

Book Reviews

Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood. *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism*. Chalice Press, 2022. Pp. 264.

At its core, *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism* is a work of theology. Nonetheless, Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood are doing work with this book that is important for the Religious Studies scholar, theologian, and layperson alike in the present moment. Since 2015, Donald Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement has ridden the tide of Christian nationalism, and often stoked it, as a means of achieving power, wealth, and influence in the United States. The movement's repeated use of Christian nationalist rhetoric has been blatant and has drawn a considerable amount of criticism from those ideologically opposed to it. Often, mainline Protestants count themselves among those opposed to the flavour and fervour of Christian nationalism in use by the Trump administration, and many of them are vocal in their opposition.

The current form of Christian nationalism¹ has a distinctly evangelical feel to it, as American evangelicals have proven to be some of the MAGA movement's strongest allies. Kaylor and Underwood argue that the current alignment of evangelicals with Christian nationalism and the alignment of mainline Protestants away from it has created a perception among mainline parishioners and clergy that Christian nationalism is something that happens elsewhere and is perpetrated by the "other" (181). Kaylor and Underwood's goals in this book are twofold: to dispel the myth that mainline Protestants have nothing to do with the current problem of Christian nationalism, and to offer a path to repentance and reconciliation for mainline Protestant communities.

In an effort to address the role of mainline Protestants in the development of Christian nationalism in the United States, Kaylor and Underwood spend much of the book giving a detailed history of various moments in the nation's past that have reframed its history and altered its trajectory in ways that make Christianity the de facto religion of the United States and render all who do not fall into that designation as "others" and "outsiders." The authors draw attention to various moments in the history of the country where mainline Protestants have had a role in the merging of church and state, such as early arguments over prayer in public schools, the creation of the National Prayer Breakfast, the inclusion of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, the inclusion of patriotic songs in mainline Protestant hymnals, and the presence of the American flag in church sanctuaries, among other cases (64, 79, 126, 136). Kaylor and Underwood correctly point out that mainline Protestants must look back to these moments where their denominations have assisted in the merging of national and religious identities and own that history, assuming they are interested in helping to solve the current crisis. In addition to an honest reckoning of mainline Protestantism's role in the rise of Christian nationalism, Kaylor and Underwood suggest that repentance and reform within denominations and individual congregations are a good place to address the problematic history of mainline Protestantism and nationalism and begin disentangling religious and national identities.

There can be little doubt that the historical work done by the authors is of great value to the scholar and layperson alike. However, I do want to offer a couple of gentle critiques. First, I would humbly suggest that the work the authors are doing to trace the genealogy of Christian nationalism here does not trace the problem back far enough. It is a mistake to assume that Christian nationalism became a problem for the United States sometime after its founding, rather than a problem that permeated the very founding of the

1. Kaylor and Underwood define Christian nationalism as an ideology that "seeks to conflate national and religious identities in a way that inherently provides Christians with a privileged place in American society" (7).

nation. A complete genealogy would likely trace the issue of Christian nationalism to the fifteenth-century papal bull that justified the colonization of Turtle Island in the first place, through what is now often referred to as the Doctrine of Christian Discovery.² Though this doctrine finds its origins in Catholicism, mainline Protestants of yesteryear still used the rationale provided in this papal bull to justify their role in colonizing Turtle Island. I fear the authors are mistaking moments where Christian nationalism was reinforced by mainline Protestants after the founding of the nation for moments of introduction. If an honest reckoning is desired, then an honest appraisal would say that the genealogy here is incomplete.

Additionally, I have some objections to the solutions offered by the authors. The solutions offered in the book mostly seek to address the issue within these mainline Protestant denominations. To me, this is akin to creating a problem, reflecting on why one did it, and apologizing, but doing nothing to assist in solving it. I understand the impulse to resist using theological language in the political sphere since it would only seem to reinforce Christian nationalism. However, I would argue that theological language is one of the few types of rhetoric that the evangelical Christian nationalists of contemporary times are moved by. I am all for these denominations rooting out Christian nationalism within their own congregations. However, in a strange paradox, a positive, justice-seeking theological language is needed right now in the public sphere to offer a counter to evangelical Christian nationalists. Their use of theological language allows them to justify their actions by claiming to be performing God's will. People are needed on the side of justice who speak the language of theology to tell the Christian nationalists that they are wrong. Otherwise, there is a risk of talking past each other as Christian nationalists and those outside Christianity operate on different paradigms. Fix the problems, address the history, but do not withdraw. The answer to the present problem is not in isolation but in allyship.

– Matthew J. Pierce, *Queen's University*

2. For more on the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, visit <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/>