

Polarization and Depolarization in the U.S.:

Roles of Religion

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Abstract

This paper focuses on religious rhetoric's role in polarization and depolarization in American public life. The subject will be analyzed from three different but interrelated religious and political dynamics in America. The first of these is "American civil religion". The rhetorical framework of American civil religion has been analyzed at length by scholars such as Philip Gorski, who lends significant weight to viewing American civil religion as a depolarizing force, advancing a more inclusive society. This perspective will be examined, as well as the qualities of American civil religion, which may, in specific contexts, uphold a status quo of historical inequality and contribute instead to polarization in American public life. The second dynamic examined is "religious nationalism", which scholars have also studied for a long time, often as a counterforce to American civil religion. Religious nationalism is a deeply rooted force of natural polarization, seeking the U.S. to be defined by one religion, i.e., Christianity. The third dynamic examined is the differing "moral foundations" across the American population. Research demonstrates that people hold differing, implicit foundational elements to the moral frameworks they subscribe to. This paper will argue that religious and political leaders who wish to advance inclusion, depolarize, and restrain religious nationalism must better understand how to appeal across different moral foundations to accomplish this goal. This paper will address the thesis that religion is critical in both polarization and depolarization in American public life. Awareness of these dynamics and their complexity is imperative for religious and political leaders wishing to advance a more inclusive and depolarized American society.

Keywords: *Polarization, Depolarization, American Civil Religion, Religious Nationalism, Inclusive Society.*

Introduction

The 21st century has been a time of increased political polarization in the U.S. population. This seems anecdotally apparent to many Americans observing the political climate, with a 2022 survey finding that 3 in 10 Americans cite political polarization as a “top issue facing the country”.¹

The Pew Research Center has demonstrated this extensively in data, showing a significant shift toward polarization between 2004 and 2014.² The COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020 highlighted this polarization further.³ The more consistently opposing political views of Americans on the right and left also correspond heavily with other cultural alignments, such as religion.⁴ This polarization in American life is not just an impediment to passing legislation. However, studies show this presents significant threats of decline in democracy and the potential for increased political violence.⁵ The need for depolarization in the U.S. is clear, and understanding the role of religion in political polarization and depolarization is a critical element in achieving this.

¹ Geoffrey Skelley and Holly Fuong, “3 in 10 Americans Named Political Polarization as a Top Issue Facing the Country”, *FiveThirtyEight*, June 14, 2022. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/3-in-10-americans-named-political-polarization-as-a-top-issue-facing-the-country/>.

² Michael Dimock et al., “Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past”, *Pew Research Center*, June 11, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/pp-2014-06-12-polarization-0-01/>.

³ Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide”, *The Pew Charitable Trusts*, March 29, 2021. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2021/america-is-exceptional-in-its-political-divide>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jennifer McCoy and Benjamin Press, “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 18, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/18/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized-pub-86190>.

“Ideas and practices like American civil religion and interfaith dialogue can be important counterpoints to religious nationalism, and the psychosocial reality of foundational value systems of communities that often emerge in religious institutions or political platforms are critical for understanding the root of significant differences and accessing common values.”

It is important to note when discussing the issue of depolarization that the methods should never call for less progress in society for marginalized people. Depolarization should not be used to validate extreme points of view that dehumanize groups of people. The answer to bringing people together over common values should not be to affirm hatred as a valid perspective, nor should it be to continue excluding the voices of historically marginalized and vulnerable people.

What needs to be recognized instead is that marginalized people face the most significant threat from polarization, which leads to a loss of diversity in point of view and the willingness of people to listen to those who disagree with them.⁶ Creating a more inclusive society requires change, and polarization is the enemy of change. Depolarization means creating an environment where diversity of perspective and openness to nuanced discussion across points of view is more characteristic than “ideological silos”.⁷

As noted, religious and political views often have increased alignment as a part of the polarization process in American life. Religion is often understood on a surface

⁶ Morgan Kelly, “Political Polarization and Its Echo Chambers: Surprising New, Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives from Princeton”, *Princeton University*, December 9, 2021. <https://www.princeton.edu/news/2021/12/09/political-polarization-and-its-echo-chambers-surprising-new-cross-disciplinary>.


⁷ Michael Dimock et al., “Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past”.

level, categorized only as adherence to one of the world's major religious traditions. However, religion as a social force is more complex and intrinsically tied to "politics". When understood as a function of what it does in society the way academics often define it, "religion" is illuminated as something far broader and, in turn, has a more significant and even inseparable role in depolarizing the political atmosphere of the U.S., just as it plays its role in the polarization already happening. Ideas and practices like American civil religion and interfaith dialogue can be essential counterpoints to religious nationalism, and the psychosocial reality of foundational value systems of communities that often emerge in religious institutions or political platforms are critical for understanding the root of significant differences and accessing common values.

Defining Religion and its Role in Politics

It is essential to see the broader understanding of "religion" beyond conventional popular understandings to understand religion's role in polarization and depolarization in American public life. Religion is often popularly conceived through the lens of major world religions, and in this way, calls to mind concepts of beliefs surrounding deities, the afterlife, and institutional churches.

However, the academic study views religion as a force with a broader societal function. An original scholar of the sociological study of religion, Émile Durkheim, articulated religion as something that emerges out of society and is defined by its function in society, specifically in separating the "sacred" (special or set apart) from the "profane" (unremarkable or every day).⁸

 **Some scholars of religion view religion as a generic concept created for grouping and studying phenomena in cultures and societies.**

⁸ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [Original work published in 1912] (New York: Free Press, 1995).

Some scholars of religion view religion as a generic concept created for grouping and studying phenomena in cultures and societies.⁹ So, the popular conceptualizations of religion can and should be examined as a part of religion. However, the more religion is understood as a subject with blurry lines rather than obvious boundaries, the more its interplay with other areas of society becomes more visible. The implication for the purposes here is that religion is a critical force in American culture, not just in the obvious ways major religious institutions function but in how the category of religion shapes politics, morality, and priorities in discourse in frequently unseen ways.

How religion is intertwined with the rest of culture should be familiar to students of ancient history. In reality, the compartmentalization of human civilization into the categories of “religion”, “politics”, and “culture” is a modern convention. It is not to say it is not a practical or essential convention.

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However, the more common way these categories are not easily separated throughout human history helps explain how they are still interrelated despite our conceptualization of their division. For example, the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*, uses an origin story of the world with deities to establish the priorities of the Babylonian empire. These priorities include establishing the supremacy of the deity, *Marduk*, as justification for Babylonian rule and occupation of other occupied peoples and their gods. The familiar Hebrew creation myth in the first chapter of Genesis is typically thought by scholars to be a refutation of the Babylonian myth in resistance to their occupation and exile. While modern scholars might divide the “religion” of the

⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”, ed. Mark Taylor, In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1998): 269-284

Babylonian empire or Hebrew people from their political priorities or other facets of their culture, these things were far more deeply intertwined than separated.

The interconnected nature of religion and political culture can be further demonstrated in history, including in the U.S. One example of this is in the work of Sigrun Kahl, who demonstrates in her work how the modern poverty policies of European nations and the U.S. correspond to the theology of each nation's religious heritage.¹⁰ Kahl demonstrates that while overtly religious language may not play into how modern poverty policy is discussed, Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist heritages all correspond to different approaches to poverty policy today, such as the U.S.' comparative preference for private charity over state-based assistance being tied to the Calvinist influence on its history.¹¹ This dynamic is vital to identify and unpack, as the religious influences on policy preferences are often unseen or ignored in discourse but also stand to reveal that values are not formed in a vacuum. The modern compartments of human culture mask the historical reasons for ideas. When values are not appropriately understood in disagreements, this impedes discourse and causes polarization but can, in turn, also impede progress in policy when historical motivations are left unexamined.

American Civil Religion

The more specific concept studied by contemporary scholars that examine the interrelated nature of religion with American culture and politics is called "American civil religion", which is the idea that an implicitly religious structure in American public life can be analyzed. Sociologist Robert Bellah famously wrote about this concept in his 1967 essay *Civil Religion in America*, arguing that while this structure

“...the interrelated nature of religion with American culture and politics is called “American civil religion”.

¹⁰ Sigrun Kahl, “The Religious Roots of Modern Poverty Policy: Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Protestant Traditions Compared”, *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie* 46, no. 1 (2005): 91–126.

¹¹ Ibid.

historically borrows from Hebrew and Christian ideas, it functions as its sort of religion in American life.¹²

Some outward examples of this structure are the ways certain facets of American culture are treated as “sacred” (fulfilling the definition of religion set out by Durkheim), such as the Pledge of Allegiance or National Anthem (paralleled with a religious confession or creed), American flag (religious icons), veterans and the founding fathers (saints or prophets), and sacred texts (Constitution or Declaration of Independence).

American NFL fans might call to mind Colin Kaepernick’s and other players’ protests during the National Anthem as an event in popular culture that highlights some of this. Mr. Kaepernick’s choice of the National Anthem to protest highlights the song’s distinctive identification with American culture, and his consultation with a former Green Beret (Nate Boyd) in seeking a way to protest with respect underlines the role of veterans in the minds of many Americans. The backlash Mr. Kaepernick faced from many people also demonstrated the religious zeal associated with American symbolism. It will be examined later that some of this may be differentiated from civil religion in its association with religious nationalism.

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Some scholars see civil religion’s historical and future potential as a depolarizing force, namely Philip Gorski, who studied under Robert Bellah. This might seem surprising since controversies involving these elements of American life might stand out. However, the way American civil religion has been used historically and its

¹² Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1–21.

potential for the future makes it an essential potential force for depolarization. To demonstrate this, it helps first to understand both the differentiation made by Gorski between civil religion and religious nationalism and historical examples of civil religion's role in societal progress.

In his book, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, Philip Gorski traces the origins of American civil religion through the nation's history, originating with the Puritans. While the Puritan community was religious and, by contemporary standards, displayed a slight separation of church and state, the differentiation of the church and government was still a significant change from England.¹³ Gorski sees the birth of American civil religion in the simultaneous differentiation between church and government and the overlap of animating religious values for the political community.

The idea of the political community being chosen by God to create a community for the common good was an ideal present within the Puritan community that led to an evolving framework of civil religion in the U.S. While there is more to unpack about the origins, perhaps the most critical point to highlight is how civil religion in America rapidly evolves with time and new thinkers. This dynamic quality differentiates it from religious nationalism, consistent in its racial and religious exclusion.¹⁴

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¹³ Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁴ Ibid.

Bellah and Gorski both identify a significant evolution of American civil religion during and after the Civil War era. One critical strand Gorski calls the “prophetic” strand for its resemblance to the Hebrew prophets who declared God’s judgment on Israel while calling the nation toward righteousness.¹⁵ Gorski traces this particular strand of rhetoric in American civil religion primarily through African American leaders like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Gorski identifies the way these leaders utilized the language of American civil religion, such as the idea of America having a calling or “chosen-ness” by God and a set of ideals to live up to, but not to praise the country unconditionally. Instead, the incorporation of the language of civil religion was to call out injustice and call the country to turn toward a path of justice and equality.

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A clear example of this can be seen in Douglass’ 1852 speech “*What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?*” which includes numerous invocations of American symbols and figures that can be associated with American civil religion. However, they are invoked to call out hypocrisy in the enslavement of people and to demand justice.¹⁶ This evolution of American civil religion demonstrates its differences from the static, exclusionary nature of religious nationalism. It illuminates how civil religion can unite society by naming national sins and pushing the nation toward a more just society. It is also essential to highlight the potential dangers and pitfalls within American civil religion. Insofar as the framework serves toward the end of national self-reflection and pursuit of justice, there is potential for it to be used for depolarization. However, it is worth noting how the framework could leave out minority groups, downplay the egregiousness of America’s historical sins, or play into a broader structure that defends values that serve those already in power when it is not wielded with proper intent.

¹⁵ Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant*.

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, “*What to the Slave is the 4th of July?*”, (Rochester, 1852).

“Even depolarization simply for the sake of keeping the peace does not serve justice if depolarization is achieved by drowning out the voices of oppressed groups. Indeed, religious nationalism pursues this as its aim...but even the structures of civil religion must be continually transformed and wielded carefully.”

Even depolarization simply for the sake of keeping the peace does not serve justice if depolarization is achieved by drowning out the voices of oppressed groups. Indeed, religious nationalism pursues this as its aim, which will be addressed later, but even the structures of civil religion must be continually transformed and wielded carefully.

Ta-Nehisi Coates illustrates some of these concerns in *Between the World and Me*, calling democracy America’s “god” and a “forgiving” god.¹⁷ This is to say, the interests of the national majority culture are quick to forgive the majority culture’s sins and usually slow to enact justice. Civil religion can only achieve the aims of depolarization if it is also continually transformed to serve not just the historic majority culture of the U.S. but to serve a way forward for everyone.

Even still, the structure of civil religion has historically been used to advance justice in a way that brings together a coalition of Americans. To do this, the mistakes and failures of the country must not be overlooked but highlighted. In short, a significant part of polarization stems from a refusal to recognize wrongdoing in American society. However, rhetoric that would dismiss all potential good also feeds the polarization. Invoking the rhetorical contributions of American civil religion means believing that there are sins and problems to fix but that improvement is possible, even demanded. American civil religion can bring together polarized ends of the country by affirming our society’s potential to be good and bringing people together to name and

¹⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

fix problems. The American cultural and political landscape has a type of religious framework that, when understood and leveraged well, provides a tool for depolarization and advancement of a more just society.

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Religious Nationalism

The idea of religious rhetoric in American discourse may sometimes be painted as uniform in popular media, and American civil religion may call to mind more nationalist rhetoric. In reality, there is another force in American life under the umbrella of religion to be examined that is arguably antithetical to American civil religion: religious nationalism. In the U.S., this is precisely “Christian nationalism”, and scholars such as Kristen Kobes Du Mez, Samuel Perry, Andrew Whitehead, and Philip Gorski have produced a good deal of scholarship examining the history of Christian nationalism in the U.S. and analyzing what defines it and who adheres to it through a sociological perspective.

“Christian nationalism is a phenomenon worth understanding more extensively to understand the landscape of American politics.”

Christian nationalism is a phenomenon worth understanding more extensively to understand the landscape of American politics. While it will only be briefly described here, books such as *Jesus and John Wayne*, *Taking America Back for God*, and *The Flag and The Cross* by the scholars mentioned above are important in understanding this more deeply. Essentially, while American civil religion is arguably characterized by dynamic characteristics that evolved to be leveraged as a tool for inclusivity and unity around progress toward fundamental ideas of equality,

Christian nationalism is a static force that has consistently been an ideology toward the end of Christian supremacy and is historically often a pretext for white supremacy.¹⁸ Understanding religious nationalism in the U.S. helps illuminate a significant cause of polarization but also helps to differentiate civil religion and its potential use in depolarization.

In his book, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, Philip Gorski also traces the origins of Christian nationalism in the U.S. through the nation's history, originating with the Puritans as with civil religion. However, contrary to the beginnings of civil religion, Christian nationalism was animated more by violent conquest and apocalyptic allegory rather than an interest in a vision of the common good.¹⁹

The idea that America is intended to be specifically a Christian nation persists historically from the Puritans through ideas such as *Lost Cause* mythology, opposition to the civil rights movement, and other contemporary manifestations.²⁰ It is also important to clarify that in the case of American religious nationalism, "Christian" refers to a specific and narrow American iteration of Christian theology, which even excludes non-conforming iterations of Christianity. The exclusivist vision of this movement naturally creates an ideological "pole". This pole continues to take a foothold in contemporary politics and demands ideological purity, adding to growing polarization, and does so in part by monopolizing the ideas of faith and religion in

“Christian nationalism advances polarization but also works against depolarizing ideas about religion by equating itself (and, in turn, being equated by the general public) with religion in American public discourse.”

¹⁸ Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant*.

public discourse. Christian nationalism advances polarization but also works against depolarizing ideas about religion by equating itself (and, in turn, being equated by the general public) with religion in American public discourse. This is especially true when popular media and the general public do not work against this by differentiating correctly.

Moral Foundations

Accessing common values, depolarizing, and resisting the extremes of religious nationalism can also benefit tremendously from a greater understanding of the underlying moral foundations in communities. Interfaith dialogue is a critical start, but understanding the root causes of differences is crucial for successfully doing this. “Moral foundations theory” is another helpful concept scholars offer. It argues that people have certain core moral foundations that animate their values and views of right and wrong and that conservatives and liberals typically weigh different moral foundations more than others.²¹

For instance, liberals’ morality tends to be animated heavily by “care/harm” (or kindness/preventing harm). While conservatives also value this, they are also animated by moral foundations such as “loyalty” (typically in-group loyalty) and “purity” (sexual purity), which are usually not seen as necessary by liberals.²² Religious groups tend to codify the outworking of these values. However, political ideologies do also, with the two often happening simultaneously, as seen in the similar polarization of political and religious groups in the U.S. along similar issues.

So, while a polarized environment typically thrives on emphasizing issues with two clear sides, focusing on values can depolarize by helping people to express their values in value-driven language rather than exclusively contemporary issues. It can also help people identify common differences, such as a shared value of “fairness”, and


²¹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

²² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*.

“The argument here is that beginning with the starting place that many people share the value of needing to protect society from more harm is more productive than asserting that polar opposite values automatically animate everyone on the opposing side.”

then discuss how that shared value animates political and religious beliefs. While there are certainly genuinely despicable actions committed in the public eye that should be denounced as such, it can also be argued that there is a great deal of benefit to affirming the shared values that animate a difference rather than asserting that someone is immoral for disagreeing on an issue.

For instance, it can be observed in public discourse how the “care/harm” value may animate some to support both greater and lesser restrictions on firearms, with some asserting that fewer firearms are needed for public safety and others arguing that more firearms would allow for more self-defense or defense of others against those who mean harm. Dialogue is desperately needed to address this difference and end the gun violence plaguing the U.S. The argument here is that beginning with the starting place that many people share the value of needing to protect society from more harm is more productive than asserting that polar opposite values automatically animate everyone on the opposing side.

 ***...productive interfaith dialogue does not start with, for instance, an argument over a polarizing theological issue. It starts with common values like divine love, peace, and respect.***

Starting a dialogue on the premise of shared value is a better way to productively discuss the evidence for policies and make progress on this issue. *Squirrel Hill Stands Against Gun Violence* is an example of one organization formed after the *Tree of Life Synagogue* shooting in Pittsburgh, which brings

together people across differing religious and political perspectives to pursue evidence-based solutions to gun violence.

Gun policy is one example, and no doubt not even the most contentious one possible, but this approach could lend heavily to depolarization in dialogue. The subject of interfaith dialogue is worth noting as a model for how to have these kinds of discussions. Interfaith dialogue typically presumes dialogue between people from different religions. This usually means that those participating in interfaith dialogue have differing beliefs about virtually anything (in particular, morality). However, those engaged in this practice know well that productive interfaith dialogue does not start with, for instance, an argument over a polarizing theological issue. It starts with common values like divine love, peace, and respect. Those participating recognize that important theological distinctions exist and make their faiths unique. However, the goal is to access common values to advance good in their communities and broader society. Suffice it to say that the leaders of interfaith dialogue can also be tremendous models for cross-value dialogue in political dialogue. Depolarization can occur when this kind of cross-value dialogue occurs between religious and political leaders and between Americans across the country. The implications include a less contentious and less violence-prone society and the potential to advance solutions born from shared values to problems that concern most people, like climate change, gun violence, or child hunger.

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The implications could also mean a quelling of the forces of religious nationalism, which inherently hold an exclusivist vision for the country because this kind of dialogue inherently demonstrates the forces of religious nationalism by highlighting shared values between people of different religions, political camps, races,

and other demographics. Dialogue driven by shared values is an active force for good and an antidote to nefarious ideas. Many individuals and organizations are actively working toward this, including *Braver Angels*, which works toward political depolarization, and *Rumi Forum*, which advances depolarization through interfaith engagement.

Conclusion

In summary, polarization is widely recognized as a critical issue facing American public life, including the interrelated dimensions of politics and religion. The risks of extremism, political violence, and the decline of democracy from this are already evident. Religion is a critical category in understanding the dynamics of polarization in American politics and a category that offers solutions to depolarization. American civil religion's structure and rhetoric is a treasure chest that offers tools for advancing inclusion in society while uniting the country. Religious nationalism is a contrary, static structure that seeks to exclude and polarize. The foundations of moral values that animate political values are frequently institutionalized in religious groups and ideas.

Religion itself is neither always a force for polarization nor depolarization, but it is critical for understanding the root of significant differences and accessing common values. Religious and political leaders who wish to advance inclusion, depolarize, and restrain religious nationalism must better understand these dynamics to accomplish this goal. Awareness of these dynamics and their complexity is imperative for religious and political leaders wishing to advance a more inclusive and depolarized American society.

Once again, creating a more inclusive society requires change, and polarization is the enemy of change. Depolarization means creating an environment where diversity of perspective and openness to nuanced discussion across points of view is normal, and people work together through shared values to pursue a more just, peaceful, and democratic society.

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David Tassell is educator and future social worker in Northern Virginia. He is passionate about exploring the connections between religion, culture, and society. As an adjunct faculty member in religious studies at George Mason University, David teaches courses such as Religion and Literature, focusing on the American context. He also works as part-time faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Excelsior University, where he teaches and supports students historically underrepresented in higher education. David has a Master of Theological Studies degree with a concentration in Political Theology from Calvin Theological Seminary. He is pursuing a Master of Social Work degree at Virginia Commonwealth University. There, David is learning clinical social work skills and examining the intersection of social work with religion and culture. He has also provided consultation services for congressional candidates who want to engage with faith communities for the common good and for non-profit organizations that want to improve their effectiveness.

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