

# The Clash of Liberties: Religious Freedom, Human Rights, and the Ascendance of Christian Nationalism in the United States

**James William Kusumawikan**

*Universitas Diponegoro Semarang*

## ABSTRACT

*The guarantee of religious freedom enshrined in the United States Constitution, intended to protect the diverse religious beliefs of its citizens, has inadvertently spawned unforeseen consequences. This article examines how the noble principle of religious freedom has intersected with the rise of Christian nationalism, posing a significant threat to democracy and human rights within the nation. Despite the Constitution's emphasis on individual liberties, the emergence of Christian nationalism has fueled a divisive narrative that privileges certain religious identities over others, thereby undermining the foundational principles of equality and pluralism. Through an analysis of historical contexts, legal frameworks, and contemporary socio-political dynamics, this article explores the complex interplay between religious freedom, human rights, and the encroachment of Christian nationalism on democratic norms. It sheds light on the challenges posed by this paradoxical situation and underscores the urgent need for safeguarding both religious freedom and human rights within the United States' democratic framework.*

**Keywords:** Religious freedom, US Constitution, Christian nationalism, Democracy, Human rights, Pluralism, Socio-political dynamics.

*Jaminan kebebasan beragama yang diabadikan dalam Konstitusi Amerika Serikat, yang dimaksudkan untuk melindungi beragam keyakinan agama warga negaranya, telah secara tidak sengaja menimbulkan konsekuensi yang tidak terduga. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana prinsip mulia kebebasan beragama telah bersinggungan dengan kebangkitan nasionalisme Kristen, yang menimbulkan ancaman signifikan terhadap demokrasi dan hak asasi manusia di dalam negara tersebut. Meskipun Konstitusi menekankan kebebasan individu, kemunculan nasionalisme Kristen telah memicu narasi yang memprivilesekan identitas agama tertentu di atas yang lain, sehingga merongrong prinsip-prinsip dasar kesetaraan dan pluralisme. Melalui analisis konteks historis, kerangka hukum, dan dinamika sosial-politik kontemporer, artikel ini mengeksplorasi interaksi kompleks antara kebebasan beragama, hak asasi manusia, dan merambahnya nasionalisme Kristen pada norma-norma demokrasi. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi tantangan yang ditimbulkan oleh situasi paradoks yang ditimbulkan dan menekankan perlunya upaya yang mendesak untuk melindungi baik kebebasan beragama maupun hak asasi manusia dalam kerangka demokrasi Amerika Serikat.*

**Kata-kata Kunci:** Kebebasan beragama, Konstitusi AS, Nasionalisme Kristen, Demokrasi, Hak asasi manusia, Pluralisme, Dinamika sosial-politik.

*The Clash of Liberties: Religious Freedom, Human Rights, and the Ascendance of Christian Nationalism in the United States*

The intersection of religious freedom, Christian nationalism, and the U.S. Constitution reflects a historical effort to reconcile diverse beliefs with democratic ideals. The First Amendment, adopted in 1791, prohibits Congress from establishing a religion or restricting its free exercise, embodying the Founding Fathers' commitment to pluralism and opposition to state-sponsored religion (Witte 2020; Heyrman n.d.). Despite these protections, Christian nationalism has emerged, merging religious identity with nationalist fervor and privileging Christianity in public life (Putnam & Campbell 2010; Stewart 2020). Its roots lie in events like the Second Great Awakening, which emphasized Christian exceptionalism and America's "divine destiny" (Williams 2016), embedding religious narratives into the nation's identity (Bellah 1967; Albanese 2012).

Religious freedom is a foundational principle of the USA and essential to its democratic ideals. Within American political and legal theory, religious freedom emphasizes the right of individuals to practice their religion without government interference, which is codified in the First Amendment. This concept was shaped by liberal political thought and intended to support a secular state that maintains neutrality among different religions (Greenawalt 2006). Religious freedom allows diverse beliefs to flourish within a pluralistic society, yet it also requires continuous negotiation to balance individual rights with the broader public interest, especially when intersecting with nationalist ideologies like Christian nationalism that seek to elevate Christianity as the preferred faith in the public realm.

Christian nationalism itself combines religious identity with a nationalistic vision, positing that the USA is fundamentally a "Christian nation" and that public policy should reflect Christian values. Scholars argue that Christian nationalism can erode democratic norms by creating an exclusionary framework that defines "true" Americans primarily by their Christian faith. Rooted in theories of nationalism and identity politics, Christian nationalism seeks to establish cultural hierarchies that prioritize Christianity over other beliefs, directly challenging the democratic ideals of equality and inclusivity upon which the nation was founded (Anderson 1983).

### **Religious Freedom Under the First Amendment**

A key component of the American legal system is the First

Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom, which prevents the government from discriminating against any religion or limiting a person's ability to exercise their faith. As stated in the U.S. Constitution, the First Amendment protects freedoms of religion, speech, assembly, and petitioning. It expressly prohibits Congress from favoring one religion over another and from limiting a person's freedom of religion (Onion et al. 2017). Debates have centered on whether the government must maintain impartiality between religious and nonreligious organizations offering social services or education, or whether taxpayer money should never be provided to religious organizations that may propagate religious doctrine. These issues have shaped how the Establishment Clause has been interpreted and applied over time.

The religious clauses of the First Amendment offer a legal structure for settling disputes regarding the place of religion in public life in an inclusive community. It ensures that religious freedom is protected, allowing for a wide range of religious practices and beliefs to coexist without government interference, except where such practices conflict with public morals or compelling governmental interests. Through this clause, religious groups of all kinds, including those with nationalistic agendas can freely participate in the public sphere (Laycock 1996). In recent decades, the debate has centered on whether religious freedom protections extend to situations where religious beliefs intersect with national or cultural identity, with scholars like Hamburger (2002) pointing out the complexity of maintaining neutrality in a religiously pluralistic society.

The freedom of individuals and groups to freely speak about their religious views and ideals in public discourse and policymaking is a fundamental component of Christian nationalism that has been upheld by the First Amendment. For instance, the freedom to express one's religious views and engage in religious activities is guaranteed by the First Amendment, which also permits the free exercise of religion. This principle has been interpreted to support the expression of Christian nationalist views in public spaces, such as speeches, proclamations, and even in the design of public symbols. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, on the other hand, forbids the state from "establishing" any religion. According to how this phrase is understood, the government cannot support or give preference to one religion over another. While Christian nationalists argue that the USA is a Christian nation and seek to integrate Christian values into public policy and

culture, any government action that appears to favor Christianity over other religions or non-religious beliefs could potentially violate this clause (Sullivan 2005).

In a number of decisions, the nation's highest court has affirmed the right to practice one's religion, frequently striking a balance between such rights and the state's obligation to preserve a secular public square. For example, the court decided that as long as religious symbols are neutral and do not favor one religion over another, they may be displayed in public places, such as crosses on public buildings. This interpretation supports the expression of Christian nationalist views in public spaces while also ensuring that the government does not favor one religion over others. As McConnell (1992) observes, the balance between allowing religious expression and ensuring government neutrality remains a delicate matter, with ongoing debates about where to draw the line in a diverse society.

### **Historical Evolution of Christian Nationalism in the USA**

The historical evolution of Christian nationalism in the United States has shaped interpretations of religious freedom, often challenging democratic principles like multiculturalism and the separation of church and state. Rooted in the colonial period, Christian nationalism has influenced pivotal moments such as the American Revolution—framed by some as part of God's plan—and Manifest Destiny, which justified westward expansion as a divine mission (Gorski 2021; O'Brien 2021). This worldview continues to fuel debates about religion's role in American politics, particularly regarding tensions between evangelical nationalism and liberal democratic values (Zhou 2023). Despite the First Amendment's guarantees of intellectual plurality, Christian nationalism has persisted, resurging in the 1930s and 1960s through movements like televangelism and organizations such as the Moral Majority. Policies promoting Christian values in public life, such as prayer in schools or Christian symbols on public property, have often come at the expense of pluralism and religious freedom (Volle 2024).

Scholars like Neil Shenvi emphasize the importance of distinguishing between genuine threats and exaggerated fears of Christian nationalism. While its influence in political and social spheres is undeniable, Shenvi argues that historical context is

essential to understanding how this movement has evolved and been contested over time. His perspective frames the ongoing debate about the role of religion in American public life (Childers 2022). Similarly, sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer highlights how religion-based violence tied to Christian nationalism threatens democratic principles. Examples include acts of terror by Christian activists, such as the 1999 shooting at a Jewish daycare and attacks on abortion clinics during the same decade. Juergensmeyer argues that such violence, despite Christianity's teachings of compassion and peace, polarizes society and undermines democracy and human rights, especially when political policies like abortion bans are justified by specific religious values (Juergensmeyer 2000).

The principle of *E Pluribus Unum*, symbolizing unity in diversity, reflects America's aspiration for pluralism. However, as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. warns in *The Disuniting of America*, this ideal has been repeatedly tested by exclusionary ideologies. Christian nationalism, rooted in movements like Manifest Destiny and the Second Great Awakening, prioritizes a singular religious identity, marginalizing others and threatening national cohesion. Schlesinger critiques these exclusivist tendencies for eroding pluralism and risking the fragmentation of American democracy. This historical trajectory of privileging one religious identity has consistently disrupted efforts to maintain an inclusive national identity, undermining the foundations of democracy (Schlesinger 1991).

### **Americans' Perceptions of the US as a Christian Nation**

Issue about the US as a Christian nation is a complex and contentious one that reflects the intersection of history, religion, and identity. Throughout its history, Christianity has undeniably influenced American culture, politics, and societal norms. The Founding Fathers' references to Christian principles in foundational documents and public discourse contribute to perceptions of the country's Christian heritage. However, interpretations of America's religious identity have evolved alongside demographic shifts and increasing religious diversity. Today, discussions about the USA as a Christian nation encompass questions of historical intent, present-day reality, and normative ideals, with differing perspectives reflecting a range of beliefs about the role of religion in public life and governance. Therefore, to support this explanation, we present a survey that delves into public perceptions regarding the USA as a Christian nation.

*The Clash of Liberties: Religious Freedom, Human Rights, and the Ascendance of Christian Nationalism in the United States*

**Figure 1.**

**Survey on Public Perceptions of the USA as a Christian Nation**

**More than four-in-ten Americans think the U.S. should be a ‘Christian nation’**

*% who say ...*

	The founders of America originally intended for the U.S. to be a “Christian nation”		The U.S. is now a “Christian nation”		The U.S. should be a “Christian nation”	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	%	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	60	37	33	64	45	51
All Christians	69	28	30	67	62	35
Protestant	73	24	27	69	68	28
White evangelical	81	17	23	75	81	18
White, not evangelical	70	26	32	62	54	40
Black Protestant	57	37	26	68	65	30
Catholic	62	35	34	64	47	49
White Catholic	68	29	36	61	56	40
Hispanic Catholic	54	42	31	66	36	60
All non-Christians	44	54	40	58	16	81
Jewish*	36	64	55	44	16	84
Religiously unaffiliated	45	53	38	60	17	80
Atheist	25	74	41	59	6	94
Agnostic	38	61	46	53	8	91
Nothing in particular	53	45	34	63	23	72
Republican/lean Rep.	76	22	29	69	67	31
Democrat/lean Dem.	47	52	39	59	29	69
Ages 18-29	50	49	34	66	23	76
30-49	55	42	33	65	39	57
50-64	63	34	31	65	56	40
65+	73	23	36	59	63	33

\* The survey included 123 interviews with Jewish respondents who were asked these questions, with an effective sample size of 61 and a 95% confidence level margin of error of plus or minus 12.5 percentage points. This margin of error conservatively assumes a reported percentage of 50%.

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 13-18, 2022, among U.S. adults.

\*45% of Americans Say U.S. Should Be a ‘Christian Nation’

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

*Source: Pew Research Center (2022)*

The Pew Research Center survey conducted in October 2022 explored Americans’ attitudes towards religion’s role in public life, including the concept of the USA being a “Christian nation” and the term “Christian nationalism”. In this survey of 10,588 American adults, questions concerning whether the USA is a “Christian nation” and “Christian nationalism” were given to half of the participants. The status of gender, ethnicity, ideological affiliation, level of education, and belief system were among the demographics that the poll was intended to represent broadly among adult Americans (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Sixty percent of adults think that the USA was originally meant to be a Christian nation. A little over one-third of those surveyed believe that the USA is still a Christian country. Additionally, more than forty-five percent of Americans express the opinion that the country ought to be a Christian nation. When compared to non-Christians, Christians are much more likely to claim that the country's founders meant for it to be a Christian nation (69% vs. 44%) and to support the nation's position as such (62% vs. 16%). However, the likelihood that the USA presently satisfies the requirements of being a Christian nation is lower among Christians (30% vs. 40%) than among non-Christians. A further 12% of respondents characterize a Christian nation as one that is founded on principles and beliefs, but they do not mention God or Christian ideas by name. For instance, "All things considered, the country shares a fundamental belief that everyone should be treated equally, regardless of color or creed" is how they characterize a Christian nation, a strong conviction in human nature and a readiness to act accordingly. Some mention "love all" "a nation of faith" "caring and loving" and "tolerance, morals and ethics" regardless of variations. One out of every five Americans (21%) think that the USA ought to be a Christian nation, compared to just 4% of people who disagree.

Some respondents described a Christian nation negatively, seeing it as one "ruled by only those with a Christian belief" or imposing narrow, false faith standards to control others. Others defined it as a nation with laws aligned solely with Christian doctrine, often at the expense of other principles. Additionally, 11% used terms like sexism, discrimination, white supremacy (5%), and totalitarianism (3%) to describe the concept. Most in this group opposed the idea of the U.S. being a Christian nation. However, many Americans still support a Christian-based government, envisioning it as one that honors God and upholds biblical principles, particularly regarding issues like homosexuality and abortion.

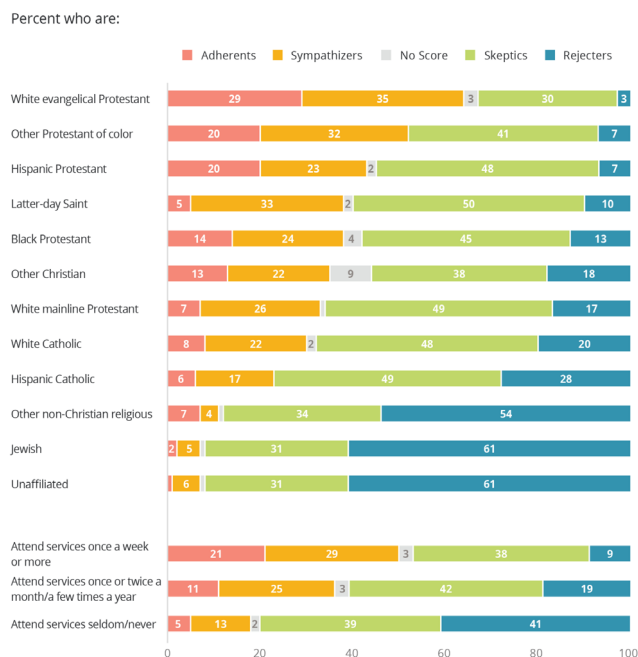
### **Demographics of People Who Support Christian Nationalism**

The demographics of people who support Christian nationalism in the USA are diverse, but there are certain groups and characteristics that are more likely to hold these beliefs. According to the PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute)/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey, support for Christian nationalist beliefs

*The Clash of Liberties: Religious Freedom, Human Rights, and the Ascendance of Christian Nationalism in the United States*

increases with age, particularly among those aged 50 and older. Additionally, according to the poll, white Americans are more inclined than non-white Americans to sympathize with Christian nationalism. The survey also indicated that those who live in the South and those who attend religious services regularly are more likely to support Christian nationalist beliefs. Furthermore, people with lesser incomes and educational levels tend to be more pro-Christian nationalism.

**Figure 2.**  
**The Christian Nationalism Scale, by religious subgroups**



Source: PRRI/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey, 2023.

*Source: PRRI/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey (2023)*

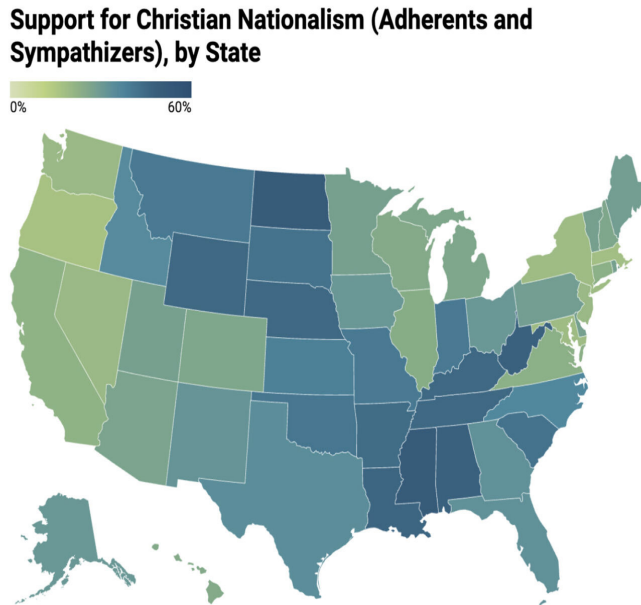
Among the assessed groups, white evangelical Protestants are the most inclined to endorse Christian nationalism. Either supporters (29%) or sympathizers (35%) of Christian nationalism would describe nearly two-thirds of white evangelical Protestants. Both sympathizers (32%) and followers (20%) make up the majority of “other Protestants of color,” a category that is mainly made up of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and mixed-race



Protestants. A little over half of Black Protestants (24%), Hispanic Protestants (23%), and Latter-day Saints (33%), who sympathize with but do not adhere to Christian nationalism, also tend toward supporting it. These findings highlight the prevalence of Christian nationalism among different religious groups, with white evangelical Protestants showing the highest level of endorsement.

This widespread support for Christian nationalism among various religious groups underscores its significant influence across the American religious landscape. It is clear that white evangelical Protestants lead in their endorsement of Christian nationalism, with a substantial number either supporting or sympathizing with its ideals. However, it is notable that other groups such as “other Protestants of color,” including AAPI and mixed-race Protestants, as well as Black Protestants, Hispanic Protestants, and Latter-day Saints, also demonstrate varying degrees of sympathy towards Christian nationalism.

**Figure 3.**  
**Support for Christian Nationalism (Adherents and Sympathizers), by State**



Source: PRRI, American Values Atlas, March 9-Dec. 7, 2023. • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

*Source: PRRI, American Values Atlas (2023)*

Geographically, people who live in green states are much more inclined than those who reside in blue states to be Christian nationalists. The horseshoe-shaped states that support Christian nationalism the most are located in the upper Midwest. They dip into the deep South, and then rise through the mountains of Appalachia. The percentage of people who adhere to or sympathize with Christian nationalism exceeds 45% in the following five states: Louisiana (46%), North Dakota (50%), West Virginia (47%), Alabama (47%), and Mississippi (50%).

### **Christian Nationalism as a Threat to American Democracy**

The doctrine of Christian nationalism appropriates Christian stories and symbols and presents its own version of the “elect,” or

those God has chosen, as conservative Christians, white people, and citizens by birth. The idea that “the elect” should be the only ones in charge of the political system and that everyone else needs to be closely watched, dissuaded, or even refused entry is inherently against democracy. It challenges the democratic ideal of a pluralistic society where all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs or backgrounds, have equal rights and opportunities to participate in civic life, including voting, which is the cornerstone of any functioning democracy.

Christian nationalism is not limited to white theologically conservative Christian groups. Many conservative Christians and non-Christians have embraced it, suggesting that the idea itself poses a threat rather than all devout Christians. This broad acceptance of Christian nationalism among different groups within society underscores its potential to influence political discourse and policy in ways that favor certain groups over others, thereby undermining the principles of equality and pluralism that are central to American democracy.

Christian nationalism’s historical and contemporary iterations have attempted to elevate an “us” (white, cultural conservatives by birth) above “them” (everyone else), giving some groups more moral standing and influence while marginalizing others. Making sure that only a select group of Americans are encouraged to fully engage in civic life, including voting, is the foundation of this public elite’s privilege and power agenda. By excluding or marginalizing certain groups, Christian nationalism threatens the democratic process and the very foundation of a pluralistic society. Christian nationalism threatens American democracy by advocating for a society where only a select group of individuals, defined by their religious beliefs, race, and citizenship status, are considered worthy of political power and participation. This ideology challenges the democratic principles of equality and pluralism, promoting a divisive and exclusionary vision of American society that is fundamentally at odds with the ideals of a free and open democracy.

In *Jesus and John Wayne*, Du Mez examines how evangelical leaders have crafted an identity emphasizing rugged masculinity, a literal Christian doctrine, and selective historical narratives to gain political power. Central to this is the belief in American exceptionalism and the entitlement of conservative, white, evangelical Christians to shape the nation’s values. Du Mez

highlights the conflict between Christian nationalism and democratic values, as its exclusionary vision prioritizes power within a specific group, undermining pluralism, equality, and democratic participation (Du Mez 2020).

### **Human Rights Violations Perpetrated by Christian Nationalist Group**

Christian nationalist groups have been found to be major obstacles to widespread vaccination throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA, directly violating public health protocols. Declaring, “We’re anti-mask, anti-social distancing, and anti-vaccine,” they disregarded alerts on the pandemic’s severity. Their stance reflects a broader trend within Christian nationalism, where some members believe the pandemic is a politically motivated event and view government-recommended vaccinations as a violation of their religious freedom (Barlow 2021).

Christian nationalism has played a significant role in shaping attitudes and behaviors related to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of vaccine hesitancy and uptake. Research has shown that Christian nationalist groups are linked to a decreased chance of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. This can be attributed to the fact that Christian nationalists tend to distrust science and are more focused on individual freedoms than on government intervention. Studies have also found that Christian nationalism is linked to other forms of science skepticism, issues including artificially generated organisms, universal vaccinations, and global warming. Furthermore, irrespective of the topic under discussion, conservative political views consistently predict skepticism towards science. For Christian nationalists, these are some of the reasons behind their general mistrust and hesitation about the COVID-19 vaccine (Stump 2021).

One example of this phenomenon can be seen in the response of some Christian nationalist leaders to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite it being declared unlawful, a preacher at the Life Tabernacle Church in Louisiana’s Baton Rouge city continued to host large church gatherings in defiance of the law. Along with dismissing concerns about the pandemic’s risk, he believes it to be a sign from God telling mankind to reform. The libertarianism against the government that characterizes Christian nationalists is consistent with this anti-vaccine mindset. Many members of

the movement believe that vaccinations are against their religious freedom or go against God's will, and they base their faith in freedom from government intervention within conventional religious frameworks.

The way marginalized communities have been treated during the epidemic is another area where human rights have been abused. Numerous governments have misused emergency authorities, postponed elections, and shut down on political demonstrations using the COVID-19 pandemic as justification. Furthermore, underprivileged groups have been singled out for unjust arrests and detention under circumstances that equate to cruel or inhumane treatment, such as migrant laborers and returned refugees. It is crucial to understand how Christian nationalism affects human rights practice and how this religious system might contribute to it. Christian nationalists may prioritize individual freedoms over collective well-being, which can lead to a reluctance to comply with public health measures such as mask mandates and social distancing guidelines. This can contribute to the spread of the virus, putting vulnerable populations at risk and hindering the overall effort to control the pandemic. In the end, it's a violation of human rights by putting the others and wider community in danger.

### **Human Rights Violations by Christian Nationalist Group**

In the Trump era, Christian nationalism played a significant role in shaping the political landscape and contributing to human rights violations. The roots of Christian nationalism in the USA can be traced back to the country's founding, but it gained significant momentum during the Trump era. The governing Republican Party's intimate ties to Christian nationalism have shaped decisions and programs that have broad effects. Before proceeding with further discussion, we need to understand the background of this issue, especially the tight ties between Christian nationalism and the party of Republicans, and its connection to Trump's presidency.

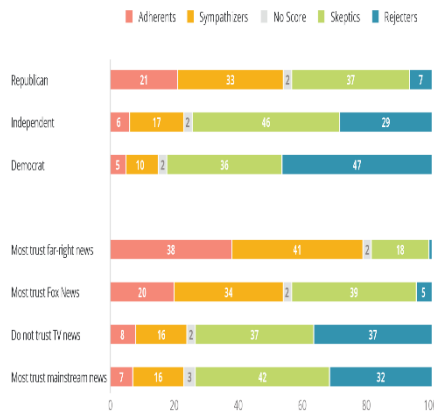
Later on, Stewart explores the ties between Christian nationalism and the Republican Party, especially during Trump's presidency. She argues that Christian nationalism shaped the party's political strategies, with religious leaders aligning theological beliefs with

political power to advance their agenda. During Trump’s tenure, these efforts were evident in policies on judicial appointments, education, immigration, and LGBTQ+ rights, often reflecting Christian nationalist priorities. Stewart highlights how this fusion of religion and politics fueled divisive policies and human rights violations, disproportionately targeting marginalized groups (Stewart 2020).

**Figure 4.**  
**The Christian Nationalism Scale, by Political Affiliation and News Trust**

FIGURE 5. The Christian Nationalism Scale, by Political Affiliation and News Trust

Percent who are:



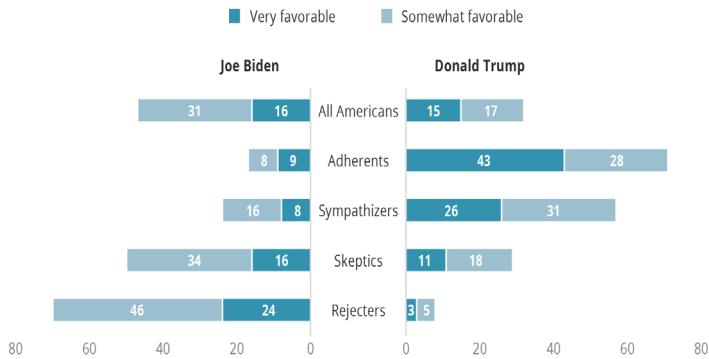
Source: PRRI/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey, 2023.

*Source: PRRI/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey (2023)*

A Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey indicates that over half of Republicans are in favor of Christian nationalism, with 21% of Republicans identifying as supporters and 33% as sympathizers. This support for Christian nationalism has been linked to white evangelical and Republican party affiliation, as well as to higher church attendance. Christian nationalism is also strongly correlated with anti-Black, anti-immigrant, antisemitic, anti-Muslim, and patriarchal views. This correlation can be seen in the context of the Trump era, where Christian nationalist beliefs were often used to justify policies and actions that were discriminatory and violated human rights (PRRI Staff 2023).

**Figure 5.**  
**View of Joe Biden and Donald Trump, by Christian Nationalist Groups**

**FIGURE 6. Views of Joe Biden and Donald Trump, by Christian Nationalist Groups**  
Percent who view:



Source: PRRI/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey, 2023.

*Source: PRRI/Brookings Christian Nationalism Survey (2023)*

According to the findings of the PRRI study, there is a significant relationship among endorsement of Donald Trump and Christian nationalism. In the election of 2020, counties tended to vote Trump more when the proportion of White Christian citizens in that county was higher. This correlation is also seen in the data on Christian nationalism among different religious groups. For instance, among white Americans, those who have positive opinions of President Trump are more inclined to be Christian nationalists (57% among those who have positive opinions of Trump) than those who have positive opinions of President Biden (9% among those who have positive opinions of Biden). The survey also revealed that 55% of Republicans identify as Christian nationalists (34% Sympathizers and 21% Adherents). This is more than twice the percentage of independents (25%) and three times the percentage of Democrats (16%). In fact, fifty-five percent of Trump supporters identify as Christian nationalists.

Human rights violations during Donald Trump’s era can be seen in the case of the Capitol attack, where many of the individuals involved were motivated by a belief in the need to “save the country”

from perceived threats, like the belief that there is an impending storm that will overthrow the ruling class. This belief in the need to take action to “save the country” can be seen as a manifestation of Christian nationalist beliefs that prioritize the interests of the “true American” over those of perceived enemies or threats. A violent protestor crowd stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, causing a disruption to the certification of the results of the 2020 presidential election (Fandos and Cochrane 2021). Christian nationalism’s contribution to the Capitol attack can be seen in the religious motifs and symbols used by the protesters. In an attempt to mimic the historical Israeli military siege of Jericho, religious supporters of the Trump Administration, for instance, staged an anti-religious plot to explain away their electoral setback and organized a “Jericho March” against potential electoral fraud.

The association between support for Donald Trump and Christian nationalism can be attributed to several factors. First, Christian nationalism is frequently connected to a feeling of authority in both culture and politics, as well as a fear of becoming a minority in a changing demographic landscape. This fear has been exploited by Trump, who has made explicit appeals to the role of Christianity in American politics and has been seen as a champion of religious voters. Second, Christian nationalism is more common among senior citizens, white evangelical Christians, and Americans with lower levels of education, all of which are central to Trump’s base of support. Additionally, support for Christian nationalism is higher in areas with a higher percentage of White Christian residents, which tends to correlate with higher support for Trump. Third, Trump’s rhetoric has often been seen as aligning with Christian nationalist beliefs. For example, his calls for a “Christian America” and his emphasis on the importance of religious freedom have been interpreted as appeals to Christian nationalist sentiments (Bump 2024).

Fourth, some Christian nationalists may see Trump as a defender of their values and beliefs, as he has been perceived as standing up against perceived threats to traditional Christian values and religious influence in everyday life. The correlation between Christian nationalism and support for Donald Trump can be attributed to a combination of factors, including Trump’s appeals



to religious voters, the demographic makeup of his base, and the alignment of his rhetoric with Christian nationalist beliefs.

### **American Response and Reactions**

In response to the threat posed by Christian nationalism, specific policies or laws have not been directly enacted as a direct countermeasure. However, the National Council of Churches (NCC) has issued a policy statement addressing its risks. The NCC highlights concerns about the belief in America's divine exceptionalism, the idea that only Christians should preserve the nation's legacy, and advocacy for privileging Christianity in law and politics. This perspective often marginalizes non-believers, deeming them less American and unfit for authority, while arguing that Christians deserve special legal protections. The NCC calls for a response rooted in justice, peace, and the welfare of all, regardless of religious affiliation.

The NCC's policy statement highlights the historical connections between nationalism and racism in the USA, taking into account the long-standing problems of slavery, genocide, Jim Crow legislation, and the various ways racism has permeated and maintained society. It also acknowledges the contribution of Christian nationalists groups in endorsing American exceptionalism while ignoring the exclusion, exploitation, and persecution of various groups, including Indigenous Peoples, African Americans who were enslaved, and their offspring, among others. The declaration urges a deliberate rejection of Christian nationalism's destructive viewpoint and denounces the misuse of Christian symbols to promote obsessive devotion to the country (NCC 2024).

The NCC emphasizes the importance of patriotism as a dedication to the nation's interests, character, purpose, and values, distinguishing between constructive and malignant forms of nationalism. It exhorts Christians to work in the public sphere to identify and promote a greater good for all people, and to serve God by reshaping the country in accordance with the idea of the throne of God, which knows no boundaries or clan. Declaring that people of different faiths and perspectives who are dedicated to the

greater good should be welcomed, respected, and cooperated with, the declaration denounces the doctrine and goals of the modern Christian nationalist movement. Pursuing what is real, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and gracious, as Paul advises, it emphasizes the frailties of democracy's links and the need to fortify the political system that permits love to triumph.

The NCC advocates for an approach to Christian nationalism that promotes cooperation in the public sphere, bridging divides to serve the greater good. It encourages Christians to support government actions that advance justice and work for improvement where needed. The declaration warns against separating politics from religion, which risks leaving power in the hands of ideologues, and rejects the notion that Christianity mandates a specific political agenda, as this oversteps constitutional limits. Instead, the NCC calls for fairness, harmony, and inclusiveness, recognizing the diversity of American citizens and challenging the exclusivity of Christian nationalism.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of Christian nationalism represents a critical challenge to the democratic principles of equality and pluralism in the United States. By intertwining religious identity with nationalist ideology, this movement has disrupted the balance between religious freedom and human rights, creating tensions that threaten national unity. Upholding the vision of *E Pluribus Unum*—a guiding principle of unity in diversity—remains essential to navigating these challenges while safeguarding democratic values.

To address the tension between religious freedom and Christian nationalism constructively, reaffirming the principle of unity in diversity is crucial. Rather than privileging any single religious identity, the United States must continue to embrace a plurality of beliefs, ensuring that no group, including Christian nationalists, can impose their values on the nation as a whole. This requires not only a legal commitment to secularism but also active cultural efforts to foster a climate of respect and inclusivity. By promoting policies that protect the rights of all religious groups and uphold the

secular integrity of public institutions, the U.S. can create a society where diverse religious expressions coexist without compromising the democratic principle of equality. Further, embedding a strong educational focus on civic values and religious pluralism can help future generations understand the importance of diversity within a democratic framework, reinforcing the idea that the freedom to practice one's religion should not infringe upon the rights of others.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to express profound gratitude to Drs. Tri Cahya Utama, MA, whose exceptional guidance, insightful teachings, and unwavering support were pivotal in the completion of this article. His dedication and expertise have been a source of great inspiration. Additionally, the author extends heartfelt thanks to the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Diponegoro, for their generous support, which made the publication of this article possible.

### **About the Author**

James William Kusumawikan is an undergraduate student in the International Relations program at FISIP, Universitas Diponegoro. He is interested in studying U.S. politics and foreign policy. He can be contacted via [james.jwkw@gmail.com](mailto:james.jwkw@gmail.com).

### **References**

#### **Books and Book Chapters**

- Albanese, Catherine, 2012. *America: Religions and Religion*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Anderson, Benedict, 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Donnelly, Jack, 2003. *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- The Clash of Liberties: Religious Freedom, Human Rights, and the Ascendance of Christian Nationalism in the United States*
- Du Mez, Kristin K., 2020. *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New York: Liveright.
- Greenawalt, Kent, 2006. *Religion and the Constitution, Volume 1: Free Exercise and Fairness*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hamburger, Philip, 2002. *Separation of Church and State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark, 2000. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kruse, Kevin, 2015. *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Laycock, Douglas, 1996. *Religious Liberty: Vol. 1, Overviews and History*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell, 2010. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Schlesinger, Arthur M., 1998. *Disuniting of America Revised and Enlarged: Reflections On A Multicultural Society*. New York: WW Norton.
- Stewart, Katherine, 2020. *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers, 2005. *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

### **Journals and Online Journals**

- Armaly, M. T., Buckley, D. T., & Enders, A. M., 2022. "Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks", *Political behavior*, **44**(2): 937–960.

- Bellah, Robert N., 1967. "Civil Religion in America", *Daedalus*, **96**(1): 1-21.
- Maccaroni, A., 2023. "Christian Nationalism in Support for Donald Trump", *Perspectives*, **15**(5).
- McConnell, Michael W., 1992. "Religious Freedom at a Crossroads", *University of Chicago Law Review*, **59**(1): 115-194.
- Williams, D.K., 2016. "Baptizing Uncle Sam: Tracing the Origins of Christian Nationalism", *Reviews in American History*, **44**: 391 - 399.
- Witte, J., 2020. "Historical Foundations and Enduring Fundamentals of American Religious Freedom", *Studies in Christian Ethics*, **33**(2): 156-167.

### Online Articles

- Barlow, M. D., 2021. "Christian nationalism is a barrier to mass vaccination against COVID-19". *The Conversation* [Online]. In <https://theconversation.com/christian-nationalism-is-a-barrier-to-mass-vaccination-against-covid-19-158023> [accessed at 5 May 2024].
- Bump, P., 2024. "The overlap of Trumpism and Christian nationalism". *The Washington Post* [Online]. In <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/02/29/trump-christian-nationalism-polling/> [accessed at 19 May 2024].
- Fandos, Nicholas and Emily Cochrane, 2021. "Mob Attack, Incited by Trump, Delays Election Certification" *The New York Times* [Online]. In <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/01/06/us/electoral-vote> [accessed at 20 December 2024]
- Childers, Alisa, 2022. "Is Christian Nationalism a Real Problem or an Overblown Strawman?". *Alisa Childers* [Online]. In <https://www.alisachildersblog.com/blog/is-christian-nationalism-a-real-problem-or-an-overblown-strawman-with-neil-shenvi-the-alisa-childers-podcast-138> [accessed at 31 May 2024].

*The Clash of Liberties: Religious Freedom, Human Rights, and the Ascendance of Christian Nationalism in the United States*

- Gorski, P., 2021. "White Christian Nationalism: The Deep Story Behind the Capitol Insurrection". *Berkley Forum, Georgetown University* [Online]. In <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/white-christian-nationalism-the-deep-story-behind-the-capitol-insurrection> [accessed at 10 October 2024].
- Heyrman, Christine Leigh, n.d. "The First Great Awakening". *Divining America, TeacherServe: National Humanities Center* [Online]. In <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/eighteen/ekeyinfo/grawaken.htm> [accessed at 30 December 2024]
- NCC, 2024. "The dangers of Christian nationalism in the United States: A policy statement of the National Council of Churches". *National Council of Churches* [Online]. In <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness-ncc/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-a-policy-statement-of-the-national-council-of-churches/> [accessed at 27 May 2024].
- O'Brien, B., 2021. "A Brief History of Christian Nationalism: From the Founders to the Cold War". *Patheos* [Online]. In <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thereligioushistorynerd/2022/10/a-brief-history-of-christian-nationalism-from-the-founders-to-the-cold-war/> [accessed at 15 October 2024].
- Onion, A., Zapata, C., Mullen, M., & Sullivan, M., 2017. "First Amendment - rights, U.S. Constitution & Freedoms". *History.com* [Online]. In <https://www.history.com/topics/united-states-constitution/first-amendment> [accessed at 23 April 2024].
- Pew Research Center, 2022. "3. Views of the U.S. as a 'christian nation' and opinions about 'Christian nationalism'". *Pew Research Center* [Online]. In <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/views-of-the-u-s-as-a-christian-nation-and-opinions-about-christian-nationalism/> [accessed at 26 April 2024].
- PRRI Staff, 2023. "A Christian nation? understanding the threat of Christian nationalism to American Democracy

- and Culture”. *PRRI* [Online]. In <https://www.prrri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/> [accessed at 26 April 2024].
- Sanneh, K., 2023. “How Christian is Christian nationalism?”. *The New Yorker* [Online]. In <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/04/03/how-christian-is-christian-nationalism> [accessed at 10 May 2024].
- Stump, J., 2021. “WVU Today: Christian nationalism, vaccine hesitancy and science skeptics: WVU researchers delve into the sociology of COVID-19”. *WVU Today | West Virginia University* [Online]. In <https://wvutoday.wvu.edu/stories/2021/10/19/christian-nationalism-vaccine-hesitancy-and-science-skeptics-wvu-researchers-delve-into-the-sociology-of-covid-19> [accessed at 26 April 2024].
- Vile, J., 2009. “Christian Nationalism”. *The Free Speech Center* [Online]. In <https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/christian-nationalism/> [accessed at 5 May 2024].
- Volle, A., 2024. “Christian nationalism”. *Encyclopædia Britannica* [Online]. In <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christian-nationalism> [accessed at 23 April 2024].
- Whitehead, A., 2021. “The growing threat of Christian nationalism in the U.S.”. *Time* [Online]. In <https://time.com/6052051/anti-democratic-threat-christian-nationalism/> [accessed at 24 May 2024].

*The Clash of Liberties: Religious Freedom, Human Rights, and the  
Ascendance of Christian Nationalism in the United States*