

ARTICLE

The varieties of American Christian nationalism

Nilay Saiya 

Associate Professor of Public Policy and Global Affairs, School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore
Email: nilay.saiya@ntu.edu.sg

Abstract

Arguably, no subject has captured more attention in the study of American religion in recent years than “Christian nationalism”—a political theology that seeks a privileged place for Christianity in American public life. Social scientific inquiries into the causes and consequences of Christian nationalism have yielded much fruit in a relatively short period of time. Nevertheless, the literature tends to treat Christian nationalism as if it were a monolithic category, with all “Christian nationalists” being motivated by the same beliefs. In reality, Christian nationalists, although presumably seeking the same goal—namely the establishment of a Christian nation—are a diverse lot, motivated by very different, in some cases mutually exclusive, belief systems. This article attempts to remedy this oversight by exploring the divergent beliefs and theologies undergirding different forms of American Christian nationalism. Specifically, it delineates three main forms of Christian nationalism present in American public life: charismatic dominionism, Calvinist nationalism, and Catholic integralism. It explores what differentiates these different Christian nationalist movements and what they mean by and how they work together to bring about a Christian America.

Keywords: Christian Nationalism; Calvinism; dominionism; integralism; religion; United States

Introduction

Arguably, no subject has captured more attention in the study of American religion in recent years than “Christian nationalism”—a political theology that seeks a privileged place for a particular form of Christianity in American public life (Whitehead and Perry, 2019, 2020a). This theology is at once both descriptive and prescriptive: American Christian nationalists believe that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that the government and its Christian citizens should take steps to keep it that way (Miller, 2021). Social scientific inquiries into the consequences of Christian nationalism have yielded much fruit in a relatively short period of time. Scholars have linked Christian nationalism to a wide array of social and political beliefs: racism, misogyny, pro-authoritarianism, homophobia, opposition to

vaccinations, skepticism towards science, and sympathy to violence (Perry and Whitehead, 2015a, 2015b; Whitehead and Perry, 2015, 2019; Perry et al., 2019, 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020a; Baker et al., 2020; Perry et al., 2021c; Davis and Perry 2021; Perry et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2022b; Saiya, 2022, 2024; Saiya and Manchanda, 2025). Whitehead and Perry (2020b) cover a number of these findings in book form.

The scholarly attention paid to Christian nationalism mirrors developments in society and politics. Prominent Christian televangelists and pastors have encouraged their viewers and congregations to embrace Christian nationalism. A 2022 *Politico* poll found that 61% of Republicans and 17% of Democrats believe the U.S. should declare itself a Christian nation (*Politico*, 2022). Several national politicians have expressed support for Christian nationalism. Marjorie Taylor Green, a congresswoman from Georgia, became the first member of Congress to openly identify as a Christian nationalist. “I’m a Christian, and I say it proudly, we should be Christian nationalists,” she declared (Shortle et al., 2022). A growing number of Green’s fellow representatives, including Lauren Boebert of Colorado, Mary Miller of Illinois, Louie Gohmert of Texas, and Paul Gosar of Arizona, have voiced support for Christian nationalist causes. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has, on several occasions, endorsed Christian nationalist ideas (Rouse and Telhami, 2022). Christian nationalists helped Donald Trump secure the 2016 and 2024 presidential elections (Gorski, 2019; Fea, 2019). Christian nationalism has been blamed for political and social outcomes as diverse as the 2021 Capitol insurrection, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, mass shootings, and increasing political polarization (Graves-Fitzsimmons and Siddiqi, 2022; Perry, 2022).

Debates on Christian nationalism have also played out in society. In 2022, two pro-Christian nationalist books quickly became best-sellers on Amazon.com: *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations* by Gab founder Andrew Torba and evangelical pastor Andrew Isker and *The Case for Christian Nationalism* by Stephen Wolfe. Of course, Christian nationalism has its share of critics, chief among them sociologists of religion Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, historians Kristin Kobes Du Mez and Jamar Tisby, and scholars of religious studies Anthea Butler and Randall Balmer. Together, they have produced a prolific body of work critiquing Christian nationalism on historical, sociological, and theological grounds. Their titles include *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism*, *White Evangelical Racism*, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right*, and *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. All of these books, too, have sold very well. Christian nationalism was even the subject of a major 2024 documentary film produced by legendary filmmaker Rob Reiner. The film, *God & Country*, discusses the rise of Christian nationalism in the United States, especially its intersection with far-right politics and its threat to American democracy.

One consequence of the surge in attention to Christian nationalism, however, is that the term has become improperly elastic, encompassing various movements and theologies broadly understood to be “Christian nationalist” (Smith and Adler, 2022).

The scholarly literature tends to treat Christian nationalism as if it were a monolithic category, with all “Christian nationalists” being motivated by the same or similar coherent ideological beliefs. In reality, Christian nationalists, although presumably seeking the same goal—namely the establishment of a Christian nation—are a diverse lot, motivated by very different, in some cases mutually exclusive, belief systems. As noted by Davis (2023: 3), “more attention should be paid to the exact conceptual feature(s) of Christian nationalism that researchers desire to measure and analyze.” Moreover, the literature on the effect of elite cues by religious leaders suggests that theological ideas, in this case ones rooted in Christian nationalism, can easily trickle down to and become absorbed by lay members of a faith community (Robinson and Goren, 1997; Paterson, 2018; Buckley, 2022). This indicates that the theological differences among different strands of American Christian nationalism matter not only for religious elites but also for average believers. Thus, there is need for refinement and nuance.

Indeed, a few recent studies on Christian nationalism have arrived at this very conclusion. Smith and Adler (2022) draw a distinction between “Christian nationalism” and “religious conservatism”—a difference that is often conflated in the Christian nationalism literature. Similarly, Li and Froese (2023) differentiate between “religious traditionalism” and “Christian statism,” the latter being a more insidious form of Christian nationalism. These studies, however, highlight the *social and political* differences between Christian nationalism and other conservative religious movements and within Christian nationalism itself. This approach likely reflects findings that Christian nationalism tends to be inextricably intertwined with partisan politics (Djupe et al., 2023). Be that as it may, it is also the case that there exist various *theological* currents underpinning different versions of American Christian nationalism—even if it tends to be a politically unified movement—that have received little attention in the literature. Yet understanding the theological differences among the different forms of the American Christian nationalist movement remains an important exercise for a fuller grasp of the movement’s nuances and aspirations. This is the gap that this article hopes to fill.

This article attempts to problematize our understanding of Christian nationalism by categorizing and exploring the divergent beliefs and theologies undergirding different varieties of Christian nationalism in the United States. Specifically, it delineates three main forms of Christian nationalism present in American public life: charismatic dominionism, Calvinist nationalism, and Catholic integralism. It explores what differentiates these different Christian nationalist movements and what they mean by and how they work to bring about a Christian America.

Three shades of American Christian nationalism

Charismatic dominionism

The first and arguably most important and widespread form of American Christian nationalism is what we may call “charismatic dominionism.” This term contains two parts. The first, “charismatic,” comes from the Greek word *χάρισμα* *charisma* (gift) and refers to the gift of the Holy Spirit as manifested in supernatural signs and

wonders, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing. Charismatic Christians base their theology on a particular reading of Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12. “Dominionism” refers to a political ideology that aspires to have Christians govern their countries according to their understanding of Bible. This requires Christian domination of politics and culture.

Largely associated with the so-called New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) (sometimes called the “prophetic movement” or “independent charismatic Christianity”)—a controversial religious movement emphasizing miracles, new supernatural revelations, mystical experiences, and the authoritative stature of prophets and apostles in church leadership—charismatic dominionism seeks cultural and political control over society (Weaver, 2016; Christerson and Flory, 2017). The theological figurehead of the NAR, C. Peter Wagner, once a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and church growth expert, became well known in charismatic circles for his writings on spiritual warfare and for his belief that the governments of the world are ruled by “territorial spirits” (Wagner, 1996: 21). Essentially, Wagner taught that demonic spirits not only attacked and possessed individuals, but could also do the same to entire places and institutions, including governments, through which they advance social and political projects counter to the will of God. This reality requires Christians to combat these demonic entities through spiritual practices such as prayer, fasting, and the gifts of the spirit (McAlister, 2016; O’Donnell, 2020). In the 1990s, Wagner retired from Fuller to devote his full attention to building a network of prophets and apostles—what he called the New Apostolic Reformation—whom he believed would turn the country—and the world—back to God (Wagner, 1998). To accomplish this, Wagner founded two organizations: the International Coalition of Apostolic Leaders and the U.S. Coalition of Apostolic Leaders. Although it is impossible to place a precise number on the number of NAR adherents given its independent nature and the lack of a formal hierarchical leadership structure, given the strong inroads that NAR teachings and music have made in more mainstream evangelical churches, it is safe to assume that the NAR has influenced tens of millions of American Christians (Pivec and Geivett, 2022).

The NAR is not centrally controlled by or associated with any particular denomination, but is rather a loose coalition and highly networked circle of independent churches, parachurch organizations, and movements. Many of the centers associated with charismatic dominionism—Bethel Church in Redding, California, the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri, and Morningstar Ministries in Fort Mill, South Carolina—have their roots in more conventional Pentecostal denominations such as the Association of Vineyard Churches and the Assemblies of God. Popular purveyors of charismatic dominionism include Bill Johnson, Rick Joyner, Mike Bickle, Kim Clement, Heidi Baker, Alan Vincent, Patricia King, Che Ahn, Lance Wallnau, Randy Clark, Jeremiah Johnson, Cindy Jacobs, Becca Greenwood, Dutch Sheets, Mark Chironna, John Kelly, and Lou Engle.

The NAR believes that the power of the Holy Spirit enables Christian believers to establish dominion over the earth (Wagner, 1998). At the heart of charismatic dominionism lies a peculiar theology called the “seven mountains mandate”—the belief that the church has been divinely authorized to gain control over seven key areas

of society: family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business, and government. It is that final and most important mandate—government—that generates a Christian nationalist agenda to take dominion over the nations and bring the kingdom of God to earth. Many have accused the NAR of striving for a theocracy devoid of religious freedom. The specific seven mountains theology appears to have been first formulated by Bill Bright and Lauren Cunningham in the 1970s and more recently popularized by individuals such as Johny Enlow (2008) and self-proclaimed prophet Lance Wallnau and Bethel Church pastor Bill Johnson (Wallnau and Johnson, 2013).

Like broader theologies of dominionism, the seven mountains mandate desires for the United States to be a country ruled by Christians based on their understanding of biblical law (Dager, 1990). The government mandate requires Christians to capture every level of government from the state and local to the national, from which they can assert control over the rest of society. Charismatic dominionists thus encourage like-minded believers not only to participate in the political process but to run for office themselves, as seen in the failed congressional campaign of Sean Feucht, the former worship leader at Bethel Church. Charismatic dominionists see spiritual and political concerns as inextricably intertwined.

The importance of the government mandate also requires believers to unify in support of political candidates who align with their political agenda, even if these politicians do not share the same religious beliefs. For example, in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 American presidential elections, charismatic dominionists rallied to Donald Trump in the belief that he could be persuaded to pursue a Christian nationalist agenda. Both the leaders of the charismatic dominionist movement and their lay followers thus came to see Trump as a kind of messianic figure who could save American Christianity from impending demise (Gagné, 2023; Lehmann, 2024). One of the most influential charismatic prophets, Lance Wallnau, likened Trump to Cyrus, a pagan Persian king who protected the Israelites and granted them the right to return to their home country—a metaphor that quickly caught fire in charismatic circles (Burton, 2018). Many NAR prophets issued prophecies ahead of all three elections declaring a Trump victory in each.

Charismatic dominionism is unique among the strains of American Christian nationalism in that it is the only one to have made serious inroads into the American governing apparatus, finding its way into the heights of power during the administrations of Donald Trump. Trump's spiritual advisor, Paula White-Cain, is a well-known televangelist who delivered the invocation at Trump's inaugural, chaired the administration's evangelical advisory board during Trump's first term, and led a newly-created Faith Office in his second. White-Cain also delivered the prayer at Trump's pre-insurrection rally on January 6, 2021. Michael Flynn, Trump's first national security advisor, has since become a prominent leader in the charismatic dominionist movement, recruiting for what he characterizes as a spiritual and political war. Influential charismatic Christians frequently visited the White House and interacted with the president. Numerous photos and videos have surfaced of those associated with the NAR laying hands on, praying for, and prophesying over Trump in the Oval Office—spiritual activities usually reserved for the commissioning of church leaders. Several national lawmakers, too, have ties to charismatic

dominionism, including Texas senator Ted Cruz, congressional representative Lauren Boebert, and the speaker of the House of Representatives at the time of this writing, Mike Johnson (Onishi and Taylor, 2023).

Charismatic dominionists were among the most visible and steadfast supporters of Trump in the months following the 2020 presidential election. NAR leaders visited the White House during the week before the Capitol insurrection. On January 5th, a pro-Trump rally took place at Freedom Plaza two blocks from the White House. One of the rally's speakers, Che Ahn, pastor of Harvest Rock Church in Pasadena, California, proclaimed that "we're going to rule and reign through President Trump under the lordship of Jesus Christ" (Montgomery, 2021).

The Freedom Plaza rally was a precursor to the fateful events that would unfold the following day. Kicking off the January 6 rally, White-Cain proclaimed that "every demonic network that is aligned . . . against the calling of President Trump" would be "broken" and "torn down in the name of Jesus" (C-Span, 2021). Before devotees of Trump breached the Capitol grounds, charismatic Christians could be found fervently pleading with God to overturn the election results. Pastors declared invocations of protection over the insurrections inside the Capitol. "Prophets" exercised demons over the Capitol. Common among the rioters was the "appeal to heaven" flag repurposed by the enormously influential author and pastor Dutch Sheets as a symbol of Christian restoration (Sheets, 2015).

The groundwork for charismatic Christian participation in the insurrection had been laid in the months following the 2020 presidential election. After the election, Sheets led a "prayer and prophecy tour" in swing states in order to build support among charismatic Christians for his belief that the presidential election had been rigged and stolen from Trump. Sheets also disseminated this message through his massively influential *YouTube* broadcasts. Taylor and Onishi (2023) unearthed evidence that Trump had been cavorting with charismatic leaders such as Sheets prior to the insurrection. The month before the insurrection, charismatic Christians participated in a "Jericho March" in Washington, D.C., during which they reenacted a scene from the Battle of Jericho as told in the Book of Joshua. Just as Joshua took Jericho by marching around its walls seven times, participants in the latter-day Jericho March believed that they could keep Trump in office by marching around the Capitol grounds seven times. As they marched, they prayed, sang hymns, and blew shofars.

Following the Capitol insurrection, Christian nationalist events tinged with charismatic dominionism were held at churches across the country, the most important of which was the "ReAwaken America Tour," a nationwide series of rallies led by Michael Flynn and a number of other right-wing personalities. Speaking at the ReAwaken America Tour stop in San Antonio, Texas in November 2021, Flynn laid bare the theocratic underpinnings of American Christian nationalism: "If we are going to have one nation under God, which we must, we have to have one religion. One nation under God and one religion under God, right? All of us, working together" (LeBlanc, 2021). During the COVID pandemic, worship leader Sean Feucht of the neo-charismatic Bethel Church in Redding, California, led a nationwide "Let Us Worship" tour across state capitals in defiance of COVID restrictions and protocols. Right Wing Watch (2023) strongly identified with Christian nationalism, declaring that Christian nationalists like him "want the kingdom to be the government," "want

God to come and overtake the government,” “want believers to be the ones writing the laws,” and “want Christians to be the only ones [in power].” In 2024, Lance Wallnau teamed up with influential right-wing activist, radio talk show host, and cofounder of the conservative youth organization Turning Point USA, Charlie Kirk, to mobilize conservative Christian churches in support of the candidacy of Donald Trump in the months ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

Calvinist nationalism

In addition to charismatic dominionism, there is also another Protestant strain of Christian nationalism in the United States, one we may call “Calvinist nationalism.” Whereas charismatic dominionism is associated with Pentecostal, charismatic, and neo-charismatic churches, Calvinist Christian nationalism comes out of the Reformed tradition and is found largely in Presbyterian (and an increasing number of Baptist) churches. This form of nationalism is heavily influenced by the theological tradition of the 16th-century Protestant reformer John Calvin, a theologian who believed that secular authorities should be responsible not only for ensuring order, peace, safety, and stability but also for upholding the true faith by punishing sins like idolatry and blasphemy. In this sense, Calvin saw civil authority as an extension of the church (Calvin, 2007). Calvinism has long influenced the development of American nationalism, stretching back to Calvin’s influence on early American religious colonists such as the Puritans (Gorski, 2020; Hollinger, 2022).

Beyond Calvin, a major figure in the formation of Calvinist nationalism was the Dutch Calvinist theologian and one-time prime minister of the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper believed that followers of Christ must work to bring every domain of life, including political orders, under his sovereignty, in the process transforming society to reflect Christ’s kingship over all creation (Kuyper, 2015 [1879]). “Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry ‘Mine!’,” he famously wrote (Kuyper, 1998: 488). While whether Kuyper was a Christian nationalist in the modern sense of the term has been a topic of fierce debate, his belief that all spheres of life should be submitted to Christ and directed toward their creational design unquestionably informs the thinking of American Christian nationalists in the Calvinist tradition today. These individuals include the New Testament scholar Wayne Grudem, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Albert Mohler, and the late influential pastor D. James Kennedy. At the same time, such individuals also ignore a key aspect of Kuyper’s theology—“sphere sovereignty”—which rejects church rule over all parts of society, including the state. Kuyper believed that each “sphere” of life must be free from being absorbed by another sphere.

The most extreme version of Calvinist nationalism in the United States is known as “reconstructionism,” sometimes called “dominion theology” or “theonomy,” which was popularized by the Armenian-American Calvinist philosopher, historian, and theologian Rousas John Rushdoony (Rushdoony, 1973; McVicar, 2015). This political theology holds that all of creation, including political orders, operates under the law of God (Ingersoll, 2015). Because God has given humankind dominion over his creation,

Christians should unapologetically exercise that God-given authority over every sphere of life, including the secular political realm. As explained by Ammerman (1994: 51), “For reconstructionists there is no neutral ground, no sphere of activity outside of God’s rule. One is either following God in all aspects of life or not following God at all.” Therefore, Christians have a divine obligation to command civil government and to create theocratic states with the law of God supplanting secular legal codes (Aho, 2013). Reconstructionists decry the apparent increase in non-Christian values and practices, including homosexuality, divorce, promiscuity, and abortion, considering these iniquities to be a clear indication that society has wandered far afield of God’s righteous requirements. They thus seek to “reconstruct” secular society in line with their interpretation of the Bible. As explained by Gary North, the leading figure in the Christian reconstructionist movement until his passing in 2022, “The moral obligation of Christians [is] to recapture every institution for Jesus Christ” (North, 1984: 267). Reconstructionists like North believe that the Bible should be the standard for governance in Christian nations. This would entail restricting the franchise to Christians only, punishing by death acts such as adultery, witchcraft, and blasphemy, and criminalizing the propagation of non-Christian religions (Bahnsen, 1977; North, 1989). Most Calvinist nationalists do not subscribe to the reconstructionist vision of a Christian nation, however, as envisioned by Rushdoony and North.

The most important recent endeavor to lay out a version of Calvinist nationalism is a 2022 book by political philosopher Stephen Wolfe titled *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Wolfe, 2022). In this work, Wolfe, drawing on Reformed Christian philosophy, presents his version of Christian nationalism as an alternative to secular governance. Wolfe argues that tribal loyalties are inherently natural and that individuals have a natural affinity for those who share a similar culture or ethnicity; people of different religions and cultures cannot be “close at heart” (65). Accordingly, cultural homogeneity is preferable to pluralism in that the former more readily allows for the spiritual flourishing of society (134). Importantly, like Rushdoony and North before him, Wolfe’s Christian nationalism is inherently anti-liberal in that it assigns to the state the role of suppressing false religion and heresy and promoting right religion (a particular version of Christianity) (183). Wolfe terms this religion-state arrangement “measured theocratic Caesarism.” With respect to the United States, Wolfe believes that American Christians must reclaim the Protestant theological principles undergirding the nation’s founding (431). In short, with Christianity and the state formally united, the United States, under the guidance of a “Christian prince,” has a responsibility to promote and protect authentic Christianity, defending it against blasphemers and pagans (278). The book represents one of the few attempts—and certainly the most important—by a Christian nationalist to defend the ideology against its critics.

One important aspect that distinguishes Calvinist nationalism from charismatic dominionism concerns the former’s racist and misogynist beliefs—ideas that are laid out with striking candor in Wolfe’s book. Although charismatic dominionism welcomes women and ethnic and racial minorities to a large extent, the same cannot be said of nationalism in the Calvinist tradition. It is largely this tradition that has given rise to the widespread term “white Christian nationalism” (Jones, 2016; Tisby,

2019; Butler, 2021; Gorski and Perry, 2022). For example, Wolfe incorporates the thought of white supremacists such as William Gayley Simpson, Ernest Renan, and Enoch Powell into his argument. He decries mass immigration, widespread interethnic marriage, and ethnic pluralism (135, 148). Of course, Calvinism has a long and troubling history with racism in other contexts like South Africa, where the public theology of the Dutch Reformed Church emphasized innate differences between races as the will of God and provided biblical sanction and theological justification for the National Party's discriminatory, rapacious policies and structural violence (Moodie, 1975). With respect to gender, Calvinist nationalism is largely driven by "complementarian" theology holding that women and men have distinct (even if equally important) roles in the family and church and that women are forbidden from holding certain offices in the church (Du Mez 2020). Such a patriarchal theology naturally bleeds into social and political frameworks as well. Rushdoony, for instance, disapproved of women's suffrage and of women's public roles. Quantitative studies have found that Christian nationalism is the strongest predictor of one holding a traditionalist gender ideology and pronatalist political views, both of which consider women to be subordinate to men not only within the household but also outside of it (Whitehead and Perry, 2019; Perry et al., 2022a).

Is Calvinist nationalism simply an elite phenomenon that has little resonance among lay Christians? Although the influence of Calvinist nationalism has been less pronounced than charismatic dominionism, especially at the governmental level, the inroads it has made in society are still noteworthy. At the time of this writing, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* has received well over 400 reviews on Amazon.com. Importantly, the 4.5 star rating suggests the book has effectively tapped into Christian nationalist affinities within and beyond Reformed circles. Further, Wolfe's ideas will certainly trickle down to Reformed congregations led by pastors enamored of Wolfe's thinking. The publisher of Wolfe's book, Cannon Press, is the publishing arm of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, led by Reformed theologian and controversial Christian nationalist pastor Douglas Wilson who has drawn criticism for his views on slavery, gender equality, and the rights of sexual minorities. According to its website, Christ Church seeks to "make Moscow a Christian town" (Christ Church, 2024). Wilson's efforts to Christianize Moscow have produced fruit. Christ Church has built a multi-million dollar enterprise, including a K-12 school, a college, a live streaming show, and the aforementioned publishing house. About 2,000 people attend Christ Church itself (NBC, 2022). But its ambitions do not end there. Wilson hopes that the Christianization of Moscow can be replicated across the United States until the country itself accepts Christianity as its national religion, although he admits that such an outcome is improbable. Nevertheless, through the adept use of social media, the hundreds of books published by Cannon Press, and a popular homeschool curriculum, Wilson desires for what is happening in Moscow to be a "spark" that can catch fire and spread "reformation and revival" (NBC, 2022). The *YouTube* videos produced by Cannon Press consistently garner tens of thousands of views. The massive attention drawn by a 2024 interview between Doug Wilson and Tucker Carlson—a video that in just a month garnered over a quarter million views online—adds further weight to the idea that Calvinist nationalism is not just an elite phenomenon.

Catholic integralism

Not all forms of American Christian nationalism are right-wing Protestant movements like charismatic dominionism and Calvinist nationalism. For much of its history, the world's oldest and largest ecclesial body, the Catholic Church, resisted liberalism in the belief that it would threaten the claim of the Church to be the one true faith and open the floodgates to errant beliefs. Following the dissolution of Christendom, anti-liberal teachings found their way into papal encyclicals including *Mirari Vos* (1832), *Quanta Cura* (1864), *Immortale Dei* (1885), *Longinqua Oceani* (1895), and *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* (1899). At the end of *Quanta Cura*, Pope Pius IX issued a document, which would become the Church's most famous invective against liberty. Known as the *Syllabus of Errors*, the encyclical's annex addressed eighty "errors" or heresies—including freedom of the press and liberty of conscience—that supposedly defiled the church. Following the Second Vatican Council, however, the Catholic Church largely aligned itself with freedom, liberalism, and democracy, stunningly reversing 1,600 years of official sanction of Christendom. The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, proclaimed as official church doctrine the inviolability of the human person rooted in the inherent dignity and worth of all God's children, in sharp contrast to the Church's position for most of Catholic history. By the late twentieth century, Catholicism had become a major contributor to global human rights, especially religious freedom (Huntington, 1991; Philpott, 2004).

In recent years, a small but growing number of conservative Catholic intellectuals have questioned the Catholic Church's embrace of liberalism following the Second Vatican Council, believing liberalism to be an inherently destructive ideology for society at large (Deneen, 2018). They see liberalism not just as a political ideology but a rival (false) religion that competes with God for the allegiance of human hearts, insofar as the liberal state remains neutral in religious matters, even including the accommodation of heretical and blasphemous views, and does not privilege the truth of the Catholic Church in a country's laws and policies (Reno, 2016; Smith, 2018). They argue that there can be no impartiality when it comes to the ultimate ends of life. Liberalism, they contend, in its hostility towards Christianity, has upended any collective vision of the common good by eroding traditional forms of social order—especially with respect to marriage and the family, gender and sexuality, and the role of religion in the public square—unsettling local communities, encouraging hedonism, destroying families, and degrading the environment (Deneen, 2018). They argue instead that the popes of the nineteenth century were correct in their denunciations of church-state separation, pluralism, individualism, modernity, and religious freedom.

Increasingly, these Catholic thinkers, known as integralists, have been gaining traction in the United States, although they lack the popular strength of their Protestant counterparts. Arguments in support of integralism tend to be confined to the pages of esoteric Catholic publications such as *American Affairs*, *First Things*, and *The Public Discourse* and on websites such as *Compact* and *The Josias* (Vermeule, 2017; Waldstein, 2017; Pink, 2018). Among the most well-known integralists or integralist sympathizers are the Harvard legal scholar Adrian Vermeule, political

scientist Gladden Pappin, theologians Alan Fimister and Scott Hahn, philosopher Thomas Pink, Austrian monk and co-editor of *The Josias* Edmund Waldstein, *First Things* editor R.R. Reno, and the *New York Post*'s Sohrab Ahmari. Some schismatic Catholic groups like the Society of St. Pius X have also gravitated towards integralist principles.

Essentially, integralism is an argument about the proper response of the Church to an increasingly hostile culture marked by secularization and progressivism. Integralists believe that because God redeems the earthly city and its attendant political orders through the activities of Christians, all of life must be rightly ordered; political, social, and religious institutions must be seen as an integrated unit (Jones, 2017). Integralism, therefore, does not distinguish between political power and the sovereign power of God; the lordship of Christ extends to all of creation, not just the community of believers. As Jesus declared before his ascension, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The integralist view takes this to mean political power as well. As explained by Waldstein (2018), "Every part of the world has to be converted and exorcised in order to liberate it from demonic power. This includes political institutions."

Political life, integralists claim, which was once rightly ordered toward and by God, is now characterized by an artificial distinction between the penultimate and ultimate matters of life, divorced from the divine. Integralists believe that liberalism—with its emphasis on individual rights, disestablishment, and secularism—is the malevolent force behind this shift. As Vermeule puts it, "There is no reason to think that a stable, long-term rapprochement between Catholicism and the liberal state is realistically feasible, whether or not it would be desirable; nor should Catholics allow themselves to become ultimately attached to any particular time, place or human political order" (Vermeule, 2018). Accordingly, the only way for societies to extricate themselves from the problems brought on by liberal ideology is to recognize the authority of the Catholic Church in political and social affairs and to transform the liberal state into an entity that promotes human flourishing as understood from within a Catholic discourse. In the resulting integrated confessional state, the government recognizes and supports the Catholic Church as the only legitimate spiritual authority. Just as the temporal end of man is subordinated to his spiritual end, the government must also subordinate itself to the power of the Church as it actively promotes the Catholic vision of the common good and enhances the Church's ability to permeate society with a higher purpose. The resulting political theology envisions a hierarchical society marked by the concentration of spiritual and temporal power in the hands of the Church, a symbiotic relationship between church and state, and the top-down imposition of faith upon both Catholics and non-Catholics. Integralists draw heavily on the thought of Thomas Aquinas, especially his arguments about natural law, in advancing their claims (Crean and Fimister, 2020).

Although integralism first emerged in Europe as a backlash against the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, it has experienced a recent rebirth among Catholic intellectuals in the United States over the past decade. Historically, American Catholics have been largely supportive of the American experiment in political secularism, ordered liberty, and ideological diversity. Indeed, that they have found

themselves in the position of a religious minority, at times oppressed at the hands of majority Protestants, has led Catholics to embrace the central tenets of classical liberalism. The new integralists, however, claim that the American commitment to neutrality in the religious realm has only enhanced the power of Satan, the “prince of this world.”

What would an America under the control of integralists look like? Integralism strikes at the heart of the Enlightenment principles underpinning the American experiment. The belief that the state must not remain neutral in religious matters would move integralists to erode the separation of religion and state that has governed the country since its founding and to dismantle the country’s liberal edifices. Integralists would also look to medieval society, where church and state formed a hybrid entity in the form of Christendom, as a template for how a properly Christianized society should operate. Spiritual and temporal power would be amalgamated in service of the common good and ordered toward the salvation of souls. In keeping with their predecessors, they would also look to the state to enforce Catholic orthodoxy as understood by integralists. In the case that spiritual and temporal authority remained separated, integralists would maintain that the state should still privilege the Catholic Church in its laws and policies and promote the Church’s conception of human flourishing and the common good and that the government should be subordinate to Church’s authority (Waldstein, 2016; Vermeule, 2018). In an integralist state, religious minorities and nonbelievers would be second-class citizens, dispossessed of equal rights and liberties, and marginalized from political decision-making. Sexual minorities would face persecution. Religious toleration would come to an end, and women’s rights would be greatly eroded. Only baptized members of the Catholic Church would enjoy the full benefits of citizenship. As in other countries marked by religious majoritarianism, minorities and dissenters would likely be subjected to harassment, coercion, and perhaps even violence and physical displacement (Henne et al. 2020; Saiya, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2021, 2025; Saiya et al., 2024; Saiya and Fidler, 2018; Saiya and Scime, 2015, 2019; Saiya and Manchanda, 2020, 2025a, 2025b). Integralists would counter, however, that a properly integrated American state would address problems endemic to liberalist and capitalist political systems: income inequality, the oppression of the poor and marginalized, the destruction of the environment, and the scourge of abortion (Waldstein, 2018). Addressing these issues, however, first requires the political empowerment of the Catholic Church.

To be sure, such a scenario is highly implausible at best, if for no other reason because Catholics comprise less than a quarter of the total American population. Still, it is worth remembering that different versions of the integralist vision of religion, society, and politics have historically been the dominant way that Catholics in the West have understood their place in the world. Integralist thought is also beginning to enter the mainstream as part of more general debates on the virtues and vices of liberalism (Deneen, 2018). Integralist critiques of capitalism, libertinism, and secularism appear to be resonating with younger Catholics in particular who are searching for meaning, identity, and belonging amid the shallowness of modern life. As Troutner (2020) writes, young Catholics sympathetic to integralism “can be found

not just on the internet but at seminaries, liberal arts schools, and parishes throughout the country.”

Overlaps and fissures

How important are the theological differences between the different varieties of American Christian nationalism? On the one hand, research has shown that religion in America has come to be interpreted in political rather than spiritual terms (Margolis 2018; Campbell et al., 2020). A study by the Pew Research Center found that, contrary to conventional wisdom, from 2016 to 2020 the number of white evangelicals grew, even amidst the country’s rapid secularization (Smith, 2021). But these new evangelicals did not identify with the beliefs and practices of evangelicalism; rather, for them the term “evangelical” was seen as being synonymous with support for Donald Trump. Put differently, politics appears to be driving religious identities. Where one stands politically on divisive issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, immigration, and transgender rights largely determines one’s religious identification. The politicizing of religion in this way has had the effect of allowing Christian nationalists to unite politically, in some cases making for strange bedfellows. For example, though raised a Catholic, Mike Flynn has become a mainstay in charismatic dominionist circles, appearing with charismatics like Sean Feucht and Greg Locke at events associated with the Reawaken America Tour.

On the other hand, though, that the theological differences within the movement are real and profound suggests that they could become points of contention in the future. If America ever does become a Christian nation, which form of Christianity should predominate? For example, the Calvinist tradition is strongly “cessationist” in nature, believing that the era of apostles and prophets ended with the New Testament church and that Christians should no longer practice the spiritual gifts. Charismatic Christians, by contrast, are “continuationists” who believe that apostles and prophets should be leading the modern church and that the other offices of the church should be in submission to them. Moreover, they believe that the gifts of the Spirit are an important part of the Christian life. Beyond these beliefs, the so-called prosperity gospel has little resonance outside of charismatic circles. Of course, both charismatic dominionists and Calvinist nationalists have fundamental differences with Catholics. C. Peter Wagner, for example, held a virulently anti-Catholic theology that equated Catholic veneration of saints with demon worship (Wagner, 2001: 21). Reformed Christian nationalism also contains a strongly anti-Catholic undercurrent. By the same token, the exclusivism part and parcel of Catholic integralism along with the general belief that Catholicism represents the “one true church” would likely render it inhospitable to non-Christian *and* Christian minorities, including Calvinists and charismatics.

Race could prove to be another point of contention. The racism implicit in some variants of Calvinist nationalism could potentially cause a rift with the large proportion of Hispanics found in the charismatic dominionist movement. Indeed, racism appears to be an emerging point of contention *among* Calvinist nationalists (Wingfield, 2024). Should the cleavage around race deepen, Calvinist nationalism could itself witness a fissure.

Although it appears that Christian nationalism is presently a socially and politically unified movement in its opposition to church-state separation, rejection of pluralism, and aspirations to form Christian states, that it will remain so seems far from a foregone conclusion. The theological and social differences between the various forms of American Christian nationalism are real and potentially important. Ironically, the success of Christian nationalism might help bring these fissures to light.

Conclusion

Several real-world developments have contributed to the explosion of interest in American Christian nationalism: Donald Trump's three presidential campaigns, the 2021 Capitol insurrection, and growing affinity for Christian nationalist ideals among conservative politicians. American Christian nationalism is not a single, coherent ideology, however, as it is often portrayed in the literature. In the United States, Christian nationalism emerges from diverse political theologies and manifests in manifold religious and political ways. True, American Christian nationalists generally reject the idea of separation of church and state and believe instead that Christians should be ruling the country. There also exists much common ground on political and cultural issues such as abortion, immigration, and support for Israel. Yet the particular theologies animating the different strains of American Christian nationalism share little else in common. American Christian nationalism is thus better understood as a *group* of political ideologies that seek to Christianize public life. The different strains of American Christian nationalism contain inherent theological differences and motivations.

The heterogeneity of Christian nationalism calls on scholars to consider a disaggregated approach in analyzing this phenomenon. It might behoove scholars to think in terms of "Christian *nationalisms*" rather than the singular "Christian nationalism" and to employ an approach which disaggregates and appreciates the foundational differences between different American Christian nationalist movements. The scholarly literature to date has ignored such distinctions, resulting in an inappropriately elastic understanding of this important concept.

Future work can build upon the insights of this work in several ways. First, although this article has highlighted three important strands of American Christian nationalism, it is possible that there are others that fail to fit neatly within the categories delineated here. For example, it stands to reason that there could exist a distinctive form of "Southern Baptist nationalism" that falls outside the scope of charismatic dominionism, Calvinist nationalism, and Catholic integralism. Some have even noted that Eastern Orthodoxy has entered the American Christian nationalist scene. Additionally, African-American Christians likely hold altogether different understandings of Christian nationalism than their white counterparts.

Second, while the present piece has looked at the differences between different strands of American Christian nationalism, future work can expand this line of inquiry by considering how Christian nationalism varies across different political contexts. For example, while the American version of Christian nationalism tends to be creedal in nature—grounding arguments for the Christian nation in the beliefs that God has a special plan for the United States in human history and that certain political

leaders are anointed by God to return the country to spiritual purity—the form of Christian nationalism predominate in Europe tends to be more secularized. In Europe, Christian nationalism is expressed more in terms of civilizational identity rather than beliefs, reflecting the depth of the continent’s secularization (Brubaker, 2017). Other distinctive forms of Christian nationalism exist in the developing world.

Third, future work can consider how American Christian nationalism has changed over time. While the present piece has examined different strains of American Christian nationalism at one particular point in time, it is likely that the versions of Christian nationalism present in the United States today have evolved over the nearly quarter millennium of its existence. Christianity and nationalism have been intertwined in various complex ways since the colonial founding, whether in the form of the Puritan “chosen nation,” the Christian-inspired era of “manifest destiny,” or Wilsonian idealism during the First World War. Given the frequent overlap between religion and race, it is highly likely that landmark political decisions such as the Immigration Quota Act and the Civil Rights Act had far-reaching effects on the development of white Christian nationalism. How Christian nationalism in America has changed with the times thus presents an important avenue for future research.

Fourth, future studies can examine the effect of different Christian nationalist beliefs on political and social attitudes and real-world outcomes like elections. Do those belonging to different strains of Christian nationalism behave the same politically or are there differences? Do they hold the same views towards minorities? Are some versions of Christian nationalism especially prone to violence? The insights contained in this article present the possibility of future work capturing important and interesting differences among Christian nationalist movements with respect to real-world behavior.

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Author Biography

Nilay Saiya is an associate professor of public policy and global affairs at Nanyang Technological University and a Yang visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School. He is the author most recently of *The Global Politics of Jesus: A Christian Case for Church-State Separation* (Oxford University Press, 2022).