INTRODUCTION

A HOUSE DIVIDING

The sanctuary was bursting with stars and stripes—draped from the balcony, lining the stage, printed on the identical ties and scarves worn by the 100-person choir and full orchestra. An image of the Bible resting on Old Glory was displayed on all the screens throughout this conservative Baptist church in South Carolina, including in the overflow area, which was quickly filling up. The balcony and ground floor of the sanctuary were already at capacity. The "God and Country Celebration" would be starting soon, and it was clear that both God and country were equally sacred in this place. After one particularly rousing part of the worship service in which the choir and orchestra performed anthems from each branch of the Armed Forces, the emcee—in full military uniform—intoned, "We would be remiss if we did not mention God, author and perfecter of our faith. He's guided and protected this country throughout its history. Any victories we claim are all because of him and his faithfulness, and in the good times and bad, *he's always been on our side*."

Earlier in the day, across town, a much larger Baptist congregation held a similar "Celebrate America" service. During this service the entire congregation pledged allegiance, *first*, to the United States flag, then to the Christian flag, and third to the Holy Bible. Actors representing various founding fathers and decked out in historically themed costumes recited lines proclaiming America's special relationship with God. Throughout the service, the leaders and congregants

lamented that the United States failed in its devotion to God's laws and principles. This backsliding had caused God to withdraw his hand of blessing. But out of this darkness, they declared, there shines a bright light. As the emcee, also in military uniform, exclaimed, "Jesus alone has the power to change our nation, he gave the ultimate sacrifice for our lives *and for our nation*."

Halfway across the country in Oklahoma, on the same day, a similar "Freedom Celebration" service was in full swing. The senior pastor began his message, entitled "America—An Exceptional Nation," by confronting the pernicious myth about the country's secular roots. Referencing political operative and self-proclaimed historian David Barton, whose ministry, WallBuilders, supplies quotes and factoids for services just like this one, the pastor proclaimed that anyone who questions the Christian heritage of the United States would need to ignore scores of original letters and documents from the founding fathers. Deniers of our heritage would also have to "go to Washington, D.C. and take a sandblaster and remove the Scriptures from the monuments and the buildings. It's all there!" Beaming with pride, the pastor boasted that his church frequently hosts a "Reclaiming America for Jesus Christ" conference, though he'd begun to wonder recently whether America really *can* be reclaimed. For that to happen, he proposed, Americans must remember their Christian past while living like Christians in the present. Only *then* would God make their country prosperous: "America has to be 'blessable' for God to shed his grace on thee." He closed his sermon with a solemn charge, citing an Old Testament verse upon which Dwight D. Eisenhower placed his hand while taking his inaugural oath, 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and I will heal their land."[1] The pastor then whispered, "The key word here in this promise is that word '*If*.' "

These July 4th worship services reflect more than a particular understanding of American history. The symbols they hold sacred, the narratives they retell, the charges they make—all express a specific vision of Christianity's relationship to American identity and civic life.

And it is one that seems to be increasingly at odds with the views of the rest of the nation, and self-consciously so. To be sure, most Americans are somewhere in the fuzzy middle on these issues. They recognize America's vaguely Judeo-Christian past and Christianity's numerical dominance in the United States. But they also celebrate the ideal of religious freedom and believe church–state separation to be a good thing. And yet it sometimes appears that Americans are gravitating toward extremes on these topics.[2]

A growing number of more secular Americans, for example, maintain that both Christianity and America's public institutions are at their best when the two function like considerate neighbors—friendly in their interactions but always respecting the boundaries between them. Toward the other end of the spectrum, however, an equally large group of Americans, the kind who attend services like those we just described, insist that since its inception the United States has been married to Christianity. As these services we attended made clear, the Christian God has "always been on our side," his son Jesus gave his life "for our nation," and our prosperity is contingent upon our returning to him. Those who hold this opinion are often quick to cite evidence of this covenantal relationship in America's founding ideals, historic documents, sacred symbols, policies, and elsewhere. Most importantly, both America and Christianity, they argue, have benefited greatly from that union, and consequently, those who wish to dissolve the marriage want nothing less than to destroy America.

This book is about the underlying causes and social consequences of this latter view, what we and others call "Christian nationalism."[3]

Is America A "Christian Nation"? Why the Answer Does and Doesn't Matter

What *is* Christianity's relationship to American identity and civic life? What *should* it be?

While these are interesting historical, theological, and political questions, they aren't necessarily questions social science can or should answer. Many books seek to test particular claims about the Christian

heritage of the United States.[4] However, the answer to whether the United States ever was or still is a "Christian nation" is not the focus of *this* book. Rather, we focus on how these beliefs, whether strongly held or barely acknowledged, influence the lives of those who hold them, as well as those who do not. Taking this angle, it becomes clear that it does not even matter whether the United States *is* or *ever was* a Christian nation. What matters is that a significant number of Americans *believe* that it is. And a significant number believes the opposite. The particular stance people take on this issue is strongly associated with how they see the world, as well as how they act to preserve or change that world. Therefore, the contention that the United States is a Christian nation has implications for us all, even for those Americans who reject such interpretations.[5]

The stakes are high. For example, a large percentage of Americans who favor Christian nationalist views (which we will detail further below) believe that the American government should unapologetically privilege Christianity. Robert Jeffress, a megachurch pastor and member of Donald Trump's evangelical advisory board, argues, "The framers of the Constitution and the earliest jurists demonstrated a clear preference for Christianity. They did not hesitate to declare that America was a Christian nation . . . the government can (and for more than 150 years did) show a preference for the Christian faith."[6] To the extent that such views become reflected in public policy, the growing percentage of Americans who are not Christian will undoubtedly feel ostracized, treated as though they are not *fully* American. These groups fear that explicitly privileging Christian identity, symbols, and "doctrines" (according to any number of interpretations) will threaten their access to civil society in more tangible ways.[7] And they would be right, as we will see. Further, it is not just religious minorities who have something to fear. Christian nationalism is linked to prejudice toward numerous minority groups.

But strong Christian nationalists are declining in number, and this also has important implications. More and more Americans collectively agree that the United States should not favor Christianity formally. Consequently, the sizeable portion of Americans who pine for

Christianity's former prominence in American civic life feel threatened and marginalized. They fear that their values and priorities will, at best, no longer be dominant, and at worst, that their freedom to preach their moral values and share their religion with others would be outlawed. But readers should not mistake these fears as limited solely to *religious* identity. There is more to the "us" that Christian nationalists wish to defend and more to the "them" that Christian nationalists wish to oppose. Throughout the book, we will show that the degree to which Americans seek to impose Christianity on the public sphere often operates as a powerful indicator of their commitment to a specific social order—with boundaries and hierarchies among natives and foreigners, whites and nonwhites, men and women, heterosexuals and others—an order they recognize is also being threatened.

How Do We Study Christian Nationalism and Christian Nationalists?

Several important books—to which we are greatly indebted—have recently addressed the phenomenon of Christian nationalism (though not always by that name) in the United States.[8] But to date, there have been no attempts to systematically and empirically examine Christian nationalism and its influence in American social, cultural, and political life. This is precisely what we do in this book, using large-scale quantitative data to develop more reliable answers to questions about who Christian nationalists are and how Christian nationalism influences their lives. Each of the datasets we use includes important sociodemographic measures that allow us to isolate the unique influence of Christian nationalism, along with scores of questions concerning politics, religious and racial/ethnic diversity, and family life and values. Several of the surveys also allow for comparisons over time. So in addition to demonstrating Christian nationalism's significance in the current cultural moment, we will also explore shifts in its prevalence and importance.

But numbers can only get us so far in understanding *narratives* of Christian nationalism. To better understand Christian nationalism and

how people articulate and apply it, we draw on 50 in-depth interviews with Americans who—to varying degrees—endorse or challenge the privileging of Christianity in the civic life of the United States. We also engaged in participant observation at large events in Texas, Oklahoma, and South Carolina where Christian nationalists and their beliefs were prominently represented. For more discussion of the specific datasets we use and how we conducted the interviews and participant observation, see Appendices A and C.

So how do we measure Christian national*ism* and Christian national*ists* in our data? Definitions matter a great deal. Consider how narrowly or broadly we could define a "Christian nationalist" depending on the measures we use. Data from the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) shows that 29 percent of Americans agree that "the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation." Even more Americans, 46 percent, agree that "the federal government should advocate Christian values." Depending on the question we use, then, we could estimate that a quarter to half of Americans to some extent agree that the United States is a Christian nation and the government should recognize this either formally or informally. In addition, in the same survey 42 percent of Americans agreed that "the success of the United States is a part of God's plan." Using slightly older data from 2013, almost two-thirds of Americans either mostly or completely agreed with the statement, "God has granted America a special role in human history." At the very least we would conclude that a sizeable proportion of Americans embrace the idea of a special relationship between God and the United States. Yet the picture of what Christian nationalism is, and who Christian nationalists are, is still rather fuzzy.

Let's see whether, by adding more detail, we can paint a clearer picture. In the 2017 BRS, 26 percent of Americans agreed that the United States has always been and currently is a Christian nation. Nearly one-third of Americans (32 percent) believe that at some point in its past the United States was a Christian nation, but is not anymore. A smaller number of Americans, 20 percent, report that America has never been a Christian nation. And still another fifth (21 percent) couldn't say either way (see Figure I.1). The responses could be combined in several ways

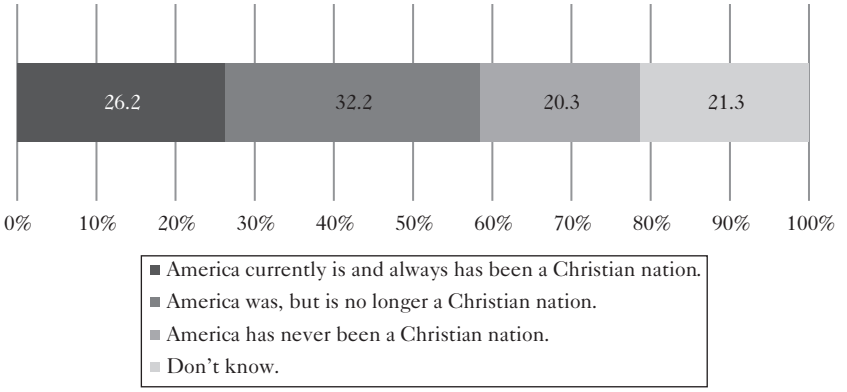

FIGURE I.1.
Americans' Beliefs Regarding the Christian Nation Narrative
Source: 2017 Baylor Religion Survey.

depending on the story one would like to tell. If you define a Christian nationalist as anyone who believes the United States is currently or ever was a Christian nation, more than three out of every five Americans reside in this category. If it includes only those who currently see America as a Christian nation, the number is less than three in 10.

While the question we use in Figure I.1 is useful in that it gives us a general idea of where Americans stand on the Christian nation narrative, it doesn't tell us how strongly Americans embrace Christian nationalism.[9] Furthermore, "Christian nationalism" is not a single idea that can be measured solely by agreement with a founding myth, but rather a more dynamic ideology incorporating a number of beliefs and values. We want to know if Americans believe the United States *should* be a Christian nation, not just whether they think it is or was a Christian nation. Thus, to measure the concept as comprehensively as possible, we primarily use a composite measure created from multiple BRS survey questions from 2007 and 2017 that asked Americans to rate their levels of agreement with the following six statements:

1. "The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation."
2. "The federal government should advocate Christian values."

3. "The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state."
4. "The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces."
5. "The success of the United States is part of God's plan."
6. "The federal government should allow prayer in public schools."

For each statement, respondents could strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, or indicate that they are undecided.[10]

Americans who believe the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation, or who want the federal government to advocate explicitly Christian values, are obviously signaling a belief that Christianity and civil society should be intimately intertwined. These measures also tap into some of the cultural touchstone moments that have occurred in the recent past. For instance, various rulings from the United States Supreme Court on prayer in public schools or the display of religious symbols in public spaces have generated a great deal of response from the American public.[11] Figure I.2 displays how Americans responded to each of these questions in the 2017 BRS.

Comparing responses to these individual measures highlights that while 50 to 60 percent of Americans may agree or strongly agree with

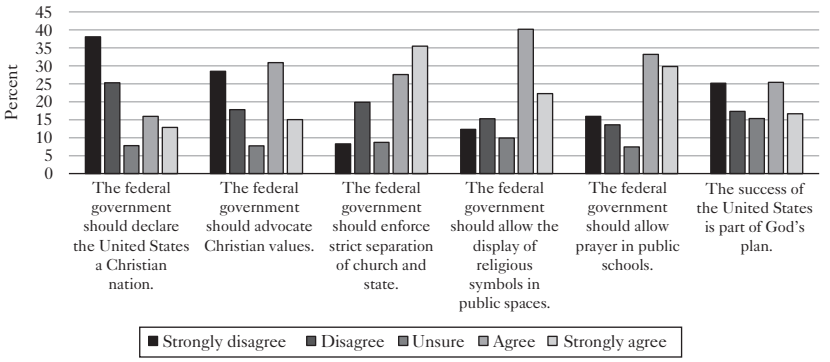

Figure I.2.
Variation in Level of Agreement across Six Christian Nationalism Measures
Source: 2017 Baylor Religion Survey.

one of the six questions, fewer will answer consistently across all six.[12] In order to create the scale, we scored every answer on a scale from zero (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree). Therefore, any respondent who "strongly agrees" on all the measures would score a 24 on the Christian nationalism scale, and anyone who "strongly disagrees" with each of the statements would receive a 0 on the scale. (Keep in mind responses to the third statement are reverse-coded.) As readers can clearly see in Figure I.3 below, Americans are widely distributed all along the scale, meaning there is a great deal of variation across the population.

There are several other observations that we can make about Americans' support for Christian nationalism. First, just over seven percent of the population strongly disagrees on every question. This shows that there is a subset of Americans who completely reject the idea of a close, symbiotic relationship between Christianity and American society. There are not, however, as many Americans who completely affirm this idea. Only one percent of Americans strongly agree with all the statements. Second, most Americans fall somewhere in the middle of the distribution. While a significant number place themselves at the upper and lower ends of the distribution, a majority are neither strongly opposed to nor strongly supportive of Christian nationalism. Third, Americans are not unevenly clumped at either end of the scale, their support for Christian nationalism is widely distributed along the scale.

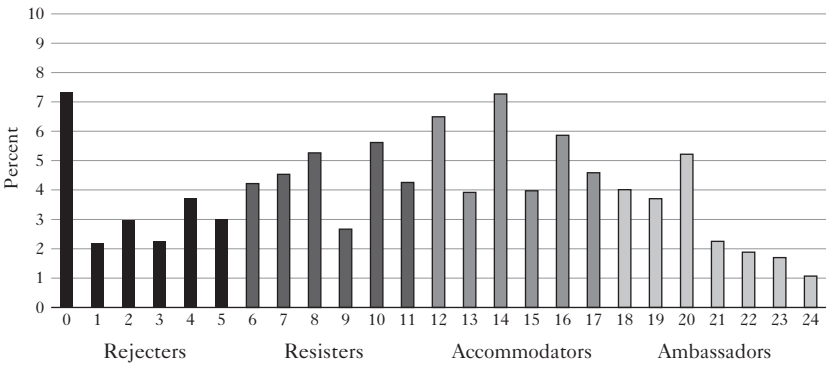

FIGURE I.3.
Distribution of Americans on Christian Nationalism Scale
Source: 2017 Baylor Religion Survey.

Using this scale as a guide, we propose there are four main orientations toward Christian nationalism in the United States. Americans are either *Rejecters, Resisters, Accommodators*, or *Ambassadors*.[13] We use these categories—intended as rough guidelines, not a rigid taxonomy—to explore patterns in Americans' diverse responses to Christian nationalism and the consequences of that ideology for public opinion and political behavior.[14]

Before we define these categories in the next chapter, though, we want to clearly define Christian nationalism and why we think it is different from both "civil religion" and religion writ large.

Understanding Christian Nationalism and Its Consequences

Simply put, Christian nationalism is a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life. But the "Christianity" of Christian nationalism is of a particular sort. We do not mean Christianity here as a general, meta-category including all expressions of orthodox Christian theology. Nor will we use terms such as "evangelicalism" or "white conservative Protestantism" (to the extent that these represent certain theological-interpretive positions) as synonyms for Christian nationalism. On the contrary, the "Christianity" of Christian nationalism represents something more than religion. As we will show, it includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious. Understood in this light, Christian nationalism contends that America has been and should always be distinctively "Christian" (reflecting this fuller, more nuanced sense of the term) from top to bottom—in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values, and public policies—and it aims to keep it that way.[15]

Several theological and ideological tributaries have shaped Christian nationalism into what we see today. Here it is helpful to draw some

critical distinctions between Christian nationalism and what has traditionally been thought of as America's "civil religion." Civil religion represents America's dominant self-understanding and ethical lodestar. Its religious influences come primarily from the prophetic Old Testament tradition in which God demands justice, mercy, and humility from his people, and from civic republicanism, a dynamic political philosophy emphasizing that civic virtue and a strong constitution that separates institutional powers are critical for maintaining free human societies.[16]

Though it has existed for just as long as America's civil religious tradition, Christian nationalism has been informed by different parts of the Bible.[17] While civil religion has held that "Providence," the "Creator," or "Nature's God" demands our exemplary fairness, beneficence, and faithful stewardship if we are to retain our blessed inheritance, the Christian nationalist tradition by contrast views God's demands more in terms of allegiance to our national—almost ethnic—Christian identity. Christian nationalism is rarely concerned with instituting explicitly "Christ-like" policies, or even policies reflecting New Testament ethics at all. Rather, Christian nationalists view God's expectations of America as akin to his commands to Old Testament Israel. Like Israel, then, America should fear God's wrath for unfaithfulness while assuming God's blessing—or even mandate—for subduing the continent by force if necessary.[18]

Finally, proponents of Christian nationalism have consistently viewed their mission through the lens of apocalyptic Christianity. A number of influential advocates of Christian nationalism could be characterized as "postmillennial," meaning that they believe that Christ's kingdom is already established on earth, and thus his followers should bring every aspect of American civic life under his reign. Others—including many influential Christian nationalists in recent decades—are better described as "premillennial," meaning that they believe the world will become increasingly corrupt until Christ returns to rescue the faithful, followed by his millennial reign on earth.[19] The former group—led by thinkers like Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, Rousas John Rushdoony, and Gary North—believed Christ's followers could ultimately "reconstruct" civilization as they established Christ's "dominion" over all things.[20]

Premillennial Christian nationalists have seen their role as "delaying" the world's eventual destruction, ostensibly so that more unbelievers can be won to Christ.[21]

But what about average Americans? Do we see evidence that these ideological tributaries inform contemporary Christian nationalism in the general population? In fact, we do.

The 2007 wave of the BRS contained questions that allow us to assess whether certain theological or ideological beliefs predict higher scores on our Christian nationalism scale, even after accounting for factors like gender, age, income, education, race, region of the country, and so on. Table I.1 shows the top ten predictors of higher scores on our Christian nationalism scale, ordered from strongest to weakest, though all the relationships are statistically significant. Importantly, almost all socio-demographic factors appear nowhere on the list because many—including race, income, age, or even whether people consider

Table I.1. Top Predictors of Stronger Adherence to Christian Nationalism

Predictor (ordered from strongest predictor to weakest)	Direction
1. Identifying with Political Conservatism	+
2. Identify as "Bible-Believing"	+
3. Bible is the literal word of God [a]	+
4. Bible is perfectly true, though not literally interpreted [a]	+
5. Religiously Unaffiliated [b]	–
6. Religious Practice [c]	+
7. Believe that the nation is on the brink of moral decay	+
8. Believe that God requires the faithful to wage wars for good	+
9. Believe in "the Rapture"	+
10. Education	–

Note: See Table B.1 in Appendix for full model.

All variables are statistically significant predictors of Christian nationalism beyond the .001 level. + = positively correlated; – = negatively correlated. [a] Compared to believing the Bible is a book of history and legends. [b] Compared to being an evangelical Protestant. [c] A scale made up of three questions asking how frequently respondents attend religious services, prayer, and read their sacred scriptures.

Source: 2007 Baylor Religion Survey.

themselves Republicans or Democrats—paled in comparison to the ideological commitments shown here.[22]

Far and away the strongest predictor of Christian nationalism is identifying oneself with political conservatism. This shouldn't be surprising, since both political conservatism and Christian nationalism are interested in preserving an older order or restoring the past, reflected in clear boundaries and hierarchies and perceived to be closer to America's founding ideals. The two factors are not synonymous, however. As we will show throughout this book, Christian nationalism is often a *stronger* predictor of Americans' attitudes about race, gender, immigration, gun rights, Islam, and family/sexuality issues than political ideology.

The next three strongest predictors after political conservatism all involve identification with a particular view of the Bible, most prominently a belief that it should be interpreted literally and characterizing oneself as "Bible-Believing." As sociologist Philip Gorski has argued, Christian nationalists have historically built their ideological foundation on a narrow, literalist interpretation of God's commands to Old Testament Israel, applying them to their contemporary national situation.

Following Bible beliefs, the next strongest predictors have to do with religious practice and affiliation. Americans who are religiously unaffiliated are obviously less likely than evangelical Protestants to embrace Christian nationalism. But it is important to note that this isn't the strongest predictor of Christian nationalism. This suggests that, as we will show more concretely later, Christian nationalism isn't localized primarily within particular religious traditions but is undergirded by a combination of conservative political ideology, belief in the Bible, apocalyptic visions of societal decline, and divine militarism.

Though religious practice is a positive predictor of Christian nationalism, the fact that it is no stronger a predictor in comparison to other ideological/theological commitments suggests there is substantial discontinuity between the two. In fact—and this is something we wish to underscore throughout the book—religious commitment and Christian nationalism appear to foster distinct moral worldviews that differ in critical ways.

Next are fears about the moral decay of the nation and belief that, following this decline into depravity, Jesus will literally whisk Christians to heaven, an event known as the Rapture. This affirms that contemporary Christian nationalism is more characterized by a "premillennial" worldview, one that interprets Christians' responsibility as delaying America's inevitable decline, as opposed to a more optimistic "postmillennial" view that sees Christians as victorious in the here and now. Sandwiched between these views is Americans' belief that "God requires the faithful to wage wars for good." This is entirely consistent with Philip Gorski's observation that Christian nationalism has historically been used to justify bloody conquests, often taking the form of imperialist and jingoist projects under the banner of God's blessing and mandate for his people.[23]

One way we can further distinguish Christian nationalism from religious commitment in general is by comparing the moral content of both. The 2007 BRS also includes a battery of questions asking, "How important is it to do the following if one wishes to be a good person?" Respondents were then presented with a list of seven behaviors. When we predict whether respondents believe a certain behavior is important for being a good person, we find that Christian nationalism and religious practice influence Americans' views differently in key ways (see Table I.2).[24]

While both Christian nationalism and religious practice are positively associated with views of morality that emphasize fidelity to one's religious faith (believing in God, teaching others about one's moral values, evangelizing), only Christian nationalism predicts that Americans see serving in the military as important to being "a good person." Religious practice, on the other hand, is negatively associated with this view, meaning devoutly religious Americans are *less* likely to say that serving in the military is important to being a good person. Furthermore, religious practice is powerfully related to views of morality that emphasize ideas of care for the vulnerable, social justice, and even reducing one's consumption patterns for the sake of environmental stewardship. Christian nationalism, however, is unrelated to taking care of the sick and needy and consuming fewer goods. In fact,

Table I.2. Ideas of Morality, Christian Nationalism, and Religious Practice

How important is it to do the following if one wishes to be a good person?	Christian Nationalism	Religious Practice
Care and Justice		
"Take care of the sick and needy"	NS	+
"Actively seek social and economic justice"	–	+
Stewardship		
"Consume or use fewer goods"	NS	+
Fidelity to the Religion		
"Have faith in God"	+	+
"Teach others your morals"	+	+
"Convert others to your religious faith"	+	+
Fidelity to the Nation		
"Serve in the military"	+	–

Note: See Table B.2 in Appendix for full model.

NS = not a statistically significant predictor of this moral belief; + = positive and statistically significant; – = negative and statistically significant. [a] Christian Nationalism scale. [b] A scale made up of three questions asking how frequently respondents attend religious services, prayer, and read their sacred scriptures.

Source: 2007 Baylor Religion Survey

Americans who embrace Christian nationalism are *less* likely to believe actively seeking social and economic justice is important to being a good person.

These initial analyses establish some broad characteristics of contemporary Christian nationalism that will guide our discussion throughout the book. Christian nationalism is 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. It is undergirded by identification with a conservative political orientation (though not necessarily a political party), Bible belief, premillennial visions of moral decay, and divine sanction for conquest. Finally, its conception of morality centers *exclusively* on fidelity to religion and fidelity to the nation.

Our Three Main Arguments

In this book we lay out three main arguments, each building on the preceding one. First, we argue that understanding Christian nationalism, its content and its consequences, is essential for understanding much of the polarization in American popular discourse.[25] That includes such pressing national questions such as:

- *Why did so many conservative Christians vote for, and continue to support, Donald Trump despite his many overt moral failings?* Contrary to the dominant narrative offered by pollsters and pundits, the answer isn't simply "white evangelicalism" or "conservative Christianity." Rather, we will show that Christian nationalism motivates Americans—whether they are evangelical or not—to see Trump as the defender of the power and values they perceive are being threatened.
- *Why do many Americans advocate so vehemently for xenophobic policies, such as a border wall with Mexico?* The answer isn't primarily about political allegiances. Rather, Christian nationalism, especially when it is held strongly by white Americans, appears to reinforce boundaries around national group membership, encouraging antipathy and mistrust toward those who do not meet the membership requirements of *native-born, Christian, and white*—namely, racial minorities, nonwhite immigrants, and Muslims. Christian nationalism expresses a particular racialized understanding of national identity. It allows those who embrace it to express a racialized identity *without resorting to racialized terms*.
- *Why do many Americans seem so unwilling to acknowledge the injustices that ethnic and racial minorities experience in the United States?* For instance, the responses of prominent conservative Christian commentators toward dozens of instances of police violence against black Americans that have been caught on camera has been largely cold, sometimes even engaging in victim-blaming. More troubling than this, their responses reflect the sentiments of millions of Americans. The cause has little to do with religion per

se. Rather Christian nationalism, we will show, tends to promote defenses of authoritarian control, especially when the target population of that control is nonwhite.

- *Despite the progress made in women's equality in the workplace and in the home, why do a sizeable proportion of Americans continue to hold attitudes suggesting women are unfit for politics? Or that healthy families require that women stay home?* While the answer to this question has traditionally been conservative religion, or perhaps conservative political ideology, we show that these factors pale in comparison to the power of Christian nationalism for predicting Americans' attitudes toward gender (in) equality. Christian nationalism advocates for a particular social order that lionizes hierarchies between men and women. The society that strong Christian nationalists wish to live in—whether they are theologically conservative Christians or not—is a society in which families are "traditional," and men and women are in their "proper place."

Other factors are involved in these issues, of course. But Christian nationalism, we will show, plays a powerful role that is essential to understanding the seemingly intractable debates and divisions plaguing American politics and society. In short, we cannot fully understand these issues without considering Christian nationalism.

We also want to stress that we are focused on Christian national*ism*, which is not synonymous with the Christian nation narrative. The American Christian nation narrative is potent because it enlists traditions and symbolism from Christianity and intertwines them with the United States' national story. Narratives and origin stories are vital aspects of cultural frameworks—telling us about where we come from, where we should be going, and how we should get there. But the Christian nation narrative can be—and indeed has been—invoked in the service of the disempowered demanding justice as well as those who wish to preserve their own cultural power. Black Protestants and white evangelicals, for example, throughout America's history have drawn upon the Christian nation narrative, but to very different ends. Frederick Douglass and

Martin Luther King Jr. cited America's so-called Christian heritage as a form of rebuke, to challenge an unjust social order. White evangelicals in the South, by contrast, have more often cited the Christian nation narrative not to contest the unjust social order but to preserve it. The difference is not the Christian nation narrative but Christian national*ism*, which again includes not only narratives, but a particular set of symbols, value systems, and moral requirements intertwined with implicit boundaries and hierarchies.

Furthermore, throughout the book we are focused on examining Christian national*ism*, not just Christian national*ists*. Clearly, we will learn a lot about Americans who strongly embrace Christian nationalism. But we will also hear from those who reject or resist Christian nationalism, and their views and stories are equally important. So instead of writing about a specific social group—Christian nationalists—we aim to examine the cultural framework of Christian nationalism as a whole, including reactions against it. We hope to show how Christian nationalism has thoroughly permeated American society and culture.[26] It is a lens through which all Americans experience and interpret the social world, and the rejection or embrace of it motivates them toward very different ends.

Our second argument is that to understand Christian nationalism, it must be examined on its own terms. Christian nationalism is necessarily part of a complex web of ideologies. We are not arguing that it is *the* single reason why certain Americans act or believe in a particular way. Rather, it works alongside and serves to prop up other ideologies in such a way that various Americans, whether religious and political elites or rank-and-file citizens, can effectively ignore discussions of economic, gender, sexual, or racial inequality. To be sure, it is related to many other important social factors and phenomena. As we will show, it is consistently and strongly associated with certain theological beliefs, political loyalties and behaviors, gender, race, sexuality, and so on. Yet it is not *synonymous with, reducible to*, or *a byproduct of* any of those things.

Let's use racism as an example. Approval of Christian nationalism, we will show, is a strong predictor of whether someone holds racially

intolerant attitudes, especially if that person is white. But being white is not synonymous with being a Christian nationalist, nor is being a Christian nationalist synonymous with being racially prejudiced (though the two are powerfully related). Christian nationalism is also not reducible to racism. In other words, we cannot claim that Christian nationalism is "really just about racism when you get down to it." On the contrary, in some instances being a member of a racial minority group and holding certain Christian nationalist views is associated with having a stronger racial justice orientation, the exact opposite of what we see in white Americans. In this sense it is the *intersection* of race and Christian nationalism that matters. Lastly, Christian nationalism is not simply a byproduct or manifestation of racism or racial prejudice. If we were to miraculously eliminate racism, Christian nationalism would still be with us.

The same goes for "right-wing authoritarianism" (RWA) or "authoritarian personality." These terms generally refer to certain personality tendencies that incline individuals toward intolerance of outsiders and toward highly conservative religious and political stances. Some might assume that Christian nationalism is really just another measure of authoritarian personality or RWA. However, they are not synonymous. We consistently find that even when we account for Americans' authoritarian leanings, Christian nationalism maintains a distinct and powerful influence on a variety of beliefs and behaviors. Nor is Christian nationalism reducible to RWA or merely a symptom of an authoritarian impulse. While they are strongly correlated, Christian nationalism exhibits an independent and important effect that is distinct from authoritarianism. For instance, when we examined what factors inclined Americans to vote for Donald Trump in 2016, we included measures of ethnocentrism, racial prejudice, and a variety of indicators that psychologists often use to measure RWA: sexist beliefs, intolerance toward ethnic and religious others, and religious literalism.[27] Chapter 2 explores this in greater detail. Yet even when controlling for each of these well-established concepts, Christian nationalism was among the strongest predictors of voting for Trump. Thus, despite knowing that people who hold more strongly to Christian nationalism are also more likely to be authoritarian, ethnocentric, racially prejudiced, Christian

nationalism represents a *unique* cultural framework. It is simultaneously related to other beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, and behaviors—like racism and authoritarianism—but it is also distinct and must be addressed as such.[28] Christian nationalism is not just repackaged ethnocentrism, racial resentment, or authoritarianism.

Related to this, Christian nationalism should not be thought of as synonymous with "evangelicalism" or even "white evangelicalism." In fact, we intend for this clarification to undo a tremendous amount of confusion regarding American evangelicals and their political behavior — confusion that, we fear, polling results perpetuate. Stated simply: being an evangelical, or even a white evangelical as pollsters often define that category, tells us almost nothing about a person's social attitudes or behavior once Christian nationalism has been considered. The two categories often overlap, to be sure. Roughly half of evangelicals (by some definitions) embrace Christian nationalism to some degree. And yet what is *really* influencing Americans' behavior? Being affiliated with evangelicalism? Holding to traditional views about the Bible? Or advocating Christian nationalism? As it turns out, being an evangelical does not lead one to enthusiastically support border walls with Mexico; favoring Christian nationalism does. Being an evangelical does not seem to sour Americans' attitudes toward stronger gun control legislation; endorsing Christian nationalism does. Being an evangelical was not an important predictor of which Americans voted for Donald Trump in 2016; supporting Christian nationalism was. Readers should keep this in mind throughout.[29]

Following from our second claim that Christian nationalism should be examined on its own terms, our third argument is that Christian nationalism is not "Christianity" or even "religion" properly speaking. We mentioned this earlier, but we wish to elaborate a bit more. A commitment to Christian nationalism is not in any way similar to "religious commitment" as sociologists often conceptualize it. This is not merely semantics. In fact, we will show that Christian nationalism often influences Americans' opinions and behaviors in the *exact opposite direction* than traditional religious commitment does.[30]

Take, for example, showing respect for America's traditions. As we show in Chapter 2, those who hold more strongly to Christian

nationalism are more likely to agree that people should be made to show respect for America's traditions (as one might expect from the church services we described above). By contrast, people who frequently attend church, pray, or read their sacred scriptures are actually *less* likely to agree with such a sentiment. Or consider attitudes toward race and policing, which we explore in Chapter 3. The more Americans adhere to Christian nationalist views, the less willing they are to acknowledge police discrimination against black Americans. But as people more frequently attend church, pray, or read their sacred scriptures, they become *more* likely to recognize racial discrimination in policing. We find these same patterns when it comes to Americans' attitudes toward immigration, environmentalism, refugees, and Muslims, as well as expanding the fight against terrorism, and so on. Thus, while Christian nationalism is a significant part of American Christianity, the two are not one and the same. Where Christian nationalists seek to defend particular group boundaries and privileges using Christian language, other religious Americans and fellow Christians who reject Christian nationalism tend to oppose such boundaries and privileges. In sociologist Philip Gorski's words, "[Christian nationalism] is political idolatry dressed up as religious orthodoxy."[31] In the final analysis, this should give us all hope, religious and secular alike. To condemn Christian nationalism as we define it is not to condemn Christianity or religion per se.[32]

So far we've only scratched the surface of these issues. The following chapter will describe exactly who Rejecters, Resisters, Accommodators, and Ambassadors are. It will also further delineate the characteristics of contemporary Christian nationalism in the United States, documenting its diversity, demographics, and growth in recent decades.