

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 696

January 28, 2023

Sons of the Soil in America

The concept of a Sons of the Soil (SoS) conflict, as I explained in Nygaard Notes Number 695, arose in India to explain conflicts between local population groups and newly-arrived migrants from other parts of the country. Can the polarization with which we are living in the United States also be understood as a Sons of the Soil conflict? I think it can.

To make the case, let's recall the basic outline of an SoS conflict as it has been identified in India:

- The local people, who speak the state's main language, are easily identified as what social psychologists call the "in-group," and the new arrivals, also easily-identified because their mother tongue is *not* the state's main language, are labeled "outsiders," or what social psychologists call the "out-group." These outsiders might have lived in the state for a long time, or have migrated there more recently, but they are not regarded as the "Sons of the Soil."
- The members of the in-group think of themselves as indigenous, and as rightfully possessing the area as their group's ancestral (or at least very long-standing) home.
- Sons of the Soil refers to groups who have historically been dominant politically and economically, but have either lost power or believe they will lose power.
- When political scientists talk about SoS "conflicts," it's important to remember that "conflict" is not limited to violent conflict, but refers to "competition and dispute over scarce resources such as land, jobs, educational quotas, government services, or natural resources."

As in India, So it is in the USA

If we can answer "Yes" to all or most of the following questions, then I think we're onto something. Ask

yourself...

Do we have an identifiable In-Group (or more than one) in the United States?

Do the members of the In-Group see themselves as truly belonging here, as being indigenous?

Do they see the country as "theirs"? Do they see "their" way of organizing the society as the best way? Indeed, the only way?

Is the In-Group a group that has been dominant but now sees their dominance threatened? Do In-Group members believe that this threat is posed by an identifiable Out-Group?

Are we seeing conflicts in this country over scarce resources such as land, jobs, educational quotas, government services, or natural resources? Are there conflicts about who gets medical care, and what types of care? Conflicts about who gets to vote, who gets to teach our kids, what is legal and illegal? Conflicts about who belongs here, and who does not? Conflicts about what kind of country we have, and what kind of country we *should* have?

The United States is not India, so the particulars of our Sons of the Soil conflicts are different than those we see in India. To understand how such conflicts take shape in the United States, and how they are playing out today, in the Trump Era—or, maybe, the post-Trump Era—let's turn our attention to a cultural phenomenon that gets some attention, but not nearly enough, as one of the engines of the polarization that threatens to tear the country apart. And that cultural phenomenon—which seeks to preserve and strengthen the dominance of an In-Group that feels its dominance slipping away—is known as White Christian Nationalism. ♦

Greetings,

Back in October I cited a 2016 Pew Research Center poll which found that 32 percent of U.S. citizens believed that to be a 'real American' one must be a U.S.-born Christian. Among Trump's primary voters, according to a 2017 Voter Study Group analysis, 86 percent thought it was 'very important' to have been born in the United States; 77 percent believed that one must be Christian; and 47 percent thought one must also be 'of European descent.'"

In the same issue I quoted from a 2017 study called "Race, Religion, and Immigration in 2016; How the Debate over American Identity Shaped the Election and What It Means for a Trump Presidency." That study talked about "the importance of various factors to 'being truly American,' adding that "Ultimately, the 2016 campaign helped make attitudes related to immigration, religion, and race more salient to voter decision-making in a way that many other attitudes were not."

Disagreements about what makes someone a "real American," they said, "speak to two conceptions of American citizenship — a 'civic' conception based on American ideals and institutions and a more 'ethnic' conception based on blood and soil."

Blood. Soil. Race. Religion. Immigration. All lead to polarization, and all can be better understood if we understand a little bit about White Christian Nationalism.

And that's what this issue of Nygaard Notes is all about. Get ready for a look at our own, homegrown, Sons of the Soil Conflict. I think it explains a lot.

Let me know what you think. I love getting your emails!

Nygaard

Christian Nationalism

Before we talk about *White* Christian Nationalism, or WCN, we had better first answer the question "What is Christian Nationalism?" Then we can talk about why I call it White Christian Nationalism. First things first.

One answer to this question comes from a February 3rd 2022 interview in *Christianity Today* with Paul D. Miller, who is a research fellow with the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, a project of the Southern Baptist Convention. Miller says that "Christian nationalism is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way. Popularly, Christian nationalists assert that America is and must remain a 'Christian nation'—not merely as an observation about American history, but as a prescriptive program for

what America must continue to be in the future. Scholars like Samuel Huntington have made a similar argument: that America is defined by its 'Anglo-Protestant' past and that we will lose our identity and our freedom if we do not preserve our cultural inheritance."

Miller goes on to say that "Christian nationalism is a political ideology about American identity. It is a set of policy prescriptions for what the nationalists believe the American government should do. It's not drawn from the Bible. It draws political theory from secular philosophy and their own version of history as well."

Another answer comes from "a grassroots movement of Christians from across the theological spectrum," who in 2019 founded a group ↗↗↗

→→ called, simply, *Christians Against Christian Nationalism*. Noting that they, and others, “have long discussed the dangers” of Christian Nationalism, they offer this definition of the thing they oppose: “Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian.”

So Christian Nationalism is, at least in part, about identity. On an individual level, to be American is to be Christian. But the State is also involved, charged with making the United States a Christian Nation. And that is an ideological task, a social task, as Paul Miller explains, saying, “Christian nationalism is a cultural framework, a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value

systems... I prefer the language of ideology, that Christian nationalism is a political ideology. Ideology is a linked set of normative ideas about the social and political order, specifically how society and politics should be ordered. It's linked ideas, but it has an art to it. It says, ‘Here's the story of the world and how the world should be.’ It gives [one] a role to work to bring that world to pass. That's what an ideology is.”

If you look up “Christian Nationalism,” you’ll almost immediately come across a variety of code words like “Anglo-Protestant” and “cultural inheritance” and “identities.” But if you explore a bit more, you can crack the code and realize that the best way to get into the Christian Nationalist show is to have the preferred ticket. And, as the following essay will show, that ticket is white skin.



The White in White Christian Nationalism

In the previous essay I quoted *Christians Against Christian Nationalism* as saying that Christian Nationalism “implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian.” But it doesn’t end there. CACN notes that Christian Nationalism “often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation.” It so often overlaps, in fact, that many people—this writer included—rarely talk about Christian Nationalism without that qualifier: “White.” This essay explains why that is so.

Speaking on a podcast from *Christianity Today* back on January 13 2021 (one week after the insurrection at the U.S. capitol) professor Paul D. Miller made an important point. Miller is a research fellow with the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, a project of the Southern Baptist Convention. He referred to a study of public opinion surveys which “found that Black Christians and white non-Christians tend to see the world one way, while white Christians see it another way. This shows,” said Miller, “that white Christians’ distinctive worldview can’t be simply a function of

their Christianity. Otherwise, Black Christians would agree with them. It can’t be simply a function of whiteness. Otherwise, white non-Christians would also agree with them.”

Then Miller went a little deeper, stating that “There is some distinctive interaction between whiteness and Christianity, which means that white evangelicalism is now an ethnoreligious historical community with its distinctive worldview and its own way of interpreting reality. That is not Christianity. It is white Christianity or Anglo Protestantism. It’s a distinct religious socio-cultural tradition that has emerged in the transatlantic area over the past three centuries in the United Kingdom and the United States.

“You can talk about the unique historical contribution of Anglo Protestants, but it’s also true that they seem to be uniquely blind to the realities of a racialized society. That’s my best answer to what’s going on here: white evangelicalism is not anymore a grand tradition of religious reflection and practice.

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White *from page 3*

It has become increasingly a narrow, provincial ethnic-religious community that is simply advocating for its own perks, power, and privilege.”

Speaking to *Christianity Today* a few weeks later, Miller said “Christian nationalism is an ideology held overwhelmingly by white Americans, and it thus tends to exacerbate racial and ethnic cleavages.”

“A Particular Ethnocultural Tribe”

In *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*, their new book from Oxford University Press, authors Philip Gorski and Samuel L. Perry say that “We define white Christian nationalism and identify white Christian nationalists using a constellation of beliefs. These are beliefs that, we argue, reflect a desire to restore and privilege the myths, values, identity, and authority of a particular ethnocultural tribe. These beliefs add up to a political vision that privileges that tribe. And they seek to put other tribes in their ‘proper’ place.”

In an article published on June 4th of last year Gorski told *New York Magazine* that “it’s important to understand this thing that we call in the book the ‘holy trinity’ of white Christian nationalism: Freedom, Order, and Violence. Which means a kind of libertarian freedom for people like us — ‘us’ being, above all, straight, white, native-born Christian men — order for everybody else, which

means racial and gender order above all else, and that kind of righteous violence directed against anybody who violates that order.”

More Identity than Religion

In their explainer “What is Christian Nationalism?”, *Christians Against Christian Nationalism* states that “the ‘Christian’ in Christian nationalism is more about identity than religion. It carries with it assumptions about nativism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and militarism.”

The international news site *The Conversation* in November published an article by political science professor Eric McDaniel of the University of Texas in which he reminded readers that “Today, only about 4 in 10 people in the U.S. are white Christians. The thought of no longer being the majority has prompted some of them to see Christian nationalism as the only way to get the nation back on the right track. Christian nationalism typically restricts adherents’ view of who can be considered a ‘true’ American, limiting it to people who are white, Christian and U.S.-born, and whose families have European roots.”

The first question we ask when considering whether we have a Sons of the Soil conflict in the U.S. is: Do we have an identifiable In-Group (or more than one) in the United States? I suggest that White Christian Nationalists fill the bill here. Another question is this: Is the In-Group a group that has been dominant but now sees a threat to their dominance, a threat posed by an identifiable Out-Group? I take a look at that next. ◆

Change is Coming. Sons of the Soil say “No”

I never tire of stating the obvious, which is that the 21st Century is a time of big and rapid change. But it is, and such change is terrifying to many people, invoking a terror that breeds conflict. And the people who are perhaps the most terrified of all are the most privileged groups—the In-Groups—who fear that the big and rapid changes threaten to knock them off their perches at the tops of the social and political and economic ladders. This is no surprise, since we know that Sons of the Soil conflicts are engendered by groups who have historically been dominant politically and economically, but have either lost power or believe they will lose power. ↗↗↗

→→ The In-Group that I'm looking at in this issue of Nygaard Notes—White Christian Nationalists—is certainly not the only In-Group. But it's a big one, filled with people who consider themselves Sons of the Soil, people who are afraid of being replaced at the top of the social order, and who are prepared to do almost anything to maintain what they consider their waning power.

A report on a conference on White Christian Nationalism at the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University last fall noted that “while white Christian nationalism in the country finds its roots hundreds of years ago, the phenomenon bubbles up during periods when white Christians feel threatened by outside forces — amplified by war, heightened immigration, or periods of economic instability.”

In a post on December 23rd the MINNPOST website ran an opinion piece (authored by a law professor and two Christian clerics) that asked “Why is Christian nationalism gaining strength?” And the answer, in part, went like this:

“There have been several inflection points of social and demographic change in the past two decades: The election of a Black president; The reversal of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ in the military; The legalization of gay marriage; The decline of Christianity in the U.S. from 80% in 2000 to 65% today, and The decline of the white population in the US from 77% in 2000 to 57% in 2020 to a predicted white minority of 49.7% by 2045.”

The authors then stated, “The perceived hegemony of white Christianity is irreversibly shifting. Those who feel threatened are passing laws, denying voting rights, stacking courts, challenging and changing materials in public schools and libraries, and acting out with violence against those they see as causing this seismic shift, this great replacement of white Christians.”

The point was underlined by Paul Miller, in the *Christianity Today* interview I cited earlier. He says that, “Over the past hundred years, as America has grown less Christian and less white, it has put the white Christian conservative population on the defensive. We feel like the world's against us. We're shrinking, our power is shrinking, our influences are shrinking against all of the other forces in the world. Non-Christian and foreign influences are now controlling our country and taking it away from us. In the last 40 years, Christian nationalists tend to believe that Christians are under attack and are being persecuted. That leans towards a worldview that increasingly includes a lot of fear: us-versus-them dichotomy, forces beyond our control are steering events against us. I think it is why today's Christian nationalism is different than past generations and why it bleeds over into some of the conspiracy theory stuff as well.”

The Sons of the Soil Concept says that the members of the In-Group think of themselves as indigenous [in the deracialized, white sense], and as rightfully possessing the area as their group's ancestral (or at least very long-standing) home.

Keep this in mind as you read the words of Philip Gorski, co-author of the book *The Flag and the Cross*. He was speaking to *New York Magazine* last June when he said that White Christian Nationalists are taught a certain version of U.S. history, in which “White Christians like us are the real Americans, and America is the exceptional nation, the chosen nation that is playing a special role in the battle between good and evil. ... And I guess the one other thing I would add to this is that if you think in terms of this narrative, if you're a white Christian, it doesn't matter when you showed up in the United States; you have a kind of a birthright. You belong. You were always here, in a sense. People like you were always here. You're part of the founding group.”

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And here Gorski's co-author, Samuel Perry, chimes in: "I would say ... that there is this huge identity-based motivation to believe these myths about America's past that are factually incorrect oftentimes. [And] frankly, a lot of people in these communities are socialized into believing it because there is an entire Christian nationalism industrial complex that is built to continue to perpetuate those myths."

Pointing out that this complex produces videos and books, "Patriot Bibles," Bibles for teenagers and Bibles for women, and so forth, Perry says that "The goal of these media resources is [in part] to provide religious consumers, people in the pews, with information about America's Christian past that may or may not be factually correct. But it is designed ... to center white Christian Americans within that story and to tell them that this nation was founded on Christian values for Christian people. This is the narrative that this nation can only work if Christianity is the foundation — or biblical principles or Christian values. And, of course, they get to decide what that means. So there's both an identity-based kind of driver there and a very real source of information that continues to be put front and center in congregations week in and week out."

In answer to the question "What do Christian nationalists want that is different from normal Christian engagement in politics?" Paul Miller told *Christianity Today* that "sometimes Christian nationalism is most evident not in its political agenda, but in the sort of attitude with which it is held: an unstated presumption that Christians are entitled to primacy of place in the public square because they are heirs of the true or essential heritage of American culture, that Christians have a presumptive right to define the meaning of the American experiment because they see themselves as America's architects, first citizens, and guardians."

"How is this dangerous for America?," asked *Christianity Today*, to which Miller replied "In recent years, the movement has grown increasingly characterized by fear and by a belief that Christians are victims of persecution. Some are beginning to argue that American Christians need to prepare to fight, physically, to preserve America's identity, an argument that played into the January 6 riot."

Another danger was noted by Bart Bonikowski, associate professor of sociology and politics at New York University. Speaking at a panel at the Yale conference mentioned above, Bonikowski noted that "Christian nationalism in the United States is exclusionary and nostalgic, seeing the nation as going downhill and needing to be recaptured by people who see themselves as its rightful owners — possibly through authoritarian means."

I'll close with the words of Samuel Perry, giving his opinion of why White Christian Nationalism is a threat to democracy. He summarized it like this:

"White Christian nationalism represents a shrinking minority of the population. And yet they still look to have political and cultural influence. The only way they are going to be able to do that over the long term is to change the political situation to where they can rule from a minority position forever. That ought to be threatening to people who understand why it's a problem."

Behold the struggle in the United States in 2023: "Real" Americans, feeling their power slipping away, are determined to do nearly anything to hang on to their fading role as Kings of the Hill. This is a Sons of the Soil Conflict writ large, and it lies at the root of the often-misunderstood conflict in the United States that is often called "polarization." ♦

SoS in America: Five Questions

I have suggested that we might find it helpful to use the Sons of the Soil Concept to better understand the basis of the polarization of politics here in the United States. I offered a series of questions which, if answered in the affirmative, suggest that the SoS Concept can indeed be helpful. Here are those questions, with the answers that are suggested in this issue of the Notes, with suggested modifications to reflect the different sociocultural context that we find in today's United States. The items in this list are numbered, but that's really to help me organize my thinking; in practice they are interconnected and fluid. No numbers needed.

Question #1: *Do we have an identifiable In-Group (or more than one) in the United States?* Indeed we do. The core In-Group consists of straight, white, native-born Christian men, but exactly who qualifies as a full member of society is constantly in dispute, more so at times of big and rapid change such as those we have seen, do see, and will see.

Question #2: *Do the members of the In-Group see themselves as truly belonging here, as being indigenous?* Yes. As Philip Gorski puts it, "if you're a white Christian, it doesn't matter when you showed up in the United States. People like you were always here. You're part of the founding group." Again, this is a group for which history begins with the arrival of white people

Question #3: *Do the members of the In-Group see the country as "theirs"?* Do they see "their" way of organizing the society as the best way? Indeed, the only way? Yes, White Christian Nationalists subscribe to a set of beliefs that reflect a desire to restore and privilege the myths, values, identity, and authority of a particular ethnocultural tribe. These beliefs add up to a political vision that privileges that tribe. And they seek to put other tribes in their 'proper' place.

Question #4: *Is the In-Group a group that has been dominant but now sees a threat to their dominance, a threat posed by an identifiable Out-Group?* The answer is Yes but, as I mention above, exactly who is

"in" and who is "out" at any given time is constantly in dispute. This "Othering and Belonging" process is ongoing, maybe it's a little more in recent years than usual. Or maybe our memory of recent years is just more vivid. But in any case the core of the In-Group remains relatively stable: straight, white, native-born Christian men. In the perverse logic of dominance and subjugation, the Out-Groups tend to be "Not That." That is, "They" are not "Us." As retired US Army lieutenant general Michael Flynn succinctly puts it: "They dress like us and they talk like us, but they don't think and act like us. And they definitely do not want what it is that we want."

Question #5: *Are we seeing conflicts in this country over scarce resources such as land, jobs, educational quotas, government services, or natural resources?* As farmers lose their land, as "job security" becomes an unattainable dream for so many, as education and healthcare access continue to recede, and fights over water and oil escalate, conflicts about who-gets-what are front and center in the U.S. body politic, and will be for a long time. A long, long time.

The Sons of the Soil Concept originated in India and was used to explain conflicts between linguistic groups at the sub-national level. But I think the answers to the above five questions make it clear that the Concept can be useful in helping explain the myriad conflicts playing out in the 21st-Century United States, at the national level and even the international level.

But... "So what?" you say. How is all this stuff "useful"? Well, in the next Nygaard Notes I hope to connect this concept with other useful concepts, concepts such as loss aversion, linguistic pragmatics, stochastic terrorism, racial backlash, and more. When I'm done, I think we'll have a better understanding of our current cultural crisis, an understanding that I think will leave us all in a more hopeful frame of mind, as well. All of that will—I think—be coming your way in Nygaard Notes Number 697! ♦

“Quote” of the Week: *“In the Midst of a Grand Transformation”*

Barbara Walter is a political scientist at UC San Diego who served from 2017 to 2021 on a CIA advisory panel called the Political Instability Task Force. The job of the Task Force “was to come up with a predictive model that helped the government predict where around the world political instability and political violence was likely to break out.”

She’s the author of a book called *How Civil Wars Start – and How to Stop Them*, which looks at more than 200 civil wars in modern history. Just about one year ago she was speaking about Sons of the Soil to MSNBC. In that context she uttered this issue’s “Quote” of the Week.

Here in the United States, we’re in the midst of this grand transformation from a white majority country to a white minority country. That’s going to happen around 2045. We’re the first white majority country to go through this transition, but Canada’s going to come after us. New Zealand is going to be next. Australia is going to be next. And it’s estimated, by 2100, the white majority countries of Europe as well will have transitioned to white minority. And to a subset of the white population here, this is deeply, deeply threatening, and they—the extremists in that group—are willing to turn to violence to maintain their hold on power. They see the United States as a white Christian country. And they feel like they’re justified to fight to maintain it.

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