Myths of Religious Nationalism:

Distinguishing it from Religion-Infused Politics

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Paul Marshall, Ph.D.

The term "nationalism" has usually been used to describe an attachment, ideology, or movement promoting the interests of a particular nation, a group of people who believe they have a shared historical, cultural, lingual, and/or religious heritage, and commonly wish to have a state that expresses this heritage.[1]

I had initially intended to focus on "religious nationalism" in the world generally since religiously infused nationalism is a growing and sometimes dangerous trend in the modern world and is likely to unsettle an already fractured international system further.

However, the use of the term has grown so promiscuously in America's polarized politics that its meaning has become plastic and is now bent on serving shorter-term political agendas. Hence, "religious nationalism" or "white religious nationalism" have now joined "secular," "liberal," "populist," "fundamentalist," "Marxist," "woke," and other terms, including the ever-popular "fascist," as terms of vague praise or blame divorced from any substantive content. Alexis de Tocqueville noted two centuries ago that an "abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: you put into it the ideas you want and take them out again unobserved."[2]

Hence, before noting world trends, I will focus on clarifying what religious nationalism is and is not, which involves examining current contorted and confused American debates.

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[1] For a classic exploration of these themes, see Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2016).

[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Book Two, Section I, Chapter 16. (New York: G. Dearborn & Co., 1838).

In the United States, some claim that "religious nationalism," "Christian nationalism," or even "white Christian nationalism" is a significant, growing, and dangerous movement.[3] There have been articles and segments in 2024 in PBS, Axios, NPR, the New York Times, and many other outlets, as well as a documentary "God and Country," that, despite earning little more than $38,000 nationwide during its opening weekend, garnered undue attention.[4]

Many books also criticize these movements, most repeating the same vague analysis.[5] In response, I will illustrate how these issues exist in the modern, international world and argue that we must carefully distinguish those who believe that their religion, or irreligion, should shape their politics, probably the vast majority of people in the world, from those who fuse such views with an exclusive and pernicious nationalism.[6]

"In the United States, some claim that *"religious nationalism," "Christian nationalism,"* or even *"white Christian nationalism"* is a significant, growing, and dangerous movement."

[3] While the expression "white Christian nationalism" is common amongst critics, the materials they survey typically lack a racial element. Also, several measures find religious nationalism to be more prominent among African Americans than among whites. For an overview of the varied statistics on religious nationalism, see Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion's *Christian Nationalists' identity dilemmas*, Volume 39 No. 4, February 2024.

[4] See David Little's review, "God & Country: A Look at White Christian Nationalism that Both Enlightens and Disappoints." *Canopy Forum*, May 16, 2024.

[5] Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking American Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Steven K. Green, *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[6] See more informed overviews by Ross Douthat, "Four Ways of Looking at Christian Nationalism," *New York Times*, March 1, 2024; David French, "What is Christian Nationalism Exactly?," *New York Times*, February 25, 2024; Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Myth of White Christian Nationalism," *First Things*, May 2024; Brad East, "How (Not) to Talk About 'Christian Nationalism'," *Christianity Today*, March 13, 2024.

Recent Arguments in the United States

In America, some people seem happy to accept the label "Christian nationalist." However, few identified themselves as such before 2022, when it was publicly endorsed by Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, whose embrace should already indicate that it is a marginal movement. Shortly after that, Douglas Wilson, the provocative pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, the source of many of these currents, argued that the concept is a "salvageable" one for Christians. In the Fall of 2022, a short book advocated a similar position: Andrew Torba and Andrew Isker's *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations* (Pennsylvania: Gab AI Inc, 2022), and Stephen Wolfe's more substantial *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Idaho: Canon Press, 2022).[7]

As Mark Tooley notes, Wilson argues for a "state that suppresses the outward display of "false" religion while not trying to govern human hearts" and writes explicitly from a supposed Calvinist perspective, drawing on sixteenth and seventeenth-century sources, and aimed at a specifically Calvinist audience. One conservative evangelical Methodist recounts giving up on the book after 20 pages because its assumptions necessarily rejected his basic theological views.

Most Baptists and non-denominational churches would also almost quickly reject it. "Nearly all self-identified Christian nationalists are Calvinists, typically Presbyterian like Wolfe, but also include theologically Reformed Baptists...."[8] The presence of Baptists here is unusual since, throughout American history, they have usually been the staunchest advocates of religious freedom and a religiously neutral state and have themselves often been persecuted by other Christians backed by the state.[9]

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[7] For some other influences, see Alexander Ward and Heidi Przybyla's "Trump allies prepare to infuse 'Christian nationalism' in second administration," *Politico*, February 20, 2024.

[8] Mark Tooley, "Christian Conservatism vs Christian Nationalism," *Juicy Ecumenism*, February 22, 2024.

[9] For a full sweep of Baptist engagement with politics, see Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker's *Baptist Political Thought*, (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2023). On the persecution of Baptists in America, see Steven Waldman's *Sacred Liberty: America's Long, Bloody, and Ongoing Struggle for Religious Freedom*, Chapters 1 and 2 (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2019).

"...throughout American history, *[Baptists]* have usually been the staunchest advocates of *religious freedom* and *a religiously neutral state* and have themselves often been persecuted by other *Christians* backed by the state."

Wolfe does not seek to defend this theological tradition but simply proceeds on the assumption that his version of it is accurate. However, the Calvinist tradition is diverse and lies at the roof of many Western democratic theories. For example, Johannes Althusius, who originated the term "political science," lies at the core of subsidiarity, now mistakenly treated as a mainly Catholic view of a decentralized society.[10] Wolfe's book is unlikely to appeal to anybody beyond his immediate circle.

Another stream that might perhaps be described as religious nationalism is "integralism" in Catholic circles, a movement usually associated with Patrick Deneen, Sohrab Ahmari, Adrian Vermeule, Gladden Pappin, Chad Pecknold, among others, wherein the common good should be the focus of political action and, for some, the Catholic Church would be given a privileged legal position. This is a diverse group, and we should also note that while some advocate for a politically privileged position for Catholicism, they do not have other nationalist elements.[11] Also, in economic matters, several integralist proponents take more left-wing positions, reinforcing, as I suggest below, that emphasizing Christian positions in politics is not a right-wing phenomenon.

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[10] Maria Cahill, "Theorizing Subsidiarity: Towards an Ontology-Sensitive Approach," *International Journal of Constitutional Law,* 15: 2017, 201-224; Ken Endo, "The Principle of Subsidiarity: From Johannes Althusius to Jacques Delors," *Hokkaido Law Review,* 44, no. 6 (1994). As it is, despite the mainly negative views of Calvinism in America, mainly based on the peculiarities of New England Puritanism, English Reformed currents, and perhaps Scottish, and undoubtedly Swiss and Dutch and perhaps Hungarian Calvinists are sources of religious freedom in the modern age. For a good overview and summary of Calvinist political and legal thought, see John Witte Jr.'s *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[11] For a robust critique of integralism, see Kevin Vallier's *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). See also Paul Marshall, "Canada as America's post-liberal Counterpart", *Providence*, April 29, 2024.

We should also note that these views, while often arguing for a Christian confessional state, do not have any clear nationalist agenda as that term has been understood historically.[12]

Dubious Recent American Descriptions of Religious Nationalism

Given the narrow presence of possible religious nationalism in small numbers in some American Reformed and, possibly, Catholic circles, why is it now appearing in the popular press and political debate as a dangerous movement of significant consequence for the United States? Part of this is its use as a handy political accusation against theological and moral religious conservatives by portraying them as incipient theocrats.[13] But some also derive from theological and comparative political illiteracy wherein religious nationalism is described so expansively that it takes in almost all those who simply want their faith to shape their politics, which historically, and perhaps necessarily, has always been the case.[14]

The most notorious example of these vague depictions was journalist Heidi Przbyla of *Politico*, who, after writing a relatively balanced and much-noticed article on some purported adherents of "Christian nationalism," stated on an MSNBC panel that "The thing that unites them as Christian nationalists, not Christians because Christian nationalists are very different, is that they believe that our rights as Americans and as all human beings do not come from any earthly authority. They do not come from Congress, from the Supreme Court; they come from God."

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[12] Here, the question arises as to whether to include as "religious nationalist" the recent growth of "conservative nationalism." This is complex since this movement, with many different currents, appears to be a transnational movement that, in a contradictory fashion, affirms particular nationalisms. These problems are explored from an American conservative perspective in Charles Kesler's "National Conservatism vs. American Conservatism," *Claremont Review of Books*, Winter 2023/24.

[13] Jim Wallis, *The False White Gospel: Rejecting Christian Nationalism, Reclaiming True Faith, and Refounding Democracy* (New York; St. Martin's, 2024). For an examination of the supposed racial element, see Harvest Prude's "White Evangelicals Want Christian Influence, Not a 'Christian Nation'," *Christianity Today*, March 15, 2024.

[14] On the media and religion, see Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Roberta Green Ahmanson's *Blind Spot: When Journalists Don't Get Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

She added in a tweet that, "While there are different wings of Christian nationalism, they are bound by their belief that our rights come from God."[15] These strange assertions quickly and appropriately received devastating criticism across the political spectrum, as commentators pointed out that the view that human rights are God-given is embodied in the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that their Creator endows them with certain inalienable rights...."

"...the view that human rights are God-given is embodied in the American Declaration of Independence: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that their Creator endows them with certain inalienable rights...*"

In addition, the northeast portico of the Jefferson Memorial contains Jefferson's declamation: "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?" The friezes on the U.S. Supreme Court illustrate prominent law-giving figures, such as Moses, Confucius, and Muhammad. An appeal to transcendent authority for rights is standard for those who want to make them inalienable, not subject to the whims of political majorities.

Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and others believed that without some transcendent authority for human rights, these rights were insecure because any court, legislature, or a majority of the people could remove them. Thus, those whom Pryzbyla describes as Christian nationalists are principally those who would adhere to the founding principles and basic features of American politics, especially that rights are inalienable precisely because they are not granted by legislatures, courts, or even the people themselves. This was at the core of President Lincoln's political argument, especially his rejection of slavery, in the face of democratic majorities that might vote for its retention.[16]

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[15] Tim Hains, "Heidi Przybyla: Extremist Conservative Christian Nationalists Believe Your Rights Come From God, Not Government," *RealClearPolitics*, February 23, 2024.

[16] Harry Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (enlarged edition) 2009).

Given her apparent ignorance, Przbyla quickly and appropriately apologized for her error.[17] But we are left to wonder why such a skilled journalist could interpret a clear appeal to America's founding documents as an expression of "Christian nationalism."

Lest it be thought that America's Founders' views are simply an irrelevant archaic reference, we may note that the Preamble to Canada's Constitution Act, passed in 1982, states that "Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law." These are not parochial claims but a common religious feature of the modern world. People wish to anchor their most basic political commitments, such as the equality and rights of human beings, in transcendent authority.

More Substantive Depictions of "Christian Nationalism"

Perhaps the most scholarly book attempting to define Christian nationalism is Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry's *Taking America Back for God*.[18] Whitehead and Perry use surveys from 2007 to 2017 and focus on how respondents' answers to six questions reveal purported religious nationalist sympathies. The questions are whether:

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. (Those who reject this position will be regarded as having religious nationalist sympathies);
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; and
6. The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.[19]

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[17] Ryan Foley, "Heidi Przybyla apologizes for her comments about Christian nationalism," *The Christian Post*, March 01, 2024.

[18] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking American Back for God* (2020). Here, I draw on Mark David Hall's *Who's Afraid of Christian Nationalism? Why Christian Nationalism is Not an Existential Threat to America or the Church* (Fidelis Books, 2024).

[19] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking American Back for God,* 7-9.

Based on a five-point scale of answers to these questions, the authors maintain that 51.9% of Americans fully or partially support Christian nationalism. However, answers to these open-ended questions could illustrate contradictory views. If asked, here would be my responses:

 # 1 No. This is the least ambiguous question. I would say no to this and agree that a positive answer to this question is that the declaration of America as a Christian nation would indicate religious nationalist sympathies.[20]

#2 Yes. This would probably elicit a positive response from nearly all Christians and possibly adherents of other religions. It is a view on the left as well as the right. Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi have both appealed to Catholic teaching on welcoming the outsider or succoring the poor. The political differences are not about whether to appeal to Christian teaching; instead, they are about the most salient Christian principles to which we should appeal. Martin Luther King Jr. would undoubtedly fit in a 'yes' category. Richard Dawkins, who has probably been the most prominent advocate of atheism in the UK, has recently said that while he is not a believer, he is a "cultural Christian" who supports the social effects of Christianity.[21]

#3 Yes. The vague phrase "separation of church and state" has been an occasional judicial doctrine that some have used to interpret the core of the First Amendment on religious freedom. Rejecting this interpretation says nothing about people's commitment to the First Amendment, which prohibits establishing a religion.

#4 Yes. The federal government has allowed such displays since America began, as any stroll around Washington, D.C. monuments will show. Islam's Prophet Muhammad is depicted in a sculpted representation on the frieze of the U.S. Supreme Court. The disputes are how much the government should advocate such symbols and whether they are discriminatory in their application.

[20] The key element is the call for a government declaration. It would be relatively uncontroversial to note that the United States is demographically Christian.

[21] Paul Shakeshaft, "Richard Dawkins, Cultural Christian," *First Things*, July 2, 2024.

#5. Yes, just as I would think that the failure of the United States would also be an expression of God's plan. This is simply a version of the notion of providence, a central part of President Washington's thought.

#6. Yes, unless you think students such as Matthew, Mohamed, or Vishal should be silenced if they venture to pray during the school day. The UCLA and Christian groups have assiduously defended such personal prayers. What is opposed by nearly all is state-sanctioned prayers. However, the question does not raise this distinction between what the state requires and what pupils or teachers may do in their free time.

Hence, I could answer 'yes' to five of these questions, depending on what they might mean, which, according to Whitehead and Perry, would put me, and most Americans, firmly in the Christian Nationalist camp. Many left-wing agnostics, or even atheists, could answer yes to several of these questions. In short, they are too vague to reveal any substantive position.

In contrast, a 2022 Pew poll found that 54% of Americans had not heard of the phrase "Christian nationalism," and only 5% of the American population had a favorable view of it. We should also note that, with the possible exception of #1, none of the questions address *nationalism* in any sense in which scholars of the matter have understood it.

Hence, the proliferation of the term in the U.S. in recent months and years does not, in the main, give any clear idea of what "Christian nationalism" is in particular and "religious nationalism" is in general. Commonly, there is confusion between religious nationalism and the much more common appeals, on both left and right, to religion as a source of political reflection and action.[22] To clarify these matters, we need to consider the relation of politics and religion in general and then illustrate the wide variety of their interactions in the modern world. Only then can we correctly focus on religious nationalism itself.

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[22] Baylor University, *Christian Nationalists' identity dilemmas*, 2024.

The Necessary Relation of Religion and Politics

As noted, much of the confusion surrounding "religious nationalism" in general and "Christian nationalism" in particular comes from equating them with people who desire their religious views to shape their politics and policy. However, such views are widespread worldwide and across the political spectrum. There is nothing per se new, unusual, or threatening in them.

Religion nearly always affects politics.[23] It does so mostly not by efforts to create some imagined "theocracy," a goal usually not of its proponents but rather a slur by its critics, but by the innate religious task of shaping hearts and minds, hopes and dreams, and also often by forming members in the habits and practices of reasoned religious deliberation. Our ultimate beliefs influence our views of history, justice, law, mercy, power, human nature, and evil. Moreover, it is impossible to approach politics in a way divorced from our views of history, justice, law, mercy, power, human nature, and evil. Indeed, some have carefully argued that it is necessarily religious to say that human beings have rights.[24] This does not produce any edict whereby we can proclaim that God has said the marginal income tax rate should be no more than 40% or pontificate on most issues in public policy. Instead, it is through shaping our views of the fundamental issues of life whose precise expression in particular circumstances will necessarily be open to dispute.

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[23] Paul Marshall, "Institutional Religious Freedom: An Overview and Defense," *Religions*, 12, no. 5: 364, (2021); Paul Marshall, "Politicizing Religion", *Fourth Annual Southeast Asia Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief*, Bangkok, August 16-19, 2018.

[24] Michael Perry, "Is the Idea of Human Rights Ineliminably Religious?" in *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 11-42; Michael Perry, *Toward a Theory of Human Rights: Religion, Law, Courts* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); John Witte Jr., and Frank Alexander, "Christianity and Human Rights," in *Christianity and Law: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 237-248.

Religions do not live in a corner, in a private realm, confined to a Sunday or Sabbath, to be enacted only at Diwali or Ramadan. They permeate and shape human life in its entirety. For good and evil, they are at the core of much of human life, and thus, they will necessarily affect politics.

Religion and Politics in America

Catholics such as Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi, while at odds with their church on many matters, especially abortion, have defended their views on, for example, immigration or policies for the poor by appealing to biblical admonitions and church teachings to care for the stranger and protect the needy. In his 2007 memoir, then-Senator Joe Biden stressed that Catholic teachings had "always been the governing force" in his politics.[25] And, of course, the Catholic Church has significantly defended religious freedom after the Second Vatican Council.[26] This reliance on religion is also significant in African-American churches, where such biblical admonitions are called forth in ringing sermons. Appeals to Christianity and the bible are not the preserve of the Christian right. They are embedded in American life, as in Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches, which are almost sermons, and most luminously in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, which gives the most significant expression of some Christian teachings given in American public life. However, they are not called religious nationalists. The critical question is not whether religion and politics will be intertwined, whether politics will affect religion, or whether religion will affect politics. This will always be the case, but the question is whether these will be done in a good or bad way.

"The critical question is not whether *religion* and *politics* will be intertwined, whether politics will affect religion, or whether religion will affect politics. [...]but...whether these will be done in a good or bad way."

[25] Joe Biden, *Promises to Keep: On Life and Politics* (Random House, 2007).

[26] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

Religious Nationalism and Varied Establishment of Religion

While there are relations of religion and politics that rightfully inspire fear and even terror, such as with Al Qaeda and ISIS, most examples are far more benign. This is shown not only in the references to the U.S. Declaration of Independence or the Canadian Constitution above but also, for example, in the Irish Constitution, whose Preface declares:

> "In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred...."

However, Ireland does not have an established church, unlike England or Scotland.

In the preamble to its constitution, Zambia upholds a type of religious nationalism in that it acknowledges "*the supremacy of God Almighty...*" and declares "*the Republic a Christian Nation while upholding a person's right to freedom of conscience, belief or religion....*" However, it continues to uphold "*the multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural character of our Nation....*" Echoing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it affirms that "*freedom of conscience... includes freedom of thought and religion, freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and both in public and in private, to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance.*" Here, recognizing religious inheritance and declaring a Christian nation does not necessarily create an established religion nor violate the religious freedoms of minorities.

Similarly, in the U.K., Queen Elizabeth II's death and Charles III's coronation were both suffused with religion, especially Christianity. Indeed, they were Christian worship services. Charles' coronation oaths included defending the mainly established *Protestant* Church of England as monarch.[27] The ceremony also drew participation and support from non-Christians, with a Hindu Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, reading from Paul's epistles, and few found it a threat to religious minorities.

[27] Jonathan Chaplin, *Beyond Establishment: Resetting Church-State Relations in England* (SCM Press, 2022).

Clearly, the coronation reflects and reinforces an establishment of religion, and the United States was founded partly to reject just such an establishment.[28] However, there are establishments, and then there are establishments. In 1776, establishments in England and America had teeth, and they did bite. Dissenters could be imprisoned. However, currently, the effects of the English state church are pretty minimal.[29]

"In 1776, establishments in *England* and *America* had teeth, and they did bite. Dissenters could be imprisoned. However, currently, the effects of the English state church are pretty minimal."

The British monarch must be a member of the Church of England since he or she is its head. Since they are also chaplains, some other officers, including several Oxbridge professors, need to be members. Twelve bishops sit in the House of Lords and, where required, state occasions, such as the coronation, will follow the Anglican liturgy. The prime minister advises the king on appointing bishops and other senior church personnel and, in effect, usually appoints them, but that is the extent of state interference. The state does not fund the church, which is facing challenging financial times, and all are granted religious freedom.

Other modern establishments are also minimal. Norway has a state church that is paid for by public funds. However, the church holds a privileged role only concerning the monarchy and state occasions. Otherwise, all religions have an equal footing. The Norwegian state gives funding to all religious groups, including Muslims. Similar minimal arrangements exist in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. Belgium has no established church but funds a range of churches and non-Christian groups, including secular humanists. The German government collects church taxes. Even with these minimal establishments and intertwinements, these countries all have high religious freedom scores. The "separation of church and state" in modern establishments may have little negative effect on broader religious freedom itself. Religious minorities no longer felt the need to flee to America during the coronation to escape religious persecution.

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[28] Paul Marshall, "Religious Lessons And Symbolism From A King's Coronation," *Religion Unplugged*, May 5, 2023.

[29] Scotland has a separate, established, more Presbyterian state church of which the monarch of the United Kingdom is not head.

Religion in the International Order

These diverse and complex trends are also shown in the world's most extensive grouping of political parties, the Centrist Democrat International (CDI).[30] The CDI has 94 member parties from 73 countries. Its earlier incarnation was the Christian Democrat International, a grouping founded in 1961 of Christian Democratic parties principally drawn from Europe and Latin America. It was established as a centrist or center-right alternative to the Socialist International and more rightist forces. Its most influential member is probably the German Christian Democratic Union, which Angela Merkel long-headed.

"*[CDI]* was established as a *centrist* or *center-right* alternative to the Socialist International and more rightist forces.

The CDI's European division is the European People's Party (EPP), currently the most prominent political grouping in the European Parliament. The equivalent in Latin America is the Christian Democrat Organization of America. The Democratic Party in the U.S. maintains links with the CDI through the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

While the CDI was initially formed to study and enact Christian principles in politics, it began to attract support from groups that were not Christian, so it rechristened itself as "centrist." Most of its members are still in the Christian Democrat camp. However, it now has member parties in other religious traditions, especially Muslim ones, and has representation from Algeria, Cambodia, Morocco, Senegal, and other countries. One recent addition to full membership in November 2018 was Indonesia's Muslim National Awakening Party (PKB).[31]

In forming the European Union, there were also powerful religious influences. A key shaping force was the early influence of the "Vatican triumvirate" of Alcide De Gasperi, Robert Schuman, and Konrad Adenauer, committed Catholics who sought European integration to help prevent the conflicts that had dragged the globe into world wars.

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[30] Paul Marshall, "New Christian-Muslim Political Alliances?," *Providence*, February 3, 2020.

[31] Eva Safitri, "PKB Officially Becomes Member of International Democratic Party Coalition," *detiknews*, March 22, 2019.

A solid case is to be made that the European Union is the child of a Christian Democratic ethos.[32] Similarly, in forming the United Nations, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there were powerful religious influences through Charles Malik, Peng Chun Chang, and others.[33]

"...the European Union is the child of a Christian Democratic ethos. Similarly, in forming the United Nations, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there were powerful religious influences..."

These Christian-oriented parties have drawn their inspiration from developed Catholic and, in some cases, as in the Netherlands, Protestant social and political teachings. However, few have regarded them as "Christian nationalists." We can also add the Christian roots of, for example, the British Labour Party, which is commonly said to draw much more from Methodism than Marxism.[34] To repeat, drawing from religious sources is widespread and, in this sense, normal throughout the world, and it has no correlation with religious repression nor with "Christian nationalism" or other religious nationalisms.

In short, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist parties claim religious inspiration and political aspiration. American, Canadian, European, and United Nations founding documents, and those of many countries, reference God or religion. Religion and politics are also intertwined in many of the countries of South and Southeast Asia, but most are neither "theocratic" nor "religious nationalist."

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[32] Maria Cahill, "Theorizing subsidiarity: Towards an ontology-sensitive approach," *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Volume 15, Issue 1, January 2017, pp. 201–224.

[33] Paul Marshall, "Confucianism and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *Religion Unplugged*, December 7, 2023.

[34] Graham Dale, *God's Politicians: The Christian Contribution to 100 Years of Labour* (HarperCollins, 2000).

Dangers of *Real* Religious Nationalism

The critical danger is *not* whether people knowingly or unconsciously draw on their religion, culture, or language to guide their politics, which is a widespread phenomenon. It is also independent of whether people want to defend and promote their heritage. Such defense is common among many groups, many of which could be called 'nations' –in Quebec, Wales, Scotland, and among Tibetans, Uyghurs, Basques, Catalans, Kurds, Baluchis, Rohingya, Palestinians, Hmong, Karenni, and many others. Even at a state level, such nationalism can be relatively mild, as in England, the Netherlands, or Thailand.

The danger is when people believe that the state should discriminately defend and protect their interests and should marginalize other religions. If not quite a fusion of religion and state, it seeks to shape the state as the agent of a broadly religiously defined nation. In so doing, it treats the members of the dominant religion and/or language, ethnicity, and culture as the core citizens. The "others" might be protected but are not considered a central part of the nation.

Muslim-Majority World

While there are major religion-related political problems in the Muslim-majority world, they are not usually of a religious nationalist kind. Azerbaijan under Aliyev or Turkey under Erdoğan might be seen as religiously nationalist. However, nationalism, in recent centuries primarily a European phenomenon and export, has not developed deep roots in the Muslim world, where states are a recent development and where the relation of religion and politics often draws on entrenched millennia-old views, and which have been complexly intertwined with new state formations.[35] Religious radicals are now much more disposed to a pan-Islamic agenda, including perhaps a Caliphate. The dangers of groups such as Al Qaeda or ISIS, or states such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, are not, with due qualifications for the latter's long imperialist history, of a nationalist kind.

[35] Ahmet Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping the World* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

This may be illustrated in perhaps the most extreme example, in ISIS' January 4, 2024, critique of Hamas in its war with Israel.[36]

> "The battle with the Jews is a religious one and not a national or populist one! It is not a battle for land, soil, or borders! In fact, it is a war legitimized by the Book [*Quran*] and the *sunnah*, not through national rules or *jahiliyyah* [pagan] laws... The purpose of the battle is to impose *tawhid* on Allah and uphold His word. This purpose has been absent from the latest battle in Gaza... From its beginning to its end, the battle is being fought over soil and a country they have made into a reason to spill blood for!"

> "Islam is what granted Palestine its place, and land has no value if it was not to be ruled by the *Shar'iah* of the Merciful, whether it was to be ruled by 'Abbas or Dahlan, and it will all be the same whether Gaza and the West Bank are ruled by America's allies or Iran's allies... The fight cannot be for national legitimacy and the *Kufr* covenants of the United Nations... A land not ruled by Islamic *Shari'ah* is not liberated even if all Jews and invaders leave it."

ISIS also condemned Iran, the chief Hamas supporter, which ISIS had bombed only a day earlier because it is Shiite. This is a perilous doctrine, but it is explicitly anti-nationalist and does not illuminate the issues we deal with here. The problems with extremist forms of Islam are very, very real but are different issues.

Where are *Real* Religious Nationalisms?

While there are other examples, the primary locus of religious nationalism is probably now in South Asia–India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and, in a gentler form, Bhutan. The situation in Myanmar is complex: the ruling junta has tried to identify itself with Buddhism in order to strengthen its legitimacy, but at the same time, it represses Buddhists who oppose it. Some recent Sri Lankan rulers have sought to identify the country with its distinctive form of Sinhalese Buddhism, especially in the previous civil war with the predominantly Hindu Tamil Tigers. Nepal overemphasizes its Hindu heritage, often in a struggle against secularists, and hence, religious minorities are often marginalized.[37]

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[36] Raymond Ibrahim, "ISIS Renews Calls for Terror," *American Thinker*, February 23, 2024.

[37] Ang Sonam Sherpa, "The Struggle Between Hindutva and Secularism in Nepal," *Harvard International Review*, September 1, 2021.

Bhutan bravely wishes to preserve its traditions against the onslaught of modernity, but this has also often affected religious minorities. India, under President Modi, has had a developed Hindu Nationalism.[38]

In the historically Christian world, perhaps the most potent example is now Russia, which has attempted to justify its invasion of Ukraine as an attempt to preserve its mission of unifying the "Russian world" (*Russkiy Mir*) as a Christian imperium.[39]

Summary and Conclusion

The examples given above suggest what religious nationalism is and is not.

First, what it is not.

It is not necessarily religious nationalism to assert that religion, or religions, have been a significant shaping force in the history, traditions, and mores of a country or people. Challenging the contention that Hinduism has shaped India would not be a critique of religious nationalism but simply a denial of reality, similarly, for Orthodoxy and Russia, Islam and Egypt, Buddhism and Japan, Christianity and America, and Europe more generally. One need not accept Samuel Huntington's warnings about a "clash of civilizations" to see that religion has, and does, shape civilizations.[40]

Nor is it necessarily religious nationalism to seek to base one's politics, public policy, or political party on religious grounds. This is common throughout the world and is present in left- and right-wing politics, although in the United States, the most recent attention has focused on the right. As noted above, the world's most extensive grouping of political parties has, at its core, Christian Democratic parties. These parties have sought, with varying success, to apply Christian precepts to modern politics and have usually been a moderating influence.

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[38] Paul Marshall, "Radicalization of Modi's India is National Interest Concern," *Providence*, June 21, 2023; Paul Marshall, "The Hindutva Threat Outside India," *European Eye on Radicalization*, December 5, 2022; Paul Marshall, "The Rise of Hindu Extremism," Freedom House, 2003.

[39] TG, "Did Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill spy on Switzerland for the KGB?," *TF1 Info*, February 6, 2023.

[40] On this, see historian Tom Holland's *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (Basic Books, 2021) and Larry Siedentop's *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

Indeed, we see more radical, mainly right-wing, forces emerging in Europe in recent years, only after such parties have declined. Nor is it necessarily religious nationalism, at least in a pernicious form, for a state to have the state have a purported religious foundation. To the surprise of many, Queen Elizabeth II's funeral and Charles III's coronation revealed the degree to which the United Kingdom has a claimed explicit Christian, indeed mainly Protestant, foundation. The Canadian constitution also states that it is founded on "principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law." Religious minorities face problems in these countries, but very few of these problems stem from the claimed religious inheritance of the country.

Religious nationalism occurs when people believe that the state should defend and protect their religious interests and marginalize other religions. If not quite a fusion of religion and state, it seeks to shape the state as the agent of a broadly religiously defined nation. In so doing, it treats the members of the dominant religion and/or language, ethnicity, and culture as the core citizens and others as second class.

This dangerous trend has been growing in several countries. Often, in religious nationalism, the national displaces the religion. We should combat it, but in so doing, we must be clear as to what we are talking about and not confuse religious nationalism with the familiar, robust presence of religion per se in politics.

Postscript

Most of what I have written argues that we should distinguish religious nationalism from the presence of religion per se in politics and defend such presence. However, we should be especially cautious of the latter since fundamental religious belief does not, or should not, quickly translate into intractable policy positions. Fundamental religious belief should always have a distance from and stand in judgment of quotidian politics.

This may be illustrated by the 1989 funeral of Zita, the last Empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had collapsed in 1918. Her funeral tells us much about how to judge temporal power. Here, I recount parts of an earlier piece on the funeral.[41]

[41] Paul Marshall, "Symbols and Shadows of the Political Order: The Empress of Austria and the Spiritual Significance of Authority," *Providence*, November 1, 2022.

Since the monarchy had been ended for over 70 years, Austria could not conduct a state funeral. However, what they provided was almost a re-enactment of such a funeral. As the late, great sociologist Peter L. Berger recounts:[42]

> "A solemn funeral mass took place in St. Stephen's Cathedral, celebrated by the Archbishop of Vienna. The prayers were read in all the languages of the monarchy–German, Hungarian, Czech, Croatian, and so on. Then the funeral procession made its way from the Stefansplatz to the nearby Capuchin monastery, in whose underground crypt, for many centuries, all Habsburg rulers had been deposited in sarcophagi–some ornate, some quite simple–and some lesser ones stacked away as in a warehouse."

When the procession arrived at the monastery, it stood before a locked gate. The marshal of the procession knocked on the door, behind which were the Abbott and all the monks. In response to the knocking, the Abbott responded, "*Who seeks entry?*"

> "The marshal responded by reciting the so-called long title. Traditionally, there were three titles–after the long one, a somewhat shorter one, then a very short one. The recitation of the long title took about ten minutes, naming every territory acquired by the Habsburgs (some by conquest, most by marriage, the Habsburgs' favorite method of imperial expansion). It drew attention again to this vast empire that reached from the eastern border of Switzerland to the western border of Russia, which, when it ended, had fifty million subjects."[43]

When the recitation of the long title was over, the abbot simply replied, "*We do not know her. Who seeks entry?*"

In the 1989 enactment, the recital of the still-lengthy middle title was omitted, and the marshal recited the shortest title: "*Empress of Austria, Queen of Hungary, Queen of Bohemia.*"

Again, the abbot replied: "*We do not know her. Who seeks entry?*" Then, finally, the marshal said: "*Zita, your sister, a poor sinner.*" And then the gate was opened. Thus, the ultimate religious judgment on political power.

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[42] Peter L. Berger, "The Fading Shadow of the Habsburgs," *The American Interest*, July 20, 2011.

[43] Marshall, "Symbols and Shadows of the Political Order."

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