual religious services.

In conclusion, the religious and racial nationalism in German and US performances in the nineteenth century has multiple intersections with performances of white Christian nationalism in the contemporary US. White Christian nationalism becomes performed through ritual religious services—which often include theatrical elements such as singing military songs or collectively waving American flags—and popular persecution complex movies in the Christian film industry. While the racial and religious elements of the nationalism remain evident, the racial dynamics in particular have adapted since the nineteenth century to become less overt and to instead center white voices as normal and oppressed. This adaptation of racial and religious nationalism reflects the adapting society around it, and it demonstrates how performances often adapt to both reflect and shape the culture around them.

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