PODCAST TRANSCRIPT
S6E15: A Whole New Social Contract with Cody Nielsen

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Cody Nielsen: We know that standing in certain shoes and standing against rights has never been the winning team. But I don't think that we are going to see the social progress that we saw at the turn of the 21st century with the election of Barack Obama and the progress that has been made. I don't know how long it's going to take for us to get back to that. I think there is an awful lot of unraveling that has occurred that is going to take a whole new social construct and contract together.

Sam Fuqua: That's Cody Nielsen, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with Cody Nielsen about the role of white Christian nationalism in the United States. He's the founder and executive director of Convergence Strategies, which addresses issues of religious, secular, and spiritual culture and identity in society. He's also an assistant professor of higher education at Western Michigan University. We spoke with Cody Nielsen at the 2026 White Privilege Conference.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi, Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi, Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're so pleased to be joined for this episode of Well, That Went Sideways! by Cody Nielsen. Hello.

Cody Nielsen: Hello. Good to be with you all.

Sam Fuqua: Well, we're here at the 2026 White Privilege Conference in Seattle. I attended a workshop you offered about white Christian nationalism, and I left the workshop pretty well convinced that white Christian nationalism is really at the root of so many of the systemic issues we face in the United States, which I think was the goal of your workshop, was to enlighten me and the others. So, for our listeners who may not be there yet, can you open this conversation with kind of an overview of why you take that position?

Cody Nielsen: Yeah. Um, thank you for that. And thank you, both of you, Sam and Alexis, for inviting me to be here with you all. I'm really grateful. So, for many of the listeners that didn't get a chance to actually come to the workshop itself, one of the things that I think is really important for us to step back and realize is that the United States of America, the country that we, most of us live in as of now, and the country that we know of as the United States of America, really was founded around a form of Christian supremacy, part, uh, mostly of a white Christian supremacy narrative. And that white Christian nationalism is really just a sort of final form of that amalgamation and beast that has existed, um, for a long period of time in our history. We often think about the history of the United States, either at the founding of the country or 1776 or Black scholars have taken us back to 1619. I really trace the origins back to the, to the Doctrine of Discovery and the signing of such a thing in 1493 when the Pope gave permission for the global powers, spe, specifically Spain and Portugal and England and France, to start claiming land on

behalf of a king or queen in the name of Christ, and that any country, any lands that were not already Christianized were already up for the taking. And so one of the things that I, I talk about in my work is that by revealing and looking at our origins of the country and, sort of, piecemealing together the history of how at first Puritanism, but later all forms of Christian dominance that have taken place in our society permeate, we find ourselves in this moment where we are seeing all of these fundamental aspects of identity being attacked. And if we look both historically and presently, we find that most of them at their, sort of, rooted center are steeped in a conventional or a conservative white Christian premise.

Sam Fuqua: What's the connection between the January 6th insurrection, as many term it, and Christian nationalism?

Cody Nielsen: I think if you, if you look at the ways in which the MAGA movement has been really built up, you will see the undercurrents of conventional and conservative wisdom of trying to take back the country. When Donald Trump used as his classic and now cliche slogan, "Make America Great Again," people said, "When was America great?" And if you listen to those that are MAGA followers, you will hear the embers somewhere before 1960. Sometimes you hear it at the beginning of the foundings of the country, which is a whole nother conversation. Some would say at the turn of the 20th century. But a lot of the aggregate is somewhere in that 1940s and 1950s. So, the connection between January 6th and Christian nationalism is largely built on a movement that at its core fundamental values exists in a world that is at least prior to civil rights, much, you know, prior to Loving v. Virginia, prior to Roe, and goes back to a time in our society in which we had quota bans on places like China, and Japan, and Korea, and South Asia, and India because those individuals didn't fit the American principles and practices, meaning that they were not Protestant, or Catholic, or Jewish, Christian. So, to that point, when you connect January 6th and you watch the folks that stumped and tried to hold the country, you see that the MAGA movement was doing its last gasp effort to keep their idol, and I really do mean that, it's, sort of, a golden calf set of principles, keep their idol, Donald Trump, who would take the country back to a place before all of this social progress would occur. And in fact, I think, what we did to unleash this was generation after generation since the 1960s and '70s of agitation across a group of individuals who found their world being taken away from them. What we mean is taken away from a white hegemonic, and privileged, and Christian environment.

Alexis Miles: I'm hearing what you say, and I'm agreeing with what you're saying, and I'm also imagining that a member of a white Christian nationalist might say, "No, you have this wrong. We just wanna go back to our scriptures, which say XYZ." I mean, how would you respond to a white Christian nationalist who challenges this perspective that you bring?

Cody Nielsen: Sure. I think one of the things that I would say to a white Christian nationalist who wants to go back to their scriptures is read your scriptures. The interesting notion that I mentioned in the workshop yesterday was that in 2017, a pretty highly prominent evangelical Christian pastor, um, was highlighted and profiled on National Public Radio, on NPR, in which he described that some of the struggles within evangelical church spaces is that his pastoral colleagues were finding that to preach messages from the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, were considered too woke for many members of his congregation. So, what I would say is that to a Christian nationalist who wishes to use scriptural reasoning, my response is make sure you're

reading the right scriptures, and also paying very, very attentive to how you have decided in a very Anne Lamott former quote in which she says, "You can be sure that you've created God in your own image when God loves all the people you love and hates all the people you hate." So, I think for the Christian nationalists out here, there is something deeper than just simply believing that you're going back to scriptural reasoning, but instead are trying to harken back to days in which you might have experienced in your adolescence or your childhood, or even that your parents spoke of, and that world that you believe in can also be a world that includes you now in a future of diverse and inclusive and equitable futures.

Sam Fuqua: I was in Sunday school a really long time ago, but I remember that these are the fundamental teachings on which Christianity is based, the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes.

Cody Nielsen: I think one of the challenges historically about religion, and specifically dominant cultural religions, and here in the United States and in North America, Christianity is the dominant cultural-based religion, is that if not carefully interrogated and if not carefully looked at about how it is practiced, it can very be, very easily be weaponized. And, the history of weaponization of Christianity goes much farther back than any of us sitting here before Donald Trump, we have to remember that the KKK was once considered a Protestant Christian denomination. And prior to that, we saw many movements out of Christian churches that broke off from Northern churches who were abolitionist churches utilizing narratives and theology to legitimize the slave trade in this country. And so, we have been through these moments, and if there's anything that connects to, for those listeners out there who are desperately clamoring to legitimize the parallelisms between what happened in Germany under the Third Reich and Nazism, every form of fascism, in my opinion, is different. But there is a fundamental parallelism within the Christian church, and that is that the German Lutheran Church endorsed the Third Reich, and it was German Lutheran scholars and theologians who found the way embedded within their theology and theories of practice to legitimize what was happening.

And I would argue that evangelical Christian pastors and churches that are endorsing of this need check those history books because those Lutheran religious-based scholars have been seemingly erased from the history. And they have been done so because the stain of their endorsement of the Third Reich essentially made them out to be an inexcusable offense, and they were essentially, like, deemed as not being actually true scholars of Christianity. And so, if we see the tw, late 20th, mid-20th century, late 20th century growth of Christian theology and what has grown out of that, and as somebody who is a, uh, is a ordained Methodist clergy but no longer practicing, when I was in seminary, we learned about those different forms of theology, and those that remain are the ones that actually held to the integrity of the gospel itself, and those that didn't were moved aside. And I would argue that this is what is the future that is coming for theological narratives, pastors, and instigators who have decided to side with this, because you are siding with empire, which is the very essence of what you have agreed in your form and principles and your confessional-based religion to avoid.

Alexis Miles: When you use the term, the, the phrase white Christian nationalist, has that been a phrase that's been in use for quite a while, or was it in use 50 years ago, 100 years ago?

Cody Nielsen: So, I think the terminology of white Christian nationalism, I don't think it's, it's new, but religious ethno-nationalism has been in part for a long time religious scholars speak to the impacts on global supremacy culture. So, we see Hindu supremacy culture and what is going on in India and Pakistan. We've seen supremacy culture in places like Malaysia. We, I mean, we even see the sort of supremacy culture baked into the Crusades and what happened, you know, in those several, you know, repetitive wars between mostly Christians and Muslims, um, throughout Europe and then, um, and then Lower Europe and, and those areas around places like Palestine. But what I would say is that we have been talking for a long time about white Christian supremacy. And I do think that the, that the correlation between Christian supremacy and Christian nationalism or white Christian supremacy and Christian nationalism is not that far of a leap. Instead, if white Christian supremacy or Christian supremacy is the belief in the supremacy of one's practice and tradition, then I would argue all religions are themselves supremacists inherently. And in fact, that actually is what I believe makes this so complicated because I've said that in a session before with folks, and they've said, "Well, I'm not a religious supremacist," and I said, "Sure you are, because you're not going to the gurdwara or the temple or the mosque." And they're like, "That's not the same thing."

Of course it is. We all believe in the more rightness of our religious practices. If we're not religious, we believe in the rightness and the accuracy of our agnosticism or our, or our atheism, or, you know, we, we sit in that place, and that makes us all supremacist. To be a white Christian nationalist or to be a religious-based nationalist means that you believe that your, your values must then be used to standardize and normalize the society that we live in. And that is something that has not been talked about in words as much as it has been talked about in practice. Because we know that conservative Christians have had a 50-year fight to overturn Roe. But to me, that is just Christian nationalism trying to play out, to nationalize standards, values, and practices for every member of the citizenry. So, I don't know if we've been using white Christian nationalism, but for our readers, when you look at the difference between being a supremacist of one's religion and being a nationalist of one's religion, I think the parallel diff, the, I think that the comparable differences is you can believe that you are right in your religion. I know a lot of Muslim colleagues, peers, who believe that their religion tradition is more right than Christianity. That's fine. We can agree to disagree. If people try to take that and use that against the rest of society and place those values, practices, morals into the construct of our legal system, into the construct of our everyday practices, you've reached toward the level of nationalism.

Sam Fuqua: We have talked, uh, with many guests on this podcast about white privilege, and of course, we're at the White Privilege Conference, uh, what is Christian privilege? That's a phrase you used the other day in your workshop.

Cody Nielsen: Yeah. Thank you for asking that question, and as you're sitting across from a white cishet man who will talk about privilege. So, I like to describe, uh, Christian privilege as, sort of, the set of unacknowledged and offered social benefits that are really within, within the Christian community. So, as a white cishet man, I look like your standard Norwegian, like, from Denmark, you know, family of origin, and I can walk down the street and walk into a church without question. Nobody, nobody even questions it. But if I was a brown skin, like, person that looked like they were from Savannah, like from anywhere in the Middle East or India or anything like this, and I walked into a Christian church in America, that's suspect. That's a simple thing.

But Christian privilege is also the fact that nobody ever questions me for taking off time for religious holidays, even though I'm agnostic. I might just say, "I really wanna be off for Easter or Good Friday." Obviously, our whole society, kind of, sets, shuts down for Christmas. That's all of the forms of Christian privilege. But this society doesn't close down on Passover or Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur or Eid, and frankly, we have a difficult time acknowledging even those dates as being a major set of holidays and practices for our communities. So, Christian privilege, in my opinion, is really a level of being everywhere, but also self-recognition that for many of us, whether or not we are personally practicing Christian, many of us have a culturally laden experience in which we are benefiting from those things that if you are participating or members of particular other religious and cultural-based traditions can easily spot as being differentiated between yourself.

Sam Fuqua: We're at an anti-racism conference, and you put forth in your workshop the idea that racism is rooted in Christianity?

Cody Nielsen: Yes. So, if we look in many ways at the history of how the racial contract, if you will, came to be, so we can look at the origins and the arguments in favor of the slave trade throughout Europe and in the United States, theologically baked narratives of the reductionist, uh, nature, dehumanizing of Black and brown folks and places like Africa that were uncivilized, that were un-Christianized, and thus enabling us to lesser than human these individuals. And I think, it is always important for us to reflect back on the constitutional compromise that led toward the framing of this country in that the South was granted a three-fifths, like, population narrative in order to justify joining the Union, but that didn't mean three-fifths of a human, it just counted each enslaved individual as three-fifths. So, that, that racial contract has been really deeply embedded in all forms of colonization. It's in the slave trade that we upheld for hundreds of years. I would also point to looking at the German Protestant scholars who argued the lesser race, like, in Blumenthal's racial theory, and this is a little heady, but Northern German Protestants were the first to create this, sort of, racial hierarchy of the ideal human and ironically, Northern German Protestants were considered the more ideal human form and figure.

Blumenthal's, like, uh, study of human skulls and what was the most human and what, one of the first iterations of this was the findings, and this is, this was reiterated and built into German Third Reich theology themselves, was that the first form of lesser human beings were Southern Germans and Austrians who were largely Jews and Catholics. That's not the only way, but of course, when we take that and we utilize all of those ways in which racialization has taken place over the course of history through the lens of the dominant religious framework and the theological appetite that has been offered, we get to a level of understanding racism with a root cause analysis that is really baked into Christian, like, forms and principles and practices. And, we still have work to do on that. I mean, we think about the Black church in America and the foundings of the Black church in America, white slavery owners handed partial biblical scripts to Black enslaved individuals, forcing them to convert and, and giving them a way to gather together, but of course, removing certain parts of the Bible on the benefit of upholding their own principles and practices because in their cherry-picked versions of the Bibles, sla, enslavement was legitimized. But we like to talk in the church about not doing cherry-picking of the Bible, which is something that our current president, when he decides that he's going to read at his table from biblical scripture, might pay a little closer attention to.

Alexis Miles: The people I know who consider themselves Christian do not think the way you just described. They don't see any relationship between Christianity and any of the isms. How would you even begin a conversation with people who feel that way?

Cody Nielsen: So, having worked with a number of faith-based communities and churches, encountering our history is a laborious but necessary practice. The denomination that I came out of, the United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church, its first form was called the Methodist Episcopal Church. But eventually, over issues related to slavery, it would fracture and create the Methodist Episcopal Church North and eventually the Methodist Episcopal Church South. That fracturing of those, of the, of that main denomination into three was built all on issues of slavery and abolition. At this point today, there are more than 40 Christian, 40 Methodist denominations, including things like the Salvation Army that were formerly a Methodist-related and come from the original tree of Methodism, but largely broke over slavery. So when we think about the modern era, we've lost a lot of that. And a lot of Christians that I come across are, "We're very pro-LGBT inclusive. We're very, like, welcoming." And, my response is, "And yet your proximity toward dominant religious culture gives a level of privilege that we are not accounting for." So, I say to a lot of Christian folks right now, as they, sort of, you know, shake fingers at other churches, other faith-based communities and are like, "That's not my church. That's not the Christianity that I practice," my response is, "You need to go get your people." Because the only people that are going to stop this are going to be Christians themselves.

And that is what we found during the splits that led toward the Civil War, and that those were the places where the rationalization of enslavement and upholding of slavery versus abolition were really founded was in the church. And while we have less individuals who are practicing churchgoers today, there's still close to 65 percent of the country who still declares themselves as being Christian. And in that 65 percent, there is an awful lot of people that need to go get people and need to have hard conversations, and we have to interrogate our histories because whether you are the most pro-LGBTQIA+ inclusive church on the block or in the neighborhood or in the city or the state, there is still a history that is behind that that we have to root out and we have to break down because people have been harmed, and our histories can inform our practices moving forward.

Alexis Miles: Well, what gives you hope? When, when I look out at the world that we live in right now, um, especially from a religious lens, um, I don't feel a lot of hope.

Cody Nielsen: So, 20 years ago, when the church started to notice its pretty significant decline, we started to see around 2003, it was probably even a little before that, but for me, I saw it 2004, 2005, 2006, we started to see a decline in practice amongst the Christian church. At the turn of the century, we were sitting at about 78 percent of the country is deeming themselves as being Christian, and then we saw the decline of this. Well, here's what I would say about the Christian church specifically. As we have had this sort of retraction, my response is there are two things happening. One, the people that are leaving the churches who have been, dare I say, milk toast in their responses, they have had this, "How do we get people to come back to church?" And my response to them is, "Don't get people to come back to church. Ask yourself what the people that left value." And there is a hope if we were to do a, sort of, flipped understanding. The church is not something that lives inside a building. The church is something that lives within our society.

And I'm only speaking from a Christian lens, so I wanna say it's not everybody and it shouldn't be everybody. Everybody needs to have a firm practice. But within Christianity, I think the hope is if we, sort of, flip that out.

The other side of the equation, the other piece that I would say we can have some hope from is that because of the retraction, there are people that are leaving the Christian church who aren't actually following the message of Christianity. And I do believe that that is happening. And they are, they are, they are moving. I mean, in, was it 19, is it 1956? I'm, that, that date might not be right, but I think it's somewhere around 1956 that MLK describes Sunday morning as the most segregated hour in America. Now, we are the most so, socially, politically stratified, and I really believe that. If you walk into an evangelical church on a Sunday and you walk into a pro-LGBT church on Sunday, you will hear two very different narratives. And, that is not, you know, it, it's more complex. It's cubal, not binary. There's, you know, and it, and it's contin, you know, on a continuum. But there's a whole spectra of work within the Christian church that is happening that I can see hope for. And if the church has a contraction of sorts of its membership and participants, I believe that on the other side of this, we will see a, see more authentic, lived, and real Christian practices.

Sam Fuqua: Is that going to be a confrontational, like a civil war within the Christian church, or is, or just more of these, these Presbyterians split off from these other Presbyterians over something?

Cody Nielsen: I actually think the civil war within the Christian church is already occurring far more than we think, and it is fracturing the Methodist, the United Methodist Church has gone through a huge split in the last four years over, uh, what they con, you know, what some conservatives consider to be, sort of, traditional Christian values. And a whole group of around 30 percent of those churches have left to form this thing called the Wesleyan Covenant Society, which is basically a conservative, homophobic, and mostly white-centered and, and very misogynistic, like, level of the Christian church. And, we are also seeing this within the Lutheran Church when the Luther, when the ELCA Lutheran Church passed, uh, marriage eq, uh, passed its statements around practices around LGBT concerns in 2007. So, I think we are alway, already seeing it. And it started with the movement around LGBT concerns, but it is so deep, I think, in where we are. I think that the future here is going to be messy and complicated, but I think the other side of this is going to be a group of religious-based communities that know who they are and stand more presently on where they are. And it is gonna take a generation or more for certain communities to gain trust back in faith communities.

And again, we're only talking about Christianity. We have whole other complicated factors within the Jewish community, whether Reform or Conservative or Orthodox. We have other issues within the Muslim community. We have other issues within the Hindu and the Sikh and the Buddhist commun, I mean, there's so many complicated and complex issues. But, when it comes to a level of hope and to what's going on, I think what I see is a hopeful side on the other end of this. Now, again, the lessons of what happened in Germany are needing to be taken account for. The lessons of what we saw, I believe, during McCarthyism as well need to be accounted for in these, in this country. And the lessons that we saw a long time ago, but not so long around slavery in this country also inform us of where we're going. But to your point, Alexis, going back

to your previous question, I think there is hope because we already know how this ends, because we know that standing in certain shoes and standing against rights has never been the winning team.

But, I don't think that we are going to see the social progress that we saw at the turn of the 21st century with the election of Barack Obama and the progress that has been made. I don't know how long it's going to take for us to get back to that. I think there is an awful lot of unraveling that has occurred that is going to take a whole new social construct and contract together. For those of you that are Christian at the table and really want to learn more about this and are maybe that sort of bookish kind of person, I really recommend to you, um, the books by a guy named Robert Jones, who is now becoming a pretty prolific author, but he wrote a book called *The End of White Supremacy*, *White Christian Supremacy*, and also *White Too Long*, which are really good books to lead people in to understand the, both rise of Donald Trump and the ways in which the Christian church has actually been culpable in so much of our history of racism. For other folks, I do recommend reading books like *White Christian Privilege* by Dr. Khyati Joshi, um, who's really, really articulate in her work. But I would also be very, very attentive to the fact that everyone has become, kind of, an armchair expert on white Christian nationalism and white Christian supremacy these last couple of years, so I invite people to go back and learn when people started talking about this work.

Sam Fuqua: Cody Nielsen, thanks so much for your time and for the information and the perspective.

Cody Nielsen: I'm so grateful, uh, to have been invited to be here and so thankful for the time, and I hope all of our listeners hang in there. There is hope to be looked at, but we are going to have to move through this phase in our m, in our life, in our time.

Sam Fuqua: Cody Nielsen is an assistant professor of higher education at Western Michigan University and the co-founder of Convergence Strategies, which addresses issues of religious, secular, and spiritual culture and identity in society. You can find them online at convergencestrategies.org. We spoke with Cody Nielsen at the 2026 White Privilege Conference in Seattle.

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