

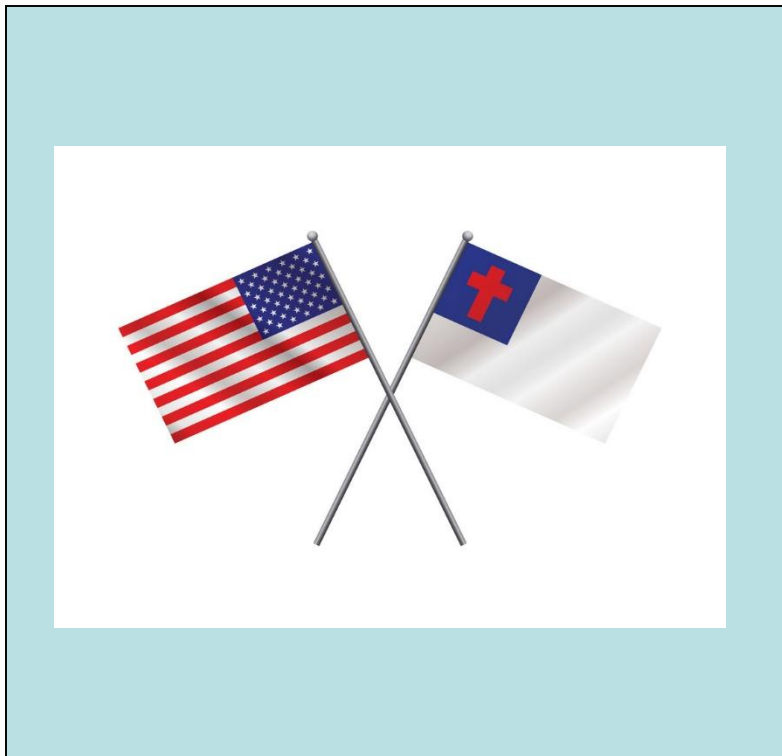
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A Christian Nation?



The headline of Pew Research Center's October 27 report on its recent survey of Americans' views about "Christian nationalism" reads "45% of Americans Say U.S. Should Be a 'Christian Nation,'" but it's important to also read the subhead: "But they hold differing opinions about what that phrase means, and two-thirds of U.S. adults say churches should keep out of politics."

According to a 2021 article in Christianity Today (CT), which is a moderate voice for evangelical Christianity, Christian nationalism is "the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way."

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The same article also says that "Christian nationalists assert that America is and must remain a 'Christian nation' -- not merely as an observation about American history, but as a prescriptive program for what America must continue to be in the future."

The article further says that Christian nationalists do not reject the First Amendment, which states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." And, says CT, neither do Christian nationalists advocate for a theocracy, which is a nation in which clergy exercise political power and in which religious law is dominant over civil law. But, says CT, "they do believe that Christianity should enjoy a privileged position in the public square."

The Pew survey found that 60% of U.S. adults believe America's founders intended the country to be a Christian nation, and 45% say they think it should be a Christian nation today, though only 33% say it is in fact a Christian nation today. But the survey also found widely differing opinions about what it means to be a "Christian nation" and to support "Christian nationalism."

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"For instance," says the Pew report, "many supporters of Christian nationhood define the concept in broad terms, as the idea that the country is guided by Christian values. Those who say the United States should not be a Christian nation, on the other hand, are much more inclined to define a Christian nation as one where the laws explicitly enshrine religious teachings."

Nonetheless, a large majority of respondents do not believe that religion and government should be freely intermingled. According to the survey report "about three-quarters of U.S. adults (77%) say that churches and other houses of worship should not endorse candidates for political offices. Two-thirds (67%) say that religious institutions should keep out of political matters rather than expressing their views on day-to-day social or political questions."

And when asked "Should Supreme Court justices bring their own religious views into how they decide major cases?" 83% of respondents said no.

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What's more, the new survey -- as well as other recent Center research -- shows that "there is far more support for the idea of separation of church and state than opposition to it among Americans overall."

The upshot of the report is that when people say the United States should be a "Christian nation," not everybody means the same thing. While some "define the concept as one where a nation's laws are based on Christian tenets and the nation's leaders are Christian, it is much more common for people in this category to see a Christian nation as one where people are more broadly guided by Christian values or a belief in God, even if its laws are not explicitly Christian and its leaders can have a variety of faiths or no faith at all."

Some others who say the United States should be a Christian nation are referring to the religious makeup of the population. If most people are Christians, then the country is a Christian nation. Still others "are simply envisioning a place where people treat each other well and have good morals."

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Francis P. Sempa, who writes about geopolitics, embraces the "nationalism" label but not the "Christian nationalist" label, which he sees as a pejorative rather than anything meaningful. He defines nationalism as "identification with one's own nation and support for its interests," and identifies a long list of people from various political perspectives as being in that category, including George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy. His list is not exclusively white, male or Christian, for he includes Martin Luther King Jr., Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Thomas Sowell as well. He labels opposition to his view as "war on our patriotism and faith."

Writing recently in *The American Spectator*, Sempa said, "The conservative response to this war ... should be an unapologetic embrace of the flag and the cross. We should proudly proclaim our 'American nationalism,' invoking Washington and Lincoln and Dr. King, and we should support those politicians ... who are willing to fight this ideological war with us. And we should insist that Christianity has a rightful place in the public square."

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Some church leaders push back against Christian nationalism, some even calling it "a danger to our nation," and many would say that Sempa's use of the term "war" is a mischaracterization of their objections to Christian nationalism as they define it.

Marvin A. McMickle, former president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, wrote, "What seems like a fringe movement in American politics today can become a danger to religious liberty tomorrow for all Americans when the power of the state is used to advance the work of any group that presumes to speak on behalf of the whole church."

While Sempa and McMickle have strongly opposing views and quite different definitions and connotations of "nationalism" and "Christian nationalism," the Pew survey seems to indicate that many Americans take a view somewhere in between. And the survey also suggests that even those people who say the United States should be a Christian nation want something other than a government-imposed theocracy. **END.**



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Warming Up:

What should patriotism mean for Christians who love both God and their country?

Since the U.S. Constitution mentions neither God nor Christianity, what do you think of the claim that the United States is a “Christian Nation”?

Do you feel the diversity of religions in the United States strengthens or weakens the country?

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Read 1 Samuel 8:1-22

Here Israel moves from a loose theocracy to a more palpable monarchy, even after Samuel urges them not to.

Questions:

What were the realistic governance concerns that might have brought the Israelite leaders to ask for a king?

What difficulties arise with a theocratic form of government?

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Read Luke 6:13-16

Here Jesus calls his first disciples and we notice that at least a few of them have the markings of being from a diverse political backgrounds. At least Simon the Zealot and possibly Judas Iscariot came from backgrounds that would be called radical or fantastical today.

Questions:

How surprising should it be that people from all sorts of political opinions, even extreme ones, come to be interested in Jesus?

How do you think Jesus handled extremism in His band of disciples? How should we handle it in the Church today?

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Read Mark 12:13-17

Here the religious authorities try to trap Jesus between a political and a religious answer, one that will get him ostracized from the religious extremists of His day and one that will possibly get Him in legal trouble.

Question:

What do you conclude from Jesus' recognition of "two countries" – one spiritual and one earthbound?

How do you feel this passage applies to Church and state separation?

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Read Luke 23:1-12

Especially in verse 2, we see the ruling authorities of Israel trying to use religion in order to condone Jesus' death.

Question:

Thinking not only of our country, but also worldwide, where do you see governments condoning unholy practices in the name of religion?

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Wrapping It Up

Respond to this, from Mark Noll, an American historian specializing in the history of Christianity in the United States:

"Is America unique in the economy of God? ... the Bible is clear. Only one nation in the history of the world has enjoyed unique divine favor -- Old Testament Israel. And it enjoyed its special status in order to prepare the entire world for the reception of God's saving grace. Since the full revelation of God's glory in Christ, 'God's country' has been made up of the Christians 'from every tribe and language and people and nation' (Revelation 5:9).

"No nation, including the United States, can be God's 'new Israel.' Much else may be said about the relative good accomplished by America. But it is in fact idolatry to think that our nation has received those special dispensations scripture declares God has reserved for the church."