

Our team is tasked with describing Christian Nationalism diagnostically and prescriptively. Our hope is to explain why Christians should be concerned about right-wing Christian extremism's growing impact. We also hope to suggest how Christians can resist it.

The descriptive task initially seemed simple. When we first met to discuss this project, the popular understanding of Christian Nationalism seemed sufficient. We began with the insight that Christian Nationalism denotes a movement that seeks to make America a Christian state. We read popular books claiming that 52% of Americans either advocate or support that vision.<sup>1</sup> It seemed at first that equipping the saints might consist of helping Episcopalians respond to something that abides in other denominations - especially Evangelical churches.

None of that was true.

In the description of Christian Nationalism that follows, we will explain our discovery that its popular definition is misleading and insufficient. Diagnosing who is infected and understanding what's at stake requires more rigor and nuance. The claims that more than half of Americans support right-wing Christian extremism overstate the case. More importantly, they obscure what's really happening. At least two kinds of right-wing Christian extremism compete in the American public square. Most importantly, one of these is likely already infecting Episcopalians. Both may metastasize under pressures of the 2024 presidential campaign. The need for urgency in equipping the saints is clear.

In what follows, we begin with everyday terms that require greater specification for this topic. Though the words are common, we use them with technical meanings important to our analysis. Next we introduce the concept of peoplehood stories (nationalisms). These are essential tools by which all polities conduct practical reasoning in negotiation of public policies. We note constructive and destructive examples.

This previews our prescriptive counsel. The cure for what ails us is persuading Americans to repudiate destructive and embrace constructive peoplehood stories. We then describe a taxonomy of American political discourses currently competing in America's marketplace of ideas. The taxonomy distinguishes two competing species of Christian nationalisms: Church Statism and Colorblind Judeo-Christian Nationalism. We conclude by describing how they interact with competing discourses, and how anxieties about that competition fuel them.

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<sup>1</sup> Whitehead, Andrew L., and Samuel L. Perry. 2020. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Oxford University Press.

We begin by defining technical terms we will use in what follows.

In today's vernacular, *Nation*, *People*, *Body Politic*, and *State* are often used interchangeably without sacrificing clarity in everyday conversations. However, in political theology, we must differentiate between these terms because their confusion historically has enflamed conflicts between groups competing for dominant power.

The first distinction is between *community* and *society*.<sup>2</sup>

A *community* is distinct from a society. Community consciousness is primarily collective and generated by heredity, geographic, and historical context, and persons receive community identities as givens. You don't get to choose your community; you receive that identity as a consequence of your context. Groups based on shared habitat, region, origin, language, socioeconomic class, and caste are *communities*.

In contrast, the creation of a society is deliberative, and the free consent of its members precedes participation in its cooperative work. Adults choose membership in a society. Society consciousness is primarily personal and generated by the person's and group's shared commitment to an idea or cause. Groups - such as churches, businesses, labor unions, scholarly guilds, and political associations - based on shared ideas, visions, missions, or ends are *intermediate* societies.

A *Nation* (or *People*) is a community, not a society. It is a community constituted as an acephalous, amorphous web of autonomous communities whose relation is generated and sustained by a shared ethnic-social foundation in a treasured land, history, tradition, and collective consciousness.

The *Body Politic* is a society humans create for cooperative work towards the *common good*. Its form is not a social contract but a covenant in which persons mutually pledge their lives in civic friendship, committing to work toward the common good, united by devotion to the Body Politic and the justice and the rule of law that are its ends.

The *Body Politic* spawns an intrinsically pluralistic *national community*, containing all the *Body Politic's* communities and societies, including families, ecclesial bodies, and cultural, educational, and economic institutions.

The *Body Politic* is pluralistic in that it contains many national communities or peoples, respecting their rights and freedoms so that justice enables their incorporation into a single national community without erasing their secondary national communities or peoples. The United States, for example, is simultaneously a confederation of national communities or

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<sup>2</sup> These descriptions are based on the analysis of the Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain in his *Man and the State*, New edition (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), pp. 1-27.

peoples (e.g., African Americans, Cuban-Americans, New Yorkers, Texans) and a single national community constituted by many peoples.

The *State* is a *society* created by the *Body Politic*, an agency specializing in promoting the common good, maintaining the law to which the people covenant to be bound, and administering the *Body Politic's* affairs. As such, it is *not the head* of the *Body Politic* but its *instrument*, invested with authority solely for and as required by the common good.

With these distinctions in mind, we can now reflect on how nationalisms or, more helpfully, peoplehood stories shape and circumscribe individual political agency.

It is a convenient fiction to describe the political agency of individuals as though individuals can be isolated from the community of which they are a part. It is also a convenient fiction to speak of the community as though we can set aside momentarily the reality of the agency of individuals. The truth, however, is that these two cannot be separated, for they are mutually articulating.

A person's identity is shaped by community, and not by just one community, but by the many circles of which she is a part. To the extent that she is a free and rational agent, she responds to an address by a single subject from within the web of her communal circles, simultaneously constraining and directing her responses to that address according to the norms of her circles. In her response to the one subject, she, at least tacitly, addresses her other circles, engaging and shaping their norms dialogically.

Address and response between two subjects regarding matters of action are never private affairs, though at times we like to pretend they are. They are inherently communal and dialectical, articulating our communally-shaped descriptions of the world and our own locations within it. Addressing and responding to fellow subjects in our practical reasoning, we continuously adjudicate our normative descriptions and judgments. "Practical reason," therefore, is "a kind of interchange of attempts at justification among persons, each of whose actions affect what others would otherwise be able to do, and all this for a community at a time."<sup>3</sup> Our practical reasoning is thus

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<sup>3</sup> Pippin, Robert B. *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. 1 ed. Cambridge University Press, 2008. 273-4.

itself a communal practice.<sup>4</sup>

This leads to what may now be an obvious fact about the specific judgments we render as we respond to those who address us. Our responses are not shaped merely by the communal norms that pertain to specific premises; they are determined as well by the community's practice of moral reasoning itself.<sup>5</sup> The way a community determines what questions may be asked and what serves as justifiable reasons communicate a worldview that, in turn, affects one's ethical reasoning.

The community shapes individual agency in both how we hear that which is addressed to us and how we determine our free and rational responses. The questions we feel free to ask and the reasons that are normatively available to justify our beliefs and actions influence profoundly how we adjudicate our descriptions of the world and our place in it.

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Communities generate and circumscribe political agency through their local curation of peoplehood stories. A peoplehood story (historically called 'nationalism') is a discourse performed by word and action that conveys to the community who counts as members, how persons relate to the *community* and its local government, and how each relates to neighboring *communities*.

In any *Nation*, multiple peoplehood stories compete in telling the *Nation's* story. Once again, these discourse describe who counts as members, how persons and communities relate to the *Body Politic* and the *State*, and how each relates to neighboring *Nations*. In addition, competing peoplehood stories negotiate which citizens owns the nation's founding, past, present, and future.

Nationalisms that respect the rights and liberties of all persons and peoples are rightly ordered. However, they are disordered when they divinize a particular community within the *Nation* and render its claims to power absolute while marginalizing others. Similarly, peoplehood stories are disordered when they identify the *State* with the *Nation* and invite the *State* to enforce by law the primacy of one of its constituent national communities over

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<sup>4</sup> Pippin. 273.

<sup>5</sup> Pippin. 276.

others.

In the next section, we will examine two relevant archetypes of disordered peoplehood stories: British Christian Nationalism, and German Christian Nationalism. However, first we turn to the archetype of a rightly-ordered nationalism - the peoplehood story developed over decades by Abraham Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln's most outstanding contribution to American intellectual thought was to construct a new American peoplehood story that established the Declaration of Independence as the key interpretative lens for the US Constitution. Lincoln's vision of our civic union remains the standard way we introduce American schoolchildren and immigrants to our founding documents and their American identity.

Before Lincoln's rhetorical achievement, the connection between the Declaration and the Constitution was an uncommon emphasis. Lincoln linked the two to help Americans imagine how to achieve his three highest priorities simultaneously: to preserve our union, remain a people committed to the rule of law, and manage our growing diversity. His synthesis is instructive for our current struggles.

Lincoln evolved his synthesis in response to his shock at Stephen F. Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska Act. With the 1820 Missouri Compromise, Congress prohibited the extension of slavery in the remaining unorganized territory of the Louisiana Purchase. Yet, the Kansas-Nebraska bill proposed to repeal the Missouri Compromise and make slavery a local option for all the states carved out of what remained of the Louisiana Purchase in 1854, a territory of more than a million square miles. Lincoln's legislative career before the bill's introduction had been mundane, focusing on roads, education, banking, and other local matters. However, Douglas' proposed expansion of slavery astounded and galvanized Lincoln because he had been "all the time in the belief that slavery was in course of ultimate extinction."<sup>6</sup>

The challenge for Lincoln as he began to contest his fellow Illinoisan's plan to extend slavery was to hold together his primary values. But, unfortunately, they seemed to be incompatible in the case of the Kansas-Nebraska Act:

- Lincoln had always believed slavery was immoral.
- He valued the union, seeing it as a sacred duty of all citizens to preserve the

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<sup>6</sup> Lapsley, Arthur Brooks, and Delphi Classics, eds. 2019. "Reply to Senator Douglas - Peoria Speech October 16, 1854." In *Delphi Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, by Abraham Lincoln, 1st edition. Delphi Classics, p.751,

peoplehood created by the Constitution's framers.

- He cherished the sanctity of a people ruled and bound together by their shared commitment to their constituting law.

However, the Kansas-Nebraska Act threatened the union because it would expand slavery, which Congress had said would never be allowed. Since slavery was an institution increasingly seen as an intolerable evil by the northern states, while seen as essential by the southern states, slavery's extension made intense interregional conflict likely. Yet, at first glance, the Constitution seemed to allow what Douglas proposed, and Lincoln's commitment to the rule of law would require him to support what he saw as a "vast moral evil."<sup>7</sup> . Lincoln's most significant contribution to American intellectual thought arose from his creative way of resolving these tensions.<sup>8</sup>

He resolved that tension by linking the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, claiming that the framers understood the Constitution to be the practical application of the principles embodied in the Declaration. Douglas promoted the bill under the banner of popular sovereignty, declaring that each territory's right to self-determination gave it the right to determine if it would permit slavery. Passage of the bill would let "democracy prevail." Lincoln turned those claims on their head, revealing their cynical semblance. He argued "that no man is good enough to govern another man, without that other's consent," and that "popular sovereignty and democratic rule only exist where there is equality."<sup>9</sup> By 1858, as the nation careened toward civil war, Lincoln linked the framers' intentions concerning the liberties of individuals and states in such a way that the concerns for constitutional order, preservation of the union, and eventual extinction of slavery were all means of securing those liberties. The people, both individually and collectively as states, rightly honor each's diversity, but the evil of slavery is not on the list of things to be tolerated throughout the land.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>7</sup> Lapsley, Arthur Brooks, and Delphi Classics, eds. 2019. "Reply to Senator Douglas - Peoria Speech October 16, 1854." In *Delphi Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, by Abraham Lincoln, 1st edition. Delphi Classics. p.755,

<sup>8</sup> Schulten, Susan. n.d. "Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, and John Dewey." *Denver University Law Review* 86, p.810; Marback, Richard, ed. 2016. "Lincoln and Obama: Two Visions of Civic Union." In *Representation and Citizenship*, by Rogers M. Smith. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Schulten, Susan. n.d. "Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, and John Dewey." *Denver University Law Review* 86, p.810;

<sup>10</sup> Marback, Richard, ed. 2016. "Lincoln and Obama: Two Visions of Civic Union." In *Representation and Citizenship*, by Rogers M. Smith. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, p. 27.

Lincoln found the linkage he sought embedded in the Constitution itself, implied by its statement of purpose to form "a more perfect union," a union "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." It was always the framers' intention that the people realize liberty for all and abolish slavery, and therefore the people rightly extinguish the institution within the boundaries of the rule of law to which all pledge commitment.

Like the Framers', Lincoln's nationalist narrative described a people in which "each individual is naturally entitled to do as he pleases with himself and the fruit of his labor, so far as it in no wise interferes with any other man's rights; that each community as a State has a right to do exactly as it pleases with all the concerns within that State that interfere with the right of no other State; and that the General Government, upon principle, has no right to interfere with anything other than the general class of things that does concern the whole."<sup>11</sup> By linking the Declaration to the Constitution as its inspiration and describing America as a people dedicated to the proposition that all humans are equal, Lincoln named our country as something not yet achieved, an experiment constantly on the way toward the Framers' vision.<sup>12</sup>

### Taxonomy of American Nationalisms

Lincoln's peoplehood story grounded Americans' understanding of national identity in "the proposition that all men are created equal" and the idea that any house will fall unless united under the rule of law. More than a century later, Barack Obama, in his second inaugural address echoed these themes, observing that the Declaration's justification of the American nation based on the equality of all humans is "what makes us Americans." Repeatedly, Obama echoed Lincoln, and extended his peoplehood story with an Obama twist: the "belief that we're all connected as one people... is what allows us to pursue our individual dreams and yet still come together as one American family.

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<sup>11</sup> Lapsley, Arthur Brooks, and Delphi Classics, eds. 2019. "Reply to Senator Douglas - Peoria Speech October 16, 1854." In *Delphi Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, by Abraham Lincoln, 1st edition. Delphi Classics. p.752-3,

<sup>12</sup> Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. New Ed edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

E pluribus unum: 'Out of many, one.'"<sup>13</sup>

Lincoln and Obama are perhaps America's most effective proponents of a rightly ordered peoplehood story that calls Americans to respect the rights and liberties of all persons and peoples due to our inalienable commitment to the principles of human equality and the rule of law. These principles form the bedrock of what sociologists call the American civil religion - a civic nationalism through which we tell the story of who counts as an American, how we relate to our near and distant neighbors, and what kind of nation we are becoming.

"Civil religion" is jargon coined by sociologist Robert Bellah that might reasonably be translated as "public philosophy" or "civic creed." It is a symbolic discourse into which most Americans are indoctrinated in school. It encourages shared ownership of our heritage, national values, and a collective vision for what America strives to become.

America's civil religion remembers heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington. It draws upon our civic canon to fuel a shared dream of America becoming "a free people governing themselves for the common good."<sup>14</sup> That common good ethic includes the commitment to protect from arbitrary power those whose insecurity is denoted by the biblical metaphors of the widow, orphan, and resident alien. It stands firm in its belief that all are equal in essential human dignity. It teaches that all Americans are called to sacrifice so that our neighbors might flourish. It respects liberal institutions as necessary but insufficient protections of liberty. It regards civic virtue as the ultimate means of ensuring the common good.

American civil religion is what most learn at home, school, and in our civic pageantries and celebrations of American heroes. However, American civil religion is not a static and monolithic belief system. It is a discourse consisting of symbols, rituals, and narratives locally curated, constantly contested, and dialectically evolving in response to events. Moreover, it consists today not of one but two distinct discourses, both different from Christian nationalism and radical secularism.

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<sup>13</sup> "Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama." 2013. Whitehouse.Gov. January 21, 2013. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>.

<sup>14</sup> Gorski, Philip S., Samuel L. Perry, and Jemar Tisby. 2022. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford University Press.



## Two Distinct Species of American Civil Religion

A recent study showed that American civil religion consists of at least two verifiable contrasting discourses that political parties coopt to generate partisan identity. Contrary to Gorski's hope, appeals to those strands strengthen rather than cure partisan divisions.

Political scientist Abigail Vegter and others followed many scholars in adopting Max Weber's typology of religious practice to analyze American civil religion.<sup>15</sup> They confirmed two mutually exclusive narratives. The "priestly" version rationalizes and defends America's deeds and received structures, often based on American exceptionalist themes. In contrast, the "prophetic" version contrasts America's deeds and structures with our ideals and calls for reform. The priestly and prophetic strands of American civil religion narrate competing accounts of America, and both are distinct from and compete with Christian nationalism.

The priestly narrative permeates Republican politics. The prophetic version is entrenched among Democratic partisans. Though they share a foundational immersion in the American civil religion, the two strands emphasize different biblical and American stories and symbols that generate distinctive worldviews, values, and political attitudes.

Most Americans make sense of their communities and place in them by locating themselves within our shared history as locally interpreted through one of the strands of the American civil religion. Moreover, they assess actions and attitudes observed in the public square based on how they cohere with that locally curated account of our heritage, values, and vision for what America strives to become. These strands are our most pervasive forms of community practical reasoning. They shape individual agency in both how we hear that which is addressed to us and how we determine our free and rational responses. They influence profoundly how we adjudicate our descriptions of the world and our place in it.

The political attitudes of most Americans are not influenced mainly by Christian nationalism or radical secularism but by one of the strands of the American civil religion that compete with them in America's marketplace of ideas.

Superfamily	Political Discourses	Political Discourses	Political Discourses	Political Discourses	Political Discourses	Political Discourses
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<sup>15</sup> Vegter, Abigail, Andrew R. Lewis, and Cammie Jo Bolin. 2023. "Which Civil Religion? Partisanship, Christian Nationalism, and the Dimensions of Civil Religion in the United States." *Politics and Religion* 16 (2): 286–300. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048322000402>.

<b>Family</b>	Peoplehood stories	Peoplehood stories	Peoplehood stories	Peoplehood stories	Peoplehood stories	Peoplehood stories
<b>Subfamily</b>	Prophetic	Prophetic	Priestly	Prophetic	Priestly	Priestly
<b>Genus</b>	Inclusive	Inclusive	Inclusive	Exclusive	Exclusive	Exclusive
<b>Sub-Genus</b>					Christian Nationalisms	Christian Nationalisms
<b>Species</b>	Beloved Community	Am Civil Religion - Left	Am Civil Religion - Right	Identity Synthesis	Church Statism	Color-Blind Judeo-Christian Nation

In reflecting on right-wing Christian movements, it is helpful to recall that "The Left" denotes social movements prioritizing emancipatory politics. "The Right" signifies social movements prioritizing the preservation of received structures and values. To what are right-wing Christian groups reacting?

Historically, the American Left has analyzed politics through the lens of class struggle. However, in the 1960s, new emphases gained influence that reflected on politics through the lenses of race, gender, and sexuality. When the Berlin Wall fell in the 1990s, class struggle diminished in influence. The American Left increasingly analyzed politics through the lenses of culture and identity.

Inspired by the work of thinkers like Michael Foucault, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Derrick Bell, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, the last four decades saw the construction of academic centers and departments committed to analyzing identity through the lenses of race, gender, and sexuality. Concepts generated by postmodernism, postcolonialism, and critical race theory converged to forge a new post-liberal Left ideology. This ideology rapidly gained dominance among scholars and administrators at America's top universities.

By 2010, due to its influence at top schools, it became similarly influential at America's leading corporations, especially non-profits and NGOs. Widespread popular distortions - often contradicting the ideology's generative thinkers - became prominent among Americans active on Twitter. Consequently, some scholars of social movements, noting the popular version's contrast with liberalism, dubbed it the "Cyber Left." Adherents called themselves "Woke."

The new Left ideology generated resistance on the Right and Left. With Donald Trump's rise in 2016, "anti-wokeness" became a performative virtue for the Right's presidential contenders. On

the Left, numerous liberal intellectuals - including Michael Walzer,<sup>16</sup> Susan Neiman,<sup>17</sup> Greg Lukianoff,<sup>18</sup> Alan Dershowitz,<sup>19</sup> and Yasha Mounk<sup>20</sup> - published critiques that decried its rejection of fundamental liberal values. Mounk, seeking a respectful name for an ideology birthed on the Left but rejecting some of its core commitments, named it the "Identity Synthesis."

Mounk helpfully described seven themes that characterize the Identity Synthesis.<sup>21</sup>

- There is no such thing as objective truth. There are only viewpoints. Appeals to objective reality conceal the ways those with hegemonic power oppress others.
- We best resist hegemonic power by changing people's language to describe the world. Our received language contains subtle biases, micro-aggressions, and cultural appropriations. We must invent new neutral vocabulary to render language more inclusive.
- Though identity groups are merely social constructions, it is strategically essential to strengthen them as a means of resisting domination by hegemonic power.
- Any appearance of progress in emancipatory politics is an illusion.
- Legislation should not be colorblind, gender-neutral, or in any way fail to distinguish citizens based on ascribed identities. Rather than treating everyone equally, equity requires that governments differentiate between citizens based on whether they are part of historically dominated groups.
- Intersectionality means that institutions and people should defer to the claims of

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<sup>16</sup> Walzer, Michael. 2023. *The Struggle for a Decent Politics: On "Liberal" as an Adjective*. Yale University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Neiman, Susan. 2023. *Left Is Not Woke*. 1st edition. Polity.

<sup>18</sup> Lukianoff, Greg, and Rikki Schlott. 2023. *The Canceling of the American Mind: Cancel Culture Undermines Trust and Threatens Us All—But There Is a Solution*. Simon & Schuster.

<sup>19</sup> Dershowitz, Alan. 2020. *Cancel Culture: The Latest Attack on Free Speech and Due Process*. Hot Books.

<sup>20</sup> Mounk, Yascha. 2023. *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*. Penguin Press.

<sup>21</sup> Mounk, 2023, 63-75.

organizations putatively representing identity groups, embracing their positions on topics that matter to them. Good standing depends on adherence to orthodox views determined by putatively representative organizations.

- Members of different identity groups cannot hope to understand each other. You have your truth, and I have mine. You have no right to question my view. Moreover, since there is no such thing as objective facts or universal truths, someone from a historically dominant group never has the right to challenge the truth of someone from a historically oppressed identity group.

Some readers will recall when these themes entered the public square. Many will nod their heads, affirming themes as they read about them. Yet liberals on the Left and conservatives on the right have raised significant concerns with this ideology.

It is beyond my scope to recount liberals' objections to the Identity Synthesis. However, it is helpful to note that several of these themes challenge those prioritizing the preservation of received structures and values. I'll highlight a few that telegraph why right-wing Christian movements might feel threatened by the Identity Synthesis ideology.

- Christians find it difficult to reconcile the claim that there is no objective truth with the ultimacy they attribute to God. Many of the other themes derive from that claim.
- Christians believe that sin obstructs and sometimes negates progress in emancipatory politics. Nonetheless, they believe the superior power of God's love that drives history toward its fulfillment justifies and summons Christians to hope.
- Christians believe God acts in history to transcend differences without erasing them, enabling people who speak different tongues to comprehend each other despite radically different social locations.
- Many Christians treasure the Great Society's civil rights settlement that established the hope for the rule by law that treats all citizens equally.

Conservative Christianity is not a monolith. In what follows, we will see that right-wing Christian movements react in diverse ways to the challenges raised by the rapid mainstream acceptance of the Identity Synthesis.

## Understanding Christian Nationalism

Let's be clear on what Christian nationalism is.

The most rigorous social scientist definition denotes folks who seek a fusion of Church and politics, define national identity in terms of membership in their particular species of Christianity, and justify violence if necessary to advance its proselytizing and extension to near

and distant neighbors (Gorski, 2019).

With all due respect to social scientists, Christian nationalism is a Christian heresy best understood theologically. We comprehend Christian nationalism by reflecting on two archetypes: the Anglican Church of the Victorian era and the German Church of the 1930s.

It's anachronistic to locate the origins of nationalism in the rise of England's sense of itself as a nation-state. Other collective identities were more significant. Nevertheless, the seeds are there. One finds in the 16th-century Elizabethan Settlement a fusion of Church and State. Queen Elizabeth was head of State and supreme governor of the Church of England. Citizenship and membership in her Church were a civic bundle. Tolerance of other religions meant dissidents could live peacefully in exchange for accepting diminished citizenship rights. England's evolution into a nation-state coincided with its fusion of Church and politics. Yet, that fusion took the form of resisting Rome's religious hegemony and the geopolitical power of other rising European states. That fusion did not yet constitute Christian nationalism because England's social imaginary located sovereignty with the Queen and not the people.

By Victoria's reign, England's national identity was firmly forged, and its sovereignty was irrevocably located in the people's parliament. Church and State remained fused. Victoria's ships carried to foreign lands a people schooled for more than a century on Isaac Watts' hymns in which the poet rewrote the Psalms, substituting Britain in Israel's place. British imperialism - that subjugated and exploited peoples on every continent - was fueled in part by the unquestioned conviction that England was the New Israel, called by God to be the world's pedagogue, teaching the nations what it means to flourish as one people under God, by force, if necessary. The British Empire, with cannons on its forecastle and King James Bibles in its nave, is the first archetype of Christian nationalism.

The German Christian Church of the 1930s is the second. That fact is well-known, but the reasons need to be better understood. Many people make the connection between the Nazis and Christian nationalism. Still, most don't know what that connection was. That's crucial.

The *Deutsche Christen*, or "German Christians," was a movement within the more extensive set of German Protestants who embraced Nazi ideology and embedded it in their self-understanding of what it meant to be a German Christian.

Throughout history, Christians have understood that Christian identity is generated through the unmerited gift of the heart's movement that recognizes Jesus as one's supreme exemplar, master, and Deliverer. I frame that movement using non-traditional language to highlight that Christians historically understand that Jesus delivers us from meaningless, nothingness, and death's abyss

by revealing and directing us along the path to human flourishing. Jesus, in this framing, is the ultimate source of revelation.

The *Deutsche Christen* movement took its cue from Nazi ideology and added *race* as a coequal source of revelation. That fact is stunning and crucial: the Deutsche Christen movement embraced race - understood as possessing Aryan bloodlines - as divine revelation.

Three extraordinary things happened with this claim. First, the Church saw a particular German government - Hitler's new Nazi regime - as divinely given to deliver the German people from its malaise. Second, it named the State's ideology divine revelation *on par with the Scriptures*. Third, on the question of race, it claimed Nazi ideology trumped the Scriptures, providing the lens through which they are rightly understood (Bergen 1996; Cremer, 2019; King, 1979; Koehne 2013).

Their claim was that God reveals what it means for humans to flourish through the historical example of those with Aryan blood. Moreover, only such people were legitimate members of the German Church. Leaders with any hint of non-Aryan bloodlines must be purged. Finally, they embraced the Nazi idea that force may be necessary to maintain the purity of the German people through which such divine revelation flows.

When we speak of Christian nationalism from a theological perspective, we denote a dangerous kind of apostasy, idolatry, and blasphemy that justifies exclusion and violence in God's name.

Apostasy is the rejection of God's Word. Idolatry is worshiping something unfit to be our ultimate concern. Blasphemy is our declaration that God endorses the falsehoods we speak and perform.

Theologically understood, Christian nationalism rejects Jesus's sovereignty and adds the State alongside Jesus as revelatory (apostasy); it divinizes the State, making it one's ultimate concern (idolatry); and it declares God's blessing upon the State's falsehoods and violence (blasphemy). It names the nation the New Israel, supplanting the Jews (supersessionism) and adopting a pedagogical stance towards near and distant neighbors. Christian nationalism coopts Christian language and symbols for the unChristian performance of oppressive power.

Ironically, the Hitler regime was anti-Christian. The Nazi elite recognized that fascism was incompatible with Christianity. They made use of the *Deutsche Christen* movement but planned its annihilation.

## 21st-Century American Church Statism

Christian nationalism arrived with British colonists and, despite Constitutional protections, remains alive and well in the United States. Mostly, we find it in fringe right-wing extremist groups.

It thrives within a dangerous derivative of Pentecostalism, the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). The Christian symbols evident during the January 6th assault on the U.S. Capitol were carried mainly by NAR members. Except for some language and symbols, NAR is a cult whose Christianity is unrecognizable to most Christians, and its members do not consider those outside their cult as Christian ([Taylor, 2022](#)).

Similarly, [Michael Flynn's ReAwaken Tour](#) consciously inducts participants into a Christian nationalist cult that is *Christianist* rather than Christian. Sociologist Rogers Brubaker borrowed Andrew Sullivan's Christianist term to name movements that embrace Christianity not as a religion but as a cultural identity (Brubaker 2017). For Flynn's disciples, the Cross, swaddled in the American flag, signifies they are members of America's White-Christian culture. Therefore, they are protected from dilution by brown immigrants, especially Muslims. Jesus is merely the name Christianists give to the one who paints them White.

More worrisome is the rising tide of a Christian nationalism variant among America's evangelical leaders. Evangelicals and adherents to the New Apostolic Reformation look alike but are distinct Christianities. This variant is most prevalent among America's Southern Baptist and non-denominational megachurches.

The rhetoric, pageantry, and teaching of many evangelical megachurch leaders increasingly reflect a malignant fusion of Church and partisan politics and the language of holy war against radical secularism. Increasingly, these leaders embrace partisan ideology *as a source of divine revelation alongside the Scriptures*, in much the same manner as the *Deutsche Christen* movement. Their leadership roles are comparable to those who led that movement. They are best positioned to lead an effort to establish a theocratic state. Their trend is concerning.

we live in infinitely complex and overlapping community circles generated by the stories we tell and the futures we imagine concerning our life together. The stories we tell contain and transmit the values, heritage, language, and boundaries that constitute the fellowship of each circle. Our circles also curate stories of our relationship to more significant associations based on ascribed identities like race, gender, or class and political identities like our nation. We are simultaneously and historically members of many circles, shaped by often competing narratives (Smith, 2015). Every person at our Thanksgiving table has been shaped by many accounts of what it means to be and who counts as an American.

Christian nationalism and radical secularism exemplify illiberal, often anti-democratic, and opposing versions of that narrative. As Phillip Gorski (2019) notes, the latter combines - in contrast with Christian nationalism - some form of "radical individualism" with the hope for the eradication of all religions (Gorski 2019:27-30). Christian nationalism dreams of a theocratic state, while radical secularism seeks to banish religion from civic life.

These two discourses thrive at opposite ends of the public square. Both are outliers in how most Americans think of the separation of Church and politics. Americans have, since our origins, valued freedom of religion, which historically is manifest as a religious free market where

religions compete for mindshare, and agnosticism and atheism are valid options. The Constitution's establishment clause prohibits the State from putting a finger on the scale in this competition.

Those competing narratives have been, since the 1930s, part of the air we breathe, swirling around us, vying to become our dominant way of thinking about America's past, present, and future (Kruse, 2015). However, scholars identify three more pervasive discourses that generate competing accounts of America's past, present, and future.

Gorski (2019) describes American civil religion as a discourse rivaling radical secularism and religious nationalism and argues that an emphasis on it can cure America's hyper-polarization. Civil religion is jargon coined by sociologist Robert Bellah that might reasonably be translated as "public philosophy" or "civic creed." It is a symbolic discourse into which most Americans are indoctrinated in school. It encourages shared ownership of our heritage, national values, and a collective vision for what America strives to become.

America's civil religion remembers heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington. It draws upon our civic canon to fuel a shared dream of America becoming "a free people governing themselves for the common good" (Gorski 2019:223). That common good ethic includes the commitment to protect from arbitrary power those whose insecurity is denoted by the biblical metaphors of the widow, orphan, and resident alien. It stands firm in its belief that all are equal in essential human dignity. It teaches that all Americans are called to sacrifice so that our neighbors might flourish. It respects liberal institutions as necessary but insufficient protections of liberty. It regards civic virtue as the ultimate means of ensuring the common good.

American civil religion is what most learn at home, school, and in our civic pageantries and celebrations of American heroes. However, American civil religion is not a static and monolithic belief system. It is a discourse consisting of symbols, rituals, and narratives locally curated, constantly contested, and dialectically evolving in response to events. Moreover, it consists today not of one but two distinct discourses, both different from Christian nationalism and radical secularism.

A recent study showed that American civil religion consists of at least two verifiable contrasting discourses that political parties coopt to generate partisan identity. Contrary to Gorski's hope, appeals to those strands strengthen rather than cure partisan divisions.

Political scientist Abigail Vegter and others followed many scholars in adopting Max Weber's typology of religious practice to analyze American civil religion (Vegter et al., 2022). They confirmed two mutually exclusive narratives. The "priestly" version rationalizes and defends America's deeds and received structures, often based on American exceptionalist themes. In contrast, the "prophetic" version contrasts America's deeds and structures with our ideals and calls for reform. The priestly and prophetic strands of American civil religion narrate competing accounts of America, and both are distinct from and compete with Christian nationalism.

The priestly narrative permeates Republican politics. The prophetic version is entrenched among



Democratic partisans. Though they share a foundational immersion in the American civil religion, the two strands emphasize different biblical and American stories and symbols that generate distinctive worldviews, values, and political attitudes.

Most Americans make sense of their communities and their place in them by locating themselves within our shared history as locally interpreted through one of the strands of the American civil religion. Moreover, most assess actions and attitudes observed in the public square based on how they cohere with that locally curated account of our heritage, values, and vision for what America strives to become. The political attitudes of most Americans are not influenced mainly by Christian nationalism or radical secularism but by one of the strands of the American civil religion that compete with them in America's marketplace of ideas.

Some Americans reject Church Statism but embrace similar illiberal and anti-democratic ideas and justify them with reasoning inspired by a second common mutation of these civil religion discourses.

Sociologist Ruth Braunstein dubs the mutation the [Colorblind Judeo-Christian Nation \(CJCN\) narrative](#) (Braunstein 2021). The priestly strand of the American civil religion mutates in its remembrance of civil rights achievements incorporated into law and cultural norms through President Johnson's Great Society legislation. The corrupted strand absolves adherents of racism charges without committing them to policies to address racism's enduring consequences.

The two healthy strands synthesized the vision of a Beloved Community put forth compellingly by 20th-century civil rights leaders. Judicial and legislative law and cultural mores adjusted their aim: America shall be a colorblind nation, and a good citizen supports laws that treat all people equally regardless of skin color. Discrimination based on race, like anti-Semitism, is culturally taboo.

However, the Great Society also gave birth to a mutation in the priestly strand. This new discourse rationalizes and defends the dominant Anglo-Protestant ethnotradition by generating the CJCN narrative. It broadens the set of those it recognizes as part of mainstream culture to include anyone who embraces that ethnotradition, rebranding it "Judeo-Christian." It redefines American-ness in terms of consent and conformity to the rebranded ethnotradition.

Through this redefinition of national belonging, the CJCN mutation converts race into a *cultural* category. The discourse promotes a liberal, colorblind ethic. However, it construes anyone who does not live according to its ethnotradition as an outsider.

Echoing the Protestant work ethic, which held that hard work was evidence of one's divine election, it construes those constrained by generational poverty, chronic crime, or substandard educational opportunities as irresponsibly rejecting Judeo-Christian norms of rugged individualism, self-sufficiency, and traditional family values. They may be citizens, but they are not legitimate compatriots because they fail to embody Judeo-Christian values. Accordingly, public policies aimed at delivering them from their plight are inappropriate. By converting race to a cultural category in this way, the CJCN discourse enables adherents to see themselves as practicing colorblind and religiously tolerant inclusivity while sustaining established practices of

exclusion and privilege (Braunstein, 2022).

Those influenced by the CJCJN discourse may sound like Church Statists at times because it leads to similar policy preferences. And the plots of their stories share a declension structure that looks nostalgically back to a golden era. However, if you listen closely, you'll notice that the golden eras they cherish and the heroes they celebrate are different (Braunstein, 2022). Moreover, Church Statists are overtly exclusive, and Judeo-Christian nationalists see themselves as inclusive and promote the colorblind cultural norm. Also, Judeo-Christian nationalists are considerably less nativist. Most importantly, they oppose the fusion of the Church and the State (Li and Froese, 2023). For these reasons, though they share some conservative commitments, Judeo-Christian nationalists and Church Statists are odd bedfellows. A better American story can recall the former to civic republicanism.

## Understanding Christian Nationalism

Let's be clear on what Christian nationalism is. The most rigorous social scientist definition denotes folks who seek a fusion of Church and politics, define national identity in terms of membership in their particular species of Christianity, and justify violence if necessary to advance its proselytizing and extension to near and distant neighbors (Gorski, 2019).

I doubt Grandpa or your bigoted brother-in-law think that hard. Christian nationalism is demanding work. It takes a lot of energy to hate so many neighbors.

I am not a social scientist; I am a theologian. With all due respect to social scientists, Christian nationalism is a Christian heresy and is best understood theologically. We comprehend Christian nationalism by reflecting on two archetypes: the Anglican Church of the Victorian era and the German Church of the 1930s.

### British Christian Nationalism

It's anachronistic to locate the origins of nationalism in the rise of England's sense of itself as a nation-state. Other collective identities were more significant. Nevertheless, the seeds are there. One finds in the 16th-century Elizabethan Settlement a fusion of Church and State. Queen Elizabeth was head of State and supreme governor of the Church of England. Citizenship and membership in her Church were a civic bundle. Tolerance of other religions meant dissidents could live peacefully in exchange for accepting diminished citizenship rights. England's evolution into a nation-state coincided with its fusion of Church and politics. Yet, that fusion took the form of resisting Rome's religious hegemony and the geopolitical power of other rising European states. That fusion did not yet constitute Christian nationalism because England's social imaginary located sovereignty with the Queen and not the people.

By Victoria's reign, England's national identity was firmly forged, and its sovereignty was

irrevocably located in the people's parliament. Church and State remained fused. Victoria's ships carried to foreign lands a people schooled for more than a century on Isaac Watts' hymns in which the poet rewrote the Psalms, substituting Britain in Israel's place. British imperialism - that subjugated and exploited peoples on every continent - was fueled in part by the unquestioned conviction that Britain was the New Israel, called by God to be the world's pedagogue, teaching the nations what it means to flourish as one people under God, by force, if necessary. The British Empire, with cannons on its forecastle and King James Bibles in its nave, is the first archetype of Christian nationalism.

## German Christian Nationalism

The German Christian Church of the 1930s is the second. That fact is well-known, but the reasons need to be better understood. Many people make the connection between the Nazis and Christian nationalism. Still, most don't know what that connection was, and that's crucial.

The *Deutsche Christen*, or "German Christians," was a movement within the more extensive set of German Protestants who embraced Nazi ideology and embedded it in their self-understanding of what it meant to be a German Christian.

Throughout history, Christians have understood that Christian identity is generated through the unmerited gift of the heart's movement that recognizes Jesus as one's supreme exemplar, master, and Deliverer. I frame that movement using non-traditional language to highlight that Christians historically understand that Jesus delivers us from meaningless, nothingness, and death's abyss by revealing and directing us along the path to human flourishing. Jesus, in this framing, is the ultimate source of revelation.

The *Deutsche Christen* movement took its cue from Nazi ideology and added *race* as a coequal source of revelation. You may need to re-read that last sentence, for it is stunning and crucial: the *Deutsche Christen* movement embraced race - understood as possessing Aryan bloodlines - as divine revelation. Three extraordinary things happen with this claim. First, the Church saw a particular German government - Hitler's new Nazi regime - as divinely given to deliver the German people from its malaise. Second, it named the State's ideology divine revelation on par with the Scriptures. Third, on the question of race, it claimed Nazi ideology trumped the Scriptures, providing the lens through which they are rightly understood (Bergen 1996; Cremer, 2019; King, 1979; Koehne 2013).

Their claim was that God reveals what it means for humans to flourish through the historical example of those with Aryan blood. Moreover, only such people were legitimate members of the German Church. Leaders with any hint of non-Aryan bloodlines must be purged. Finally, they embraced the Nazi idea that force may be necessary to maintain the purity of the German people through which such divine revelation flows.

When we speak of Christian nationalism from a theological perspective, we denote a dangerous kind of apostasy, idolatry, and blasphemy that justifies exclusion and violence in God's name. Apostasy is the rejection of God's Word. Idolatry is worshiping something unfit to be our ultimate concern. Blasphemy is our declaration that God endorses the falsehoods we speak and

perform. Theologically understood, Christian nationalism rejects Jesus's sovereignty and adds the State alongside Jesus as revelatory (apostasy); it divinizes the State, making it one's ultimate concern (idolatry); and it declares God's blessing upon the State's falsehoods and violence (blasphemy). It names the nation the New Israel, supplanting the Jews (supersessionism) and adopting a pedagogical stance towards near and distant neighbors. Christian nationalism coopts Christian language and symbols for the unChristian performance of oppressive power.

Folks who enjoy serenading neighbors with charges of fascism and Nazism should know that the Nazis were anti-Christian. The Nazi elite recognized that fascism was incompatible with Christianity. They made use of the *Deutsche Christen* movement but planned its annihilation.

## 21st-Century American Christian Nationalism

Christian nationalism arrived with British colonists and, despite Constitutional protections, remains alive and well in the United States. Mostly, we find it in fringe right-wing extremist groups.

It thrives within a dangerous derivative of Pentecostalism, the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). The Christian symbols evident during the January 6th assault on the U.S. Capitol were carried mainly by NAR members. Except for some language and symbols, NAR is a cult whose Christianity is unrecognizable to most Christians, and its members do not consider those outside their cult as Christian ([Taylor, 2022](#)).

Similarly, [Michael Flynn's ReAwaken Tour](#) consciously inducts participants into a Christian nationalist cult that is *Christianist* rather than Christian. Sociologist Rogers Brubaker borrowed Andrew Sullivan's Christianist term to name movements that embrace Christianity not as a religion but as a cultural identity (Brubaker 2017). For Flynn's disciples, the Cross, swaddled in the American flag, signifies they are members of America's White-Christian culture. Therefore, they are protected from dilution by brown immigrants, especially Muslims. Jesus is merely the name Christianists give to the one who paints them White.

More worrisome is the rising tide of Christian nationalism among America's evangelical leaders. Evangelicals and adherents to the New Apostolic Reformation look alike but are distinct, so let me be clear here. I now point to leaders of America's Southern Baptist and non-denominational megachurches. The rhetoric, pageantry, and teaching of many evangelical megachurch leaders increasingly reflect a malignant fusion of Church and partisan politics and the language of holy war against radical secularism. More ominously, our new House Speaker, Mike Johnson, holds several political attitudes consistent with that desire. Increasingly, these leaders embrace partisan ideology as a source of divine revelation alongside the Scriptures, in much the same manner as the *Deutsche Christen* movement. Their leadership roles are comparable to those who led that movement. They are best positioned to lead an effort to establish a theocratic state. Their trend is concerning.

## What about Grandpa?

The key to understanding Grandpa and the others at our tables this Thanksgiving is remembering that we live in infinitely complex and overlapping community circles generated by the stories we tell and the futures we imagine concerning our life together. The stories we tell contain and transmit the values, heritage, language, and boundaries that constitute the fellowship of each circle. Our circles also curate stories of our relationship to more significant associations based on ascribed identities like race, gender, or class and political identities like our nation. We are simultaneously and historically members of many circles, shaped by often competing narratives (Smith, 2015). Every person at our Thanksgiving table has been shaped by many accounts of what it means to be and who counts as an American.

Christian nationalism and radical secularism exemplify illiberal, often anti-democratic, and opposing versions of that narrative. As Phillip Gorski (2019) notes, the latter combines - in contrast with Christian nationalism - some form of "radical individualism" with the hope for the eradication of all religions (Gorski 2019:27-30). Christian nationalism dreams of a theocratic state, while radical secularism seeks to banish religion from civic life.

These two discourses thrive at opposite ends of the public square. Both are outliers in how most Americans think of the separation of Church and politics. Americans have, since our origins, valued freedom of religion, which historically is manifest as a religious free market where religions compete for mindshare, and agnosticism and atheism are valid options. The Constitution's establishment clause prohibits the State from putting a finger on the scale in this competition.

Those competing narratives have been, since the 1930s, part of the air we breathe, swirling around us, vying to become our dominant way of thinking about America's past, present, and future (Kruse, 2015). However, scholars identify three more pervasive discourses that generate competing accounts of America's past, present, and future.

## Competing Civil Religion Strands

Gorski (2019) describes American civil religion as a discourse rivaling radical secularism and religious nationalism and argues that an emphasis on it can cure America's hyper-polarization. Civil religion is jargon coined by sociologist Robert Bellah that might reasonably be translated as "public philosophy" or "civic creed." It is a symbolic discourse into which most Americans are indoctrinated in school. It encourages shared ownership of our heritage, national values, and a collective vision for what America strives to become.

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The priestly narrative permeates Republican politics. The prophetic version is entrenched among Democratic partisans. Though they share a foundational immersion in the American civil religion, the two strands emphasize different biblical and American stories and symbols that generate distinctive worldviews, values, and political attitudes.

Grandpa - along with most Americans - likely makes sense of his communities and his place in them by locating himself within our shared history as locally interpreted through one of the strands of the American civil religion. Moreover, he likely assesses actions and attitudes observed in the public square based on how they cohere with that locally curated account of our heritage, values, and vision for what America strives to become. The political attitudes of most Americans are not influenced mainly by Christian nationalism or radical secularism but by one of the strands of the American civil religion that compete with them in America's marketplace of ideas.

## The Colorblind Judeo-Christian Nation

However, despite what our Thanksgiving pageantry signifies, if Grandpa and your brother-in-law double down on illiberal and anti-democratic ideas, their airwaves have likely been overly saturated with a common mutation of these civil religion discourses.

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Through this redefinition of national belonging, the CJCN mutation converts race into a *cultural* category. The discourse promotes a liberal, colorblind ethic. However, it construes anyone who does not live according to its ethnotradition as an outsider. Echoing the Protestant work ethic, which held that hard work was evidence of one's divine election, it construes those constrained by generational poverty, chronic crime, or substandard educational opportunities as irresponsibly rejecting Judeo-Christian norms of rugged individualism, self-sufficiency, and traditional family values. They may be citizens, but they are not legitimate compatriots because they fail to embody Judeo-Christian values. Accordingly, public policies aimed at delivering them from their plight are inappropriate. By converting race to a cultural category in this way, the CJCN discourse enables adherents to see themselves as practicing colorblind and religiously tolerant inclusivity while sustaining established practices of exclusion and privilege (Braunstein, 2022).

Those influenced by the CJCN discourse may sound like Christian nationalists at times because it leads to similar policy preferences. And the plots of their stories share a declension structure that looks nostalgically back to a golden era. However, if you listen closely, you'll notice that the golden eras they cherish and the heroes they celebrate are different (Braunstein, 2022). Moreover, Christian nationalists are overtly exclusive, and Judeo-Christian nationalists see themselves as inclusive and promote the colorblind cultural norm. Also, Judeo-Christian nationalists are considerably less nativist. Most importantly, they oppose the fusion of the Church and the State (Li and Froese, 2023). For these reasons, though they share some conservative commitments, Judeo-Christian nationalists and Christian nationalists are odd bedfellows in the MAGA coalition. A better American story can recall the former to civic republicanism.

It is currently fashionable on the Left to indict all conservative Christians as Christian Nationalists. That may be good sport, but for those who are serious about defeating MAGA, it is bad strategy. Most conservatives are influenced by discourses that oppose Christian nationalism. Grandpa likely is not a Christian nationalist. By discriminating and telling a better story, we can divide and conquer the MAGA movement. Rhetorical grenades that fail to distinguish conservative discourses reinforce Trumpism's appeal.