What Is Christian Nationalism?

An explainer on how the belief differs from other forms of nationalism, patriotism, and Christianity.

Paul D. Miller   February 3, 2021

You've probably seen headlines recently about the evils of Christian nationalism, especially since December's Jericho March in Washington, DC, and since a mob of Trump supporters—[many](#) [sporting](#) Christian signs, slogans, or symbols—rioted and stormed the US Capitol building on January 6.

What is Christian nationalism, and how is it different from Christianity? How is it different from patriotism? How should Christians think about nations, especially about the United States? If nationalism is bad, does that mean we should reject nationality and national loyalty altogether?

What is patriotism, and is it good?

Patriotism is the love of country. It is different from nationalism, which is an argument about *how to define* our country. Christians should recognize that patriotism is good because all of God's creation is good and patriotism helps us appreciate our particular place in it. Our affection and loyalty to a specific part of God's creation helps us do the good work of cultivating and improving the part we happen to live in. As Christians, we can and should love the United States—which also means working to improve our country by holding it up for critique and working for justice when it errs.

What is nationalism?

There are many definitions of nationalism and an active debate about how best to define it. I reviewed the standard academic literature on nationalism

and found several recurring themes. Most scholars agree that nationalism starts with the belief that humanity is divisible into mutually distinct, internally coherent cultural groups defined by shared traits like language, religion, ethnicity, or culture. From there, scholars say, nationalists believe that these groups should each have their own governments; that governments should promote and protect a nation's cultural identity; and that sovereign national groups provide meaning and purpose for human beings.

What is Christian nationalism?

Christian nationalism is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way. Popularly, Christian nationalists assert that America is and must remain a "Christian nation"—not merely as an observation about American history, but as a prescriptive program for what America must continue to be in the future. Scholars like Samuel Huntington have made a similar argument: that America is defined by its "Anglo-Protestant" past and that we will lose our identity and our freedom if we do not preserve our cultural inheritance.

Christian nationalists do not reject the First Amendment and do not advocate for theocracy, but they do believe that Christianity should enjoy a privileged position in the public square. The term "Christian nationalism," is relatively new, and its advocates generally do not use it of themselves, but it accurately describes American nationalists who believe American identity is inextricable from Christianity.

What is the problem with nationalism?

Humanity is not easily divisible into mutually distinct cultural units. Cultures overlap and their borders are fuzzy. Since cultural units are fuzzy, they make a poor fit as the foundation for political order. Cultural identities are fluid and hard to draw boundaries around, but political boundaries are hard and semipermanent. Attempting to found political legitimacy on cultural likeness

means political order will constantly be in danger of being felt as illegitimate by some group or other. Cultural pluralism is essentially inevitable in every nation.

Is that really a problem, or just an abstract worry?

It is a serious problem. When nationalists go about constructing their nation, they have to define who is, and who is not, part of the nation. But there are always dissidents and minorities who do not or cannot conform to the nationalists' preferred cultural template. In the absence of moral authority, nationalists can only establish themselves by force. Scholars are almost unanimous that nationalist governments tend to become authoritarian and oppressive in practice. For example, in past generations, to the extent that the United States had a quasi-established official religion of Protestantism, it did not respect true religious freedom. Worse, the United States and many individual states used Christianity as a prop to support slavery and segregation.

What do Christian nationalists want that is different from normal Christian engagement in politics?

Christian nationalists want to define America as a Christian nation and they want the government to promote a specific cultural template as the official culture of the country. Some have advocated for an amendment to the Constitution to recognize America's Christian heritage, others to reinstitute prayer in public schools. Some work to enshrine a Christian nationalist interpretation of American history in school curricula, including that America has a special relationship with God or has been "chosen" by him to carry out a special mission on earth. Others advocate for immigration restrictions specifically to prevent a change to American religious and ethnic demographics or a change to American culture. Some want to empower the government to take stronger action to circumscribe immoral behavior.

Some—again, like the scholar Samuel Huntington—have argued that the

United States government must defend and enshrine its predominant "Anglo-Protestant" culture to ensure the survival of American democracy. And sometimes Christian nationalism is most evident not in its political agenda, but in the sort of attitude with which it is held: an unstated presumption that Christians are entitled to primacy of place in the public square because they are heirs of the true or essential heritage of American culture, that Christians have a presumptive right to define the meaning of the American experiment because they see themselves as America's architects, first citizens, and guardians.

How is this dangerous for America?

Christian nationalism tends to treat other Americans as second-class citizens. If it were fully implemented, it would not respect the full religious liberty of all Americans. Empowering the state through "morals legislation" to regulate conduct always carries the risk of overreaching, setting a bad precedent, and creating governing powers that could be used later be used against Christians. Additionally, Christian nationalism is an ideology held overwhelmingly by white Americans, and it thus tends to exacerbate racial and ethnic cleavages. In recent years, the movement has grown increasingly characterized by fear and by a belief that Christians are victims of persecution. Some are beginning to argue that American Christians need to prepare to fight, physically, to preserve America's identity, an argument that played into the January 6 riot.

How is Christian nationalism dangerous to the church?

Christian nationalism takes the name of Christ for a worldly political agenda, proclaiming that its program is *the* political program for every true believer. That is wrong in principle, no matter what the agenda is, because only the church is authorized to proclaim the name of Jesus and carry his standard into the world. It is even worse with a political movement that champions some causes that are unjust, which is the case with Christian nationalism and its attendant illiberalism. In that case, Christian nationalism is calling evil

good and good evil; it is taking the name of Christ as a fig leaf to cover its political program, treating the message of Jesus as a tool of political propaganda and the church as the handmaiden and cheerleader of the state.

How is Christianity different from Christian nationalism?

Christianity is a religion focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ as defined by the Christian Bible and the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. It is the gathering of people "from every nation and tribe and people and language," who worship Jesus (Rev. 7:9), a faith that unites Jews and Greeks, Americans and non-Americans together. Christianity is political, in the sense that its adherents have always understood their faith to challenge, affect, and transcend their worldly loyalties—but there is no single view on what political implications flow from Christian faith other than that we should "fear God, honor the king" (1 Pet. 2:17, NASB), pay our taxes, love our neighbors, and seek justice.

Christian nationalism is, by contrast, a political ideology focused on the national identity of the United States. It includes a specific understanding of American history and American government that are, obviously, extrabiblical —an understanding that is contested by many historians and political scientists. Most importantly, Christian nationalism includes specific policy prescriptions that it claims are biblical but are, at best, extrapolations from biblical principles and, at worst, contradictory to them.

Can Christians be politically engaged without being Christian nationalists?

Yes. American Christians in the past were exemplary in helping establish the American experiment, and many American Christians worked to end slavery and segregation and other evils. They did so because they believed Christianity required them to work for justice. But they worked to advance Christian principles, not Christian power or Christian culture, which is the key distinction between normal Christian political engagement and Christian nationalism. Normal Christian political engagement is humble, loving, and

sacrificial; it rejects the idea that Christians are entitled to primacy of place in the public square or that Christians have a presumptive right to continue their historical predominance in American culture. Today, Christians should seek to love their neighbors by pursuing justice in the public square, including by working against abortion, promoting religious liberty, fostering racial justice, protecting the rule of law, and honoring constitutional processes. That agenda is different from promoting Christian culture, Western heritage, or Anglo-Protestant values.

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