

What Is Christian Nationalism, Exactly?

David French 2/25/2024

If you're alarmed by the rise of Christian nationalism, the single worst thing you can do is define it too broadly. If you define it too broadly, then you're telling millions of ordinary churchgoing citizens that the importation of their religious values into the public square somehow places them in the same camp or on the same side as actual Christian supremacists, the illiberal authoritarians who want to remake America in their own fundamentalist image.

Enter the new feature-length documentary "God and Country," which examines the role of Christian nationalism in American politics. Even before I knew that Rob Reiner (the director of "A Few Good Men") was involved in the project, I agreed to be interviewed by the filmmakers for two key reasons: First, I wanted to make sure that I could offer a sensible definition of Christian nationalism, one that didn't cast aspersions on Christians simply for bringing their values into the public square. And second, I wanted to outline exactly why actual Christian nationalism presents a real danger to our Constitution.

To understand what Christian nationalism is, it's important to understand what it is not. It is not Christian nationalism if a person's political values are shaped by the individual's Christian faith. In fact, many of America's most important social movements have been infused with Christian theology and Christian activism. Many of our nation's abolitionists thundered their condemnations of slavery from Northern pulpits. The civil rights movement wasn't exclusively Christian by any means, but it was pervasively Christian — Martin Luther King Jr. was, of course, a Baptist minister.

Anyone may disagree with Christian arguments around civil rights, immigration, abortion, religious liberty or any other point of political conflict. Christians disagree with one another on these topics all the time, but it is no more illegitimate or dangerous for a believer to bring her worldview into a public debate than it is for a secular person to bring his own secular moral reasoning into politics. In fact, I have learned from faiths other than my own, and our public square would be impoverished without access to the thoughts and ideas of Americans of faith.

The problem with Christian nationalism isn't with Christian participation in politics but rather the belief that there should be Christian primacy in politics and law. It can manifest itself through ideology, identity and emotion. And if it were to take hold, it would both upend our Constitution and fracture our society.

The sociologists Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead define Christian nationalism as a "cultural framework that blurs distinctions between Christian identity and American identity, viewing the two as closely related and seeking to enhance and preserve their union." The author and pastor Matthew McCullough defines Christian nationalism as "an understanding of American identity and significance held by Christians wherein

the nation is a central actor in the world-historical purposes of the Christian God.” Both definitions are excellent, but what does ideological Christian nationalism look like in practice?

In 2022, a coalition of right-wing writers and leaders published a document called “National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles.” Its section on God and public religion states: “Where a Christian majority exists, public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by the state and other institutions both public and private.” That’s an extraordinary — and ominous — ideological statement, one that would immediately relegate non-Christians to second-class status. It’s utterly contrary to the First Amendment and would impose a form of compelled deference to Christianity on both religious minorities and the nonreligious.

But Christian nationalism isn’t just rooted in ideology; it’s also deeply rooted in identity, the belief that Christians should rule. This is the heart of the Seven Mountain Mandate, a dominionist movement emerging from American Pentecostalism that is, put bluntly, Christian identity politics on steroids. Paula White, Donald Trump’s closest spiritual adviser, is an adherent, and so is the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, Tom Parker, who wrote a concurring opinion in the court’s recent I.V.F. decision. The movement holds that Christians are called to rule seven key societal institutions: the family, the church, education, the media, the arts, business and the government.

One doesn’t have to go all the way into Seven Mountain theology, though, to find examples of Christian identity politics. The use of Christianity as an unofficial but necessary qualification for office is a routine part of politics in the most churchgoing parts of America. Moreover, one of the common red-America arguments for Trump is that he might not be devout himself, but he’ll place lots of Christians in government.

But what is Christian identity politics but another form of Christian supremacy? How does Christian identity alone make any person a better candidate for office? After all, many of the worst actors in American politics are professed believers. Scandal and corruption are so pervasive in the church that when a person says, “I’m a Christian,” it tells me almost nothing about their wisdom or virtue.

Finally, we can’t forget the intense emotion of Christian nationalism. Most believers don’t follow ideological and theological arguments particularly closely. In the words of the historian Thomas Kidd, “Actual Christian nationalism is more a visceral reaction than a rationally chosen stance.” It is tied, in other words, to a visceral sense that the fate of the church is closely tied to the outcome of any given political race.

That fervor can make believers gullible and potentially even dangerous. Its good-versus-evil dynamic can make Christians believe that their political opponents are capable of anything, including stealing an election. It artificially raises the stakes of elections to the point where a loss becomes an unthinkable catastrophe, with the fates of both church and state hanging in the balance. As we saw on Jan. 6, 2021, this belief invites violent action.

Committed Christian nationalists represent only 10 percent of the population, according to a 2023 PRRI/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey. But even members of a minority that small can gain outsize power when they fold themselves into the larger Christian electorate, casting themselves as “just like you.”

That's why we cannot conflate Christian activism with Christian nationalism. One can welcome Christian participation in the public square while resisting domination, from any faith or creed.

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