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# Nationalist and Non-nationalist Christianity in the United States

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Nationalist and Non-nationalist Christianity in the United States

By Aaron Epperson

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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and

Conflict Resolution

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## Introduction

*Religion was the first arena for American intellectual life, and thus the first arena for an anti-intellectual impulse. Anything that seriously diminished the role of rationality and learning in early American religion would later diminish its role in secular culture.*

*-Richard Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

Much ink has been spilled about the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. The speculation and theorizing about the success of his election in 2016 will undoubtedly continue if not increase with the 2024 presidential election around the corner and Trump himself looking to recapture the second term that slipped from his grasp. Regardless, no matter what official narrative about his elevation is favored in the future, reality reminds us that history is larger than one man. And in the case of Trump's rise to power, one of those drivers was his adoption by America's Christian Nationalist movement.

This observation of Trump, however, does not mean to center him in the story of Christian Nationalism in the US. Yet, his rise to political power and close association with the movement has become how most learn about Christian nationalism in the first place. Its new prominence in public discourse has been linked to Trump so often that the average observer might naturally assume they are integral to one another—especially after the violence on January 6 and other recent events. And with a broader understanding of nationalism, this close link to Trump makes sense. As a bullish and aggressive leader, his brash, populist, and country-first bravado closely aligns with the nationalist theme. When defined as a worldview, nationalism—no matter its manifestations—centers the nation above all other things, making it a self-serving arbiter that centers its interests while imbuing it with the power to control collective freedom, moral rightness, and state violence. Nationalism further promotes the nation as the pure source of

personal identity and, in many cases, as an extension of a fixed racial, ethnic, or religious community.<sup>1</sup> Trump has seemingly embraced many of these during this time in office.

Yet, the story of Christian nationalism and its philosophical forbearers in the country is much older than this relationship. Trump is only a new chapter in a much larger story that tracks back to the country's earliest days. While a defined movement under the banner of Christian nationalism may not have always existed in the US, the legacy of Manifest Destiny, the slavery of black and indigenous peoples, Japanese internment, and more show that many of its characteristics and principles have always been found in the American milieu—especially visible when one looks at the contemporary religious and social commentary on these events in their own time.

Thus, the connection between Trump and Christian nationalism causes a problem. This close linkage in the popular imagination fundamentally limits the ability to see and understand Christian nationalism in its full width and breadth. Instead of comprehending the historical and social drivers behind it, the conversation about Christian Nationalism has become artificially limited to current events and speculation. This limitation also causes the real motivations, goals, strengths, and weaknesses of Christian nationalism as a movement to be hidden from view and proper analysis.

The inability to see Christian nationalism holistically creates conditions that obfuscate or hide its more extreme expressions from a public too exhausted and overwhelmed by a 24-hour news cycle to look past headlines. In such a case, simple rebuke and rejection may be assumed to be enough to check its influence. Yet, as with many instances of nationalism in history, this response to it is rarely enough, offering anemic results at best.

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<sup>1</sup> Anastasiou, Harry. 2023. *The War on Terror and the Terror of War: Bellicose Nationalism versus Peace and Democracy*. Ebook. New York: Lexington Books. *Ebook*.

What follows is an attempt to clarify Christian Nationalism in the US and place it in the broader landscape of American Christianity. This attempt at explication hopes to reveal a more accurate view of Christian nationalism that goes past its current treatment in the news cycle. Such work is worthwhile because Christian nationalism is not simply an aspect of our political moment but a worldview with advocates pushing for its broad adoption in American political and religious life. If successful, the fundamental core of American democracy will forever be altered.

Accomplishing this means dividing the following into three parts. The first will explore nationalism, looking to explain what it is and is not. This deep dive into the basics of non-qualified nationalism is needed to resist the temptation offered by American exceptionalism — one that suggests Christian nationalism in this country is somehow unique when, in fact, it conforms to well-established patterns found in all expressions of nationalism. Afterwards, this article will compare nationalist and non-nationalist Christianity in the US, hoping to demonstrate how Christian nationalism is distinct from other forms of the faith. Lastly, a comparison between the narratives non-nationalist and nationalist Christianity's produce will be examined, focusing on the impacts of Christian nationalist rhetoric when it goes unopposed.

### **Pitfalls and the Soft Edges of Nationalism**

Pitfalls must be acknowledged when trying to complete such a project. A clear view of Christian nationalism rests at the intersection of many disciplines, including social anthropology, history, psychology, religious studies, politics, conflict resolution, and more. A truly complete picture of it would require an interdisciplinary team. The best that can be hoped for here is a clear snapshot that offers an entry point for those looking to explore the topic further.

There is also a fundamental issue when talking about Christian nationalism because of the broad language and scope that must be used in discussing its features and claims. Nuance and

subtle differences between positions and arguments—especially in politics and theology—are easily lost. This means that the study of Christian nationalism done here must also necessarily be qualified as coming from one viewpoint and the academic perspective of peace and conflict studies. This perspective naturally concerns itself with the historical and structural mechanisms behind conflicts, their causes, and perceptions and suggests possibilities to end or manage the clashes they produce. Therefore it is multidisciplinary in nature and temperament, erring on the side of a broad approach to its topics. This approach, however, holds some danger. In an attempt to promote resolutions and more desirable human conditions through analysis, it can appear to sidestep personal interactions and leave out the individual dimension. Sadly, because of limits and time, this project's scope stops an exploration of personal interactions with Christian nationalism—although this work is desperately vital as this topic continues to be explored.

In light of the limitations under which the work here is being done, this last point should be highlighted and well-considered by those who find Christian nationalism's current swell in popularity and influence as a cause for alarm. There is a significant difference between the abstractions and ideas underlying Christian nationalism and Christian nationalists as people. Nationalism offers no firm, outer edge, clearly marking its adherents. Because of this, the acceptance of any nationalism by individuals should be seen as existing on a sliding scale. Therefore, calling someone a Christian nationalist does not mean they accept or hold every conviction that comes with the worldview. Instead, their alignment with Christian nationalism should be measured depending on the evidence of their actions and what they state about their own beliefs. Fundamentally, there is a vast difference between a person attending a church's Fourth of July picnic and their neighbor who is a member of a far-right anti-government militia.

Indeed, to complicate matters further, some people are nationalists but might not know the word, just like there are nationalists who consider themselves sincerely committed to peace. For every broad generalization, there is an exception to the rule. Therefore, applying the following points or conclusions to conversations with individual Christian nationalists should be done after sober contemplation.

### **Nationalism**

*With our young, wide-open eyes, we saw that the classical notion of patriotism we had heard from our teachers meant, in practical terms at that moment, surrendering our individual personalities more completely than we would ever have believed possible...*

*- Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front*

Nationalism is an ideology born from the crucible of the French and Industrial Revolutions at the beginning of the 18th century. Before that time, many conditions that make the modern world possible were absent. The life and psychological norms of common people revolved around their community and the demands of agrarian life. And because of this, most found themselves with lives filled with tight connections to those around them with a firm grasp on their own identity and place in the world. One must remember that history often ignores the masses, and our impressions of the past are filtered through the lens of elites—those with the time and resources to write things down. Because of that, it is important to underscore that before the birth of nationalism in 18th century Europe, the politics of kings, and the new ideals of the Enlightenment were far off for most people as they went about daily life. Not until events like the Industrial and French Revolutions did people find themselves in radically different circumstances, migrating from rural to urban lives and from farming to factory work.

In this new reality, people found themselves no longer connected to tight communities but rather as one person in a crowd of strangers, eventually being urged by historical drivers to



be political. Gone was the clear understanding of who a person was based on their role in their family or village. Karl Marx would use this shift to critique capitalism, arguing that the new world of individuals would need to be harnessed for change by forging them into the working class.<sup>2</sup> However, Marxism and its philosophical descendants were not the only ideas that resulted from this new world. It would go on to provide the psychological elements necessary for the rise of nationalism after the birth of nation-states that resulted from the collapse of European empires. Now detached from traditional ways of forming an identity, people naturally looked for ways to fill the void, and eventually, many settled on their own nation-states as the source. As Harry Anastasiou (2008) explains in his series about nationalism and ethnic conflict in Cyprus, *The Broken Olive Branch*, nationalism is much more than politics. Instead, it is a worldview with deep historical and sociological roots, and its prominent theme is the centrality of the nation-state. From this lens, he explains, "...nationalism is a way of being in the world. It implies that nationalists have a certain view of life, society, and history."<sup>3</sup>

It must be noted that today many definitions of nationalism are used, both among scholars and in news and popular media. The analysis here agrees with Anastasiou in his assessment that nationalism is a worldview that focuses on the centrality of the nation-state as the ultimate good for society. That is because nationalism is not confined to specific political outlooks or tendencies. Liberals, progressives, conservatives, and libertarians can all be nationalists. It is just that these and other views are secondary to the nationalist worldview they hold.

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<sup>2</sup>Kittrie, Nicholas N. 1997. "The Crisis of Identity At The Dawn of The Third Millennium." *International Journal on World Peace* 14 (4): 5–6.

<sup>3</sup>Anastasiou, Harry. 2012. *The Broken Olive Branch: Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and the Quest for Peace in Cyprus*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Syracuse Studies on Peace and Conflict Resolution. Syracuse University Press.

It is also inappropriate to conflate nationalism with patriotism or fascism, which is frequently done in popular discourse. While in times past, patriotism and nationalism have been synonymous, today, they are perhaps best understood as distinct. While taking pride in their country and its traditions, patriots would stop short of seeing it as the ultimate good for society. They might not share a nationalist understanding of history. Turning to fascism, it is important to underscore that it is a specific political system defined by its relationship to authoritarianism, conformity, racial ideology, and more. While fascism holds at its core a hard-line form of ultranationalism, it does not represent it as a whole. While all fascists are nationalists, not all nationalists are fascists. Nationalists, within the bounds of the nation-state, can be open to democracy and other anti-fascist ideals, given their particular ideas on what is best for their nation.

If nationalism is a worldview, then there are tendencies we can look for and identify that should be generally held by nationalists, no matter what country they live in or their social location. While prudence limits the examples provided here, identifying common themes in the nationalist worldview helps us unpack it more broadly and discover its edges.

Within the framework of nationalism, people conflate their national identity with their individual one. In other words, to be themselves means also *being a citizen of their nation*. A consistent nationalist would never be able to move from one country to another and adopt or embrace the customs and outlooks found there. This psychological component brings about a particular perspective of the self in that people adopting nationalist thinking believe what is good for them is good for the country and *vice versa*. When taken to its extreme, this conflation between self-interest and nation produces a form of narcissism. It sets the stage where any negative comment on the nation—even in the form of political discourse or constructive

critique—can become an attack on the person. Understanding how this works and is translated to the group level is still being studied and debated. As an example, in a recent article for *Political Psychology*, researchers posit that nationalism is distinct from what they call *national collective narcissism*, defined as an exaggerated belief in the greatness of one's nation that is dependent on external validation. They argue that while nationalism and it are related, those prone to become nationalists may have experienced *national collective narcissism* beforehand as a stepping stone to the worldview.<sup>4</sup>

Another common trait among nationalists is an aggressive approach to policing ingroups and outgroups. Said another way, nationalists are obsessive about who counts as legitimate members of the nation-state and who does not, no matter what passport they might hold. The current rise of Hindu nationalism in India showcases this principle. Writing for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Milan Vaishnav observes that Hindu nationalists reject Christians, Jews, Parsis, and Muslims as authentically Indian because their religious centers are in other countries, unlike Hinduism, which centers India itself. In this example of religious nationalism, to be Indian and Hindu is one and the same.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the most well-known example of this principle is the Holocaust which saw Nazis murder over six million Jews—accusing them of being a hostile force among the supposedly pure German population. But this principle is often more subtle, expressing itself in conversations, attitudes, and laws that look to curtail the rights and comfort of outside or minority groups in less extreme ways. Comments about 'fly-over country' or the practice of redlining are examples of this in action in the US.

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<sup>4</sup> Federico, Christopher M., Agnieszka Golec De Zavala, and Wen Bu. 2023. "Collective Narcissism as a Basis for Nationalism." *Political Psychology* 44 (1): 177–96.

<sup>5</sup> Vaishnav, Milan. 2019. "Religious Nationalism and India's Future - The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. April 4, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/religious-nationalism-and-india-s-future-pub-78703>.

These two tendencies among nationalists are probably the most recognizable in everyday life. Indeed, these behaviors are so ingrained in many nation-states that it could be easy to miss them as nationalist in origin, identifying them as negative cultural norms instead. However, that leads to another point about nationalism that should not be overlooked in discussions about it. Despite how ingrained it may seem, nationalism is not the natural endpoint people come to while living in the modern nation-state system of the globe. It is only a result produced by historical drivers. Therefore, nationalism and the negative consequences that follow from its more extreme expressions can be countered. To understand how nationalism is not the default, we must return to the earlier conversation about life before the shift from an agrarian society to an industrial one

While that change was a significant event of mass mobilization across Europe and the rest of the world, not everyone left rural life. Many people found themselves in newly formed nation-states because of historical events, but that did not mean they suddenly saw themselves as sharing the nation's identity or letting go of their local ones. As Walker Connor points out, this was the case in France. While France's academic and upper-class intelligentsia insisted that French national identity was visible in history since the middle ages, many people in the rural parts of the country failed to conceive of themselves as French as late as World War I.<sup>6</sup> Today, cross-border democratic organizations like the United Nations and the European Union have gone on to demonstrate that many people are willing to reject hard nationalism in search of what they see as better alternatives, namely that of extending democracy across national borders.

### **Ethno-ideological religious nationalism**

So far, a focus has been placed on non-qualified nationalism to showcase the broad throughlines and shared components qualified nationalisms have between them. British

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<sup>6</sup> Connor, Walker. 1994. "When Is a Nation?" In *Nationalism*, edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, 154–59. Oxford Reader. Oxford University Press.

nationalism, Hindu nationalism, and Greek nationalism all may have unique features when considered on their own, but broadly speaking, the worldview they share makes them all fundamentally unremarkable and homogeneous in rhetoric, if not action. They all claim their own nation is unique, exceptional, and sacred.<sup>7</sup> This is, of course, the case for Christian nationalism. While its proponents wrap their ideas and arguments in the American flag and baptize it with Christian theology, they still argue for a worldview that centers the nation-state as the ultimate good for society. They still demonstrate an exaggerated belief in the greatness of their nation-state, and they are obsessive about who counts as legitimate, fighting constant rhetorical and political battles to declare who is in and who is out as a member of the nation.

Mark Juergensmeyer points out that two forms of religious nationalism have evolved over the years—ethnic and ideological. Ethnic-religious nationalism is connected to people and land. These nationalists use religious and cultural identities to argue for their right to their nation-state. Ideological-religious nationalism rejects the laical underpinnings of secular nationalism, politicizes their faith, and hopes to recast society along their religious-ideological lines. Modern Christian nationalism blends these strains into what Juergensmeyer calls *ethno-ideological religious nationalism*.<sup>8</sup> These movements focus on religious and ethnic identity when forming the criteria for bonds and who should be at the top within the power structure. By way of another example, Juergensmeyer cites the Hamas movement in Palestine as another illustration of this form of nationalism. Their ideology is summed up in a quote from their founder, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who said, "the only true Palestinian state is an Islamic state."

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<sup>7</sup> Anastasiou, *The War on Terror and the Terror of War, Ebook*.

<sup>8</sup> Juergensmeyer, Mark. 1996. "The Worldwide Rise of Religious Nationalism." *Journal of International Affairs* 50 (1): 1–20.

To better understand this form of nationalism, it is worth breaking down and examining its major parts of ethnic and religious nationalism. Ethnic nationalism is the idea that nation-states should be composed of and serve one ethnic group—tied to each other by traditions and shared identity. Indeed, this idea is deeply connected to nationalism in general. The notion that ethnicities (or nations) should be bound together through a state government within a physical territory spawned decades of violence in Europe and is even now a major factor in the Russo-Ukrainian War today. It continues to be a major factor in violence on the global stage in other places, with conflicts in Myanmar, Israel, and Ethiopia’s Tigray region being prime examples in modern times.

Nationalists often uphold the idea of monoethnic nation-states as a natural progression of history. Some claim that national identities exist before a nation-state and that the birth of a state provides formal oversight and bureaucracy to an already existing reality. Nationalists see ethnicity as an *a priori* reality that naturally collects members together and whose common bond should crescendo into the birth of a nation-state should history allow. However, these claims are hard to support, as Connor helped demonstrate earlier in the case of French national identity. How nations, or ethnic groups form, is still debated, but the idea that ethnic identity is somehow a clear or pure construct linking groups of people to the past in a straight line has been widely dismissed. For example, the social anthropologist Fredrik Barth argued that ethnicity was more like an ongoing negotiation within the broader context ethnic groups found themselves in and is malleable.<sup>9</sup> Other issues abound with ethnic nationalism, as well. States that form around the idea—that one identity should be catered to above others—often treat minority ethnicities or groups as second-class citizens or active threats to the nation-state's well-being. Perhaps the best

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<sup>9</sup> Barth, Fredrik, ed. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*. Reissued 1998. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press.

example of this in modern times is the tension between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, whose conflicts have been well documented.<sup>10</sup> As a nation founded on the ethnic identity of Jewish people, Israel has often enshrined Jews as priority citizens, leaving Arabs and others iced out of equal rights and protection in broader society.

Sharing many features of ethnic nationalism, religious nationalism shifts the focus to religious identity and practice as the core bond between people. Via this frame, religion becomes the lens adherents see traditional nationalist ideas through. God (or the equivalent) is directly linked with the concept of the nation-state, and it operates under divine mandate and authority. The tenants and laws of the religion are ideally adopted as the law of the land. Non-religious people, those of other faiths, and even those sharing the faith but with different theology are otherized and become potential targets of violence if seen to be causing harm. While other forms of the worldview may rest their arguments for nationalism in history and identity, the shift towards placing the divine at the center of the nation-state represents a fundamental difference in attitude. It is one thing to argue with history and quite another to argue with God. In this framework, then, the mandates and norms of the state become sanctified, and any opposition can be seen as a denial of divine authority.

### **Nationalism and violence**

Careful readers of this exploration of nationalism will have noticed a theme starting to develop. Within the worldview, there is always an outsider or internal other who represents a fundamental threat to the ingroup or purity of the nation. This feature of nationalism means that by proxy, nationalism and its resulting calls to action have become one of the largest motivators for violence in the modern world. This trend does not seem to be abating, as Christian

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<sup>10</sup> Rouhana, Nadim N., and Susan H. Korper. 1996. "Dealing with the Dilemmas Posed by Power Asymmetry in Intergroup Conflict." *Negotiation Journal* 12 (4): 353–66.

nationalism within the US is but one example of a turn towards nationalism that has been seen across the world. While Hindu nationalism in India has already been mentioned, to it can be added movements in Poland, Italy, Russia, Iran, China, and more. While many of these countries have long nationalist traditions, the uptick and acceptance of nationalism within their popular discourses and policies are concerning. For example, in choosing Giorgia Meloni as their new Prime Minister in 2022, Italians elected not only the first woman to the office but also an open far-right nationalist who has opted to defend neighboring Poland's authoritarian leadership.<sup>11</sup> By way of otherization, her government has recently started to attack surrogacy, arguably because of its popularity as a way for LGBTQ couples to have children.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, writing on same-sex adoption, a member of Meloni's government, Minister Eugenia Roccella wrote that children raised by same-sex couples are "destined to grow up in a tormented life."

Nationalism's interplay with ethnicity and religion also motivates other, more direct forms of violence, as seen in the current Russo-Ukrainian War and the German annexation of Austria (an event known as the Anschluss) directly before World War II. In both cases, Russia and Germany developed arguments that justified territorial expansionism intending to bring outside ethnic enclaves into the country's physical borders. Both are practical outgrowths of the nationalist belief that ethnic groups should naturally come under a unified nation-state within unified borders. While many Austrians were enthusiastic about embracing Nazification after the Anschluss because of the high percentage of ethnic Germans in the country, it also made them culpable in the murder of tens of thousands of Austrian Jews. On the other side, Ukraine's fierce

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, Patrick, and Claudio Lavanga. 2022. "A Far-Right Nationalist Looks Likely to Become Italy's First Female Prime Minister." News. NBC News. September 25, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/italy-giorgia-meloni-far-right-nationalist-prime-minister-mussolini-rcna48506>.

<sup>12</sup> Pascale, Federica. 2023. "Debate Flares in Italy over Surrogacy, LGBT Rights." Euractiv. March 20, 2023. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/debate-flares-in-italy-over-surrogacy-lbgt-rights/>.



resistance to Russian invasion has already seen hundreds of thousands dead on both sides with no end in sight as this is being written.<sup>13</sup>

The broad swath of examples displayed in this conversation may seem suspect, as seemingly disparate forms of nationalist violence have been given. It is easy to see how examples ranging from attacks on LGBTQ rights to war might seem alarmist or too broad in scope. While such suspicions are healthy, the argument here includes accepting that many forms of violence exist, including physical, emotional, political, and so on. The performance and display of violence is as much the point as the harm itself, so whether violence is physical or not does not mean it is any less effective. As Philip Dwyer explains, the concept of violence itself is often ambiguous and culturally specific. This means that the perceptions of violence and what is considered violence vary widely from culture to culture. Because of this, theories of violence have been expanded to include more than just physical manifestations and have explored ways the structure of a society can turn into forms of violence, as an example. In these frameworks, violence is often calculated, but its results and outcomes are often unforeseen and unintentional.<sup>14</sup> And as history shows, nationalist movements lean on any form of violence that helps satisfy its goals.

### **Christianity**

*To be convinced of the sanctity of the world, and to be mindful of a human vocation to responsible membership in such a world, must always have been a burden. But it is a burden that falls with greatest weight on us humans of the industrial age...*  
- Wendell Berry, *The Burden of the Gospels*

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<sup>13</sup> Faulconbridge, Guy. 2023. "Ukraine War, Already with up to 354,000 Casualties, Likely to Last Past 2023 - U.S. Documents." *Reuters*, April 12, 2023, sec. Europe. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-war-already-with-up-354000-casualties-likely-drag-us-documents-2023-04-12/>.

<sup>14</sup> Dwyer, Philip. 2022. *Violence: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 3-4

Serious discussion about present-day Christianity in the US must start with the dramatic shift in religious opinion and allegiance over the last few decades. As seen in data from the Pew Research Center, the demographics of religious beliefs have quickly changed. In 2019 they reported that only 65% of American adults considered themselves Christian, down from 77% ten years prior. This loss stretches across the Protestant and Catholic divide, with both groups shrinking as the religiously unaffiliated rise in number. That population saw massive growth from 16% to 23% during the same period.<sup>15</sup>

As expected, this and other changes have caused some to speculate that the US will follow Europe's supposed embrace of secularism—one that expresses religion's place is in the home, not the public square. A concept perhaps poorly understood but best seen by Americans in France with its tradition of *laïcité*. Yet, this example of America's declining Christian impulse does not create a trustworthy narrative on its own. In an analysis of the decline of Christianity for CNN, John Blake rightly points out that immigration and ethnic change may have a massive impact on America's religious future, providing a pathway for Christian influence to remain a feature in American civic life.<sup>16</sup>

As people continue to migrate to the US from areas with different religious contexts, such as the Global South, and as the country sees its population become majority-minority, it may be unwise to assume the US will be the next Europe. The shrinking of American religious identity is most evident among Whites, and to extend trends about them to others would be premature. And indeed, it seems that even Europe may not be as committed to secularism as once thought, with

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<sup>15</sup> “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.” 2019. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

<sup>16</sup> Blake, John. 2023. “Predictions about the Decline of Christianity in America May Be Premature.” CNN, April 9, 2023, sec. Opinion. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/08/us/christianity-decline-easter-blake-cec/index.html>.

far-right movements in Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and Russia openly appealing to their own forms of Christian nationalism to maintain and grow support.<sup>17</sup>

These factors directly relate to both nationalist and non-nationalist Christianity in the US. Convincing arguments have been made that fears over demographic shifts and immigration have been a major motivating factor in the growing popularity of Christian nationalism—especially among Whites. Yet these same forces have also had massive effects on non-nationalist Christianity as it looks to retain its historical prominence in the nation. Episcopal Churches celebrating the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Asian-American clergy demanding their denominations fight anti-Asian racism, and Eastern Orthodox Missions opening to serve Black communities are all examples. This all suggests that America's popular idea of who is and is not a Christian may need to change over the following decades. While these trends are not enough to know the destiny of American Christianity over the long term, it contains enough clues that the popular mental image of a Christian being a White man in the pulpit will need to be revised, perhaps better replaced by a Latina woman volunteering at her local food pantry.

Racial and ethnic diversity is further complicated in American Christianity by wide theological and political variety. Christian diversity spreads across the country, from Eastern Orthodoxy to Quakerism and Charismatics to Independent Fundamental Baptists. While the prevalent way to talk about Christianity within the US has been to speak of the gap between Catholics and Protestants, this does not go far enough to showcase the full landscape of Christian thought. Even with single denominations, the width and breadth of views can be areas of the study unto themselves. And because of this, it cannot be assumed that Christians who agree on political ideology and advocate for specific outcomes as a group are free from deep theological

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<sup>17</sup> Barker, Philip W. 2009. *Religious Nationalism In Modern Europe: If God Be For Us*. Routledge Studies in Nationalism and Ethnicity. London and New York: Routledge. 10-14.

disagreements about their faith. And it is in this context that conversations focusing on Christian nationalism must take place.

### **Christian Nationalism**

As mentioned above, one of the critical features of Christian Nationalism is its Whiteness. According to a report published by the Public Religion Research Institute, "White evangelical Protestants are more supportive of Christian nationalism than any other group surveyed. Nearly two-thirds of white evangelical Protestants qualify as either Christian nationalist sympathizers (35%) or adherents (29%)." This finding makes sense when considering nationalism's relationship to ethnic identity.<sup>18</sup>

It must be noted that White evangelical Protestants are not alone in their support. PRRI/Brookings found significant yet lower rates of support among Asian, Hispanic, and Black Protestants as well. This support among non-whites seems deeply connected to evangelical identity. The report outlines that language around being 'born-again' or self-identifying as an evangelical positively correlates with Christian nationalism across racial identity. Those Christians who did not self-identify as evangelical are dramatically less likely to support Christian nationalism. Another predictor is political affiliation, with the report stating that most Republicans support Christian nationalism (sympathizers at 33% and adherents at 21%), while most Democrats and Independents lean towards rejecting it.

Lastly, this report helps us address the accusation that Christian nationalists are not real Christians. Typically, this argument stems from those hoping to rob Christian nationalism of its legitimacy or voice. However, the PRRI/Brookings' report suggests this is not the case, finding

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<sup>18</sup> ""More Acceptance but Growing Polarization on LGBTQ Rights: Findings From the 2022 American Values Atlas." 2023. Washington, DC: PRRI. <https://www.prri.org/research/findings-from-the-2022-american-values-atlas/>.

that those in favor of Christian nationalism are nearly twice as likely to report attending church than other Americans, with 44% saying religion is the most important thing in their lives.

This debate about Christian nationalists and the authenticity of their faith should be dismissed as it presupposes arguments and demands evidence that cannot be constructed in a meaningful way. After all, who is and is not a Christian is a deeply theological question that has been the root cause of more than one war throughout history. Such questions, then, are not helpful when studying or understanding Christian nationalism for the discussion here.

That said, the interplay between authentic faith and Christian nationalism should not be reduced to this dispute. In his 2009 book on religious nationalism in Europe, Philip Baker notes there is evidence the adoption of religious nationalism drives religious practice, not the other way around as some may assume. He quotes John Coakley, who, in turn, argues that through the lens of nationalism, religious identity is more critical than adherence. However, even if this is true, the underlying personal reasons for religious belief do not automatically make it less genuine or sincere at the individual level.<sup>19</sup>

Because of this complexity, Christian nationalism cannot be judged by its theologies or claims alone. A clear picture of it can only come into view by examining what it also leads people to do along with exploring what they claim to believe. And through the brief exploration of Christian nationalism done here, we can start to define it. Therefore, Christian nationalism in the US is an example of *ethno-ideological religious nationalism* that declares Christianity should be the state religion. Christian nationalists support this claim because they believe the nation-state is the ultimate good sanctioned by God and therefore do not view a distinction between their identity as Christians or citizens. For them to be a Christian is to be a citizen of the US.

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<sup>19</sup> Barker, 14.

Because of this tight connection of identity, they are more prone to accepting and supporting behaviors that downplay or are openly hostile to those in the nation-state who do not fit their Christian-American ideal. To see how this plays out, we must place the historical drivers of Christian nationalism in the US in context.

### *The road to evangelicals*

Religiosity has traditionally found fertile soil in America. As a colony of the British Empire, it was firmly under the spiritual authority of the Church of England. However, the New World offered a haven for European religious minorities fleeing persecution. While Christian in declaration, these groups varied wildly. Catholics, Baptists, Quakers, and more made the colonies their home. Eventually, Protestantism became the dominant form of Christianity within the US, even after the country adopted secular rule through its constitution.

The first part of the twentieth century found the descendants of these Protestant traditions engaged in a monumental theological dispute between liberals and conservatives. In *The Evangelicals*, Frances FitzGerald explains that liberal theologians had come to dominate the country's major centers of theological education, including the divinity schools at Harvard and Yale. In response, theological conservatives published a series of books entitled *The Fundamentals*, condemning everything from Catholicism to Darwinism. These writings would spark the modern fundamentalist movement to which they lend their name.<sup>20</sup>

Despite their founding zeal, Fundamentalists would eventually fall out of favor as the years passed. FitzGerald relates that the movement ultimately lost public credibility when members fought to keep evolution out of schools through the highly publicized Scopes trial in

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<sup>20</sup> FitzGerald, Frances. 2017. *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

1925. Many saw this event and doctrines within Fundamentalism, such as dispensationalism,<sup>21</sup> as signs of anti-intellectualism. It would take a 50-year gap and the preaching of a young fundamentalist named Billy Graham to bring the spirit of the movement back to the national stage.

Billy Graham is still remembered as a force of nature, becoming one of the first preachers to harness the power of television, reaching millions with his message of redemption. He spent hours traveling and preaching across the country, guiding the new faithful, and his efforts sparked a religious fervor, filling pews nationwide. Soon, other so-called televangelists would take to the airwaves following Graham's lead, sparking the creation of America's current evangelical landscape.

### ***The Evangelical-Republican Alliance***

According to historian Kristin DuMez, this new center of power and influence attracted the attention of Republican politicians looking to use the evangelical movement to their advantage. As DuMez explains, President Dwight Eisenhower cultivated a relationship with Billy Graham after the famed preacher had signaled to Republicans that they could win the evangelical vote if they were willing to marry their policy to evangelical morality.<sup>22</sup> For Eisenhower, this also became a way to cultivate support among a broad cross-section of the public regarding the Cold War. As a result, both preacher and President worked to frame the Cold War religiously, with messages that promised a robust American military would keep the USSR at bay, leaving citizens free to worship God how they saw fit. This relationship would culminate in the departure of White southern evangelicals from their traditional home in the

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<sup>21</sup> A way of reading the Bible literally that states history is divided into stages while emphasizing prophecies of the future.

<sup>22</sup> Du Mez, Kristin. 2020. *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted and Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Democratic Party over the following decades, pushing them into the arms of the GOP. Other evangelical leaders like Jerry Farwell and Bob Jones would also lead the way, helping to trigger a new embrace of conservative theology, now mixed with Republican politics.

Farwell eventually founded the Moral Majority in 1979. The organization was designed to gather conservative Christians and mobilize their vote for conservative political causes. This and other developments spurred the birth of the modern Christian political right. At the time, this development shocked many political observers, who had predicted the decline of religion in public life. The following year, Farwell traveled across the country, recruiting pastors to his cause while denouncing abortion, pornography, and homosexuality at rallies.<sup>23</sup>

Du Mez argues that embracing conservative politics within conservative theology has resulted in evangelicals adopting a new version of the faith as time has gone on. This modern creation upholds conservative theological positions yet now supports them using a hard-line interpretation of masculinity modeled more on militancy and pop-culture icons like John Wayne than the teaching of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament. This new relationship to masculinity is important to Du Mez's explication of the modern evangelical movement and its adoption of Christian Nationalism. She writes:

From the start, evangelical masculinity has been both personal and political. In learning how to be Christian men, evangelicals also learned how to think about sex, guns, war, borders, Muslims, immigrants, the military, foreign policy, and the nation itself.<sup>24</sup>

The union with the political right, through the embrace of the Republican party, has also changed the meaning of evangelicalism. As evidence of this, today, even the word evangelical has started

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<sup>23</sup> FitzGerald, 291-294.

<sup>24</sup> Du Mez, 279.



to decouple from its original theological meaning. Gone is any talk of the Bebbington quadrilateral.<sup>25</sup> Increasingly, it has become a shorthand used to sum up a person's political identity and how they feel about social issues.

Lastly, it is essential to note that everything mentioned above is the history of White evangelicalism in the US. As a theological movement, evangelicalism immediately planted roots in the Black church and eventually among other groups like Hispanics. Yet, these other evangelical traditions are almost wholly absent from the histories of evangelicalism Du Mez and FitzGerald chronicle, as they themselves note. That is because the story of the evangelical embrace of conservatism and the Republican party happened along White ethnic lines in the US—often as a direct response to the Civil Rights movement Black evangelicals like Martin Luther King Jr. were leading during the same time.

What does this say about finding support for Christian nationalism among some minorities highlighted earlier by PRRI and The Brookings Institution? Precious little. This is, of course, a byproduct of the fact that Christian nationalism is still active and evolving in the US, and shifts like these will need to be studied by scholars as time goes by. For instance, the report suggests that some non-White supporters of Christian nationalism do not see anti-Black racism as an issue and may be anti-immigrant themselves. These insights should indicate that the story of Christian nationalism in the US should never be considered stagnant or straightforward.

### *Christian nationalism today*

The rise of the religious right in the US, fueled by the evangelical movement, continued into the late 1980s and 1990s. However, it arguably helped expand a darker side of American

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<sup>25</sup> A definition of evangelicalism developed by British historian David W. Bebbington that focuses on their acceptance of four principles. Including the Bible as the source of spiritual truth, a focus on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the need for all people to be converted, and the importance of evangelism and missionary work.

political life. During this period, beliefs like Christian Identity<sup>26</sup> swirled with Nazi groups, Klan organizations, and anti-government radicals producing stand-offs like Ruby Ridge and Waco. Timothy McVeigh cited both events as reasons he carried out the tragic Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995, killing over 600 people. It also witnessed the election of David Duke, a self-professed Christian Ku Klux Klan leader, as a Republican to the Louisiana State House of Representatives.

In this confusing era of conspiracy, racism, and violence in the far-right, Christianity plays a complicated role. However, it is hard not to argue that the more extreme elements of the far-right during this time incubated the future ideological arguments more radical Christian nationalists have made during the Donald Trump era. This conclusion is supported by David Duke's and other far-right extremists' emphatic support of Donald Trump during his presidential campaigns, seeing in him a continuation of their movements and the resurgence of White supremacists groups that took part in the Unite the Right rally discussed later on.

Of course, no conversation about Christian nationalism can be had without speaking about 9/11. The terrorist attack that day fundamentally changed the world and drove nationalism within the US to new heights, as shown by the classic signifiers of nationalism in the months and years following it. Attacks on Arabs and other minorities increased as a form of ethnic otherization. A new pride in American identity and exceptionalism swept the public, with President Bush and others claiming US exceptionalism was one of the core reasons for the attack.

This wounding of American national identity and ego, coupled with the inherent group narcissism nationalism encourages, sparked the resulting Global War on Terror, Iraq War, and Afghan War. All of these took on religious overtones, with President Bush casting them with that

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<sup>26</sup> A belief in many extreme right-wing groups that states ethnic Europeans are the descendants of the "Lost Tribes of Israel" and that modern Jews are impostors.

history-pregnant term *crusade*. This framing rhetoric may have played well at home at the time, but its effect on many outside the US and in the global Muslim community reinforced a narrative that the resulting actions of the US had undeniable Christian overtones if not direct motivations.<sup>27</sup>

The election of Barack Obama, the first Black executive of the country, again strengthened American nationalism, both in its religious and secular forms. Anger about the election of Obama engulfed the political right, spurring the creation of new movements like the Tea Party and a host of conspiracies about Obama himself, such as claims he was secretly Muslim and that his birth certificate was fake, making him a non-citizen and therefore ineligible to sit in the Oval Office. It also pushed Tony Blankley to publish his book, *American Grit*, a full-throated endorsement of nationalism that, while not religious, laid out the political agenda with force.

Blankley, however, was not a political outcast or fringe player like in the case of Duke and others in the far-right. His credentials included time spent as a speechwriter for President Regan and an editor for the Washington Post. Before his death due to stomach cancer in 2012, his later career saw him serve as press secretary for former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. He also spent significant time on the right-wing radio circuit and was not a stranger to appearances on mainstream news networks.<sup>28</sup> In *American Grit*, Blankley sheds his identity as a traditional conservative and fully embraces American nationalism. "My first objective is no longer to find the policy that best fits my definition of conservative," he wrote, "but rather the

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<sup>27</sup> McCartney, Paul T. 2004. "American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War." *Political Science Quarterly* 114 (3): 409-410.

<sup>28</sup> Puzanghera, Jim. 2012. "Tony Blankley Dies at 63; Press Secretary to Speaker Newt Gingrich." *Los Angeles Times*. January 9, 2012. <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-tony-blankley-20120109-story.html>.

surest path to protecting my country."<sup>29</sup> He argues that protection should be based on placing US interests at the center of every decision, even at the expense of human rights.

Blankley goes on to denounce a comprehensive list of items he feels are putting the country at risk including entitlement programs, and investment by the Obama administration into international diplomacy. His book also calls for implementing a permanent military draft among young men, restricting the free press, removing "multicultural education" from schools, and pulling funding from colleges that publish research deemed worthless or hostile to US policy, foreign or domestic.

Perhaps most disturbing, however, is Blankley's proposal that individual Americans should be willing to lose personal rights and benefits in their own country because of national security demands. "Currently, the best interest of the nation requires us to consider rolling back our attachment to personal rights and entitlements," he declared, "an attachment that has become self-indulgent."

Blankley proves himself to be a textbook nationalist in *American Grit*, making argument after argument that any weakness or deviation from his version of absolute loyalty to the country is an attack on the US itself. For him, the US is the ultimate good for its citizens and, at times, for the world. However, his direct engagement with religion was through the denunciation of Islam via terrorism and a few cultural notes of the risk of losing what has been termed America's Judeo-Christian heritage. His work is an essential stop on the way to today's Christian nationalism.

Blankley's foundation for the political adoption of nationalism in the US would be picked up by Donald Trump in spirit, and at times through action, when in 2018 he declared himself a

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<sup>29</sup> Blankley, Tony. 2009. *American Grit: What It Will Take to Survive and Win in the 21st Century*. Ebook. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc.

nationalist at a political rally supporting Senator Ted Cruz in Texas.<sup>30</sup> While denounced by his political foes, the admission was perhaps long overdue. In his surprise election victory two years before, he had already adopted the famed "America First!" slogan to describe his campaign to capture the White House. Formerly a rallying cry of the Ku Klux Klan, the saying has deep historical ties to US nationalism and non-interventionism. His call to categorically ban Muslims from the country also closely aligns with Blankley's treatment of Muslims in *American Grit*. Blankley saw allowing Muslims into the country as an active threat to national security and called for "security-based ethnic profiling" of Muslim men coupled with new laws to enshrine the practice into law. Trump's plan went even further, eventually culminating in the infamous Executive Order 13769. Nicknamed the 'Muslim Ban' it sought to halt travel to the country from a host of majority Muslim countries. Both Blankley and Trump's stances against Muslims deeply align with the ethnic conflicts nationalism generally encourages. Interestingly, public opinion on the so-called 'Muslim Ban' radically shifted after it was enacted, and despite the Trump administration's support for it and it being upheld by the Supreme Court, the public and media remained highly critical of the policy.<sup>31</sup>

Trump remains an active influence in US politics as this is being written. Therefore a deeper analysis of how his political career will affect the future of the US remains out of reach. Nevertheless, his adoption by the Republican party, the far-right, and religious conservatives has clearly been one reason for his success. And while Trump's rise to power was fueled by his relationships with these groups, his influence on them may loom more significant than

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<sup>30</sup> Forgey, Quint. 2018. "Trump: 'I'm a Nationalist.'" Politico. October 22, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/10/22/trump-nationalist-926745>.

<sup>31</sup> Oskooii, K. A. R., Lajevardi, N., & Collingwood, L. (2021). Opinion Shift and Stability: The Information Environment and Long-Lasting Opposition to Trump's Muslim Ban. *Political Behavior*, 43(1), 301–337. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09555-8>

anticipated. Trump's adoption as the champion of White American Christians, particularly evangelicals, shocked some. Trump's history of divorce, his reality TV career, and business and political scandals seemed set to repel a voting block that historically claimed to want religious morality as a key trait in their political leaders. Yet, in 2018, two years after his election, Pew Research Center reported that support for Trump among conservative Christians remained steady. They showed that 52% of Catholics reported voting for him, and among Protestant evangelicals, the percentage jumped to 77%. While the number dipped to 57% among mainline Protestants, it was still a firm majority.<sup>32</sup> In 2021, Pew found evidence that during the four years of his term, White Americans who were not evangelicals but supporters of Donald Trump were more likely to start identifying themselves with the label and start using terms like *born-again* to describe themselves. This same report also mentions that his support among evangelicals was higher during his 2020 reelection campaign than in 2016 during his original bid.<sup>33</sup>

The reasons why non-evangelical supporters of Trump would adopt the label during his tenure in office hint at significant shifts in identity and how the general public saw the term evangelical. This data supports Du Mez's earlier claims about the changes taking place in the evangelical movement, morphing the identity from a purely religious or theological identifier to one that also assumed conservative politics. Fueled by Trump's rise as a political outsider, this fusion of Christianity and politics may have been enough to set off a rapid change in people's outlooks and positions—swelling the adoption of more hardline stances among conservatives in general. After all, it was during the Trump presidency that Christian nationalism burst into the

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<sup>32</sup> Jones, Bradley. 2018. "An Examination of the 2016 Electorate, Based on Validated Voters." Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. August 9, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, Gregory. "More White Americans Adopted than Shed Evangelical Label during Trump Presidency, Especially His Supporters." Pew Research Center. Accessed May 18, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/15/more-white-americans-adopted-than-shed-evangelical-label-during-trump-presidency-especially-his-supporters/>.

broader political consciousness of the nation, fueled by the example of a combative chief executive and anger still simmering in conservative circles since the Obama administration. Trump's election closely followed eight years of perceived progressive wins, including, among other things, the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the expansion of environmental policy, and the legalization of same-sex marriage via a ruling of the Supreme Court in *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

The legalization of same-sex marriage, in particular, did much to galvanize the religious right and Christian nationalists. In 2015 before Trump's election the following year, same-sex marriage was on the cusp of being legalized. Religious conservatives were in full swing, fighting its federal legalization after repeatedly losing victory after victory at the state level. During that same year, research by Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry released findings that Christian nationalists particularly were significantly likely to see same-sex unions as a threat to their identity and the nation. Whitehead and Perry explain that legal protections being extended to same-sex couples were seen by them as breaking a covenant with God and rejecting America's unique relationship with the Christian deity.<sup>34</sup>

This attitude was seen at the time among reactions in some Evangelical communities, who used the legalization of same-sex marriage to decry secularism and to recommit to the movement's long tradition of political activism. In a story on the topic, NPR quotes Calvary Chapel pastor Jack Hibbs whose words captured something of the anger swirling in the community as he blasts Christians for not having done more to stop it:

And they ripped from the pages of the Bible God's definition of marriage. They raised the flag, and they said, Christians, stay out of it; this is a political issue.

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<sup>34</sup> Whitehead, Andrew L., and Samuel L. Perry. 2015. "A More Perfect Union? Christian Nationalism and Support for Same-Sex Unions." *Sociological Perspectives* 58 (3): 422–40.

And Christians in America, led by weak, pathetic hirelings in the pulpits, backed down and went into their little cloisters and hit out.<sup>35</sup>

Enraged, Hibbs and other pastors endorsed the American Renewal Project. This national organization trains pastors to become expressly political and pushes them to run for office. In 2022, the organization had another Calvary Chapel pastor, Ken Graves, as its board president. Graves has used his pulpit to push Christian nationalist messages. Through the ARP, he has worked with Republicans to get candidates his organization endorsed elected to office, often finding success and gaining influence.<sup>36</sup>

The group's sway in North Carolina is significant, with the state's current Lieutenant Governor, Mark Robinson, frequently speaking at state-chapter events. At one of these, he is quoted as telling a crowd that those who do not believe the US was founded as a Christian nation or that it should be ruled through Biblical principles should leave the country, later offering to purchase their tickets.<sup>37</sup>

Trump's leadership in the White House did more than create room for political activity and rhetoric to take shape among Christian nationalists. It also paved the way for violent action, as demonstrated by the Unite the Right rally of 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the January 6 insurrection that saw the US Congress building attacked in an attempt to overturn the 2020 US presidential election results. Both events shocked the nation, albeit with the Unite the Right rally having far fewer implications for the US as a whole. However, each saw adherents of Christian

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<sup>35</sup> Gjelten, Tom. 2015. "Conservative Pastors Deliver Sharp Criticism Of Same-Sex Marriage." NPR, June 29, 2015, sec. Religion. <https://www.npr.org/2015/06/29/418641115/conservative-pastors-deliver-sharp-criticism-of-same-sex-marriage>.

<sup>36</sup> Killian, Joe. 2022. "North Carolina Republican Leaders Embrace Christian Nationalism." NC Newslines. October 26, 2022. <https://ncnewslines.com/2022/10/26/north-carolina-republican-leaders-embrace-christian-nationalism/>.

<sup>37</sup> Killian, Joe. 2022. "PW Special Report: Religious Conservatives Showcase Close Bond with NC Republican Leaders." NC Newslines. October 19, 2022. <https://ncnewslines.com/2022/10/19/pw-special-report-religious-conservatives-showcase-close-bond-with-nc-republican-leaders/>.



nationalism participate in open violence, resulting in multiple deaths, mass destruction of property, attacks on law enforcement, and violent clashes with improvised weapons.

Unite the Right was planned by a host of white supremacist and far-right groups looking to flex their muscle through direct public confrontations and violence. Indeed, it is perhaps best remembered for the news coverage it created, showing young-white men chanting, "Jews will not replace us!" as they carried torches and marched in lockstep. Looking at the event through the lens of terrorism and conflict studies, Emily Blout and Patrick Burkart note that, rather than being an event that got out of hand, it was a highly planned and coordinated one between hate groups. Besides the rally, it also included coordinated cyber attacks on the local community and the harassment of local city leaders for their Jewish and Black identities. They also note that the event spurred the beating of one Black man in a parking garage, running hand-to-hand combat between rally-goers and counter-protesters, directed gunfire, the death of two police officers due to a flight accident, and the murder of an opposition protest named Heather Heyer by a neo-Nazi who ran her down using his car.<sup>38</sup>

The fallout of Unite the Right was intense. Citing the Anti-Defamation League, Bount and Burkart note that white supremacist violence increased after the rally, with 73 murders related to it documented over the next two years.<sup>39</sup> Donald Trump also found himself surrounded by controversy after telling the media that both sides of the clashes included "very fine people." While he did denounce White nationalism and Nazism in further comments, Republicans and Democrats at the time went on record saying his denunciation was not strong enough.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Blout, Emily, and Patrick Burkart. 2021. "White Supremacist Terrorism in Charlottesville: Reconstructing 'Unite the Right.'" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, January, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1862850>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Phelps, Jordan. 2019. "Trump Defends 2017 'very Fine People' Comments, Calls Robert E. Lee 'a Great General.'" ABC News, April 26, 2019. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-defends-2017-fine-people-comments-calls-robert/story?id=62653478>.

It is worth mentioning that while not all Christian nationalists are avowed white supremacists, the evidence is clear that the two creeds can be readily welded together. After all, if Christian nationalism is a worldview that focuses on the nation as the ultimate good, including a focus on dominant cultural norms most common among Whites, the leap from one to the other is easy to understand. If anything, the Unite the Right rally was a successor to the White supremacist radicalism of the 1990s. Its connection to Christian nationalism runs in a similar vein.

The January 6 attack on the US Capital also included violence, only now aimed at the US government. After losing his bid for a second presidential term, Donald Trump refused to concede to his challenger, Joe Biden. In an attempt to keep himself in office, Trump falsely made accusations of widespread voter fraud and corruption. Using tactics ranging from media blitzes, legal challenges, and pressure on local election officials to change results, Trump and his allies also incited anger among his supporters. This culminated in a political rally he held on January 6 in Washington, DC, at Freedom Plaza that then turned into an attack on the US Congress. The choice of January 6 was no accident, as it was the day elected officials in Congress sought to certify the election results.

The attack was brutal, with the chaos unfolding on major news networks for the whole country to see. Reporting later estimated that between thirty thousand and eighty thousand people had gone to the nation's capital for the Freedom Plaza rally, with thousands later marching to Congress at Trump's behest. In preparation for protests, the Capital Police had deployed a sizable force but were quickly overrun, requiring backup from local police and

eventually the National Guard.<sup>41</sup> Clashes were ruthless as thousands of protestors sought entry into the building while elected officials fled to safety. Police officers were beaten unconscious, received chemical burns, and one officer, Brian D. Sicknick, died. Several others committed suicide in the weeks and months following as a direct result of their involvement. Five civilian deaths also resulted, with one member of the mob, Ashli Babbitt, being shot by a police officer.<sup>42</sup>

The attack was also planned, with many people taking Trump's rhetoric in the lead-up to January 6 as a call to violence. One assailant planted pipe bombs at both the Republican and Democratic National Committee headquarters close to the capitol building the night before<sup>43</sup> (thankfully neither detonated), and far-right militias like the Oath Keepers were later found to have planned their attacks, with many members being charged with sedition later on. They were joined that day by many other anti-government groups like the Proud Boys, whose members were also later prosecuted and convicted for sedition.

On prominent display among those attacking Congress that day were traditional symbols of the Christian faith, including Bibles and crosses, mixed with signs declaring Christian messages. After the breach into the Capitol building, a throng of assailants was led in prayer on the Senate floor, invoking the name of Jesus and giving thanks for the nation's rebirth.<sup>44</sup> The day before, a large crowd had conducted a "Jericho March," a ceremony common among some

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<sup>41</sup> Zou, Jie Jenny, and Erin B. Logan. 2022. "Key Facts to Know about the Jan. 6 Insurrection." Los Angeles Times, January 5, 2022, sec. Politics. <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2022-01-05/by-the-numbers-jan-6-anniversary>.

<sup>42</sup> Jackman, Tom. 2021. "Police Union Says 140 Officers Injured in Capitol Riot." Washington Post, January 28, 2021. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/police-union-says-140-officers-injured-in-capitol-riot/2021/01/27/60743642-60e2-11eb-9430-e7c77b5b0297\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/police-union-says-140-officers-injured-in-capitol-riot/2021/01/27/60743642-60e2-11eb-9430-e7c77b5b0297_story.html).

<sup>43</sup> Barr, Luke. 2023. "2 Years Later, Jan. 6 Pipe Bomber Remains a Mystery." ABC News. January 4, 2023. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/reward-climbs-500k-information-suspect-pipe-bombs-day/story?id=96184838>.

<sup>44</sup> Schor, Elana. 2021. "Christianity on Display at Capitol Riot Sparks New Debate." AP News. January 28, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/christianity-capitol-riot-6f13ef0030ad7b5a6f37a1e3b7b4c898>.

Evangelicals where a traditional horn known as a Shofar is blown as a weapon of spiritual warfare.<sup>45</sup> Christian nationalist involvement was a significant factor in the January 6 attack.

The Unite the Right rally and January 6 are distressing for the violence displayed during both events and the long-term ramifications each has had on the country. What is also clear is that both were made possible by people and groups that hold and support the worldview of Christian nationalism, using it as a way to justify the violence they choose to commit. As a slate of researchers from the University of Mississippi and the University of Louisville have argued, there is a direct link between Christian nationalism and support for political violence. They also note that the link is strengthened through individual traits like perceived victimhood, reinforcing racial and religious identity, and immersion in conspiratorial informational sources.<sup>46</sup>

Because violence in the nationalist worldview is central, events, like Unite the Right and January 6 fit into a broader narrative nationalism claims is natural to its growth and adoption in a country. As Michael Howard points out, this can be seen in many early nineteenth-century nationalists who claimed that while their end goal was peace, that peace could only be won through a violent struggle against anti-nationalist and non-nationalist opponents. At this time, Howard claims, nationalism became tightly linked in practice and theory with the idea of war.<sup>47</sup> Today, in Christian nationalism, this same acceptance of violence as a legitimate means of political change within the US is openly proclaimed.

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<sup>45</sup> Shimron, Yonat. 2020. "How the Shofar Emerged as a Weapon of Spiritual Warfare for Some Evangelicals." Religion News Service. January 6, 2020.

<https://religionnews.com/2021/01/06/how-the-shofar-emerged-as-a-weapon-of-spiritual-warfare/>.

<sup>46</sup> Armaly, Miles T., David T. Buckley, and Adam M. Enders. 2022. "Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks." *Political Behavior* 44 (2): 937–60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09758-y>.

<sup>47</sup> Howard, Michael. 1994. "War and Nations." In *Nationalism*, edited by Anthony D. Smith and John Hutchinson, 254–58. Oxford Reader. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 254-55.

One explicit example of this support comes in the eighth chapter of a book published in 2020 by Stephen Wolfe titled, *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. Here, Wolfe argues that Christians are allowed to wage violent revolutions against tyrants whose actions have harmed the practice of Christianity as the true religion of the state. Tyrants, Wolfe clarifies, are any civil ruler who stops the correct practice of Christianity through approaches he identifies as secularization, heresy, infidelity, and paganism. He states such a ruler is "...an enemy of his people's good, an enemy of the human race, and an enemy of God."<sup>48</sup> He also states that while he does not believe that violence can advance Christ's kingdom on earth, it can be used to secure it.

American Christians, he explains, should see themselves as under a hostile occupation, claiming that those outside their communities suppress a natural drive toward the practice of public religion:

The ruling class (of the US) is hostile to your Christian town, to your Christian people, and your Christian heritage. The occupation universalizes their ideology, forcing your Christianity to exist only in the walls of churches, denying any civil and social ordering to God and Christ's kingdom.

It must be kept in mind that much of Wolfe's work in his book hinges on a specific version of Christianity that is much narrower than the diverse expressions of it already mentioned. Indeed, within the introduction of his book, he tells readers that his account of Christian nationalism is not universal or even broadly Protestant. Specifically, it is an account of Presbyterian Christian nationalism. While he laments readers may not be swayed to the correct practice of the faith as found in Presbyterianism, he remains confident much of it will translate to other traditions.

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<sup>48</sup> Wolfe, Stephen. 2022. *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. Ebook. Moscow, ID: Canon Press.

He also tightly holds on to the importance of ethnic identity found in nationalism. In Chapter 3, he states ethnic groups have a right to center their self-interest and that he expressly envisions himself trying to reinvigorate a Christianity that centers men with Western European ancestors. Later, he declares that various ethnic groups can respect differences, do business, and be human but cannot have a real integrated life together. "Each person ought to (in normal circumstances) prefer their own people over others," he writes.

These admissions join others found in the introduction of Wolfe's book, which demonstrates how nationalism redefines or minimizes competing worldviews like those found in religion once it is taken up as a person's primary way of seeing the world. For instance, when expressing his ideas of nationalism, Wolfe does not feel the need to address it on a historical level or through a deeper analysis of its workings. He only provides his definition of it. He also explains to readers that he does not need to justify or excuse any historical example of nationalism or the moral questions that have arisen from it. This treatment underscores that for Wolfe, the goodness of nationalism is an unassailable *a priori*. Any critical interrogation of it beyond acceptance of it as a self-evident truth is simply a waste of time.

This centering spills over to his interaction with Christianity itself. Because nationalism must be true for Wolfe, it follows that the only coherent forms of Christianity must be nationalist. Perhaps because of this, Wolfe rejects building his case for a Christian dominance in the US on scriptural grounds. It may be because exploring the intersection of Christian scripture and nationalism would again be a waste of time. Why explore things that are self-evident? He acknowledges that his disengagement with the Bible as a basis for his arguments will frustrate some readers.

He also does not claim that his work is one of theology but is instead an expression of Christian political theory. Although, he informs readers that his theological outlook for Christian nationalism is rooted solely in the Reformed tradition, sometimes still known as Calvinism. And while he commits himself to this section of the Christian tradition, he also admits that portions of his conclusions will differ from its norms and traditional stances. Further in the introduction, this refusal to interact with proofs outside of his own goes even further when, in referencing Chapter 3, he states he will mainly appeal "...to the reader's own experience." It seems that, at least in part, Wolfe's arguments rest on his audience's proclivity to agree with him.

This explication of Wolfe's introduction is included here to demonstrate the worldview of nationalism in action as articulated by one of its proponents. While Wolfe's Christian nationalism would naturally clash with other presentations of it rooted in different traditions like Roman Catholicism or the Charismatic movement, examining his work helps us see the general outline of what Christian nationalists claim and what positions they come to hold. It also shows us how the actions they suggest fall in line with other nationalism, like those revolving around ethnic purity and the acceptance of violence. Finally, it shows us that when nationalism becomes the predominant worldview, even direct engagement with its religious tradition becomes an obstacle. Arguments for nationalism that rely on traditional theological and scriptural support become distractions. Hence for Christian nationalists, the ideas of nationalism supply the required answers rather than understandings of their religious tradition.

### **Non-nationalist Christianity**

With the broad edges of Christian nationalism explored a question comes into focus. How should non-nationalist forms of Christianity be defined in the US? It is a crucial question because

it is vital if there is a desire to counter or geld the influence of Christian nationalism in politics. There are two main reasons for this.

The first reason is rooted in nationalism's relationship to violence. Because nationalists predict and encourage violence, there is an argument to be made that violent reactions against them serve their ideological ends. Violence against nationalists unwittingly gives them a platform, solidifying their position internally as it allows them to portray themselves as victims. And indeed, Wolfe spends Chapter 8 in his book crafting an argument for armed revolution predicated on the idea that Christians are victims. His framing of secularism and tyrant rulers is constructed so that any power not wielded to support his version of Christian hegemony is the victimization of the faithful. "If only the enemies of true religion were so bold to openly attack the church," he opines.

Defining non-nationalist Christianity shows that Christians can peacefully live in a secular society while they support non-Christians' rights, significantly undermining the narrative of victimization. It also robs Christian nationalists of the claim that such an arrangement is inherently impossible. Of course, a legitimate and needed secular reaction rebukes and rejects nationalist ideas and actions in the public square, especially regarding violence. And, as the US possesses a secular form of government, these strategies are particularly suited to groups who feel directly threatened by the rise of violence spurred on by Christian nationalism within the country, especially if they are not Christians themselves. Yet, as nationalism predicts these reactions against it, rebuke and rejection are not enough to be effective on their own. While crucial, at some point, committed nationalists with enough resources will simply ignore them as strategies. That is why counter-evidence and examples of why their claims are not true become so important.



Secondly, articulating the edges of non-nationalist Christianity within the US undermines Christian nationalists' claims that their expression of the faith is mainstream within the religious tradition. With the steady decline of the Christian faith now a reality in the US, it stands to reason that fewer people will be familiar with the norms and broad tenets of the religion as time passes. An outsized focus on Christian nationalism, even when negative, gives it a kind of legitimacy over the Christian message because it becomes the prevalent example in society. In some cases, it may be the only version of Christianity people are exposed to regularly. Giving that kind of legitimacy means Christian nationalism can drown out dissent from non-nationalist Christians or present itself as the only option for those interested in practicing the faith. Both outcomes again lend to the myth that conflicts between Christians and secular society are inevitable.

With these reasons in mind, outlining the edges of non-nationalist Christianity starts with the phrase 'non-nationalist' itself. That is because the term must be critiqued for its broadness. As mentioned in the section explicating nationalism, liberals, conservatives, and others along the political spectrum can still be nationalists. This is also true for non-nationalist Christians. They, too, can fit into many places along the political spectrum. And, while Christian nationalists of all stripes and theological commitments share the classic markers of nationalism regarding their positions and actions, non-nationalist Christians share no such rhetorical throughline.

Because non-nationalist Christians lack a unifying worldview like nationalism, they must be identified through actions. And expressly, actions that demonstrate a willingness to broadly abandon characteristics of nationalism by rejecting activities like violence as a political tool and ethnic otherization, as discussed previously. A general outline of non-nationalist Christianity comes into focus via this approach.

Through this lens, non-nationalist Christianity has deep roots in the US. As the movement to end slavery in the country, Abolitionism began early, rooted in deep disagreements among Christians about the morality and acceptability of slavery. Quakers and many others picked up the Bible to prove to fellow believers and citizens that slavery was an immoral evil to be cast down. While its relationship to violence would vary widely among many in the movement, before the US Civil War, figures like Fredrick Douglass used their faith to condemn the brutalities of slavery while shaming other Christians for defending it through peaceful speeches.<sup>49</sup> While the nationalism of today did not exist, figures like Douglass worked tirelessly to fight ideas declaring America's freedom was only for Whites.

Later in American history, the Social Gospel movement saw Christians across denominations take on social justice issues like fighting poverty and ending child labor while decrying war and nationalist ideals. After World War I, writing in his book defending the Social Gospel through theology, Walter Rauschenbusch said proponents demanded: "... (military) disarmament and permanent peace, for the rights of the small nations against the imperialistic and colonizing powers (of large ones)."<sup>50</sup>

While the Social Gospel movement would eventually dissolve, its ideals would influence future Christian leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose leadership helped the civil rights movement make massive strides for Black rights through non-violent methods. Ever a Baptist minister, King continued where Douglass had left off—now criticizing fellow Christians for their support of segregation. In his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, he bluntly calls white supremacy blasphemy before asking readers, "What greater hearsay has religion know?"<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Blight, David W. 2018. Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks. 125-127.

<sup>50</sup> Rauschenbusch, Walter. 1922. A Theology for the Social Gospel. New York: The Macmillan Company. 4.

<sup>51</sup> King, Jr., Martin Luther. 1968. *Where Do We Go From Here?: Chaos or Community*. Boston: Beacon Press. 79.

King is a tempting figure to profile as an example of non-nationalist Christianity in the US. As a civil rights leader and committed proponent of non-violent struggle, his legacy has served as an example for all Americans looking to fight for social justice issues. Also striking is his widely unpopular stance against the Vietnam War as it was happening, along with his active denunciation of poverty as a blight on any American experiencing it. Yet, the success of King creates scenarios where the realities of the man buckle under the figure remembered in history. Marshall Frady notes in his biography about King that his legacy is now so great his message exists as a weightless effigy compared to the reality of his life. "To hallow a figure," he writes, "is almost always to hollow him."<sup>52</sup> This means a deeper analysis of his example should stand on its own.

However, King was not alone in blending Christianity with a desire for social change or taking actions to attack ethnic otherization or curtail violence. William Stringfellow was born in 1928 and led a profoundly religious life that fueled a deep commitment to social activism. Before he died in 1985, he had crafted a legacy that included working as a civil rights lawyer in Harlem after graduating from Harvard's Law School and becoming a leading lay theologian in The Episcopal Church. Later, he and his partner Anthony Towne came under the surveillance of the US government for giving refuge to the Catholic priest and anti-war protestor Daniel Berrigan who was eventually imprisoned for stealing and burning draft documents using homemade napalm as a protest against the Vietnam War. Perhaps his most lasting impact was serving as the canonical counselor and defender for the first women irregularly ordained as priests within the Episcopal denomination.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Frady, Marshall. 2006. *Martin Luther King Jr.: A Life*. London: Penguin Books. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Wylie-Kellermann, Bill. 2004. "Foreword to the 2004 Edition." In *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

One of his most important works as a lay theologian is the book, *An Ethic for Christians And Other Aliens In A Strange Land*. In it, he explores what it means to be a faithful Christian in a country like the US, which he describes as unbiblical because of its poor track record on social issues and the widespread belief that it was divinely favored. Stringfellow charges that for too long, the Bible has been understood through people's biases as Americans and never used to call out America for its immoral behavior domestically and internationally.

When compared and contrasted against Wolfe's *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, the work paints an entirely different vision of what being a Christian in society should mean. For Stringfellow, Christians should not take over or passively withdraw from society. Instead, they have an ethical obligation to hold the line against social abuse and mistreatment of those harmed by unjust systems. They must form a resistance to structural evil.<sup>54</sup>

The difference between Wolfe and Stringfellow becomes even more striking when looking at specific subjects. For instance, while Wolfe argues different ethnicities should guard their own interests and stick together, Stringfellow blasts White Americans in his time for being blind to the inherent inequality suffered by Black Americans. "For white citizens to be blinded to this is a victimization of them as human beings—consigning them to a delusive state where conscience is dead—just as much as the more blatant and public dehumanization visited upon blacks," he wrote.<sup>55</sup>

Stringfellow also touched on revolution, but unlike Wolfe, he declares violence is incompatible with the Christian life:

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<sup>54</sup> Stringfellow, William. 1976. *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. William Stringfellow Library. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers. 117-122.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

In all of these associations and recollections, Christians stand in dialectical posture, recognizing the hopes which human beings attach to revolutionary causes and affirming that much. Simultaneously Christians realize an inherent inefficacy in classical revolution because of its reliance upon the very same moral authority as the regime or system which it threatens to overthrow and succeed—death—and thus, they resist that.<sup>56</sup>

Stringfellow's approach to his book is also different in its methods. While, like Wolfe, his subject focuses on Christianity and politics, he refuses to disengage with the Bible or theology.

Stringfellow contends heavily with the Bible throughout his book from the standpoint of a knowledgeable theologian, highlighting its ethical dimensions to support his arguments and conclusions. Although written to articulate a clear argument for resistance against evil and the support for justice from a Christian perspective, by extension, it showcases that the version of the faith extolled by Christian nationalists is not the only or obvious way for American Christians to be.

### **Opposing narratives**

*What is important is not that in every man are the roots of good and evil, but which of the two prevails.*

*-Vladimir Solov'ev, War, the Christian, and The Antichrist*

Christian nationalism in the US today exists as one element in a larger history of political and cultural change that the country has been experiencing for some time. Swift changes in technology, the legacy of 9/11, a changing economy, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and mass polarization must also be seen as critical elements that weave together an intricate tapestry of historical drivers. The rise of mass polarization itself is something to be

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 123.

particularly aware of, as beyond a certain level, it undermines the order of society, and democratic systems become severely restricted in their ability to govern effectively.<sup>57</sup> The events mentioned above have culminated in recent surveys finding that sizable portions of the US population feel that by 2050, political divisions in the country will only widen.<sup>58</sup>

Christian nationalism can potentially become a permanent driver of conflict and violence in the country and drive deep polarization, even if only adopted by a minority. In many ways, nationalists' arguments aim to cause conflict and purposely heighten division. Therefore, confronting and containing the harmful influence of Christian nationalism is critical. The question then becomes how to do this effectively.

There is no one answer to this question. Still, one of the answers comes by examining how nationalist ideas become mainstream and, by extension, non-nationalist narratives fade into the background. That process involves narratives crafted by pro-nationalist elites looking to influence ordinary people. By understanding how this process works, counter-narratives and arguments can help hamper or stop the spread of nationalist ideas that lead to extreme polarization or contribute to extremism. One such example directly tied to Christian nationalism is the attack on same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights.

### **The rise of anti-LGBTQ laws**

As mentioned, legalizing same-sex marriage motivated evangelicals to engage more in politics. And it seemingly led to more evangelicals becoming aware of or welcoming Christian nationalist narratives that argued LGBTQ rights like same-sex marriage represent an attack on

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<sup>57</sup> Axelrod, Robert, Joshua J. Daymunde, and Stephanie Forrest. 2021. "Preventing Extreme Polarization of Political Attitudes." *PNAS* 118 (50): 1–11.

<sup>58</sup> Daniller, Andrew. April 24, 2023. "Americans Take a Dim View of the Nation's Future, Look More Positively at the Past." *Pew Research Center*. Accessed May 21, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/24/americans-take-a-dim-view-of-the-nations-future-look-more-positively-at-the-past/>.

the nation. The nationalist argument being that rights like same-sex marriage would decenter Christian morality and harm the US's special relationship with God. Therefore, the nationalist fight against sexual minorities was mainstreamed among evangelicals and other Christians *in general*, creating a narrative that LGBTQ otherization and loss of rights were necessary for the nation's purity and health—even as broader public opinion went the opposite way. Indeed, despite political and religious resistance, marriage equality has done much for the acceptance of the LGBTQ community, with a Pew study finding that over 61% of adults in the US find legalization was overall good for society—a stunning reversal from even a few decades ago.<sup>59</sup>

When the results of that same study are focused on religion, it shows that support mainly rests among religiously unaffiliated adults, most White *non-evangelical* Protestants, and two-thirds of Catholics. As expected, it finds that 71% of White evangelical Protestants find same-sex marriage is bad for society. Released in late 2022, the findings show that a solid aversion to LGBTQ rights has lasted among most White evangelicals in the seven years since its legalization. It also suggests this aversion has continued to motivate evangelicals to support legislation and structural systems targeting LGBTQ rights. This becomes an example of a position being incubated among Christian nationalists before being adopted and normalized among a larger faith community. It also shows that position fossilizing over time, seemingly becoming more and more resistant to change.

Another complicating factor is that many evangelical Christians have also adopted language that rights for LGBTQ people also represent a form of victimization of their own community. Their claim contends that any recognition or protection of LGBTQ rights robs

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<sup>59</sup> Borelli, Gabriel. 2022. “About Six-in-Ten Americans Say Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage Is Good for Society.” Pew Research Center. November 5, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/15/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-legalization-of-same-sex-marriage-is-good-for-society/>.

Christians of the preferred status they ought to enjoy under a government they see tasked as upholding their own sexual norms that denounce any non-heterosexual, monogamous arrangement as sinful.<sup>60</sup> This tracks with the general conflation of the nation and self nationalists typically drift into. As Sophie Bjork-James points out, this framing of victimization allows those making the argument to believe *they have a right to discriminate against LGBTQ people to defend themselves*. Bjork-James also correctly notes that claims of victimhood coupled with arguments supporting the right to discriminate is a tactic standard to all forms of nationalism.<sup>61</sup>

The results of this narrative among evangelicals should be sobering. This year, 2023, has already seen over 400 anti-LBGTQ bills introduced in Republican-controlled states nationwide. The bills heavily focus on children, with Republican lawmakers looking to censor what children can learn about sex and gender in school while also limiting the care and support transgender children can receive in school or from their doctors and family.<sup>62</sup> Recently passed legislation in Florida, for example, bans transition support for transgender youth and allows the state custody over children whose parents have provided them with gender-affirming care. Doctors who provide care can face felony charges and five years in prison.<sup>63</sup> Many other states are considering similar measures. It is important to note that gender-affirming care is the standard of care for transgender children, as argued by the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the American Academy of Pediatrics.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bjork-James, Sophie. 2019. "Christian Nationalism and LGBTQ Structural Violence in the United States." *Journal of Religion and Violence* 7 (3): 278–302.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 297.

<sup>62</sup> Choi, Annette. 2023. "Record Number of Anti-LBGTQ Bills Have Been Introduced This Year | CNN Politics." CNN, April 6, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/06/politics/anti-lgbtq-plus-state-bill-rights-dg/index.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Yurcaba, Jo. 2023. "DeSantis Signs 'Don't Say Gay' Expansion and Gender-Affirming Care Ban." NBC News. March 17, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/desantis-signs-dont-say-gay-expansion-gender-affirming-care-ban-rcna84698>.

<sup>64</sup> Christensen, Jen. 2022. "Gender-Affirming Care, a 'crucial' Process for Thousands of Young People in America." CNN, April 21, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/21/health/gender-affirming-care/index.html>.



There is little evidence that the support for these bills among those proposing them is centered in medical science. Instead, these efforts are directly connected to the Anti-LGBTQ rhetoric proclaimed by Christian nationalists. The example of the effect Christian nationalist rhetoric has had on anti-LGBTQ bills also shows just how far the ideology can affect change over a short period. In 2018, only 42 bills targeting LGBTQ rights were introduced nationwide, with more and more being introduced yearly until 2023, when the number of bills more than doubled over the year before.<sup>65</sup> This rise in Anti-LGBTQ legislation arguably correlates with the current rise of Christian nationalism in the public eye and among evangelicals.

### **Elites, narratives, and common people**

The conflict between the LGBTQ community and many Christian political movements has deep roots in American cultural disputes. One of the first examples can be seen in the 1970s when Christian activist Anita Bryant started a campaign to repeal the first laws protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination based on their identity. Bryant, a mother of four and devout Southern Baptist, was horrified that legal protections might be extended to the community and started a campaign to repeal laws passed in Miami, Florida. Wildly successful, her campaign worked while also throwing her into the national spotlight. Beginning an organization named Save Our Children, she appeared on national media, became close with televangelists, and took her fight against LGBTQ rights nationwide.<sup>66</sup> She used much of the same rhetoric familiar today against the LGBTQ community, claiming that they represented a threat to the order of society and against children.

Bryant's story is only possible through her access to a national system of elites who saw her movement as a way to push their own messages forward about who should be seen as

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<sup>65</sup> Choi

<sup>66</sup> FitzGerald, 300-301.

legitimate members of society and who should not be. Bryant was backed by notable names in the evangelical movement at the time, like Jerry Farwell, Pat Robertson, and Jim and Tammy Bakker. All of whom had adopted the evangelical embrace of politics as a tool to center Christian morality in government policy. Her targeting of the LGBTQ community helped spur on their goals in this regard.

This move by elites to use nationalist ideas and framing to push forward their goals is standard—specifically designed to change the positions people might come to otherwise.<sup>67</sup> Telling large groups of Christians that their country is under threat because of the perceived immorality of another group does more than create intragroup solidarity between them. It also motivates them to become a voting block that can wield significant power at the ballot box and via activism like Bakkers. The unity and cohesion of such a group exist because the nationalist narrative they have been presented becomes normative and seemingly unquestionable.

However, the Christian nationalist narrative of the hostile relationship between Christianity and LGBTQ people is artificial in its construction and premise. The Christian nationalist demand that Christianity and members of the LGBTQ community can only exist in a state of antagonism is demonstrably false once the relationship is explored. While deep theological questions and arguments abound among Christians in its various traditions on LGBTQ issues, when the practice and lived experience of the faith is analyzed, it becomes difficult to see how the conflict is not artificially exaggerated if not manufactured.

William Stringfellow himself is an example of this. Reading his works, it is evident that Stringfellow's Christianity was intensely sincere and personal. It is hard not to see his commitment to justice issues springing from a strong religious practice and regard for the Bible.

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<sup>67</sup> McDaniel, Eric, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle. 2022. *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics*. New York: Cambridge.14.

He was also a gay man who did not see any conflict between his homosexuality and his ability to practice the Christian religion faithfully. However, probably due to the time he lived in, Stringfellow felt the need to be closeted, and moving in with his partner Anthony Towne was his only public comment on his orientation. Nevertheless, this did not stop Stringfellow from publicly advocating for gay rights from a religious perspective and as a lawyer. "If homosexuals in this society are orphans or prisoners," he declared, "for a Christian that is itself enough reason to be concerned with them."<sup>68</sup>

Today, Stringfellow may not have felt the need to hide his sexuality from public view. According to a study conducted by the Williams Institute in the UCLA School of Law in 2020, almost half of all LGBTQ adults identify as religious, with 4.1 million identifying as Christians spread across Protestantism, Catholicism, and other Christian traditions.<sup>69</sup> Many denominations and Church organizations have made room for LGBTQ people in their pews and leadership, with denominations like The Episcopal Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America affirming and admitting LGBTQ clergy, including the ordination of Bishops. Many other examples of acceptance can also be found among evangelicals, pentecostal movements, and more.

And while the Pew research discussed earlier cited 71% of White evangelicals opposed same-sex marriage, its results on support among other Christians should also be noted. That same study found that 62% of White *non-evangelical* Protestants and 66% of Catholics *do support same-sex marriage*,<sup>70</sup> meaning that significant populations of Christians in the US deny the

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<sup>68</sup> Johnston, Marshall R. 2007. "Bombast, Blasphemy, and the Bastard Gospel: William Stringfellow and American Exceptionalism." Waco, TX: Baylor University. 56-61.

<sup>69</sup> Conron, Kerith J., Shoshana K. Goldberg, and Kathryn O'Neill. 2022. "Religiosity Among LGBT Adults in the US." Los Angeles: Williams Institute UCLA School of Law.

<sup>70</sup> Borelli

Christian nationalist narrative that LGBTQ people and their rights under the law pose a fundamental threat to the country or themselves. Another study by PRRI looking at support for nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ people found that solid majorities in all but one of the major religious groups in the US support those protections. According to their findings, among Christians, the only group that did not have a majority of members who supported nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ people were White evangelicals.<sup>71</sup>

The points above arguably become part of an opposing non-nationalist narrative that shows that Christians and the broader LGBTQ community can peacefully coexist together in society. That millions of LGBTQ people are themselves practicing Christians and that millions of other Christians value protecting their rights is potent evidence that such valid arguments can be made. It is also evidence that Christians can live alongside a minority group without the significant conflicts Christian nationalism demands. The ability to produce such counter-narratives against Christian nationalist rhetoric, therefore, goes beyond straightforward rebuke and rejection, crafting examples and roadmaps the people can use better to see the adverse outcomes of Christian nationalist rhetoric themselves and push back against its influence.

In 2020 The Center for American Progress released research exploring the relationship between the advancement of LGBTQ rights and opposition to those rights motivated by religion in print and online media. They found that most news coverage in the US depicts American Christianity in general as inherently opposed to LGBTQ rights, despite polling and evidence to the contrary. They also note that much of the time, articles discussing the issue generalized Christianity, giving the impression that all members of the religion are against rights for the

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<sup>71</sup> Jones, Robert P., Natalie Jackson, Diana Orcés, Ian Huff, and Daniel Greenberg. 2019. "Broad Support for LGBTQ Rights Across All 50 States: Findings from the 2019 American Values Atlas." Washington, DC: PRRI.

LGBTQ community.<sup>72</sup> It noted that negative views of LGBTQ rights motivated by religion are primarily articulated in articles by influential religious activists or spokespersons rather than common people.<sup>73</sup> In other words, the study found that American news media presents the Christian nationalist narrative about LGBTQ people as normative for Christians through interaction with elites using Christian nationalist rhetoric while mostly ignoring the non-nationalist narrative explored above.

Researchers also found that overall, Congressional Republicans were religiously identified more than their counterparts in the media they reviewed. This was often coupled with their portrayal as authorities on Christianity's relationship with LGBTQ rights concerning legislation, despite the vast majority of those Republicans holding anti-LGBTQ views. This treatment by the press allows them to normalize anti-LGBTQ arguments based on religion, and as the report notes, this works to disadvantage the LGBTQ rights movement at large. Pro-LGBTQ Christian Democrats were rarely mentioned in the articles examined.<sup>74</sup>

This normalization of the Christian nationalist idea about LGBTQ people and Christianity is only one example of many. Yet, it effectively demonstrates the consequences an outsized focus on the arguments of Christian nationalism can have by giving it legitimacy over the Christian tradition as a whole and the damage it can do when unchallenged. That Christian support for LGBTQ rights has been so absent from news media and national debate in the US is striking, resulting in worse outcomes for LGBTQ people as they are targeted by legislation looking to take away their rights and harm them.

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<sup>72</sup> Modi, Rucha, Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, Maggie Siddiqi, and Rasheed Malik. 2020. "How Religion and LGBTQ Rights Intersect in Media Coverage." Washington, DC: The Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/religion-lgbtq-rights-intersect-media-coverage/>. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 12.

It must be highlighted that many people in the LGBTQ community have been deeply injured by Christians using theological and political justifications and that nothing written here excuses or washes away those realities. While a deeper exploration of that relationship must be examined, it seems to be evolving. There seems to be evidence that supports American Christians, on the whole, are moving towards accepting and supporting LGBTQ people and that many are comfortable with this on both theological and political grounds. It only seems that a cultural and media focus on the Christian nationalist narrative has drowned this out. What would happen if the non-nationalist Christian narrative on LGBTQ rights was centered instead?

### **Conclusion**

*Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.  
-St. Paul, Romans 12:21, KJV*

In the late nineteenth century, the Russian philosopher and mystic Vladimir Solov'ev wrote a moral critique of nationalism while waging a rhetorical battle with the leading Russian nationalists of his day. Rooted in his Russian Orthodox faith, he tackled what was then a new social issue—the growth and acceptance of nationalism in his country. His ideas revolved around a moral call for tolerance, and he eventually argued that nationalism was fundamentally incompatible with Christianity. Like Stringfellow after him, he felt that Christian politics should center on building a better world.<sup>75</sup>

His story shows that the debate between nationalist and non-nationalist Christianity is not new. While it may take on many forms in countries worldwide, it seems clear that as nationalism spreads, its place and relationship to Christianity become a point of contention. That the US

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<sup>75</sup> Gout, Greg. 1998. “Can a Christian Be a Nationalist? Vladimir Solov’ev’s Critique of Nationalism.” *Slavic Review* 57 (1): 77–84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2502053>. 77-84.

today is seeing its own modern version of this clash is, in some ways, expected in a world dominated by nation-states and ethnic conflicts.

Yet, while arguably expected, Christian nationalism in the US represents a source of extreme conflict, destructive polarization, and violence. Its narratives and arguments seem proposed to accomplish these, and indeed, already have achieved them through events like January 6 and the national attack on LGBTQ rights in many states. Its own positioning as the normative Christian expression also hopes to add to its legitimacy while drawing out protests and counterexamples by non-nationalist Christians who wish to follow in Solov'ev footsteps.

And while this might work on specific issues, the non-nationalist traditions and expressions of Christianity in the US convincingly demonstrate that Christian nationalists' claims are unfounded. It is the outlier within the Christian tradition, not the other way around. And it also seems that the best counter to the spread and influence of Christian nationalism is to confront its claims head-on, exploring and explaining their narratives to test their mettle and, in doing so, show when they come up short.