BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS

Christian nationalism and cognitive ability…

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I was intrigued by a recent article by Samuel L. Perry in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, "Cognitive ability and Christian Nationalism." Perry is the Sam K. Viersen Presidential Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma. He has some very interesting findings confirming a few suspicions I've had over the years.

The data that form the basis for the study were taken from several waves of the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of Americans conducted periodically by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) beginning in 1972. Sample sizes varied greatly over the years, and the most recent data referenced are from 2024.

Perry uses the definition of "Christian nationalism" employed by many researchers in the field, which is "a set of beliefs about America's conservative Christian foundations (often supernatural in nature) and the need to institutionalize some form of Christian supremacy in America's self-understanding and policies."

Similarly, in the present context, "cognitive ability" is understood as the "capacity for learning and applying information and engaging in more complex, abstract thought processes necessary for critical thinking and social skills like empathy and tolerance."

Now that the requisite explanations are out of the way, let's move on to what Perry actually found in this ground-breaking inquiry. Based on his detailed analysis and interpretation of the data, Perry came to several conclusions which tend to mirror the impressions many of us have had for decades.

First, individuals who score lower on measures of cognitive ability tend to find Christian nationalism to be more in line with their personal values – a finding not correlated significantly with level of formal education. Apparently less intelligent folks seem to feel we should all just accept what they insist is true.

Second, individuals who scored lower on cognitive ability are more susceptible to political messaging and hyperbole promoting a brand of Christian nationalism that embraces conservative religious views and reactionary political positions. This is probably why many right-leaning candidates embed tenets of Christian nationalism into their campaign rhetoric.

Third, individuals who exhibit higher cognitive ability tend to be less politically intolerant of nontraditional social conventions and favor more egalitarian, humanistic principles. In other words, the more developed your analytical prowess, the less likely you'll be to buy into the "us vs. them" mentality at the heart of Christian nationalism mythology.

Finally, individuals with more pronounced cognitive abilities understand you can be an American without being a Christian, a notion actively opposed by many strands of Christian nationalism. The reality is Americans come from all religious affiliations, and no one is "less than" is they do not adopt a specific ideological perspective.

The Constitution is very clear about how we should view religion relative to both our national identity as well as our individual rights. The First Amendment states unequivocally "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…"

We are not a Christian nation; we are a nation in which you are free to be a Christian. Big difference. Oh, and the religious affiliation of the Founders is irrelevant - all that ultimately matters is what they enshrined in that sacred document.

Full disclosure: I am a Christian. I believe we are called to advocate for our particular belief system – not impose it on others against their will, especially with a demeaning and holier-than-thou attitude. Nowhere in the Bible do I see Jesus commanding anyone to follow Him involuntarily.

Moreover, it's perfectly acceptable to question your religious background and beliefs, including what you were taught in the past and are currently being told in the present. If your articles of faith are as true and powerful as you claim, they can withstand the scrutiny. And if they can't, that should likewise tell you something.

My experience has also been – regardless of what religion they espouse – fundamentalists generally do more harm than good in the world. This was true for the Crusaders a thousand years ago. It's true for the Christian nationalists today.

If you are interested in following up on this research, you can find the original paper here: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jssr.70101



— Aaron W. Hughey is a university distinguished professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. The views expressed in his columns are entirely his own.