Speaker Johnson: Christian Nationalism in the Speaker's Office?

INTRODUCTION:

This white paper was developed by the Congressional Freethought Caucus (CFC), a group of twenty members of Congress who reflect the religious diversity of America—Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, other believers, and nontheists. CFC members share a commitment to protecting the constitutional separation of church and state; ensuring public policy is based on facts, science, and reason; and defending religious liberty in the United States and abroad.

Since Mike Johnson's election as Speaker, much has been written about his deep religious faith. We respect, celebrate, and treasure his right—and the right of every American—to freely practice his faith as guaranteed by the First Amendment.

But, apart from the freedom to pursue his individual private faith, Speaker Johnson's public record on the religious freedom of other Americans raises troubling questions. Although the Free Exercise Clause guarantees an individual's right to worship freely (or to not worship at all), the Establishment Clause prohibits the government from establishing, endorsing, or favoring any religion or dogma over another faith or belief system. For if any religious group can dominate the state, they can—and will—use government power to infringe upon the religious freedoms of other Americans.

It is well understood that these two religious First Amendment clauses reinforce one another and stand best when they stand together. These central First Amendment clauses, and the clause forbidding any "religious test" for public office, created what Thomas Jefferson called a "wall of separation" between church and state.[1] This wall protects everyone's freedom of conscience, belief, and religion against governmental imposition of dogma, orthodoxy, and control.

In November, given our mutual interests in religious freedom, the CFC invited Speaker Johnson to engage in a dialogue with us about an agenda for protecting religious freedom and toleration in America. Unfortunately, the Speaker has ignored our invitation, leaving us no choice but to undertake our own investigation of his pronouncements and actions to better understand his public program.

Although new information continues to surface virtually every day about Speaker Johnson's record on religious freedom and church-state separation, what we already know is troubling and alarming. Speaker Johnson is deeply connected in political practice and philosophy to Christian Nationalism, more so than any other Speaker in American history. He has spent decades working to deny, reject, and undermine the constitutional separation of church and state, including trafficking in fake histories about our nation's founding and distorting the meaning of the Establishment Clause. He has spent much of his career trying to impose sectarian-based moral codes on others. He has a long record of opposing and undermining civil rights and liberties in the name of religion. And he has collaborated closely with hate groups and Christian Nationalist extremists to advance a theocratic agenda by transforming our pluralist constitutional republic into a "biblically sanctioned government."

The findings of our investigation are summarized below. This white paper identifies key unanswered questions to which the public deserves a response, and it provides a framework for the CFC and

[1] Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to the Danbury Baptists," *Library of Congress*, January 1, 1802, https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html.

congressional allies to confront Speaker Johnson's extremist agenda. The CFC will use this white paper to educate members of Congress, congressional staff, and other interested parties. We have also provided a copy to Speaker Johnson and his staff, and to the extent they disagree with any of our findings, we warmly invite their response. Our invitation for a dialogue on the separation of church and state with Speaker Johnson still stands.

FINDINGS:

1. Church-State Separation

In describing his decision to run for Congress, Speaker Johnson explained: "I was called to a legal ministry, and I've been out on the front lines of the culture war defending religious freedom, the sanctity of human life, and biblical values."[2] Speaker Johnson has spoken passionately about creating a "biblically sanctioned government" and said repeatedly that the United States is and always has been a "Christian nation."[3] He has urged Christian churches to engage directly in politics, and he is co-leading a bill to explicitly bring partisan politics into churches by repealing the Johnson Amendment (named for Lyndon Johnson), which prevents tax-exempt nonprofits including churches from engaging in partisan politics.[4]

On several occasions, Speaker Johnson has explicitly rejected church-state separation, a basic pillar of American constitutionalism. On the House Floor, he has denounced the "so-called separation of church and state" as "the opposite of how we were founded as a country."[5] He has insisted that the Founders wanted only "to protect the church from an encroaching state, not the other way around."[6]

Speaker Johnson has also suggested that the Establishment Clause does nothing more than prevent the state from establishing an official religion.[7] This narrow and outdated interpretation of the First Amendment cuts against decades of First Amendment case law. It could unleash the government to sponsor particular religious practices, endorse religious codes such as the Ten Commandments, and legislate government-led prayers for millions of public-school students.

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[2] Will Hall, "Mike Johnson: Faith, family & freedom motivate run for seat in U.S. Congress," *The Message*, September 30, 2016, https://www.baptistmessage.com/mike-johnson-faith-family-freedom-motivate-run-seat-u-s-congress/.

[3] David Corn, "Mike Johnson Conducted Seminars Promoting the US as a 'Christian Nation,'" *Mother Jones,* October 2023, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2023/10/mike-johnson-seminars-christian-nation-speaker-far-right/. For an archived video of one seminar, see Mike Johnson, *Answers For Our Times,* First Baptist Church Haughton, April 28, 2019, https://archive.is/0WReS. See also Brian Kaylor, "Church Scrubs Sermons by Speaker Johnson But I Saved Them," *Public Witness,* November 9, 2023, https://publicwitness.wordandway.org/p/church-scrubs-sermons-by-speaker.

[4] Adam Chodorow, "Mike Johnson Wants to Unleash Ministers on Politics," *Slate*, November 9, 2023, https://slate.com/business/2023/11/mike-johnson-speaker-johnson-amendment-religious-leaders-taxes.html. See also Congressman Steve Scalise "Scalise, Hice, Johnson Reintroduce Free Speech Fairness Act," February 5, 2021, https://scalise.house.gov/media/press-releases/scalise-hice-johnson-reintroduce-free-speech-fairness-act#:~:text=The%20Free%20Speech%20Fairness%20Act%20restores%20the%20full%20constitutional%20rights,of%20religious%20non%2Dprofits.%22.

[5] Speaker Mike Johnson @SpeakerJohnson, "As we celebrate the 2nd annual observance of 'Faith Month,' this is a great time to explain the true meaning of the so-called 'separation of church and state.'" Twitter, April 18, 2023, https://twitter.com/SpeakerJohnson/status/1648361786393911296.

[6] Disciple's Voice of Hope with Alex T. Ray, "DVOH - God in Politics with Mike Johnson," August 30, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=696lilpnoqM.

[7] Lauren Sforza, "Speaker Johnson: Separation of church, state 'a misnomer,'" *T*he Hill, November 14, 2023, https://thehill.com/homenews/house/4308643-speaker-johnson-separation-of-church-state-a-misnomer/.

Speaker Johnson's rejection of church-state separation rests on a distorted reading of the Constitution. The Constitution itself plainly debunks his theories and related claims that our government was founded on Biblical principles or as a Christian nation. Nowhere does the Constitution mention the Bible, God, or Christianity. The only references to religion are found in Article VI, which *prohibits* religious tests for public office, and the First Amendment, which *protects* absolute individual freedom of conscience by prohibiting the establishment of religion or any law preventing free religious exercise. Not one of the Founders said they were creating or serving a "Christian nation" in any document, private correspondence, or publicly noted utterance.[8] Speaker Johnson's frequent descriptions of America as a "Christian nation" are obviously false, in addition to being divisive, disturbing, and threatening to many Americans—non-Christians and Christians alike—who reject religious intolerance and theocracy.

Speaker Johnson has also invoked the Declaration of Independence to support his revisionist theory that our country was founded as a "Christian nation." In Johnson's first speech as Speaker, he claimed that Thomas Jefferson's reference to a "Creator" in the Declaration proves that the United States was "founded upon a creed" and reflects "almost theological lucidity."[9] Of course, Jefferson—the author of the metaphor of the constitutional "wall of separation," which Speaker Johnson routinely deplores—was an Enlightenment thinker who wanted to break from centuries of religious warfare, Inquisition, crusades, witchcraft trials, persecution, and intolerance. He was often attacked as an infidel and atheist.

The Declaration was an announcement to the world that the American colonies intended to sever ties to Great Britain and become an independent nation committed to human rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Whether Jefferson intended for the United States to become a Christian nation by simply referencing a Creator or whether he was merely establishing that the rights of humanity are natural—rather than depending on kingly permission—very little turns on the answer. The Declaration itself not only excludes other mentions of religion, church, or theocracy, but it also never became a governing document that defined our rights and laws. That only came later when the Founders drafted a wholly secular document—the Constitution of the United States.

As Speaker of the House and second in line to the Presidency, Speaker Johnson owes it to Congress and the American people to answer these specific questions:

- Does he acknowledge and accept the constitutional separation of church and state?
- What does his oft-stated goal of creating a "biblically sanctioned government" actually mean?
- Does he believe, as many Christian Nationalists argue, that the Bible—not the Constitution—must function as the supreme law of the United States and that the Bible must prevail in the event of conflict between the Bible and civil laws?

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[8] Dr. Gregg Frazer, "The Faith of the Founding Fathers," *The Master's University*, https://www.masters.edu/master_tmu_news/the-faith-of-the-founding-fathers/#:~:text=There%20were%20Christians%20among%20the,to%20create%20a%20Christian%20nation.

[9] Mike Johnson, "Speaker-Elect Mike Johnson Floor Speech," October 25, 2023, https://www.c-span.org/video/?531374-3/speaker-elect-mike-johnson-floor-speech.

- Does he agree that his longstanding goal and "legal ministry" of conforming our nation's laws, norms, and institutions to his religious beliefs is essentially calling for an American theocracy? If not, how is it different?
- Since he views the United States as a "Christian nation," what does that mean for Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other believers and non-believers? Does he support laws that favor Christianity over other religions, or that favor the Bible over other religious texts?

2. Using Public Education and Public Resources to Promote Evangelical Christianity

Although the Constitution bars public schools from mandating or sponsoring religious prayer and limits public schools to teaching the Bible "objectively as part of a secular program," Speaker Johnson has spent much of his career attacking and undermining these essential constitutional guidelines.[10]

Johnson championed a controversial course developed by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools.[11] That Bible course was a thinly veiled attempt to impose evangelical Christianity on public school students by promoting a thoroughly evangelical interpretation of the Bible, including a literal reading of the Genesis creation story, which is rejected by many mainline Christians and Biblical scholars.[12] Among his many other efforts in this area, Johnson has also defended a public school accused of religious proselytizing[13] and advocated for legislation to facilitate faculty participation in student-led public school prayers.[14]

Speaker Johnson's legal efforts to undermine the separation of church and state have extended to other areas as well, such as defending a painting of Jesus Christ displayed in a courthouse. In that case, he argued speciously that the "ideas expressed in this painting aren't specific to any one faith, and they certainly don't establish a single state religion."[15] In another case, he defended funneling state subsidies to a private Noah's Ark theme park that promotes evangelicalism and Biblical literalism.[16] He celebrated this project as "one way to bring people to this recognition of the truth that what we read in the Bible are actual historical events."[17] This is plainly an effort to use state funds to endorse and amplify a religious tenet.

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[10] Abington School District v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

[11] Judd Legum, Tesnim Zekeria, and Rebecca Crosby, "What Everyone Should Know about the New House Speaker, Mike Johnson," *Popular Information* (blog), October 26, 2023, https://popular.info/p/what-everyone-should-know-about-the.

[12] Mark A. Chancey, A Textbook Example of the Christian Right: The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 75, Issue 3, September 2007, Pages 554–581, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfm036.

[13] Brian Kaylor and Jeremy Fuzy, "Christian Nationalism in the Speaker's Chair," *Word&Way*, October 26, 2023, https://wordandway.org/2023/10/26/christian-nationalism-in-the-speakers-chair/.

[14] Congressman Mike Johnson. "U.S. Rep. Johnson Applauds Passage of Louisiana Prayer Bill," May 21, 2018, https://mikejohnson.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=552.

[15] Kyle Mantyla, "The Right's Concept of 'Inclusive,'" *Right Wing Watch*, July 10, 2007, https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/the-rights-concept-of-inclusive/.

[16] Robert Tait, "House Speaker Once Won Taxpayer Funds for Noah's Ark Park Accused of Bias," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/oct/26/mike-johnson-noah-arc-amusement-park-tax-money.

[17] Liz Skalka and Paul Blumenthal, "New House Speaker Thinks Creationist Museum Is 'Pointing People to the Truth,'" *HuffPost*, October 27, 2023, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mike-johnson-young-earth-creationist_n_653adc81e4b0d69ae7068a0b.

Speaker Johnson has the right to hold any and all extreme religious views, but no right to use public resources to promote them. He should answer the following questions regarding his plans and intentions as Speaker of the House:

- Will he continue attempting to promote or mandate sectarian religious teachings, materials, or practices in our public schools?
- Will he continue advocating for the display of sectarian iconography in public places? Does that include the United States Capitol?
- Will he work to direct subsidies or other public resources to religious enterprises such as the Noah's Ark theme park or the Museum of the Bible?

3. Curtailing Civil Rights and Liberties in the Name of Religion

A recurring theme in Speaker Johnson's decades of work to embed "God in government" is his steadfast support of right-wing Christians imposing their values on others and discriminating in the name of religion. These efforts include relentless attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, opposition to no-fault divorce, extreme restrictions on women's reproductive healthcare, and discriminatory immigration policies.

a. *Crusading Against LGBTQ+ Rights*

As both a lawyer and legislator, Johnson has focused throughout his career on opposing LGBTQ+ rights. He inveighs against homosexuality as not only a sin but as an "inherently unnatural," "bizarre," and "dangerous lifestyle." [18]As Senior Legal Counsel for the Alliance Defending Freedom, a legal organization which described itself as aiming to "recover the robust Christendomic theology of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries," Johnson defended the criminalization of sex between consenting same-sex adults.[19] In Louisiana, he championed a same-sex marriage ban, defended that ban in court,[20] fought to block same-sex adoptions and marital benefits,[21] promoted discredited 'conversion therapy,'[22] and introduced the "Marriage and Conscience Act," which would have created a broad legal safe harbor to discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals.[23]

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[18] Mike Johnson, "Marriage amendment deserves strong support," *The Shreveport Times*, September 12, 2004, https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-times-kfile/134019997/. See also Johnson, "Sexual orientation move should be opposed," *The Shreveport Times,* July 20, 2005, "https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-times-mike-johnson-2005/134051395/.

[19] Mike Johnson, "Justices take swipe at American values", *The Shreveport Times,* "Alliance Defending Freedom," Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d., https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/alliance-defending-freedom.

[20] "FRC Presents 'Family, Faith, and Freedom Award' to ADF Lawyer," *The Christian Post*, March 17, 2005, https://www.christianpost.com/news/frc-presents-147-family-faith-and-freedom-award-148-to-adf-lawyer.html.

[21] Ken Tran, "House Speaker Mike Johnson Worked on 2014 Case Seeking to Stop a Same-Sex Family Adoption," *USA TODAY*, November 2, 2023, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2023/11/02/mike-johnson-lgbtq-lawyer-louisiana/71417591007/.

[22] Amy Couch, "Mike and Kelly Johnson Have Spent Years Promoting Discredited 'Conversion Therapy' - Americans United," Americans United for Separation of Church and State, November 6, 2023, https://www.au.org/the-latest/articles/johnsons-conversion-therapy/.

[23] Matt Lavietes, "New House Speaker's Views on LGBTQ Issues Come under Fresh Scrutiny," *NBC News*, October 26, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/mike-johnson-house-speaker-lgbtq-views-scrutiny-rcna122317.

As a Member of Congress, he has authored a federal version of Florida's infamous "Don't Say Gay" law, supported criminalization of gender-affirming care, cosponsored legislation to bar transgender students from competing on women's and girls' sports teams, and voted against the Equality Act and Respect for Marriage Act.[24] He even claimed that legalizing marriage equality would require us to protect every "deviant group," which could lead to legalized pedophilia, bestiality, and the downfall of "the entire democratic system."[25]

b. *Making Divorce Harder*

Like many leaders of the religious right, Johnson opposes no-fault divorce laws, which he views as disrespecting the sanctity of marriage and contributing to America's moral decline (along with things like "radical feminism").[26] But Johnson has taken it even further by promoting the religious institution of "covenant marriage" and spearheading a Louisiana law to create special "covenant marriage" legal standards that make it harder for a covenant marriage spouse to get divorced. This law has been criticized for creating a legal mechanism—under the guise of protecting a religious sacrament—which empowers violent and abusive spouses to delay and impede their victims from securing a divorce.[27]

c. *Attacking Reproductive Freedom*

Speaker Johnson has spent much of his career trying to impose his faith-based views by banning abortion and contraception for every woman in America.[28] Undaunted by the fact that most Americans disagree with him, Johnson's efforts have been sweeping and, by any measure, extreme. Indeed, his record on reproductive freedom is among the most radical of any member of Congress.

Banning abortion and reproductive choice was at the heart of his work as Senior Legal Counsel for the Alliance Defending Freedom. In that capacity, he fought to shut down Louisiana abortion clinics,[29] described abortion as "a holocaust,"[30] challenged contraceptive coverage,[31] and called for

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[24] Brooke Migdon, "Johnson's strident LGBTQ views put advocates on alert," *The Hill*, November 3, 2023, https://thehill.com/homenews/lgbtq/4291024-johnsons-strident-lgbtq-views-put-advocates-on-alert/.

[25] Johnson, "Marriage amendment deserves strong support."

[26] Martin Pengelly, "New House Speaker Mike Johnson Praised '18th-Century Values' in Speech," *The Guardian*, October 27, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/oct/27/mike-johnson-value-moral-conservative-republican.

[27] Molly Olmstead, "Want to Understand the New House Speaker? Look to His Marriage.," *Slate Magazine*, October 30, 2023, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/10/mike-johnson-republican-house-speaker-covenant-marriage.html.

[28] Tessa Stuart, "House Speaker Johnson's Long Crusade Against Birth Control," *Rolling Stone*, October 31, 2023, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/mike-johnson-crusade-birth-control-1234865718/.

[29] POLITICO Pro Staff, "Here's Where Speaker Mike Johnson Stands on the Issues," POLITICO, October 25, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/10/25/new-house-speaker-mike-johnson-on-the-issues-00123627#:~:text=In%20that%20role%2C%20he%20worked,six%20weeks%20into%20a%20pregnancy.

[30] Scott MacFarlane and Michael Kaplan, "House Speaker Mike Johnson Once Referred to Abortion as 'a Holocaust,'" *CBS News*, October 27, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/house-speaker-mike-johnson-abortion-holocaust/.

[31] Alliance Defending Freedom, "ADF, Louisiana College Challenge Obama Mandate," November 17, 2022, https://adflegal.org/press-release/adf-louisiana-college-challenge-obama-mandate.

a return to "18th-century values."[32] In Congress, he has cosponsored several nationwide abortion bans and introduced legislation to impede minors from traveling across state lines to receive abortion care.[33] He has also called for anyone who provides an abortion to be "imprisoned at hard labor."[34]

d. *Championing Religious Immigration Tests and Nativism*

Speaker Johnson's support for former President Donald Trump's discriminatory "Muslim ban" suggests that he believes our "Christian nation" can impose a religious immigration test to exclude Muslims, and presumably other non-Christian believers, from entering our country. When he appeared at a panel discussion for a White Nationalist hate group that espouses the "great replacement theory," he claimed that immigrants "whose names I cannot pronounce from countries all over the world" are threatening "our identity as a nation-state."[35]

In light of the above, Speaker Johnson should give clear answers to the following questions:

- As Speaker of the House, will he continue to press an extreme agenda of banning and/or criminalizing abortion and contraception across the country?
- Will he continue trying to overturn settled law regarding marriage equality?
- Does he think states have the power to ban interracial marriage?[36]
- Will he continue trying to criminalize consensual same-sex relationships?
- Will he try to enact federal legal protections and privileges for Christians who seek to discriminate on the basis of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, creed, or other protected class?
- Will he attempt to federally weaken or limit no-fault divorce laws, including codifying religious practices such as "covenant marriage"?
- Does he support religion-based immigration tests?
- Does he agree with the "great replacement" theory?

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[32] Pengelly, "Speaker Mike Johnson Praised '18th-Century Values.'"

[33] Shawna Mizelle, "What are new House Speaker Mike Johnsons's record and views on abortion?" *CBS News,* October 26, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mike-johnson-abortion-house-speaker/. See also POLITICO, "Here's where Speaker Mike Johonson stands on the issues."

[34] Mike Johnson, "BREAKING: Late yesterday, the La. Department of Health informed abortion facilities in our state that the right to life has now been RESTORED! Perform an abortion and get imprisoned at hard labor for 1-10 yrs & fined $10K-$100K." Twitter, June 25, 2022, https://twitter.com/SpeakerJohnson/status/1540730281010860032.

[35] Caleb Kieffer, Hannah Gais and Rachel Janik, "Hate Groups Rejoice Over Newly Elected Speaker Mike Johnson," Southern Poverty Law Center, November 2, 2023, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/11/02/hate-groups-rejoice-over-newly-elected-speaker-mike-johnson.

[36] As a Louisiana state legislator, Johnson authored a "Pastor Protection Act" which, while focused on creating legal immunity for pastors to discriminate against gay people, relied on the same arguments that were historically used to oppose interracial marriages. When Johnson was asked in 2015 whether his bill could be used to discriminate against interracial couples, Johnson deflected. In 2022, he also voted against the Respect for Marriage Act, which protects marriage equality for same-sex and interracial couples under federal law. Brian Slodysko, "Mike Johnson Was Dean of a Christian Law School That Didn't Exist," *AP News*, November 1, 2023, https://www.apnews.com/article/mike-johnson-house-speaker-2d1a3399e8fe61bf0619d66ba29a1520.

4. <u>Undermining Democracy and the Extreme Christian Nationalist Agenda</u>

Lastly, we are concerned by Speaker Johnson's close personal, professional, and political ties to Christian Nationalists.[37] This includes connections to hate groups that were deeply involved in the January 6th insurrection and espouse violent, theocratic, and anti-democratic views about our country.

For instance, Speaker Johnson has worked closely with the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), including pastor Jim Garlow, who he called a "profound influence" on his life.[38] NAR promotes the controversial "Seven Mountain Mandate," which calls for Christians to "conquer" and "take dominion" over the "key mountains of society" (such as education, business, media, and government) in order to establish a hegemonic Christian domain.[39] As key evangelical advisors to former President Trump, Garlow and other NAR leaders played a powerful role in promoting 2020 election lies that motivated the January 6th insurrection.[40] In the weeks leading up to the attack, NAR leaders coordinated "Global Prayer for Election Integrity" calls that implored Christians to pray and mobilize for Trump's reinstatement as President.[41]

Speaker Johnson regularly participated in these calls when they became the "World Prayer Network," and he was at the heart of Trump's legal efforts to overturn the 2020 election results.[42] He worked closely with Trump's legal team and House GOP colleagues to develop legal theories to overturn the 2020 election results. The litigation that Mr. Johnson helped initiate promoted debunked conspiracy theories and false claims about Dominion voting machines that were universally rejected by the courts.[43]

Speaker Johnson's close relationship with NAR appears to be ongoing. Earlier this year, he was "at the helm of the planning" for a Christian Nationalist alternative to the National Prayer Breakfast with Garlow.[44] We noticed that Johnson also decided to fly the "Appeal to Heaven" flag outside his

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[37] *Ibid.* See also Anne Nelson, "How Christian Nationalists, Big Oil and the Big Lie Seized the Speaker's Gavel," *Washington Spectator*, October 31, 2023, https://washingtonspectator.org/how-christian-nationalists-big-oil-and-the-big-lie-seized-the-speakers-gavel/.

[38] World Prayer Network, "WPN Prayer Call 82," November 14, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/WorldPrayerNetwork.org/videos/435024358065927.

[39] Bradley Onishi and Matthew Taylor, "The Key to mike Johnson's Extremism Hangs Outside His Office," *Rolling Stone,* November 10, 2023, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/mike-johnson-christian-nationalist-appeal-to-heaven-flag-1234873851/.

[40] Matthew D. Taylor, "Mike Johnson, Polite Extremist," *The Bulwark*, October 30, 2023, https://plus.thebulwark.com/p/mike-johnson-polite-extremist. See also Peter Montgomery, "The Religious Right's Rhetoric Fueled the Insurrection," The American Prospect, February 5, 2021, https://prospect.org/politics/religious-right-rhetoric-fueled-the-capitol-insurrection/.

[41] Taylor, "Polite Extremist."

[42] *Ibid.* See also Tim Dickinson, "Mike Johnson: 'Depraved' America Deserves God's Wrath," *Rolling Stone,* November 15, 2023, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/mike-johnson-america-god-wrath-jim-garlow-1234879233/.

[43] Jonathan Chait, "New Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson Was the Mastermind of the January 6 Plot," *New York Magazine*, October 26, 2023, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/10/house-speaker-republican-mike-johnson-january-6-mastermind-trump-election-2020.html.

[44] Molly Olmstead, "The National Prayer Breakfast's Mysterious Schism," *Slate Magazine*, February 2, 2023, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/02/national-prayer-breakfast-family-fellowship-gathering.html. For more information about the National Gathering for Prayer and Repentance, see Mark Wingfield, "Museum of the Bible to

office, which NAR popularized as a Christian Nationalist symbol, and which was carried by many January 6th rioters.[45]

Speaker Johnson is also closely aligned with David Barton, a prominent Christian Nationalist who has spent years attacking the separation of church and state, promoting a revisionist history of the United States as a Christian nation, calling for mandated prayer and biblical creationist courses in public schools, and claiming that "the first purpose of public schools is to teach students to love and serve God."[46] Johnson describes Barton as a "profound influence on me, and my work, and my life and everything I do." Barton boasted that he has been advising Speaker Johnson on staffing, and it appears the Speaker is listening.[47] Barton claims that Mr. Johnson's elevation to the Speakership offers him "some tools at our disposal now we haven't had in a long time."[48]

Additionally, some of the other Christian Nationalist groups Speaker Johnson is close to—including his former employer "Alliance Defending Freedom"—have collaborated on the "Project 2025" policy agenda for the next Republican President.[49] This radical authoritarian agenda has been described as a plan to install Trump as "dictator."[50] Among other things, it calls for sweeping new executive powers, embraces a "unitary executive" theory that reduces checks and balances on presidential abuse of authority, purges politically disloyal employees from the federal workforce, and biblically "purifies" the country by opposing marriage equality, criminalizing materials with LGBTQ+ content, and restricting other civil rights and liberties.[51]

As recently as December, Speaker Johnson headlined the annual gala for the National Association of Christian Lawmakers, an openly Christian Nationalist organization that honored Johnson for his "Christian leadership." In Johnson's keynote address, he declared that God speaks to him regularly and had urged him to "step forward" like Moses to lead the nation and "seek Him for the path through the roiling sea."[52] Speaker Johnson also sent a fundraising appeal lamenting that our

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Host Wednesday Morning Event to Pray for God's Judgment on America," *Baptist News Global*, January 31, 2023, https://baptistnews.com/article/museum-of-the-bible-to-host-wednesday-morning-event-to-pray-for-gods-judgment-on-america-and-breakfast-is-not-included/.

[45] Onishi and Taylor, "The Key to Mike Johnson's Extremism."

[46] Mike Hixenbaugh, "Meet the Evangelical Activist Who's Had a 'profound Influence' on Speaker Mike Johnson," *NBC News*, October 26, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/evangelical-activist-influence-speaker-mike-johnson-rcna122313.

[47] *Ibid.* See also Tori Otten, "Mike Johnson's New Chief of Staff Has Ties to a Dangerous Far-Right Group," The New Republic, December 7, 2023, https://newrepublic.com/post/176935/mike-johnson-new-chief-staff-ruth-ward-extreme.

[48] Robert Downen, "Meet the Christian Nationalist from Texas Advising Mike Johnson," *The Texas Tribune*, November 3, 2023, https://www.texastribune.org/2023/11/03/david-barton-mike-johnson-texas-church-state-christianity/.

[49] Project 2025, "Advisory Board," Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project, November 17, 2023, https://www.project2025.org/about/advisory-board/.

[50] Spencer Ackerman, "This Is How Trump Becomes a Dictator," *The Nation*, August 7, 2023, https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/trump-presidential-power-security-state/.

[51] Guthrie Graves-Fitzimmons, "The right's Project 2025 wants to make faith the government's job," MSNBC, September 8, 2023, https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/project-2025-heritage-foundation-christian-nationalism-rcna103510. See also Brynn Tannehill, "The GOP Has a Master Plan to Criminalize Being Trans," *Dame Magazine*, August 14, 2023, https://www.damemagazine.com/2023/08/14/the-gop-has-a-master-plan-to-criminalize-being-trans/.

[52] Tim Dickinson, "Mike Johnson Compares Himself to Moses at Christian Nationalist Gala," *Rolling Stone*, December 6, 2023, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/mike-johnson-moses-christian-nationalist-

"depraved culture" has "fallen so far since the founding of our country" and insinuating that schools today are causing more students to identify "as something other than straight." He asked his followers, "Does America need more God?" and concluded himself: "America needs to recognize that we have much to repent for if we want to avoid the judgment we so clearly deserve, but that starts with returning America to God's good graces once again."[53]

In light of the breathtaking depth and breadth of Speaker Johnson's ties to Christian Nationalists, including organizations labeled as hate groups, and the central role he played in the attempts by these groups and others to overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential election, Speaker Johnson should answer the following questions:

- Did Joe Biden win the 2020 election?
- Is there any part of the Christian Nationalist movement—including hate groups, attempts to overturn the 2020 election, and calls for political violence—that Speaker Johnson is willing to denounce or disavow?
- Does he support NAR's Seven Mountain Mandate?
- Will he attempt to implement the Seven Mountain Mandate by placing like-minded Christians in key positions of power to transform the nation into a hegemonic Christian domain?
- Does he support the Project 2025 agenda developed by his former employer and other Christian Nationalist groups?
- Are there any parts of the Project 2025 plan that he would denounce or disavow, such as the elimination of checks and balances on executive power or the criminalization of materials containing LGBTQ+ content?
- If Mr. Johnson is Speaker of the House in January of 2025, and if Joe Biden wins at least 270 electoral votes, will he in any way oppose, obstruct, or delay the convening of a joint session of Congress to certify the election results?

CONCLUSION

The CFC respects the central role of religion in Speaker Johnson's life and the role that religion, philosophy, ethics, and morality play in the lives of most other Americans. We are fortunate to be citizens of a country that protects the rights of all people to express themselves freely and live in accordance with their beliefs—under a Constitution that protects every person from having religion imposed on them or institutionalized by the government.

But we must be clear-eyed about Speaker Johnson's public record: he has dedicated his career as a lawyer, advocate, and legislator to undermining these constitutional freedoms, weakening the separation of church and state, and trying to impose his own radical religious views on other citizens. To this day, he remains deeply entwined with Christian Nationalists that seek to transform our secular democracy into an authoritarian theocracy. Now that he is second in line to the

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[53] Punchbowl News, "Does America Need More God, Patriot?" December 3, 2023, https://punchbowl.news/johnson-depraved-culture-fundraising-email/.

Presidency, Speaker Johnson has the power to continue pressing an extreme agenda that threatens both the secular and democratic character of our republic.

While Speaker Johnson's extensive public record speaks for itself, we nevertheless hope that some of his extreme views and goals may have tempered now that he is Speaker of the House. If so, the CFC and undoubtedly millions of Americans would appreciate assurances to that effect. The CFC still invites Speaker Johnson to dialogue in person with us, and we are committed to seeking opportunities to work with him on advancing freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. But if Speaker Johnson remains unwilling to meet with us, we hope at a minimum that he will answer the questions posed in this white paper.

Like most Americans, we do not want to live in a theocracy. No matter the circumstances, the CFC will continue to defend the separation of church and state and to stand up for the rights and liberties of all religious and non-religious Americans.