

Vashti, Esther, and the “no” and “yes” to Christian nationalism

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Abstract

This article examines Vashti and Esther together as a model for responding to dangerous power. I explore Christian nationalism formation as a destructive power in the United States and its far-reaching impact. To demonstrate the model's potential, I survey Black women's responses to Christian nationalism using Vashti and Esther's “no” and “yes” as the framework. I argue both responses are valuable and sometimes necessary to survive and flourish in the face of white Christian nationalism.

Keywords

Black women, Christian nationalism, Esther, Vashti

Growing up, the sermons I heard preached from Esther were always focused on the phrase, “If I die, I die.” Esther was celebrated as a heroine who stepped up in dire circumstances, helping to save her people, even if it cost her life. I, too, have preached on Esther being compelled to come forward and say “yes” for the sake of her people. Not until I was an adult did I begin to hear sermons on Vashti and her refusal to come before the king when beckoned. Vashti’s “no” becomes viewed as a foundation for resistance. Scholars have often pitted the two women and their positions against each other. Preachers often present Esther’s “yes” and Vashti’s “no” as a binary choice, implying that only one is the right path. This perspective, however, overlooks the complexity of human experience, in which people do not live within the simplistic binaries imposed upon them. Every day, they face an array of challenging issues. One such problem is the impact of Christian nationalism on their lives. This article examines Vashti and Esther together as models for the multiple ways of responding to domination and danger. Using the responses of Vashti and Esther, I explore how Black women have been shaped by Christian nationalism and how they are now responding.

Christian nationalism has become a buzzword used by scholars, preachers, and the media. The usage of the term is not always the same, and it is sometimes used synonymously with “evangelical” or even “conservative Christians.” For this essay, I am using the definition of Christian nationalism offered by Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry in *Taking America Back for God*. Whitehead and Perry define Christian nationalism as “a cultural framework—a collection of myths, tradition, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion

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of Christianity with American civic life.”¹ The authors explain how it incorporates nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity assumptions with what is understood as a divine sanction for authoritarian control. “It is as ethnic and political as it is religious.”² Furthermore, Whitehead and Perry identify the various orientations people in the United States have toward Christian nationalism and how they cross social, religious, and political demographics. Thus, to use the term “evangelical” as a synonym for Christian nationalism is not accurate. Thinking about Christian nationalism in this way is a helpful framing because it provides more clarity. The research by Whitehead and Perry also helps identify those who identify with Christian nationalism and what they believe.

While parts of the Bible have formed parts of Christian nationalism, an essential task is to identify which parts of the Bible, how it is interpreted, and who provides the interpretation. Christian nationalists believe God has an expectation of the United States,³ like that of Israel in the Old Testament. There seems to be a marriage between divine retribution and U.S. exceptionalism, because Christian nationalists believe the United States should fear the wrath of God for unfaithfulness and assume God has a special blessing for the country. Focusing on biblical texts about ancient Israel’s relationship with God and what it required, who Jesus was, and the biblical texts of his teachings does not hold as much influence.

When examining who has provided these interpretations, one can see a long history of interpretation from scholars and preachers who supply the needed interpretive foundation.⁴ One of the many interpretive moves was the justification for slavery. A noteworthy observation of the commonality is not only the gist of their interpretations but also the identity markers of the interpreters. They are all white men. The house of Christian nationalism was built upon the interpretations and work of white Christian men such as Bishop Thomas Newton, Thorton Strongfellow, James Henley Thornwell, and others.⁵ Thus, a central point in Christian nationalism is that the primary and most important members are white Christian men. The desired outcome is to protect the power of white Christian men at all costs. I argue, therefore, that the more accurate term to use is white Christian nationalism. To be clear, however, despite being created and continued primarily for the benefit of white males, it is not limited in practice to white males.

White Christian nationalism has roots in slaveholder theology produced in the United States. The literal interpretations of biblical texts such as Gen 9:18–27 and Eph 6:5–7 provided support for enslaving African people as being ordained by God. The interpretations of these two passages were emphasized to the enslaved. Preachers hired by slaveholders repeatedly preached these texts and others to impose upon enslaved people that they be obedient and docile while performing all the labor requested of them, as this was the will of God. Many enslaved people clearly had a hermeneutic of suspicion of these teachings and began to discern that there was a different Christianity than the one being preached and taught to them. Thus, Christianity is not monolithic, particularly in the United States, as more than one Christianity has operated since enslaved Africans were brought here.

1. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.
2. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 10.
3. I am intentionally using “United States” instead of “America,” although Christian nationalists typically use “America” because of their focus on the United States. However, America is much more than the United States.
4. See Emerson Powery, “The Bible and Slavery in American Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, ed. Paul C. Gutjahr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 304–18; Kevin Burrell, “Slavery, the Hebrew Bible and the Development of Racial Theories in the Nineteenth Century,” *Religions* 12.9 (2021): 792, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090742>.
5. Powery, “Bible and Slavery;” Burrell, “Slavery, the Hebrew Bible.”

Frederick Douglass understood this as “Christianity of the land and Christianity of Christ.”⁶ In another examination of the distinctions in various Christianities, Howard Thurman referred to it as the religion about Jesus.⁷ They both illustrate differences in beliefs and practices in the two separate approaches to Christianity. Maintaining power was a key component of the Christianity of the enslaver or those in power, and freedom was a key component of the enslaved and marginalized. Each approach has continued to be taught and practiced up to today. Although the majority of those who followed the Christianity of the land were white, their teachings were embedded in the theology of many Black people. As the slaveholder theology and Christianity of the land continued to transform into white Christian nationalism, it was and continues to be embedded in some Black people as Christianity. Just as some rejected slaveholder theology, some also reject its offspring of white Christian nationalism.

Black women in the United States have had the duty of producing for this country while being disrespected, denigrated, and disregarded. During chattel slavery in the United States, Black women were expected to produce on the plantation and for the plantation. As they provided physical labor, they were subjected to physical and sexual violence and had no agency over their bodies or the bodies of the children they were forced to birth. The demands upon Black women and the attempts to control them did not stop when slavery was outlawed; it continued through Jim Crow up to today. There have always been some Black women who have rejected this mistreatment over the years.⁸ Today, however, a more widespread rejection of mistreatment and things that do not benefit Black women and their communities appears to exist.

Black women say “no” to things not in their best interest or fruitful for their families and communities. At the same time, they are making their “yes” clear as they decide to move in ways that aid their community and promote personal and communal flourishing. Seeing Black women say both “no” and “yes” to power parallels the responses of Vashti and Esther. In Esther, the story opens with a lavish party hosted by the king as he flaunts his wealth and wants to show his power as well. In Esth 1:10, he beckons Queen Vashti to leave the banquet she is hosting for the women to appear before him and his drunken attendees wearing her royal crown, to which she replies, “no.” Her refusal to appear before the king upon request could have been out of fear for her own safety. Coming before a group of drunk men or claiming agency for her own body and determining when and how she shows up in a space could have been dangerous. One can only speculate the reason for her “no,” but the impact of her “no” is evident. When Queen Vashti responds “no” to the most powerful person in the kingdom, the king’s ego has been badly bruised, and his advisors are convened. In the patriarchal ingathering, they decide that Queen Vashti’s refusal could not go unpunished because, if the king could not control the queen, then no man in the kingdom would be able to control his wife. The king decides to strip Queen Vashti of her crown, and she is never heard from again.

The text does not indicate whether Queen Vashti was banished or murdered. What is clear is that her “no” was costly. Her “no” cost her position and possibly her life. It seems likely that she would have given some consideration to the possible outcomes of her refusal, and she still said “no.” The decision to say “no” to power and oppressive systems cannot be made lightly, and it is one that Black women are making. In the face of white Christian nationalism, Black women are saying “no” to people, power, and systems in a myriad of ways.

A significant component of white Christian nationalism is the importance of white supremacy, which is framed as being ordained by a white god. To support the idea of the superiority of white

6. Frederick Douglass and Theresa Puskar, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, deluxe special ed. (New York: G&D Media, 2019).
7. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).
8. Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

people, it is framed as being ordained by a white god. God is presented as a white male who is the father of a white Jesus. The images of God and Jesus placed in churches, books, and elsewhere feature a white man.⁹ Black women are rejecting the image, belief, and authority of a white male God. Christena Cleveland, who illustrates this position in *God is a Black Woman*, she eschews what she calls whitemalegod, as the god of the United States, whose identity rises from the intersection of white supremacy and toxic masculinity. The whitemalegod justifies the oppression of Black, Indigenous, and people of color, more specifically Black women, including those of trans experience.¹⁰ Looking to whitemalegod, who does not offer Black women an opportunity to see divinity in themselves and who actively participates in their oppression, is an idea and practice to which Black women are responding, like Vashti, with a resounding “no.”

Many Black women are no longer beholden to the whitemalegod and are instead opting to look to a brown-skinned Jesus who can understand their suffering. These women are also recognizing the divine within themselves. They are living into the words of Ntozake Shange: “I found God in myself & I loved her/I loved her fiercely.”¹¹ They are rejecting whitemalegod who requires their subjugation and self-hate. These Black women, in the face of white Christian nationalism, are saying “no” to whitemalegod and choosing love of themselves.

Black women are also refusing to be denied reproductive freedom and agency over their own bodies. As previously noted, Black women had little to no agency over their bodies during slavery and were forced to work and have children against their will. There was no regard for their health or their wishes. Enslavers demanded that Black women give birth to children for the further enrichment of the enslaver, either through increased labor or sale. Enslaved women were not allowed to mother their children after they were born, as slaveholders continued their control. The slaveholder decided if and when the child would remain with the mother or be sold. These mothers endured the agony of rape, childbirth, separation of the child, and even death of the child.¹² Enslavers separated mothers from their children for financial gain and control over women. Enslaved women were forced into submission or to remain on the plantation by threatening their children, which is why fewer women ran away than men. Mothers and fathers of Black children were made to feel as if they could not be parents to their children. “Slavery could only exist by nullifying Black parents’ moral claim to their children.”¹³

The denial of bodily autonomy was not only through procreation. Another example of Black women’s denial of agency is how enslaved Black women were used for medical testing without their consent. James Marion Sims made progress in the field of gynecology through the use of enslaved Black women’s bodies. Lucy, Betsey, Anarcha, and other enslaved Black women were brutalized through Simms’s testing without any anesthesia because of the racist false belief that they did not experience pain.¹⁴ Agonizing pain and humiliation were forced upon many Black women who were not able to say anything to the control placed upon their bodies.

The ending of slavery did not end the consistent attempts to control the bodies of Black women, as their bodies continued to be under attack physically and socially. Black women were frequently raped, after emancipation and throughout the Jim Crow Era, because the Black woman’s body was

9. A Google search on “image of God” provides primarily images of white males.

10. Christena Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2022), 41–42.

11. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 87.

12. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Boston: Published by the Author, 1861).

13. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 2014), 39.

14. Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 2.

considered part of white men's rights. These erroneous beliefs were grounded and supported by the sexual stereotypes of Black women. However, Black women's bodies were also physically attacked through eugenics efforts of sterilization and testing of dangerous contraceptive methods. Often, these women were not informed of the sterilization procedure being performed or the dangers of the contraceptives.¹⁵ These events denied agency to too many Black women. Denied agency extended to the legal requirement to give birth to children, when Black women often had no control over their conception or provision. Black women were subjected to much lower pay and higher levels of poverty than women of other races, and, because abortion was illegal, they were obligated to give birth to children they could not care for and to raise them in unsafe living conditions.¹⁶

After *Roe v. Wade*, more access to safe abortions became available, and Black women had more agency over their bodies. Paul Weyrich, the co-founder of the Heritage Foundation, coined the term "moral majority." Weyrich and others raised abortion as a mobilizing issue to build a power base. As white Christian nationalists lifted abortion as the most pressing issue for Christians, women of all races were repeatedly told they needed to be anti-abortion to be true Christians. Even though a significant number of them privately disagreed with the teaching and the belief, they silently submitted. As a result, plenty of Black women, accepting this teaching as the word of God, carried their pregnancies to term out of fear and shame. Although many of them did not have financial stability or other desirable factors in place and would have preferred to terminate their pregnancies, they did not. Now, more and more Black women are no longer beholden to this position on abortion and are no longer willing to be silent.

When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Dobbs v. Jackson* that the U.S. Constitution does not confer a right to abortion, abortion bans quickly started to become the law in states across the country. As of the time of writing, 24 states have abortion bans. These laws disproportionately impact the lives of Black women. Black women, who fundamentally believe they should have agency over their own bodies and lives, have pushed back against the abortion ban laws. A survey in March 2024 found abortion was the top issue for many Black women in the 2024 election.¹⁷ Black women are rejecting the notion that someone else, even the church, should decide what happens to their body. For Black women, however, whether one has access to a safe and legal abortion, if necessary, is not the extent of their insistence on agency. They seek reproductive justice.

The phrase "reproductive freedom" has become more commonplace. After *Dobbs*, the mobilization of women was grounded in the language of reproductive freedom. Reproductive justice was created by combining "reproductive rights" and "social justice." The term "reproductive justice" is not a substitute for or interchangeable with abortion rights, family planning, pro-choice, reproductive rights, or population control. Twelve Black women birthed the reproductive justice movement in June 1994 while attending a conference in Chicago.¹⁸ The women believed health care for women needed to include a full range of reproductive health services such as contraceptives, pre- and postnatal care, well-women preventive care, and abortions. In their statement to Congress in a full-page ad in *The Washington Post*, they wrote, "Reproductive freedom is a life and death issue

15. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 59–103.

16. Some Black women during and after slavery did find ways to terminate their pregnancies even when it was considered illegal.

17. Amanda Seitz, "More Black Women Say Abortion is their Top Issue in the 2024 Election, a Survey Finds," *Associated Press*, March 7, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/black-women-abortion-top-issue-election-voters-da88c34a9390732b89f25c9c11f262f0>.

18. The founding women are Toni Bond, Alma Crawford, Evelyn S. Field, Terri James, Bisola Maringay, Cynthia Newbille, Loretta J. Ross, Elizabeth Terry, Mabel Thomas, Winnet P. Willis, and Kim Youngblood. See Toni M. Bond Leonard, "Laying the Foundations for a Reproductive Justice Movement," in *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundation, Theory, Practice, Critique*, ed. Loretta Ross, et al. (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2017), 39–49.

for many Black women and deserves as much recognition as any other freedom.”¹⁹ What these women understood and what has become more evident to Black women is that the decision to birth a child, the ability to care for themselves and children, and the opportunity to live and raise a child in a safe place free from environmental toxins are all factors in reproductive justice and reproductive freedom. Denial of their agency in achieving reproductive justice and reproductive freedom is being met with “no.”

As Vashti declared to the king that she gets to decide if, when, and how she will appear before him and that she will exercise some agency over her life with her “no,” the same could be said for Black women. They are no longer allowing the church’s position on abortion to dictate their position or how they will live their lives. Furthermore, they are not passively letting white Christian nationalism have control over their bodies. This action is comparable to Vashti’s refusal as a rejection of patriarchal control.

Notably, Vashti’s “no” made Esther’s saying “yes” possible. Caught up in the same patriarchal society and need for control, Esther finds herself with no agency over her life as she and many other young virgin girls are sexually trafficked as they are brought to the palace against their will and rotated in and out of the king’s bedroom. Possibly out of fear and certainly out of survival, Esther navigates the palace and the king differently and becomes the new queen. In her new role, she achieves a level of security with her privilege. She remains in her privilege until Mordecai brings to her awareness the danger facing her family and community. He implores her to go before the king to stop their pending genocide. After hesitation, Esther acquiesces and gives her “yes” to Mordecai. She tells Mordecai that before she goes to the king, she will first fast and pray. Esther decides to pause.

Esther’s decision to pause before taking action appears to mirror the choice of Black women to pause and rest in response to white Christian nationalism. In the United States, Black women and Black mothers have the highest labor participation rate of all women. With that being said, their pay continues to be less than that of white women and men. According to 2021 data, Black women make 63% of what white, non-Hispanic men make.²⁰ Even with more education, Black women continue to earn less pay. One must also bear in mind that this phenomenon is not new for Black women, who have been working for no or less pay throughout the history of this country. Black women have always worked hard to support their families and themselves despite racist stereotypes and labels placed upon them, such as “lazy” or “welfare mothers.” Black women are also realizing that the grind culture of capitalism upheld by white Christian nationalism has killed too many people, particularly too many Black women. They are, therefore, saying “yes” to pause and rest.

Black women are declaring the need to rest and incorporate rest into their lives.²¹ Taking time to pause and rest is self-care and resistance. According to Tricia Hersey, “To rest is to creatively respond to grind culture’s call to do more.”²² Thus, the intent and goal of the pause and rest is not

19. “Black Women on Health Care Reform,” *The Washington Post*, August 16, 1994, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/black-women-health-care-reform.jpg>; see also Toni M. Bond, “A Womanist Theo-Ethic of Reproductive Justice,” in *T&T Clark Reader in Abortion and Religion: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Rebecca Todd Peters and Margaret D. Kamitsuka (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 290–96.

20. See Mathilde Roux, “5 Facts about Black Women in the Labor Force,” *The Washington Informer*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/5-facts-about-black-women-in-the-labor-force/>; Jasmine Tucker, “Black Women Have Been Undervalued and Underpaid for Far too Long,” National Women’s Law Center, June 2024, <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/BWEPD-2024.6.28v4.pdf>.

21. Amanda Miller Littlejohn, “Black Professional Women Are Exhausted. They’re Finally Claiming the Time to Rest,” *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/08/20/black-women-professionals-rest/>.

22. Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*, 1st edn. (New York: Little Brown Spark, 2022), 58.

to rejuvenate to produce more, but because of their divine right. Furthermore, Black women affirm Audre Lorde's statement: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."²³ The pause and rest is resistance for Black women who are resisting white Christian nationalism's co-signing on the capitalizing off their labor from slavery to today.

Black women usually have to create the space to pause and rest. For them to say "yes" to the pause, they are saying "yes" to themselves while simultaneously saying "no" to the many demands on their time and labor. In this time of pause, Black women are aware of the many issues impacting their lives and communities, just as Esther knew of the danger on the horizon. Still, Esther did not rush into action but first said "yes" to the pause.

After her pause, Esther said "yes" to taking action for her community. Esther faced the possibility of death by going before the king on behalf of her community. For Esther, action required a plan. She did not simply go before the king and inform him of the plot to kill her people; he presumably knew about the plot because he approved it for the right price. Esther instead decides to remind the king of his care for her and then demonstrates how the nefarious plan would detrimentally impact her. Through her actions, Esther is able to save her community.

Black women in the United States have been saying "yes" to taking action for themselves and their community. Black women have taken action in every significant movement for rights in this country. For example, Harriet Tubman, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Sojourner Truth took action against slavery. Nannie Hellen Burroughs, Mary Church Terrell, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary took action for women's right to vote. When it was time to fight for civil rights, Ella Baker, Pauli Murray, and Fannie Lou Hamer took action. Many more names and causes could be added to this list, and Black women have continued to say "yes" to taking action up to the present day.

Black women are taking action in many ways as they live in the intersection of race, gender, class, and other parts of their identity while facing white Christian nationalism. Black women are advocating for themselves and their communities. A variety of issues impacting Black communities have mobilized Black women to advocate for something better. The high maternal mortality rate for Black women, which is three times that of white women, reproductive justice, environmental justice, educational reforms, gun reform, and many other issues have Black women saying "yes" to advocacy. Black women are also taking action in voter engagement and participation. Since 1980, Black women have persistently had one of the highest voter turnout rates in the United States.²⁴ Even though exercising their right to vote is not always an easy task due to voter suppression efforts and laws, they continue to take action at their polling locations. The reality is that Black women understand that systemic and policy changes are necessary to improve their lives, and they are taking action to work toward those changes. Their "yes" mirrors Esther's because the "yes" is not just about them; it is about what is also good for the community.

When exploring Vashti and Esther in the biblical text, one can see these women had similar and differing experiences. Their individual responses are often critiqued and lauded, with one's response being raised as the exemplar and the other as flawed. Instead, both are models of how people can navigate the complexities of a life lived within unjust systems. Black women have followed Vashti with their "no" and Esther with their "yes" in the face of white Christian nationalism. To be clear, this is not to suggest that all Black women are saying the same thing, because Black people are not monolithic. Some Black women will continue to acquiesce to white Christian nationalism. There are also those who say "no" or "yes" in the ways discussed previously. Then, some of whose responses are "no" or "yes" are quite different. These many ways illustrate that one does not have

23. Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2017), 141.

24. "Gender Differences in Voter Turnout," Center for American Women Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, 2025, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/voters/gender-differences-voter-turnout#NPGR>.

to choose Vashti or Esther; one can select both if it takes both to survive and flourish. White Christian nationalism has a heavy influence on the culture and laws in the United States, which has a seriously taxing impact on the lives of Black women. In the face of white Christian nationalism's long reach, Black women are being like Vashti and Esther to help themselves and their community.

Author biography

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