

# [***Christian-nation idea fuels US conservative causes, but historians say it misreads founders' intent***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BBW-8W61-DYMD-64P7-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

February 17, 2024 Saturday 1:00 PM GMT

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**Section:** DOMESTIC NEWS; POLITICAL NEWS

**Length:** 1367 words

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**Body**

The U.S. Constitution doesn’t mention Christianity or any specific religion. The Declaration of Independence famously proclaims that people’s rights come from a “Creator” and “Nature’s God” — but doesn’t specify who that is.

Yet large numbers of Americans believe the founders intended the U.S. to be a Christian nation, and many believe it should be one.

Such views are especially strong among Republicans and their white evangelical base. Already such views are being voiced by supporters of Donald Trump amid his bid to recapture the presidency.

The idea of a Christian America means different things to different people. Pollsters have found a wide circle of Americans who hold general God-and-country sentiments.

But within that is a smaller, hardcore group who also check other boxes in surveys — such as that the U.S. Constitution was inspired by God and that the federal government should declare the U.S. a Christian nation, advocate Christian values or stop enforcing the separation of church and state.

For those embracing that package of beliefs, it’s more likely they’ll have unfavorable views toward immigrants, dismiss or downplay the impact of anti-Black discrimination and believe Trump was a good or great president, according to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey.

This latter group reflects a movement widely called Christian nationalism, which fuses American and Christian values, symbols and identity and seeks to privilege Christianity in public life.

The idea of Christian nationhood fills Americans’ need for an origin story, a belief that “we’ve come here for something special, and that we’re here for God’s work,” said Eric McDaniel, an associate professor of government at the University of Texas.

It creates a sense of “national innocence,” so adherents resist confronting uglier parts of U.S. history, he said.

The belief connects to other beliefs past and present, from the Manifest Destiny doctrine that justified continental conquest to Trump’s America First and Make America Great Again slogans, said McDaniel, a co-author of “The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American ***Politics***.”

Trump has echoed some of these ideas, vowing to bar immigrants who “don’t like our religion.”

Many conservatives and Republicans embrace the idea of Christian national origins, even as many reject the “Christian nationalist” label.

Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson has proclaimed that America is and was founded as a Christian nation and that Thomas Jefferson was “divinely inspired” in his writing of the Declaration of Independence, according to a 2015 sermon that drew wider attention with his recent election as speaker.

WallBuilders, an organization Johnson credits for its “profound influence” on him, has spread materials claiming that “revisionist” historians have downplayed America’s Christian origins, but the group has been widely criticized for historically dubious claims.

A lawsuit on its behalf is challenging the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority’s refusal to run its bus ads touting the purported beliefs of founders.

Vocal supporters of Trump have described current ***politics*** as spiritual warfare for the destiny of a country that former Trump aide Steve Bannon described as the “New Jerusalem” and conservative activist Charlie Kirk said was founded by “courageous Bible believing Christians.”

Recent Texas, Oklahoma and Kentucky Republican Party platforms proclaim the country was founded on “Judeo-Christian” principles.

The Rev. Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, said he doesn’t identify as a Christian nationalist, but does believe America was founded as a Christian nation.

“I’m not claiming that all of our founders were Christians,” he said in an interview. “Some were deists, some were atheists, but the majority were Christians. I’m also not saying that non-Christians shouldn’t have the same rights as Christians in our country.”

But he said “there’s a case to be made that the Judeo-Christian faith was the foundation for our laws and many of our principles.” He cited founder John Jay — the first Supreme Court chief justice — asserting it was Americans’ duty “in our Christian nation, to select and prefer Christians for their rulers.”

Jeffress said he doesn’t believe America is privileged by God but, as with any nation, “God will continue to bless America to the extent that we follow him.”

Anthea Butler, chair of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania, said history precludes any idea of a Christian nation.

“It doesn’t mean that Christians weren’t a part of the founding of this nation,” said Butler, a historian of African American and American religion. “What it does mean is that if you believe that America is a Christian nation and you happen to subscribe to Christian nationalism as a part of that, you’re buying into a myth.”

That America-as-a-Christian-nation idea is “a trope of exclusion,” she said, centering American history on white Anglo-Saxon Protestants as “the ones that are willing and should be running the country both then and now.”

That justifies viewing others as “heathens,” including the enslaved Blacks and the Native Americans whose land was being taken.

Those arguing for a Christian America are generally not historians and not really talking about history — they’re talking ***politics***, said John Fea, author of the 2011 book “Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?”

“They appeal to a false view of the founding, or at least a partial view of the founding, to advance political agendas of the present,” said Fea, a history professor at Messiah University, a Christian university in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. “These agendas are built on a very weak historical foundation.”

The belief in America’s Christian origins is mainstream.

Six in 10 U.S. adults said the founders intended America to be a Christian nation, according to a 2022 Pew Research Center survey. About 45% said the U.S. should be a Christian nation. Four in five white evangelical Protestants agreed with each assertion.

By some measures, Democratic President Joe Biden might be seen in that category, citing the importance of his Catholic faith and calling for God’s blessings on America and its troops — but also invoking shared values “whether you’re Christian, whether you’re Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or [*any other faith, or no faith at all.*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84KQOdUgFoQ) ”

One-third of U.S. adults surveyed in 2023 said God intended America to be a promised land for European Christians to set an example to the world, according to a Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)/Brookings report.

Such surveys have found a smaller, more ardent group of believers in Christian nationhood. In another survey, PRRI identified about 10% of Americans as the most committed adherents.

The Constitution prohibits any religious test for office, and its First Amendment bars congressional establishment of any religion, along with guaranteeing free exercise of religion.

Defenders of Christian nationhood can point out that several of the 13 original states funded Protestant churches at their origins, though within a few decades all had followed Virginia’s example in halting the practice. They can point to Christian rhetoric by some founders, such as John Jay, Patrick Henry and Samuel Adams.

But several key founders would never pass a test of orthodoxy. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin viewed Jesus as a great teacher but not as God.

“Could you find stuff where John Adams talks about religion being the foundation of the republic, like George Washington said in his farewell address?” asked Fea. “Are there states where Christianity was privileged? Yes, you can find all those things. You can also find things to show the Constitution wants to keep religion and government separate.”

Some secular activists today advocate for an opposite view — that U.S. founders sought to banish religion from public life. Fea said that also goes too far: “When you’re dealing with the 18th century, nuance and complexity is essential,” he said.

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Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP’s [*collaboration*](https://bit.ly/ap-twir) with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

**Load-Date:** February 17, 2024

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