

Christian Reflections on Christian Nationalism(s)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Until recently, almost no American claimed to be a Christian nationalist or advocated for Christian nationalism per se. The phrase was coined by critics in 2006, and it has primarily been used to condemn conservative Christians who bring their faith into the public square. These critics, polemical activists and academics alike, have always defined it as a dangerous, toxic phenomenon. For instance, in their influential book, *Taking America Back for God*, Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry explain that Christian nationalism is “an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture” that “includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism.”¹

In 2022, for the first time, some prominent Christians embraced the label or argued that we should “salvage” it.² These men and women insist that they are arguing for a healthy version of Christian nationalism, one that does not conflate God and country and that is not racist.

In this white paper, I first consider the critics of Christian nationalism. A major aim of these critics is to cast aspersions on conservative Christians who bring their faith into the public square. Understanding why and how their works are flawed enables politically engaged Christians to effectively respond to accusations that they are Christian nationalists. I then consider the two books published to date that advocate for Christian nationalism. I show that their authors are not really nationalists, and that these books are of interest only to a handful of idiosyncratic, patriarchal thinkers. I conclude by arguing that Christians can and should be patriotic, and we must bring our faith into the public square to advocate for laws and policies that benefit all Americans.



INTRODUCTION

Until recently, almost no American claimed to be a Christian nationalist or advocated for Christian nationalism. Since 2006, there has been a constant stream of books warning of its dangers. The stream became a flood with the election of Donald Trump and, especially, the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol which was, according to the sociologist Samuel Perry, “as Christian nationalist as it gets.”³

The sociologist Andrew Whitehead asserts that Christian nationalism poses “an existential threat to American democracy and the Christian church in the United States.”⁴ Similarly, Andrew Seidel, vice president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, claims that it is an “existential threat to a government of the people, for the people, and by the people.”⁵ Amanda Tyler, president of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, merely contends that Christian nationalism is the “single biggest threat to America’s religious liberty.”⁶

¹ Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), ix-x, 10. Christian nationalism exists in other countries, but in this white paper I consider it only in the American context.

² See, for instance, Douglas Wilson here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsFhrtx_zgk (at about 7:58, accessed October 15, 2022).

³ Thomas Edsall, “The Capitol Insurrection Was as Christian Nationalist as It Gets.”

Religious resentment has become a potent recruiting tool for the hard right.” *The New York Times* (Jan. 28, 2021).

Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/28/opinion/christian-nationalists-capitol-attack.html> (accessed October 1, 2022)

⁴ Andrew Whitehead on Twitter, (Feb. 13, 2021) available at <https://mobile.twitter.com/ndrewwhitehead/status/1492960031595282439> (Accessed October 8, 2022).

⁵ Andrew Seidel, on Twitter, (Feb. 9, 2021) available at: <https://twitter.com/AndrewLSeidel/status/1359315394209722371> (accessed October 1, 2022).

⁶ Amanda Taylor, interview (April 13, 2021) available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/christian-nationalism-is-single-biggest-threat-to-americas-religious-freedom/> (accessed October 4, 2022).

Most of the books and articles touting the dangers of Christian nationalism are written by polemicists who rely more on rhetoric than arguments and, if they offer evidence to support their claims, it is often based on unsubstantiated assertions.

Most of the literature criticizing Christian nationalism is written by activists who clearly have axes to grind. The concept is ill-defined, often amounting to little more than the idea that Christians are arguing for laws disfavored by critics. Thus, this literature portrays Christians fighting to end abortion or defend religious liberty as scary Christian nationalists, but considers Christians motivated by their faith to pursue civil rights legislation to be laudable political activists.⁷

THE CRITICS

Most of the books and articles touting the dangers of Christian nationalism are written by polemicists who rely more on rhetoric than arguments and, if they offer evidence to support their claims, it is often based on unsubstantiated assertions. In the words of Georgetown Professor Paul D. Miller, himself a critic of Christian nationalism, these works “are rather extreme and almost comical examples of beating up on straw men — or would be, if they weren’t also fear-mongering scurrilous libel masquerading as scholarship.”⁸ I have criticized this literature elsewhere, and so will not address it here.⁹ There are, however, a few books and articles written by academics that attempt to define, examine, and critique Christian nationalism. It is important for Christians involved in politics to understand what these works are claiming and why they are problematic. In this section, I address the most influential of these books: Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry’s *Taking America Back for God*.

Whitehead and Perry define Christian nationalism as “an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture” that “includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism.”¹⁰ Using flawed measures, they contend that 51.9% of Americans are fully or partially supportive of this toxic ideology.

Whitehead and Perry purport to measure American Christian nationalism by using responses to survey questions given between 2007 and 2017 which asked respondents to state whether they strongly disagree, disagree, [are] uncertain, agree, or strongly agree with the following statements:

1. The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.
2. The federal government should advocate Christian values.
3. The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state. [The responses to #3 are “reverse coded” by the authors so that strong agreement with this proposition is recorded in the same way that strong disagreement is recorded for the other five.]
4. The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.
5. The success of the United States is part of God’s plan.
6. The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.¹¹

Responses are ranked on a four-point scale, with zero points for “strongly disagree” to four points for “strongly agree.” Americans are labeled based on how many points they earn as follows:

- 0-5: Rejectors (21.5%)
- 6-11: Resisters (26.6%)
- 12-17: Accommodators (32.1%)
- 18-24: Ambassadors (19.8%)¹²

Using these measures, Whitehead and Perry conclude that 51.9% of Americans are partially or fully supportive of Christian nationalism (Ambassadors and Accommodators). Given their definition of Christian nationalism, this is a terrifying finding. It is not difficult to see why their work is popular with progressives who are critical of conservative Christians who bring their faith into the public square.

Whitehead and Perry emphasize that an important aspect of Christian nationalism is privileging Christianity above other religions.¹³ But one can strongly agree with five of these six statements without favoring Christianity over other faiths. It is easy to imagine, for instance, someone thinking that Christian values such as peace, justice, liberty, and equality should be promoted by the federal government. To be sure, these are not uniquely Christian values, but they are values that many Christians hold dear because of their biblical and theological convictions.

⁷ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 76, 119, 177-78.

⁸ Paul D. Miller. *The Religion of American Greatness: What’s Wrong with Christian Nationalism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 44.

⁹ See, for instance, see Mark David Hall, “Tilting at Windmills: The ‘Threat’ of Christian Nationalism” available at: <https://www.standingforfreedom.com/white-paper/tilting-at-windmills-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism/> (accessed October 10, 2022).

¹⁰ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, ix-x, 10.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 7-9.

¹² *ibid.*, 25.

¹³ See, for instance, Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back*, ix-x, 4, 6, 9, 10.

Statements 3, 4, and 6 all concern the separation of church and state. Those advocating for the strict separation of church and state have contended that, among other things, it prohibits a state from including a Star of David in a Holocaust Memorial, providing public funds from going to Hassidic Schools, permitting Native Americans to use peyote in religious ceremonies, and allowing Islamic students to pray in public schools.¹⁴ One could believe that all of these things should be permitted without favoring Christianity above other faiths.

Finally, the fifth statement may simply measure whether one is a Calvinist or not. Calvinists believe that everything is a part of God's plan, including the success or failure of nations. Hopefully, we can all agree that it is possible to be a Calvinist without being a Christian nationalist (at least as the term is defined by Whitehead, Perry, and other critics).

Whitehead and Perry may have intended to measure Christian nationalism in an objective manner, but their implicit biases are sometimes evident. For instance, they explain that pro-life Americans are really committed to "male authority over women's bodies."¹⁵ Indeed, they assert this twice without offering any empirical evidence or addressing the well-known fact that there is little difference between males and females when it comes to opposing all abortions.¹⁶ Are pro-life females really committed to male authority over women's bodies, or might it be the case that they are concerned with protecting innocent human life?

Similarly, Whitehead and Perry assert that Christian nationalists are redefining religious liberty to "mean something more than freedom to worship," that they want it to mean that one may act on one's religious convictions in the public square.¹⁷ But religious liberty in the United States has *always* meant more than freedom to worship; after all, the First Amendment protects the "free exercise" of religion.¹⁸ Sixty years ago, the liberal Justice William Brennan articulated an excellent test for interpreting the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, a test that protected a wide range of religious activities that go far beyond freedom of worship.¹⁹

Simply put, Whitehead and Perry grossly overestimate the

percentage of Americans who embrace the toxic stew they call Christian nationalism. This is important as their findings have regularly been used by progressives who believe that conservative Christians should not bring their faith into the public square.²⁰

CHRISTIANS EMBRACE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Almost no American claimed to be a Christian nationalist until the summer of 2022, when Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene embraced the label.²¹ Shortly thereafter, Douglas Wilson, the provocative pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, argued that the concept is "salvageable." The fall of 2022 saw the publication of a short book advocating Christian nationalism, Andrew Torba and Andrew Isker's *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations* (endorsed by Wilson) and Stephen Wolfe's *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (published by Canon Press, a press closely associated with Wilson, who also endorsed it).²²

The emergence of Americans actually claiming to be Christian nationalists was a gift to the critics of Christian nationalism. Here they believe, finally, is evidence of a theocratic movement bent on taking over America for Christ. That the above-mentioned books were portrayed as bestsellers only helped the critics' case.²³ Unfortunately for them, if one bothers to read these works it becomes evident that they will be of interest only to a handful of idiosyncratic, patriarchal writers who are not interested in the United States. Indeed, other than Douglas Wilson and authors associated with him, it is difficult to find anyone offering a serious, sustained argument that Americans should embrace (or salvage) Christian nationalism.

Wilson, Torba, Isker, and Wolfe are all Calvinists who believe that Christianity should influence every aspect of life. Such Calvinists have written innumerable books explaining how the Christian faith should inform things like family life, education, and business practices.²⁴ There is nothing new about Calvinists arguing for the creation of Christian political institutions and laws; the only thing new about Wilson et al. is that they are now calling it "Christian nationalism."

¹⁴ *American Legion v. American Humanist Association* (2018) available here: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/18pdf/17-1717_4f14.pdf; *Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer*, (2017) available here: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/16pdf/15-577_khlp.pdf; Frederick Mark Gedicks and Rebecca G. Van Tassel, "RFRA Exceptions from the Contraception Mandate: An Unconstitutional Accommodation of Religion," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, Vol. 49, Issue 2 (Summer 2014), 343-384; Carl H. Esbeck, "Third-Party Burdens, Congressional Accommodations for Religion, and the Establishment Clause," testimony before the Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Justice, February 13, 2015.

¹⁵ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back*, 76.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 76, 123. On male and female opposition to abortion over time, see: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245618/abortion-trends-gender.aspx> (accessed July 13, 2021).

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸ This is not to say, of course, that the religious liberty of minority groups has always been protected. See, for instance, my essay: "Why Tolerate Religion? The Rise and Fall of Religious Liberty in America," in *Citizens and Statesmen: An Annual Review of Political Theory and Public Life* 12 (Fall 2019): 54-66.

¹⁹ *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 US 398 (1963).

²⁰ Other non-polemical works by scholars include Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness*, which I review here: <https://lawliberty.org/book-review/christian-nationalism-an-existential-threat/>. See also Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022) and Eric McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Jesse Smith and Gary J. Adler, Jr. offer a critique of Whitehead and Perry's book that is similar to mine in their article "What Isn't Christian Nationalism? A Call for Conceptual and Empirical Splitting," *Socius* 8 (2022). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23780231221124492> (accessed October 12, 2022).

²¹ See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/08/19/republicans-mostly-mum-calls-make-gop-party-christian-nationalism/> (accessed October 15, 2022).

²² Andrew Torba and Andrew Isker, *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations* (Gab Publishing, 2022) and Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2022).

²³ See, for instance, <https://twitter.com/A9Collective/status/1568695991385362432>, <https://canonpress.com/products/the-case-for-christian-nationalism/> (endorsements), and <https://refusefascism.org/2022/11/13/bradley-onishi-the-extremist-history-of-white-christian-nationalism-and-what-comes-next/> (both accessed December 2, 2022).

²⁴ See, for instance, <https://canonpress.com/collections/douglas-wilson/> (accessed October 17, 2022).



All four of our Reformed advocates of Christian nationalism deny that they are arguing for anything like what Whitehead and Perry describe as “a fusion of Christianity with American civic life” that “includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism.”²⁵ In other words, they endorse what they consider to be a healthy form of Christian nationalism.

For reasons of space, I’ll focus on the two book-length arguments supporting Christian nationalism.²⁶ Andrew Torba and Andrew Isker’s self-published *Christian Nationalism*, is a screed; long on rhetoric, short on argument, and riddled with errors. Central villains of the work include “craven, cowardly leaders of American churches,” “weak and pathetic emasculated ‘Christian’ men,” “Lazy Journalists” (also known as “regime apparatchiks and propagandists,”) and “hireling evangelical leaders.”²⁷

For a book on Christian nationalism, the authors have little to say about the nation. Instead, they are far more interested in states:

No longer do Christian Nationalist [sic] in America seek to establish official state churches or religions, but rather we seek to reestablish states that recognize Jesus Christ as King, the general Christian faith as the foundation of state government, and state laws the [sic] reflect (in every way possible and reasonable) Christian morality and charity.²⁸

Moreover, the authors spend little space discussing what state political institutions or laws would look like. Much of the book is dedicated to exhorting manly Christian men to build “a parallel Christian society,” “boldly share the Good News, the gospel of Jesus Christ,” “establish nuclear families,” and “build sovereign businesses.”²⁹

For Torba and Isker, far more than politics and law, education is key for the eventual victory:

Our sons will have been through the Classics, all of Greek Philosophy, the entire Bible, and know how to build things with their hands, shoot guns, grow food, hunt, fish, lift weights, and start a business by the time they are 18.

By way of contrast, the:

world’s sons will be demoralized for 18 years in the demonic schools, propagandized by the enemy’s entertainment and ‘news’ media, then sink into a mountain of debt slavery to be intellectually castrated by some marxist [sic] college.³⁰

It is fair to call Torba and Isker’s book patriarchal. Women are virtually absent, although the authors do assure us that a “Christian woman is feminine.”³¹ They go into detail about the education their sons receive, but say nothing about their daughters. And throughout the work they make it clear that it will be manly men (not “weak and pathetic emasculated ‘Christian’ men”)³² who, from a human perspective, bring about God’s kingdom on earth.

Torba and Isker’s book has little to recommend it, and yet for all its problems it should be acknowledged that the authors clearly state, on multiple occasions, that their version of Christian nationalism has nothing to do with race, and that they do not “see America as some uniquely chosen nation.”³³ In other words, even Torba and Isker do not embrace the toxic form of Christian nationalism described by many critics.

Like Torba and Isker, Stephen Wolfe is a Calvinist. Unlike them, he earned a Ph.D. in political science and has written a serious book arguing for the virtues of Christian nationalism. Wolfe proceeds on the assumption that the Reformed theological tradition is true, and so makes “little effort” to make biblical or more broadly theological arguments to support it.³⁴ Instead, he engages in depth with the works of giants of the Reformed tradition including John Calvin, Francis Turretin, Johannes Althusius, Franciscus Junius, and English and American Puritans (he has no interest in neo-Calvinists, except for Herman Bavinck, and he explicitly rejects the “modern theonomist movements that arose in the late 20th century.”)³⁵

The title of Wolfe’s book and the image on the front cover strongly suggests that his project involves bringing Christian nationalism to the United States of America, but the interior of his 478-page book tells a very different story. Indeed, America hardly comes up in the first nine chapters, and much of what he writes could be applied to any Christian (by which he always means “Protestant”) nation.

²⁵ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back*, 10.

²⁶ Wilson writes about Christian nationalism in some detail here: <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/christian-nationalism-and-other-things-that-skeered-us-bad.html> (accessed October 16, 2022).

²⁷ Andrew Torba and Andrew Isker, *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations* (Gab Publishing, 2022), 43, 52, 66, 98.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 24, 49, 80.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 107.

³¹ *ibid.*, 17.

³² *ibid.*, 66.

³³ *ibid.*, 67, see also 22, 68.

³⁴ Wolfe, *Case for Christian Nationalism*, 16.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 267-69.

Christians should be patriots, and we have a biblical obligation to bring our faith into the public square to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city.”
(Jeremiah 29:7)

By “nation,” Wolfe means a small people-group whose members have a great deal in common including language, shared values, and a sense place.³⁶ He has little interest in America, believing that “the *United States*, as a whole, is lost.”³⁷ But localities are another matter. He observes that “there is at least one Christian nation in America.”³⁸ This Christian “nation,” existing within the boundaries of the United States, could “will” itself into existence.³⁹ One practical step in this direction would be for state governors to “resist and nullify unjust and tyrannical laws imposed on the people by the federal government.”⁴⁰

Wolfe repeatedly reminds his readers that he has written a theoretical work, not an “action-plan.”⁴¹ If we ignore the practical problems involved in willing a Christian nation into existence and assume that one somehow manifests itself, what would it look like? Wolfe contends that political regimes in Christian nations would differ for prudential reasons, but he clearly favors rule by a Christian “prince”: a title that “denotes both an executive power (viz., one who administers the laws) and personal eminence in relation to the people. The prince is the first of his people — one whom the people can look upon as father or protector of the country.”⁴²

Like almost all Christian political thinkers, Wolfe understands that the church and state are separate institutions, but the prince is responsible for ordering the people toward godliness and supporting/overseeing the church. The latter means, among other things, that he must fund churches and seminaries, call synods, confirm or deny the theological judgements of these synods, and “correct the lazy and errant pastor.”⁴³

Much of Wolfe’s book may be treated as an intellectually serious exercise in working through what local societies and political units would look like if they embraced 16th and 17th century Reformed views of politics, religious liberty, and church-state relations. Alas, its concluding chapter reads as if it had been written by Torba and Isker. Wolfe complains of the “Globalist American Empire ... centered in Washington, DC” that “wields US diplomatic, military, and economic power to advance modern liberal ideology across the globe.”⁴⁴ He also laments the “Immigration and Nationalism Act of 1965, which opened the floodgates of non-Western immigration into the United States ...” And readers are informed that we “live under a gynocracy — a rule by women ... The rise of Christian nationalism necessitates the fall of gynocracy.”⁴⁶

Neither Torba/Isker or Wolfe are advocates of nationalism, at least as the term is usually understood. In no way do they conflate God with the United States of America. Nor is either book racist.⁴⁷ Even so, both books reinforce the caricature of Christian nationalism as a retrograde movement that favors male Protestant Christians above all others. Yet it should be clear that these books will of interest to only a handful of peculiar and patriarchal thinkers associated with Douglas Wilson.

A BETTER WAY

Christians should reject both the Christian nationalism described by its many critics and the Christian nationalism described by its relatively few advocates. Indeed, there is a better way. Although some scholars believe nationalism can be healthy,⁴⁸ others warn of the danger of an inordinate love of country, perhaps such a disordered love that would lead one to follow one’s country “right or wrong.”⁴⁹ Christians must reject this approach; our ultimate allegiance is to the King of Kings, not a particular nation state. There is nothing wrong with loving one’s country, but it should be a properly ordered love that does not result in blind obedience. This proper love of country is best referred to as patriotism.⁵⁰

³⁶ Wolfe, *Case for Christian Nationalism*, 135-145.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 474.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 399.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 176, 181.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 473.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 433.

⁴² *ibid.*, 279.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 312-13.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 438.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 441.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 445, 452.

⁴⁷ The above discussion is based only on the two books, not tweets or posts made by Torba, Isker, Wolfe, or their collaborators.

⁴⁸ See, for instance Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018) and R.R. Reno, *The Return of Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2021).

⁴⁹ This phrase is attributed to the U.S. naval hero Stephan Decatur, who made the toast: “Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong!” See: <https://www.thoughtco.com/my-country-right-or-wrong-2831839> (accessed December 3, 2022). Paul Miller contends that that nationalism is always bad in *The Religion of American Greatness*.

⁵⁰ The following website contains excellent resources on how and why Christians should be patriotic: <https://providencemag.com/podcast/foreign-policy-provcast-ep-64-patriotism-c-s-lewis/> (accessed December 8, 2022).

Christians should be patriots, and we have a biblical obligation to bring our faith into the public square to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7).⁵¹ Throughout American history, Christians have regularly been motivated by their faith to create fair and just institutions, fight for political freedom, oppose slavery, secure religious liberty for all, and the like. In *Did America Have a Christian Founding?*, I describe the many ways America’s founders were influenced positively by Christianity when they created America’s constitutional order. In my forthcoming book, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land*, I discuss numerous ways in which Americans throughout the nation’s history have been inspired by their Christian convictions to advance liberty and equality for all Americans.



For reasons of space, I discuss only Christian advocacy for religious liberty in this conclusion. This is particularly appropriate because the critics regularly complain Christian nationalists seek to codify “Christian privilege in the law, favoring Christians above others [and] disfavor[ing] the non-religious [and] non-Christians.”⁵² Stephen Wolfe agrees that Protestantism should be privileged as a matter of law, and he is correct that this view was common among 16th and 17th century Reformed thinkers.

Fortunately, in the 17th and 18th centuries, indisputably pious men including Roger Williams, William Penn, Elisha Williams, Samuel Davies, Isaac Backus, and John Leland began to make persuasive biblical and theological arguments in favor of the proposition that the religious liberty of all citizens, including non-Christians, must be protected. These Christian leaders advocated religious liberty for a variety of reasons, including the conviction that persecution does not work, that liberty of conscience causes true religion to flourish, and that the Bible and Christian theology require liberty of conscience.⁵³

Let’s begin by considering the fact that religious persecution doesn’t work. Far from being a merely prudential argument, the chief concern of critics was that persecution hindered the flourishing of true Christianity. William Penn, for instance, contended in 1675 that “force makes hypocrites, ‘tis persuasion only that makes converts.”⁵⁴ He reiterated this conviction a dozen years later, noting that persecution “converts no body; it may breed hypocrisy, that that is quite another thing than *salvation*.”⁵⁵ Good social and legal policies should produce faithful Christians, not hypocrites.

When religious minorities gain political power, they sometimes forget their commitment to religious liberty, but when Penn had the opportunity to craft laws for Pennsylvania, he included a provision in the colony’s statutes that protected:

all persons living in this province, who confess and acknowledge the one Almighty and eternal God, to be the Creator, Upholder and Ruler of the world; and that hold themselves obliged in conscience to live peaceably and justly in civil society, shall, in no ways, be molested or prejudiced for their religious persuasion, or practice, in matters of faith and worship, nor shall they be compelled, at any time, to frequent or maintain any religious worship, place or ministry whatever.⁵⁶

Penn may be criticized for guaranteeing religious liberty only for monotheists but, in his defense, there is no record of any citizen of Pennsylvania being anything other than a monotheist until well after he died. Although some Native Americans in the region might be characterized as polytheists, no colony dealt more fairly with, and used less force against, indigenous peoples than did Pennsylvania. Penn thought that religious liberty helped Christianity flourish, but he was also convinced that it promoted virtue, stability, and even trade.⁵⁷

Arguments similar to Penn’s were adopted by influential Americans in the eighteenth century. For instance, the Baptist minister Isaac Backus contended in 1773 that:

where each person, and each society, are equally protected from being injured by others, all enjoying equal liberty, to attend and support the worship which they believe is right, having no more striving for mastery or superiority than little children (which we must all come to, or not enter into the kingdom of heaven [Matthew 18: 3]) how happy are its effects in civil society?⁵⁸

An evangelist, Backus cared more about the eternal state of souls than worldly happiness, but like most founders he also understood that true religion was good for society.

⁵¹ For arguments about how and why Christians should engage in politics, see Francis Beckwith, *Politics for Christians: Statecraft as Soulcraft* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010) and Amy Black, *Honoring God in Red or Blue: Approaching Politics with Humility, Grace, and Reason* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012). H. Richard Niebuhr describes different ways Christians have engaged society in his classic study *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

⁵² Andrew Seidel, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American* (New York: Sterling, 2019), 6.

⁵³ Good secondary works that support this point include Andrew R. Murphy, *Conscience and Community: Revisiting Toleration and Religious Dissent in Early Modern England and America* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001) and Nicholas Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵⁴ Penn, “England’s Present Interest Considered,” 1675, in *The Political Writings of William Penn*, ed. Andrew R. Murphy (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Press, 2002), 57.

⁵⁵ Penn, “Good Advice to the Church of England, Roman-Catholic, and Protestant Dissenter,” 1687, in *The Political Writings of William Penn*, 340 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁶ Dreisbach and Hall, *Sacred Rights*, 118.

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Murphy, *Political Writings of William Penn*, 62-74, 99-101, 126.

⁵⁸ Isaac Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty* (1773) in Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, 359 (emphasis in original).

In 1776, the Presbyterians of Hanover County, Virginia sent a memorial to the General Assembly where they argued that:

if mankind were left in the quiet possession of their unalienable religious privileges, Christianity, as in the days of the Apostles, would continue to prevail and flourish in the greatest purity, by its own native excellence, and under the all-disposing providence of God.⁵⁹

These believers made a variety of arguments in favor of religious liberty and against religious establishments, but like virtually everyone advocating for these positions a key contention was that religious liberty causes Christianity to flourish and to be purer. In like manner, the future Supreme Court Justice James Iredell remarked in North Carolina's Ratifying Convention that it:

would be happy for mankind if religion was permitted to take its own course, and maintain itself by the excellence of its own doctrines. The divine Author of our religion never wished for its support by world authority. Has he not said that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it [Matthew 16: 18]? It made much greater progress for itself, than when supported by the greatest authority upon earth.⁶⁰

During the height of the First Great Awakening Elisha Williams, a Congregationalist minister, Yale rector, member of the General Assembly, and judge on the Connecticut Superior Court, wrote an impassioned plea for religious liberty entitled "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants" (1744). A central contention in this work is:

That the sacred scriptures are the alone rule of faith and practice to a Christian, all Protestants are agreed in; and must therefore inviolably maintain, that every Christian has a *right of judging for himself* what he is to believe and practice in religion according to that rule.⁶¹

Williams' argument encapsulates some of the key commitments of the Protestant Reformation —notably *sola scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers. If one truly believes these doctrines, he averred, one must embrace freedom of conscience. To be sure, this is a very Protestant argument and might not have been as effective in Catholic countries. But in a colony that was 99.99% Protestant, it worked well.

Just as they advocated for religious liberty, Christians have been motivated by their faith to oppose slavery, fight Jim Crow legislation, oppose Indian removal, reform prisons, protect innocent human life, and the like.

By the founding era, virtually every civic leader embraced the view that religious liberty should be robustly protected. The United States Constitution specifically banned religious tests for federal office, and its oath provisions included a religious accommodation to permit Quakers and others who have religious objections to swearing oaths to affirm them instead. By the end of the Revolutionary era, every state offered significant protection of religious liberty.⁶² The federal Constitution of 1787 did not, but only because its supporters believed the national government did not have the delegated power to pass laws interfering with religious belief or practice. In the face of popular outcry, the first Congress proposed and the states ratified a constitutional amendment stating that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ... "

To be sure, the freedom of religious minorities was not always respected, but Christian civic and religious leaders continued to be leaders in the fight to protect the ability of all citizens to act upon their religious convictions.⁶³ Today, there are ten major Christian legal advocacy groups that defend the religious liberty of all Americans (many of them are active in other countries as well). According to Daniel Bennett, the best student of these groups, all but one of them (Thomas More Law Center) represents and files briefs on behalf of non-Christians.⁶⁴ Critics like Whitehead and Perry ignore this reality, describing these organizations as existing to "privilege Christian religious expressions and standards of morality."⁶⁵ Ironically, the only source they cite to support this claim is Bennett's study — a study that shows the opposite of what they assert.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Dreisbach and Hall, *Sacred Rights*, 270.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 395.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, *Sacred Rights*, 175 (emphasis in original).

⁶² Vincent Phillip Muñoz, "If Religious Liberty Does Not Mean Exemptions, What Might it Mean? The Founders' Constitutionalism of the Inalienable Rights of Religious Liberty," *Notre Dame Law Review* 91 (2016), 1387-1418.

⁶³ See, for instance, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land*, chapter seven and my essay "Religious Accommodations and the Common Good." In *Set Free: Restoring Religious Freedom for All* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2019).

⁶⁴ Daniel Bennett *Defending Faith: The Politics of the Christian Conservative Legal Movement* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017).

⁶⁵ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 119.

⁶⁶ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 240. Andrew Seidel makes even more outlandish claims in *American Crusade: How the Supreme Court Is Weaponizing Religious Freedom*. My review of this book is available at: <https://lawliberty.org/book-review/a-crusader-court/>. It is noteworthy that Whitehead and Perry separately endorse this book.

Just as they advocated for religious liberty, Christians have been motivated by their faith to oppose slavery, fight Jim Crow legislation, oppose Indian removal, reform prisons, eliminate poverty, protect innocent human life, and the like. I discuss some of these inspiring movements in *Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land*, and other good books about them are mentioned in the footnote to this sentence.⁶⁷ Of course, Christians have sometimes used the Bible to support evil practices like slavery and racism, but these arguments have been rejected by the vast majority of Christians.

There are excellent reasons for Christians to reject both what the critics call Christian nationalism and what its proponents call Christian nationalism. Instead, Christians should be patriotic, and we must bring our faith into the public square to advocate for liberty, justice, and equality for all. We cannot let critics shame us into privatizing our faith and abandoning our responsibility to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7).



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⁶⁷ See, for instance, David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York: Knopf, 2011); Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* Revised Edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997); Curtis D. Johnson, *Redeeming America: Evangelicals and the Road to the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Macmillan, 1988); *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1998) *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).