How Christian Is Christian Nationalism?

Many Americans who advocate it have little interest in religion and an aversion to American culture as it currently exists. What really defines the movement?

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)   March 27, 2023

For many Americans, Christianity is more about "heritage" than faith, more about demography than doctrine.Illustration by Timo Lenzen

Seven years ago, during the Republican Presidential primary, Donald Trump appeared onstage at Dordt University, a Christian institution in Iowa, and made a confession of faith. "I'm a true believer," he said, and he conducted an impromptu poll. "Is everybody a true believer, in this room?" He was scarcely the first Presidential candidate to make a religious appeal, but he might have been the first one to address Christian voters so explicitly as a special interest. "You have the strongest lobby ever," he said. "But I never hear about a 'Christian lobby.' " He made his audience a promise. "If I'm there, you're going to have plenty of power," he said. "You're going to have somebody representing you very, very well."

By the time Trump reluctantly left office, in 2021, his relationship with evangelical Christians was one of the most powerful alliances in American politics. (According to one survey, he won eighty-four per cent of the white evangelical vote in 2020.) On January 6th, when his supporters gathered in Washington to protest the election results, one person brought along a placard depicting Jesus wearing a *MAGA* hat; during the Capitol invasion, a shirtless protester delivered a prayer on the Senate floor. "Thank you for filling this chamber with patriots that love you, and that love Christ," he said.

The events of January 6th bolstered a growing belief that the alliance

between Trump and his Christian supporters had become something more like a movement, a pro-Trump uprising with a distinctive ideology. This ideology is sometimes called "[Christian nationalism,](#)" a description that often functions as a diagnosis. On a recent episode of "*REV*covery," a podcast about leaving Christian ministry, Justin Gentry, one of the hosts, suggested that the belief system was somewhat obscure even to its own adherents. "I think that, spitballing, seventy per cent of Christian nationalists don't know that they're Christian nationalists," he said. "They're just, like, 'This is normal Christianity, from the time of Jesus.'"

In contemporary America, though, the practice of Christianity is starting to seem abnormal. Measures of religious observance in America have shown a steep decrease over the past quarter century. In 1999, Gallup found that seventy per cent of Americans belonged to a church, a synagogue, or a mosque. In 2020, the number was forty-seven per cent—for the first time in nearly a hundred years of polling, worshippers were the minority. This changing environment helps explain the militance that is one of the defining features of Christian nationalism. It is a minority movement, espousing a claim that might not have seemed terribly controversial a few decades ago: that America is, and should remain, a Christian nation.

There is no canonical manifesto of Christian nationalism, and no single definition of it. In search of rigor, a pair of sociologists, Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, examined data from various surveys and tracked the replies to six propositions:

> The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.
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> The federal government should advocate Christian values.
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> The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state.

> The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.
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> The success of the United States is part of God's plan.
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> The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.

Respondents who answered more often in the affirmative (or, in the case of the third proposition, the negative) were judged to be more supportive of Christian nationalism, and the scholars conducted interviews with fifty subjects, to get a better sense of who believed what. Near the end of Trump's term, Whitehead and Perry published the results in a book called "[Taking America Back for God](#)," in which they predicted a growing schism. "Christian nationalism gives divine sanction to ethnocentrism and nativism," they wrote, noting that a number of respondents doubted that immigrants or non-English speakers could ever be "truly American." Christian nationalism was, they argued, a divisive creed; its adherents were more likely than other groups to believe "that Muslims and Atheists hold morally inferior values."

Perry expanded this argument last year in "[The Flag and the Cross](#)," which he wrote with the sociologist Philip S. Gorski. For many people, Gorski and Perry argue, "Christian" refers less to theology than to heritage. Drawing on their own survey, they found that more than a fifth of respondents who wanted the government to declare the U.S. a "Christian nation" also described themselves as being "secular," or an adherent of a non-Christian faith. Paradoxically, so did more than fifteen per cent of self-identified Christians. This last data point might be a sign that "Christian" is starting to become something more like "Jewish": an ancestral identity that you can keep, even if you don't keep the faith. There are, of course, plenty of nonwhite Christians in America, and even nonwhite Christian nationalists. (In the earlier book, Whitehead and Perry reported that Black Americans were in fact more likely than any other racial group to support Christian nationalism.) But Gorski and Perry argue that in American politics Christian nationalism [has often served as a white-identity movement](#). They note, for instance, that

white Americans who support Christian nationalism are likelier to evince disapproval of immigration and concern about anti-white discrimination. And they worry that "white Christian nationalism is working just beneath the surface" of American politics, ready to trigger an outburst, as it did [on January 6th](). "There will be another eruption—and soon," they write.

Gorski and Perry warn that a second Trump Administration might lead to "Jim Crow 2.0," with "non-white, undocumented immigrants" singled out for "mass deportations on an unprecedented scale." But they also note that the white Christian nationalists in their survey expressed the most hostility not toward immigrants or toward Muslims but toward socialists. In this, the Christian nationalists are firmly within the historical mainstream of American conservatism. That may also be true even of those respondents who wish to "institutionalize Christian identity and values in the public square," given all the ways in which America remains distinctively and sometimes officially Christian. (The federal government shuts down on Christmas, for instance, and on no other religious holiday; even in New York, there are special restrictions on the sale of alcohol on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath.) An allegedly insurgent demand is, in a way, a description of the status quo.

As a whole, the six Christian-nationalist propositions appear to be correlated with all sorts of other ideas and impulses. But, examined individually, most of them aren't hard to defend. School prayer has been the subject of a series of fine-grained Supreme Court decisions; this past summer, the Court ruled, 6–3, [in favor of a high-school football coach who liked to pray on the field after games](). As for whether it is God's plan that the United States succeed, even someone with nuanced views about Providence and predestination might nevertheless hope so. To a secular liberal, it might seem distasteful for a Christian to consider Muslim or atheistic values "morally inferior," or to want the government to promote "Christian values." But to claim any set of values as your own is to find them superior, in some meaningful sense, to the alternatives, and probably to hope that they will guide the decisions that your government makes on your behalf. In any case, it is impossible to

separate the Christian history of America from the country we live in today. Both the secularization of the country and the counter-reaction to that secularization are reflections, in different ways, of a country founded on ideals of faith and freedom.

Anyone looking for a charter of American Christian nationalism might begin in 1630, the year John Winthrop, the future governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, delivered his speech comparing the settlement to a "city upon a hill," in "covenant" with God, serving as a beacon to "all people." (The famous phrase came from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.") In the eighteenth century, arguments for American independence were often cast in religious terms. Congregationalists, who structured their churches around ideals of self-governance and free conscience, were particularly influential: Jonathan Mayhew, a Congregational minister in Boston, published a sermon in 1750 in which he denounced the "tyranny and oppression" of Charles I, the former king. (One of Charles's transgressions: "He authorized a book in favor of sports upon the *Lord's day*"; on this front, anyway, America is indisputably less Christian than it used to be.) And in November, 1777, the Continental Congress issued a message of wartime commemoration and gratitude—it is sometimes considered the first Thanksgiving proclamation—which extolled "the Principles of true Liberty, Virtue, and Piety." There is a certain tension, of course, between the principle of liberty and that of piety: in 1791, the First Amendment to the Constitution prohibited the "establishment of religion" by the new federal government, but Massachusetts did not officially break with the Congregational Church until 1833.

"We think he can still hear you."
Cartoon by Roland High

Then, as now, Christian identity in America was often tribal—which is to say, anti-tribal. In a fascinating book called "[Heathen](#)," the religious historian Kathryn Gin Lum suggests that, in many times and places, the divide

between Christian and "heathen" was the central divide in American life. The original British colonies were sometimes taken to be efforts to promote the "propagation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ amongst those poor heathen," as a 1649 act of Parliament declared. The term could justify both exclusion and engagement: the scourge of heathenism was later adduced as a reason to oppose Chinese immigration to California, and to support the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands. But "heathen" is an unstable identity, because it denotes a condition that ought to be cured. A heathen is someone who has not yet been exposed to and converted to Christianity.

Africans and their descendants were sometimes held to be heathens of a peculiar sort, because they were considered to be both a Biblical people and a cursed one: descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham and grandson of Noah. In the Bible, Ham has an ambiguous encounter with a drunk and naked Noah, and is punished with a generational affliction: "Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." [Frederick Douglass](), in his autobiography, described this view of Africans as a perversion of the Bible. He wrote that he abhorred what he called "the religion of the South," but also that he cherished "the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ." He was making a version of an argument that appears throughout American history: that this country is not truly Christian enough.

Across the centuries, the political power of Christianity has waxed and waned, in tandem with waves of religious revival and retreat, and with the needs and aspirations of politicians. In 1899, a newly elected U.S. senator, Albert J. Beveridge, endorsed the conquest of the Philippines in starkly missionary terms, declaring, "It is ours to bear the torch of Christianity where midnight has reigned a thousand years." Judging from church-membership figures, the nineteen-fifties may have been the most pious period in American history; it was the decade when the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance (1954), and when "In God we trust" was adopted as the country's official motto (1956). By then, politicians were

talking less about heathenism and more about a new adversary; many, like Senator Joseph McCarthy, believed that America was "engaged in a final, all-out battle between Communistic atheism and Christianity." In America, Christianity works best as an organizing principle when there is a strong non-Christian force to organize against.

In "[The Religion of American Greatness: What's Wrong with Christian Nationalism](#)," Paul D. Miller, a political scientist at Georgetown, tries to make sense of this complicated history. He is, he writes, a Christian, and a patriot, "proudly pro-life" and "a zealot for religious liberty." Yet he thinks there is a difference between leaders who humbly seek God's guidance and those who insist, as Jerry Falwell once did, that "when a nation's ways please the Lord, that nation is blessed with supernatural help." Miller wants Christians to be more aware of "the undemocratic elements of the founding," and more willing to consider the possibility that America's history since then has been, in some ways, "a gradual story of progress." In place of Christian nationalism, he advocates something more abstract: an acknowledgment that "Anglo-Protestant culture" has shaped America's ideals, and a hope that those ideals will endure, even as culture changes.

In the face of all this disapproval, a few intellectuals have decided to claim the term for themselves. In "[The Case for Christian Nationalism](#)," Stephen Wolfe, a political philosopher and faithful Presbyterian, advances a series of syllogisms designed to convince believers that they must help America become more Christian, and more of a nation. But the country he wants to bring about seems less a realistic future for America than a thought experiment—occasionally a sinister one. (Wolfe's Protestant vision sometimes evokes the Catholic "integralists," who dream of building an unapologetically Catholic state.) He has firm opinions on whether non-Christians are "entitled to political equality" (no), whether "political atheism" should be excluded from the bounds of "acceptable opinion" (yes), and whether "arch-heretics" can justifiably be put to death (yes). In Wolfe's view, Christians are too quick to dismiss the virtue of tribalism—the notion that

people are drawn to others who share their "ethnicity," a word he uses to gesture at a wide range of traits. (Ethnicity, as he defines it, is not just "blood ties" but also "language, manners, customs, stories, taboos, rituals, calendars, social expectations, duties, loves, and religion.") At one point, Wolfe disparages "ethnic identity politics," but elsewhere he suggests that "in some cases amicable ethnic separation along political lines" might be beneficial for everyone.

Wolfe's book avoids explicit claims about race, but after its publication, in November, a shadow was cast over it by an investigation that Alastair Roberts, an English theologian, conducted into the public writing of one of Wolfe's close friends and collaborators, Thomas Achord. (Achord hosted a podcast with Wolfe.) Roberts assembled evidence that Achord, under a pseudonym, had been posting online in support of what he called "robust race realist white nationalism." Roberts pointed to a Twitter account that had responded to a post from the American Jewish Committee by writing, "OK jew," and referred to Representative Cori Bush, of Missouri, as a "Ngress." In response to a discussion of white supremacy by Jemar Tisby, a prominent Black historian of Christianity, the account posted, "Please leave soon. — Sincerely, All White Peoples."

Achord parted ways with a Christian school in Louisiana where he had been headmaster, and said that the posts, most of them from 2020 or 2021, reflected "a spiritually dark time marked by pessimism and anger and strained relationships." While he eventually admitted that the Twitter account in question was his, he said he had "trouble recollecting" posts connected to it. (Achord could not be reached for comment.) Wolfe, who had defended Achord and had pledged some of his book royalties to him, wrote a Twitter thread "repudiating" the old tweets, and asking that his book be judged on its own merits. But the Achord affair made it clear that even a sympathetic reader of Wolfe's book could be confused about how, exactly, an ideology of "amicable ethnic separation" might differ from white nationalism.

The scandal was a big deal in the small world of intellectual Christian nationalism. One difference between Wolfe and someone like Jerry Falwell, who believed many of the same things, is that Falwell could plausibly claim to be leading what he called a "moral majority," whereas many of today's Christian nationalists are keenly aware of their minority status—and perhaps, as a consequence, less likely to worry about transgressing dominant social norms. In today's America, anyone eager to denounce "sodomy" is marking himself as a dissident: not a defender of American culture as it currently exists but, rather, an enemy of it. "Christian nationalist," as sociologists and pundits use the term, refers to a broad array of conservatives, concerned—as conservatives always are—about the way their country is changing. But those who embrace the term are a much smaller, self-selected group: in this climate, calling yourself a Christian nationalist is a much more radical act than merely being one.

The Presidency of George W. Bush was a high-water mark for Christian politics. Bush launched initiatives to support "faith-based organizations," and brought a missionary's fervor to the promotion of democracy in the Middle East and, much more successfully, *AIDS* treatment in Africa. By contrast, Trump was perhaps the least Christian President in modern times; although he kept his promise to anti-abortion Christian voters by appointing three Supreme Court Justices who helped [overturn Roe v. Wade](#), he seemed to view this not as a moral triumph but as a favor for a special interest. (During a recent interview, Trump said, "They won—Roe v. Wade, they won!" In this formulation, "they" meant the Christian lobby, and Trump expressed disappointment that "they" hadn't done more to support his preferred candidates during the 2022 midterms.) And, though some of Trump's supporters put Christian identity front and center, others are harder to categorize. The January 6th protester who prayed in the Senate, for instance, was Jake Angeli, known as the QAnon Shaman, who had previously referred to himself as part of a "light occultic force." During his prayer, Angeli thanked God for the "divine, omnipresent white light of love and protection, peace and harmony": this is the language of "lightworkers" and of other

contemporary spiritualists. Perhaps a shaman is the perfect figurehead for a movement defined by Christian heritage, not Christian faith. America may now be following the trajectory of Europe, where Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, talks about the importance of "Christian roots," even though fewer than twenty per cent of Hungarians attend church regularly. If the rise of Christian nationalism in America reflects the decline of Christianity, that is bittersweet news for secular liberals, because it means that they might expect to see more and more of it as the country grows less pious.

How did this decline happen? No one seems to know. Sociologists such as Gorski and Perry can tell us that Christian-nationalist beliefs reflect a tribal or partisan identity, but they can't tell us why so many self-identified Christians seem uninterested in the religion itself. Miller, for his part, seems confident that the Christian values he cherishes can endure and thrive, even in an increasingly post-Christian country, but it's not clear why. The question is even more urgent for someone like Wolfe, who portrays America as a formerly Christian polity undermined by immigration and relativism. If America was once better than it is now, why did our Christian forebears allow it to get worse? In answering this question, Wolfe sometimes sounds more like a critic of the faith than a defender of it. Christian majorities, he contends, too often refuse to wield government power when they have it, insisting on official neutrality in ways that Muslim majorities, for instance, typically don't. "Western Christians gaze at the ravishment of their Western heritage," he writes, "either blaming themselves or, even worse, reveling in their humiliation." He could almost be quoting Nietzsche, who excoriated Christianity for its ethic of mercy and self-sacrifice, for siding with "the weak, the low, the botched." Wolfe thinks that there is something "weird" about the way in which the U.S. and other Western nations reject ethnic chauvinism—officially, anyway—in favor of an "ideology of universality." But this weird universality is part of what sets Christianity apart from most other creeds. Tellingly, one of the scholars who blurbed Wolfe's book was the Israeli political scientist Yoram Hazony, who has suggested that American

nationalists should draw inspiration from the example of Israel, which conceives of itself as "the national state of a particular people."

The strangest thing about the debate over Christian nationalism is the assumption shared by many of the participants. The sociologists see a fearful tribe, resentful of a country that won't stop changing. Exponents see a small but indomitable movement, standing strong against a tide of secularism. Miller sees an opportunity for Christians to play a constructive role in a changing country, preaching what their compatriots may no longer practice. But the underlying idea is that recent trends will continue: that churches will keep emptying out, and that Christianity will become an ever more tribal identity. The secular country that emerges might be increasingly free, anxious, and unpredictable—less prayer in schools, more shamans in the Capitol. Why should we assume, though, that these trends are irreversible, and that most of today's Americans are beyond the reach of a message that has reached so many for so long? Earlier periods of secularization in America have given way to periods of Christian renewal. Is the next Christian revival just around the corner? It seems hard to believe—but, surely, not impossible. ◆