

We Still Don't Know What It Is: The Historical Origins of Christian Nationalism in America and its Intentional Ambiguities

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Abstract: Although scholars, journalists and the American public have been debating the impact and influence of Christian nationalism for years, scholars have recently noted that there is very little consensus about what, exactly, Christian nationalism is. The nebulous nature of the term has confounded researchers and journalists alike, with current remedies providing little clarity. This essay argues that the nebulous nature of Christian nationalism does not come from a lack of statistical data or the weaknesses of scholars' analytical tools, but is rather an intentional feature of the ideology built in by its proponents in the mid-twentieth century. When the presidential administrations of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower wanted to unite Americans behind their preferred policies, they promoted a particular form of American religion that is the basis of modern Christian nationalism. Since their preferred unity in diversity was tenuous, they subsumed race with religion and insisted that any critique of the nation only helped America's enemies. After establishing the historical nature of Christian nationalism, I offer some potential avenues of research that might break through the ambiguities.

Keywords: Christian Nationalism, American Religion, Civil Religion

When Donald Trump won the United States presidential election in 2016, American journalists and academics scrambled to explain how a reality television star and real estate mogul had captured the American presidency, with little consensus emerging. Some attributed Trump's victory to Americans' economic anxieties or dissatisfactions, while others explained it as a manifestation of nascent racist, sexist, and/or xenophobic attitudes among the American electorate, and particularly white conservatives.¹ Yet another explanation, and the one that has most intrigued American journalists and the public at large, came principally from Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, who argued that "support for Donald Trump represented a defense of America's supposed Christian heritage in the eyes of many Americans."² Whitehead and Perry, along with their co-author Joseph Baker, called the belief in that Christian heritage, and the absolute need to defend it from all threats, internal and external, Christian nationalism. Their subsequent work further defined Christian nationalism as "a cultural framework – a

1. See, for example, Mabel Berezin, "On the Construction Sites of History: Where did Donald Trump Come From?" *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 3 (Oct. 2017): 322–337, [DOI:10.1057/s41290-017-0045-7](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-017-0045-7); Penny Edgell, "An Agenda for Research on American Religion in Light of the 2016 Election," *Sociology of Religion* 78, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 1–8, [DOI:10.1093/socrel/srw057](https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srw057); Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel, "Economic Anxiety Didn't Make People Vote Trump, Racism Did," *The Nation*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/economic-anxiety-didnt-make-people-vote-trump-racism-did/>; Philip S. Gorski, "Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump: A Critical Cultural Sociology," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5 (2017): 338–354, [DOI:10.1057/s41290-017-0045-7](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-017-0045-7).

2. Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry and Joseph O. Baker, "Make America Christian Again," *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 148.

collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems – that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”³

However, as Corwin Smidt has demonstrated, “despite the fact that considerable scholarly and journalistic attention has been given to its presence, the concept of Christian nationalism has remained nebulous.”⁴ Corwin notes an expanding list of definitions and conceptions of the term, with scholars and journalists defining it as an ideology, a set of beliefs, a cultural viewpoint, and a political ideology, among others.⁵ Internationally, scholars have mostly lumped it with the concept of “ideological religious nationalism,” which is defined by Mark Juergensmeyer as a worldview that “combines traditional religious beliefs in divine law and religious authority with the modern notion of the nation-state” and inevitably leads adherents to “religionize politics.”⁶ Perhaps as American scholars interact more with the work of their colleagues abroad, American Christian nationalism may become less nebulous as both a concept and analytical tool.

However, pivoting to ideological religious nationalism as an international equivalent currently does little to clarify the ambiguous nature of Christian nationalism, particularly in regard to what adherence to the ideology concretely changes about one's actions. As Nilay Saiya and Stuti Manchanda have rightly noted, few, if any, studies investigate “the effect of Christian nationalism on actual social or political outcomes.”⁷ In other words, is Christian nationalism merely a belief system or ideological lens that is attractive to certain segments of the population, or is the ideology a motivating factor in political or social action? Saiya and Manchanda were only able to identify one study that made a causal link between Christian nationalism and behavior – one's likelihood of voting for Donald Trump.⁸ However, they were also able to demonstrate that “the political empowerment of Christian nationalism” at least correlates with an increase in “antiminority violence.”⁹ Although the Capitol insurgency of January 6th, 2021, increased concerns about Christian nationalism and political violence, little work has clarified the relationship between the two.

In fact, much of the recent work on Christian nationalism has centered on further refining the term, its adherents, and their political activities due to the same nebulous nature Smidt pointed out. At the very least, Perry and Eric McDaniel have demonstrated that sharing Christian nationalist beliefs does not automatically mean someone supports the state enforcement of those beliefs. They have shown that a large number of Black Americans share Christian nationalist ideology but do not support the state's enforcement of those beliefs, as many of their white compatriots do.¹⁰ Other scholars have similarly begun separating Christian nationalist ideology into at least two camps, regardless of one's race or ethnicity. First, there are

3. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford UP, 2020), 19.

4. Corwin E. Smidt, “Christian Nationalism, Civic Republicanism, and Radical Secularism in Contemporary American Politics over Time,” *Religions* 15, no. 11 (Nov. 2024): 1.

5. Smidt, “Christian Nationalism,” 2.

6. Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Worldwide Rise of Religious Nationalism” *Journal of International Affairs* 50, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 1–20; Joseph A. Wagoner et al., “Ideological Religious Nationalism: Measurement, Construct Validity, and Cross-Cultural Comparisons,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 165, no. 4 (2025): 525–557, DOI: [10.1080/00224545.2024.2441312](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2024.2441312).

7. Nilay Saiya and Stuti Manchanda, “Christian Nationalism and Violence Against Religious Minorities in the United States: A Quantitative Analysis,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 64, no. 1 (2025): 4.

8. Saiya, “Christian Nationalism,” 4–5.

9. Saiya, “Christian Nationalism,” 5.

10. Samuel L. Perry and Eric L. McDaniel, “Must Religious Nationalism Divide? Race, Government-supported Religion, and Views of Political Solidarity and Compromise,” *Social Science Quarterly* 104 (2023): 1253–1266. For a historical review of this dynamic, also see Curtis J. Evans, “White Evangelical Protestant Responses to the Civil Rights Movement,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (Apr. 2009): 245–273.

those, like many Black Protestants, who focus on social and civic responsibilities and believe religion, often defined through a decidedly Protestant lens, plays a vital role in the character and social structure of the nation. Ruiqian Li and Paul Froese note that this group advocates for “a religious-based cultural conservatism,” but “they tend to be more trusting of others overall” and are “less Islamophobi[c], less anti-Semitic, and less nativist” than many who share similar beliefs about America’s special place in God’s divine plan.¹¹ Li and Froese refer to this wing of Christian nationalism as “Religious Traditionalism,” but other scholars have referred to it as “Civic Republicanism” or “civil religion,” an older term with a history all its own.¹²

Li and Froese, joined by a growing chorus of academics, argue that Religious Traditionalists are concerned with societal health and cohesion, whereas other, significantly more dangerous, Christian nationalists, whom they call “Christian Statists,” are far more likely to endorse governmental enforcement of their shared values, policies, and preferred Christian symbolism in American life. It is these Christian Statists, they argue, who are “strongly linked to exclusive and intolerant attitudes toward the most marginalized groups.”¹³ Similarly, Ruth Braunstein has argued that Christian nationalists can be grouped into two clear camps, one which champions a “white Christian nation,” akin to Li and Froese’s Christian Statists, and another that instead favors a “color-blind Judeo-Christian nation.”¹⁴ The difficulty, for Braunstein, Li, Froese, and other social scientists, is that although they see two versions of Christian nationalism, they are currently unable to determine clearly who belongs in each camp, since both use nearly identical language to express their understanding of, and hope for, the nation and publicly champion the same religious patriotism. In other words, if there are two camps within Christian nationalist circles, scholars have yet to distinguish clearly who falls into each camp based on the self-reported ideological beliefs of Americans in current polling.

This study argues that the nebulous nature of Christian nationalism, particularly attempts to distinguish between types thereof, comes not because of a lack of statistical or analytical foundations, but rather because the historical origin of Christian nationalism in America was, at its heart, an inherently political enterprise that very clearly conflated a “color-blind Judeo-Christian” nation with a “white Christian nation.” Although scholars have rightly noted the influence of the Religious Right and Moral Majority of the 1980s on current Christian nationalist movements, those ventures were themselves echoing older legacies of religious nationalism, particularly those of the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁵ One clear evidence of this is the fact that Donald Trump’s campaign to “Make America Great Again” by, at least in part, “stopping cold the attacks on Judeo-Christian values” is solidly grounded in a return to America’s holy fifties, a time when, according to Trump, “[Americans] were not pushed around, we were respected by everybody, we had just

11. Ruiqian Li and Paul Froese, “The Duality of American Christian Nationalism: Religious Traditionalism versus Christian Statism,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no. 4 (Dec. 2023): 771.

12. Smidt, “Christian Nationalism,” 1–18. See also Eric L. McDaniel, *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics* (Cambridge UP, 2022).

13. Li and Forese, “Duality,” 771–772.

14. Ruth Braunstein, “The ‘Right’ History: Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America,” *Religions* 12, no. 2 (Feb. 2021): 2, [DOI: 10.3390/rel12020095](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020095).

15. See, for example, Matthew Avery Sutton, “Was FDR the Antichrist? The Birth of Fundamentalist Antiliberalism in a Global Age,” *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (March 2012): 1052–1074; Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2011); Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford UP, 2010); and Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate American Invented Christian America* (Basic Books, 2015).

won a war, we were pretty much doing what we had to do.”¹⁶ The chief proponents of the religious patriotism, supposed national unity, and international dominance to which Trump and his supporters long to return lumped these elements together into what they called a “faith in freedom.”¹⁷

America's faith in freedom was purposefully nebulous, centering on appeals to an ill-defined Judeo-Christian tradition upon which the nation was supposedly founded. Borrowing from a long tradition of patriotic and militant religion, mid-century politicians, advertisers, and public relations experts, often working directly for the White House, reinterpreted the trope of America's providential destiny for their own uses and applied it most forcefully to the organization of a militarily and economically dominant nation.¹⁸ Social unity was the principal selling point of their efforts, even if it was primarily a means to other ends. Consequently, Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower, along with their various allies, intentionally concealed America's growing racial divide by subsuming race under religion and insisting that confronting racial injustice inevitably divided and, consequently, weakened the country. The religious patriotism and façade of national unity within America's faith in freedom were not an accident, but they were not the point, either. They were the by-product of a political project that still haunts America to the present day.

Intentionally Nebulous from the Beginning

On October 30, 1949, Democratic president Harry Truman, a man few associate with the rise of Christian nationalism, proudly declared on all four major television and radio networks that “the United

16. Donald J. Trump, “Remarks at the Family Research Council's Values Voter Summit” (speech, Washington, DC, October 13, 2017), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-family-research-councils-values-voter-summit>; and Alison Griswold, “Donald Trump says America Hasn't Been Great in 116 Years,” *Quartz*, July 21, 2022, <https://qz.com/648386/donald-trump-says-america-hasnt-been-great-in-116-years>.

17. For a few select examples of presidential uses of “faith in freedom,” see Franklin Roosevelt, “Proclamation 2629—Thanksgiving Day, 1944,” November 1, 1944, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-2629-thanksgiving-day-1944>; Harry Truman, “Address at the Unveiling of a Memorial Carillon in Arlington National Cemetery” (speech, Arlington, VA, December 21, 1949), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-unveiling-memorial-carillon-arlington-national-cemetery>; Dwight Eisenhower, “Radio Report to the American People on the Achievements of the Administration and the 83d Congress,” (speech, August 6, 1953), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-report-the-american-people-the-achievements-the-administration-and-the-83d-congress>. For a look at the possible origins of this term, see Franklin D. Roosevelt to Roy Ross, letter, July 14, 1943, folder 8129, Religious Education Week; cross-reference sheet for Elmer Davis, July 23, 1943, folder 6680, Religion, President's Personal File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, NY (hereafter FDR Library). For a more complete account of the historical development of mid-twentieth century American religion, see Andrew R. Polk, *Faith in Freedom: Propaganda, Presidential Politics, and the Making of an American Religion* (Cornell UP, 2021).

18. Although the ideas of what we now call Christian nationalism have existed throughout US history, they have most often flared up during times of war. Not surprisingly, advertising agencies, in particular, leaned heavily on these antecedents during the Second World War and early Cold War. For scholarly examinations of early Christian nationalism during the American Revolution, see Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (Basic Books, 2010), and James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution* (Oxford UP, 2013). For the US Civil War, see Richard Carwardine, *Righteous Strife: How Warring Religious Nationalists Forged Lincoln's Union* (Knopf, 2025), and James P. Byrd, *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War* (Oxford UP, 2021). Finally, for World War I, see Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade – Angels, Apocalypse, and the Spiritual Dimensions of Modern Violence* (HarperOne, 2014), and Jonathan H. Ebel, *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (Princeton UP, 2010).

States has been a deeply religious nation since its earliest beginnings.” He went on to tell the American people:

[T]he need which the founders of our country felt – the need to be free to worship God, each man in his own way – was one of the strongest impulses that brought men from Europe to the New World. As the pioneers carved a civilization from the forest, they set a pattern which has lasted to our own time. First, they built homes and then, knowing the need for religion in their daily lives, they built churches.¹⁹

Yet this spiritual foundation was not relegated to the past, Truman insisted. “When the United States was established, its coins bore witness to the American faith in a benevolent deity. The motto then was ‘IN GOD WE TRUST.’ That is still our motto and we, as a people, still place our firm trust in God.”²⁰

Rife with historical inaccuracies, Truman’s mythic account of the nation’s religious origins is typical for the religious propaganda of the period.²¹ With no mention of Native Americans or the horrors of slavery, Truman’s narrative has no room for criticism of American history or the nation’s present activities, and any mention of such criticisms would only weaken the nation and help the “godless communists” who constantly threatened America’s freedoms. Yet Truman did recall the nation’s faith in God, a faith that prompted the founders to include “In God We Trust” on their coinage. In truth, the phrase was not included on American coinage until the Civil War. Northern preachers were concerned that the Confederacy explicitly and unequivocally called upon God in both their Constitution and official proclamations, while the Union included no such declarations. Although Abraham Lincoln opposed the numerous amendments designed to add an acknowledgment of God to the US Constitution, he did agree to have the motto added to the coinage. The Union was in the midst of a war, and they needed to show that they were on God’s side.²² Truman and his speech writers might have genuinely believed their erroneous version of the story, but it seems unlikely. Regardless, historical accuracy might not have mattered. Truman understood that, even if their current rivalry had not yet escalated into all-out war, Americans needed once again to demonstrate, or at least claim, their devotion to God if they were to gain the upper hand.

The fact that the president of the United States would so brazenly proclaim America’s religious foundations might be surprising to some. Others might assume such declarations would be made by Truman’s successor, Dwight Eisenhower. They would be right, of course. Eisenhower, who historians have rightly characterized as the high priest of America’s civil religion in the mid-twentieth century, made so many declarations of the nation’s religious heritage during his presidency that years before he left the office, his staff had begun denying requests for speaking events so that the president’s seemingly endless religious

19. Harry Truman, national broadcast (press release copy), October 30, 1949, folder 260, Religion, box 449, President’s Personal File, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, MO (hereafter HST Library).

20. Harry Truman, national broadcast, October 30, 1949.

21. Although employing the term “religious propaganda” might seem suspect, the period’s religious campaigns were explicitly called such by the federal government, both Congress and the White House. For example, see “Memorandum of Conversation,” November 21, 1952, folder 080, American Legion, Psychological Strategy Board Files, box 4, Staff Member and Office Files, Papers of Harry S. Truman, HST Library. See also Nancy E. Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960* (Cambridge UP, 1999); Robert Jackall and Janice M. Hirota, *Image Makers: Advertising, Public Relations, and the Ethos of Advocacy* (University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (University Press of Kansas, 2006).

22. Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (Penguin, 2006), 373–374.

references would not annoy the public.²³ Yet Eisenhower, despite his friendship with the evangelist Billy Graham and seemingly genuine religious patriotism, was really following a program established by his two immediate predecessors, Truman and Franklin Roosevelt.

The three had numerous allies in that project, but none was more influential than the Advertising Council, a conglomeration of American advertising executives who offered their expertise and services to the government free of charge. Formed during the Second World War as the War Advertising Council, the group simply dropped “war” from their name after the conflict ended. Their public relations campaigns were responsible for many of the more famous slogans during the war, including “Rosie the Riveter,” Smokey the Bear’s “Only You can Prevent Forest Fires” (from the rumored Japanese loyalists seeking to start fires in the Pacific Northwest), and “Loose Lips Sink Ships.” They worked diligently with the government’s Office of War Information (OWI) both to inform and convince the American people of the government’s preferred view of the conflict. The Roosevelt administration was especially concerned with inculcating a sense of unity behind the war effort. Americans were incredibly diverse, but they needed to unify for the sake of the war, Roosevelt believed. Race, ethnicity, and class were too divisive, but in the end, all Americans, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, believed in the same God and held the same essential American faith.²⁴ Or, at least, that is what the Advertising Council continuously told the American people. The Advertising Council and the Roosevelt administration made the relationship between them more official and more secretive soon after, when the latter invited members of the former’s Executive Committee to the White House for “off-the-record indoctrination talks” with the president and members of the War Department, Navy Department, and other executive agencies.²⁵ The meeting would become an annual event in the coming years.²⁶

When Truman similarly asked the Advertising Council to continue their work with the government, the group was happy to do so. Public relations campaigns linking patriotic support with brand recognition and consumer expectations for the postwar world drove record profits for the advertising industry during the war.²⁷ The group’s public service work also garnered them far more influence over public opinion than they could have ever achieved on their own, since it made them both the intermediaries between the government and private sector and the architects of both sectors’ public messages. Most often, this happened when the government gave them specific issues to promote, such as when seasoned propagandist Archibald McLeish, former director of the Office of War Information and then Assistant Secretary of State in charge of public and cultural relations, came to Advertising Council executives in 1945 asking them to generate public support for international cooperation. The advertisers then sold the idea to the business community as a way to promote international trade and free enterprise and to the American media as a demonstration of patriotic duty and public service. The resulting funds and free advertising space gave the Advertising Council the means to craft messages that appealed to the American people and were guaranteed to be echoed

23. Bruce Harlow to Murray Snyder, memorandum, November 23, 1954, folder 47, Committee on Religion in American Life, White House Central Files, President’s Personal File, box 806, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, Abilene, KS (hereafter DDE Library).

24. Polk, *Faith in Freedom*, 13–71.

25. “Memorandum for General Watson and Grace Tully,” February 16, 1944, and “Memorandum for the President,” March 6, 1944, folder Advertising, 1944, file 196, box 196, Official File, FDR Library.

26. Daniel L. Lykins, *From Total War to Total Diplomacy: The Advertising Council and the Construction of the Cold War Consensus* (Praeger, 2003), 41.

27. John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1976), 100.

by America's influential leaders.²⁸ In this way, the line between advertising and propaganda became razor thin with the Advertising Council. For the advertisers themselves, the distinction was essentially irrelevant and had far more to do with polemics than substance.²⁹ By combining governmental policies with corporate objectives, they could sell both as a public service. Consequently, the group set about finding ways to link governmental policies with the needs and desires of the business community.³⁰

This link became more official as the Advertising Council ingratiated itself to the White House. With the war's conclusion and the complete dismantling of the OWI, the Advertising Council did not want to lose access to the president. Consequently, after the Media Programming Division, the peace-time progeny of the OWI, asked the Advertising Council to coordinate all messaging, outdoor advertising, and radio allocations for the government, the Advertising Council requested that the White House formally integrate the Media Programming Division into the Executive Office of the President, ensuring a close relationship with the administration.³¹ They then leveraged that relationship to ensure Congress funded the newly created office, with Truman personally interceding on their behalf.³² Thus securing their position, the Advertising Council ensured that they maintained the same system they had developed during the war; they would promote the business interests of their corporate sponsors, but only insofar as they did not overstep or overshadow the government's aims. In other words, they could promote the White House's propaganda and fold corporate interests into those programs, as long as they could persuasively argue the campaigns were always advancing the government's preferred causes.

In 1946, the government chose atomic energy, world trade, and religious unity as their three chief causes.³³ The first two easily fit into the Advertising Council's objectives. Atomic energy promoted both technological innovation and national security, and world trade advanced both Truman's interventionist policies and the business community's interests in an expanded consumer economy. Religious unity might seem odd, but the Advertising Council had found throughout the war that religion was a useful means of promoting American unity while necessarily admitting to its great diversity. They were also happy to discover that liberal Protestants publicly affirmed their message. The Council based the language and general schema of their campaigns on the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America's (FCC) "Judeo-Christian" ecumenism. Although the term Judeo-Christian first appeared in 1899, it did not receive wide usage until the late 1930s, when it became popular in liberal Protestant circles as a designation of the shared beliefs and heritage of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.³⁴ Consequently, whenever liberal Protestant leaders spoke of America's foundational alliance of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, they would implicitly,

28. See James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 31–32.

29. For a detailed example of the way public opinion, advertising, and propaganda were conceived during this period, see Leonard W. Doob, *Public Opinion and Propaganda* (Henry Holt and Company, 1948).

30. Lykins, *Total War*, 39–49.

31. Anthony Hyde to Mr. Stellman, November 15, 1946, as quoted in Inger L. Stole, *Advertising at War: Business, Consumers, and Government in the 1940s* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 246n26.

32. Theodore S. Repplier, "Advertising Dons Long Pants," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1945): 269–278; "Truman Acts to Aid Advertising Council," *New York Times*, October 18, 1945, 27.

33. Kevin Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to its Protestant Promise* (Oxford UP, 2011), 69. See also Schultz's examination of the movement on pages 68–73.

34. Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 65–85; Mark Silk, *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America since World War II* (Touchstone, 1988), 40–53; Deborah Dash Moore, "Jewish GIs and the Creation of the Judeo-Christian Tradition," *Religion and American Culture* 8 (Winter 1998): 31–53; Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 57–63, 73–80; and especially K. Healan Gaston, "The Cold War Romance of Religious Authenticity: Will Herberg, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Rise of the New Right," *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 4 (March 2013): 1133–1158.

and sometimes even explicitly, endorse the Advertising Council's efforts. In the Advertising Council's hands, that religious unity reinforced the government's continued calls for American patriotism and sacrifice to keep the nation safe and the business community's advancement of a prosperous, and consumeristic, nation. Dubbing their religious campaign "United America," the Advertising Council ran it alongside, and in support of, the National Council of Christians and Jews' Brotherhood Week. Executives throughout America's burgeoning advertising industry supported the campaign, including those with no direct link to the Council. Catholic and Jewish advertisers, who had only recently entered the industry in significant numbers, were especially supportive.

By all accounts, United America was an unqualified success. It ran from 1946 to 1952, but reached its height of exposure and influence in 1949. That year, over twelve thousand newspapers throughout the country received full advertising kits with cartoons, proof sheets of photos, and editorials written by some of the nation's leading journalists. Hundreds of newspapers pledged their own personal coverage of the event through editorials or essays.³⁵ Eighteen thousand movie theaters received kits with window cards and posters personally delivered by the National Screen Service, and every major Hollywood studio pledged significant time in their newsreels for the event. The most prominent coverage came from the nation's radio stations, which almost unanimously used the organization's pre-recorded "live" spots featuring such notable actors and celebrities as Bing Crosby, Red Skelton, Jane Wyman, and Jack Benny.³⁶ All four major networks dedicated time to United America, including six thirty-minute broadcasts and even two television shows. Although the true impact of such a massive promotion cannot be completely measured, advertising agencies used listener impressions to determine the overall public exposure to a message. According to the Advertising Council's measurements, one listener impression meant that either one person or household heard or viewed the message once. United America's radio spots produced over one billion listener impressions in 1949 alone.³⁷

United America was, in many ways, an extension of a previous advertising campaign, the Freedom Train. Co-sponsored by outside groups with their own interests in mind, most notably the American Heritage Foundation, the Freedom Train and its accompanying "patriotic revival meetings" were intended to educate the American public on what they considered America's three great pillars: religious freedom, free-market capitalism, and a strong military essential to defending them both. Coming after the innovations of the New Deal and with the baggage of America's historical distaste for large standing armies, the latter two were hard sells, but they were made all the more palatable by the former. In the words of Thomas D'Arcy Brophy, the Advertising Council executive who coordinated the project, the Freedom Train was about "re-selling Americanism to Americans," and they had long ago decided that religion was the best way to do so.³⁸

Consequently, the Train was intended to define America for Americans. Numerous political, economic, civil, and religious individuals and groups vied over the Train's message. Through these many machinations, a central message emerged: freedom. They defined America as both a land of freedom and freedom's ardent protector. Some ideologically liberal leaders, including Attorney General Tom C. Clark,

35. Nelson A. Rockefeller to Harry Truman, letter, February 16, 1949, folder 1460, Christians and Jews, National Conference of (1945–1949), folder 1, Official File, HST Library.

36. "1949 Brotherhood Week Progress Report to Harry Truman," February 16, 1949, folder 1460, Christians and Jews, National Conference of (1945–1949), folder 1, Official File, HST Library.

37. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 70.

38. "A Program to Re-sell Americanism to Americans," November 15, 1946, folder 8, Thomas D'Arcy Brophy Papers, box 35, Wisconsin State Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI, as quoted in Wendy Wall, *Inventing the American Way: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford UP, 2008), 2.

advocated for either “democracy” or “equality” as America’s defining virtue. However, Advertising Council executives decided that the terms carried too much baggage. Equality, especially, meant too many things to too many different people. Granted, freedom was just as vague, but organizers felt that people held more firmly to their various interpretations of equality, whereas everyone loved freedom, no matter what they thought it actually was. Organizers were especially cognizant of the many divisive connotations that equality held in the southern states.³⁹

Freedom was better, they thought. Specifically, they designated religious freedom, which they nebulously defined as a sort of Judeo-Christian heritage rather than religious disestablishment, as a core tenet of American life and the vital element that both America’s enemies threatened and the American military had to protect. Thanks to the goading of business leaders, organizers also intimately linked free enterprise with freedom of religion as the communists’ target. The Freedom Train taught Americans that their country was a bastion of religious freedom and the land of opportunity, where free enterprise meant that anyone could pull himself, or less commonly herself, up by the bootstraps.⁴⁰ When visitors learned that the communists hated our freedom, they also learned that both America’s material and spiritual prosperity represented this freedom and, consequently, Americans had to defend them at all costs. In all, over three and a half million people visited the Train itself and an estimated one in three Americans participated in one of its associated events.

Yet both the Freedom Train’s and United America’s successes paled in comparison with the Advertising Council’s next major campaign, Religion in American Life (RIAL), which Truman’s national address on October 30, 1949, was designed to kick off. As Truman’s speech indicates, the White House directly sponsored the initiative and was vital in gaining the support of local newspapers and advertisers, who generously donated over three thousand print ads. Besides simultaneously broadcasting Truman’s speech, the American Broadcasting Channel, Mutual Broadcasting System, National Broadcasting Channel, and Columbia Broadcasting System dedicated free commercials and hours of airtime to the campaigns’ message. Despite its overlap with the wildly successful 1949 United America campaign, RIAL still generated over five hundred million listener impressions just in the month of November. The US population was around one hundred and fifty million in 1949, meaning that public exposure to the RIAL was astonishing. The Advertising Council also blanketed the nation’s outdoor billboards with over fifty-two hundred advertisements that taught Americans during the build-up to Thanksgiving Day that “Families that Pray Together Stay Together.” RIAL inundated Americans with tales of the religious foundations of the country, the Soviet threat to American prosperity, and, for the sake of their freedom, the need for national unity.⁴¹ According to the Advertising Council, Americans could demonstrate that unity by supporting the expansion of America’s essential military presence abroad, buying American-made products, and “attending and supporting the churches and synagogues of their choice.”

The story of the mid-century’s religious propaganda goes far beyond Truman and the Advertising Council, though the latter was a key player in both Roosevelt’s and Eisenhower’s own programs. Roosevelt, the first to breach America’s traditional wall of separation between church and state in such a way, first looked to religious leaders to support his policies with divine sanction. However, they proved to be unwieldy allies, especially the liberal Protestant FCC. Yet his move beyond religious institutions and

39. See Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (W.W. Norton and Co., 1998), 249–252; and Wall, *Inventing*, 227–240.

40. “American Heritage Program,” folder American Heritage Foundation, Tom C. Clark Papers, box 18, HST Library.

41. “Background Memorandum for Religion in American Life,” October 24, 1949, folder 5573, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., President’s Personal File, HST Library.

recruitment of secular propagandists such as the OWI and Advertising Council would prove to be a vital template for his successors. Truman initially repeated many of Roosevelt's mistakes and wooed those same religious elites, only to reject them in much the same way. Eisenhower, for his part, never even attempted to court religious leaders, though he had the advantage of Roosevelt's and Truman's established programs and the support of additional secular interests in advancing his own religious propaganda, such as the United States Information Agency, the American Legion, and the Foundation for Religious Action in the Social and Civil Order. He also had Billy Graham, whose embrace of the period's propaganda would heavily influence conservative evangelicals' embrace of its core tenets in the coming decades.

The religious propaganda campaigns of these three presidents are not wholly responsible for the religious revivals of the so-called "holy fifties"; the individual experiences of everyday Americans are far too complex to be wholly attributed to public relations campaigns. However, the fact that advertisers, politicians, and military leaders chose to define American identity in religious terms to suit their own ends is itself important, especially since that same patriotic religious rhetoric has come to define the period during which they employed it and is the template for Christian nationalist ideology today. Examining how these civic leaders crafted religious propaganda to, as one of Eisenhower's allies put it, prompt "religiously-motivated action" toward common political goals also sheds light on the ways others have used and continue to use religion to promote their own agendas, including those around the world who seek to "religionize politics," as Juergensmeyer proposes.⁴² In truth, although their contexts and policy goals have changed over time, most of the presidents since Eisenhower have adopted America's faith in freedom.⁴³ However, since the 1980s, the conflation of free market economics and military strength with religious nationalism has been closely associated with white evangelical Protestants, the Republican Party, Christian nationalism, and the many organizations and leaders who blur the lines between them all.

A Color-blind Judeo-Christian Nation is a White Christian Nation

The mid-twentieth century origins of today's Christian nationalist symbols, sayings, and tropes is noteworthy in and of itself, but it also helps explain the nebulous nature of the term and the inability of Braunstein and others to distinguish between those who use the ideology to promote a "color-blind Judeo-Christian nation" and those in favor of a "white Christian nation." Simply put, the original, mid-twentieth century origins of Christian nationalism made no distinction between the two. Despite the rhetorical calls

42. Charles Lowry and John L. Sullivan to Charles Wilson, letter, January 3, 1956, folder 118, Church Matters and Religion, 1956, General File, box 680, White House Central File, DDE Library; Wagoner et al., "Ideological Religious Nationalism," 525–526.

43. See, for example, John F. Kennedy, "Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, Salt Lake City, Utah, Mormon Tabernacle" (speech, Salt Lake City, UT, September 23, 1960), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/speech-senator-john-f-kennedy-salt-lake-city-utah-mormon-tabernacle>; Richard Nixon, "Remarks at Tulsa, Oklahoma" (speech, Tulsa, OK, November 3, 1972), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-tulsa-oklahoma>; Gerald R. Ford, "Remarks at the Combined Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters and the National Association of Evangelicals" (speech, Washington, D.C., February 22, 1976), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/document/s/remarks-the-combined-convention-the-national-religious-broadcasters-and-the-national>; Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Prayer," (speech, September 18, 1982), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-address-the-nation-prayer>; and George W. Bush, "Remarks at the American Conservative Union 40th Anniversary Gala" (speech, Washington, D.C., May 13, 2004), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-american-conservative-union-40th-anniversary-gala>.

for unity in diversity, the supposed Judeo-Christian foundations of the nation came out of the white, Protestant imagination and principally applied to, and was advantageous for, the same group. Catholics, Jews, and Black Americans were invited to join the political and social mainstream insofar as they accepted and endorsed a religious patriotism on white, Protestant terms.

Yet again, Truman perfectly illustrates this dynamic, particularly in his letter to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States on April 29, 1946. Considering his audience, Truman's letter understandably included far more religious language than was common, yet he described concepts of America and American religion that would become far more pervasive later in his presidency and come to epitomize America's national identity in the first decades after World War II. Truman began the letter by declaring that "Religion and Democracy in this country have risen side by side."⁴⁴ Truman went on to describe how religion and democracy strengthen each other and would always prosper together. In America, this symbiosis had produced a shining example of freedom and cooperation for the rest of the world, Truman claimed. Specifically, "religion in America is a supreme demonstration of unity in diversity." Echoing the Office of War Information's and War Advertising Council's World War II campaigns, Truman insisted that despite the great diversity of American life, religion was the glue that held them all together. "Ours is a religious unity," Truman wrote, "without prejudice to any worthy loyalty of faith or creed. [...] What we have here achieved among different races, colors and faiths points the way and offers encouragement to all other [nations]."⁴⁵ The vast majority of Black Americans of the day disagreed. So too did American Catholics and Jews who had suffered prejudice and discrimination throughout the war and who had long been wary of Protestant definitions of "worthy" faiths and creeds.

Although he often used inclusive language to describe Americans' "several faiths," Truman made it clear that in his mind American "religion" was Christianity. "Here, as perhaps nowhere else in the world," he wrote, "the fundamental unity of Christianity and freedom has been demonstrated."⁴⁶ He went on to quote Jesus and the biblical Acts of the Apostles as demonstrations of universal religious thought. This conflation of Christianity with religion, spoken of in decidedly Protestant terms, helped thwart Truman's attempts to unite the world's religious leaders against communism later in his presidency, but it resonated with American Protestants who had long held similar biases.

Similarly, and perhaps more egregiously, Roosevelt often conflated Christianity with "religion" in confounding ways. For instance, throughout 1939, Roosevelt was increasingly concerned with the evolving situation in Europe and, though the American public had been clear they wanted the nation to stay out of what looked to be yet another European conflict, he was certain the nation needed to become more involved. To garner support for a more forceful response to Adolf Hitler's expansionist agenda, Roosevelt decided a unified denunciation of German aggression by America's, and perhaps even the world's, religious leaders would put diplomatic pressure on the Nazi Party and elicit public support for his own policies.⁴⁷ Consequently, on December 24, 1939, Roosevelt's Office of Communications widely disseminated to national and international media outlets three "personal" letters addressed to the respective leaders of the three more dominant religious traditions in America and, as far as Roosevelt was concerned, the world.

44. Harry Truman to William Lampe, letter, April 29, 1946, folder 260, Religion, President's Personal File, box 449, HST Library.

45. Harry Truman to William Lampe, April 29, 1946.

46. Harry Truman to William Lampe, April 29, 1946.

47. See Franklin Roosevelt to George Buttrick, personal letter, March 14, 1940, folder 1628, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, President's Personal File, FDR Library; and unsigned internal memorandum, December 28, 1939, folder 1628, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, President's Personal File, FDR Library.

Roosevelt's administration painstakingly constructed the letters over the preceding weeks and held them in strict secrecy until they released them to the media. The letters were portrayed as both a goodwill gesture and Christmas greeting from the president. The administration chose Rabbi Cyrus Adler, president of Jewish Theological Seminary, to represent American Jews, and George A. Buttrick, president of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (FCC), for American Protestants. The last letter went to Pope Pius XII, head of the Roman Catholic Church. Roosevelt offered each man warm wishes and his hearty thanks for all that each had done for his people and the world. Yet Roosevelt also noted the fear and uncertainty of the time; war had again come to Europe and threatened to envelop the globe. It was the responsibility of all people of goodwill, Roosevelt insisted, to come together in any way they could for the cause of peace. He hoped the three men and those they represented would put aside religious differences and join together for the common good.⁴⁸

Yet, the Christmas letters demonstrate that Roosevelt's proposed religious unity was grounded in a decidedly liberal Protestant framework. For instance, his letter to Rabbi Adler often referred to the common faith of America's diverse religious traditions and their love for a common God but argued for religious unity through an explicit allusion to Christian belief. In what is a particularly puzzling argument to present to a Jewish leader, Roosevelt suggested that just as the shepherds first saw the star heralding the birth of Christ, so do the common people long for a guiding light in this time of chaos and uncertainty; he then implored Adler to be such a light. In a more pointed example, during a working lunch in 1942, Roosevelt told two of his advisors, Leo Crowley and Henry Morgenthau, Jr., a Catholic and Jew, respectively, that America was "a Protestant country, and the Catholics and Jews [were] here under sufferance." It was up to the two men and those within their religious traditions, Roosevelt proclaimed, to "go along with anything I want."⁴⁹

Neither Truman nor Eisenhower were ever so explicit, but both at least shared Roosevelt's tendency to equate "religion" with Protestant Christianity and his annoyance at the insistence of religious leaders to divide Americans over theological and doctrinal issues they considered minor and unnecessary. Ironically, of the three, Eisenhower is most remembered for his constant appeals to religion during his administration, yet he also had the least interest in religious ideology of the three, a trait he adopted from his father. Although committed to a Mennonite sect called the River Brethren in Eisenhower's youth, his father became convinced that all Christian sects and traditions had been corrupted by dogmatism and refused to join another.⁵⁰ Eisenhower embraced his father's aversion to institutionalized Christianity when he left Abilene, Kansas for the Army's military academy at West Point. He maintained a respect for religious principles and a firm belief that religious values were central to a proper family and civic life but rejected theological and doctrinal systems as unnecessary burdens. He attended interdenominational services during his time at West Point but dropped the practice almost completely during the rest of his illustrious military career. When General Douglas MacArthur once chided Eisenhower for conspicuously avoiding religious services, Eisenhower replied that he had "gone to the West Point Chapel so G.D. often" that he would never need to go to another church service again.⁵¹

48. Press release, December 23, 1939, folder 1628, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, President's Personal File, FDR Library.

49. As quoted in Michael R. Beschloss, *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman, and the Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1941-1945* (Simon and Schuster, 2002), 51.

50. William Stringer, "The President and the Still Small Voice," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 26, 1954; James Hagerty to Anne Whitman, memorandum, April 5, 1954, and Dwight Eisenhower to William Stringer, letter, April 8, 1954, folder 53, Religion (1), President's Personal File, box 903, DDE Library.

51. As quoted in Piers Brendon, *Ike: His Life and Times*, (Harper and Row, 1986), 9.

When Eisenhower ran for president in 1952, a great many of his advisors felt that he had a very pressing need to go to church services. America needed a leader with a deeply held faith. Eisenhower was such a man, his confidants argued, but the public would not know this, and he, therefore, could not properly lead them unless he made a public display of his personal faith. Both Billy Graham, with whom Eisenhower had recently struck up a friendship, and Claire Booth Luce lent their voices to the effort, but Eisenhower was firm. Although he agreed with them, he refused to join a church just to garner votes. He would do so after the election, but not before.⁵² The fact that Eisenhower did not join, or even attend, a church during his election bid did not mean that he was silent on what he thought was the nature and effect of religion. He had retained his belief that religion was necessary for the formation and maintenance of social order, and he saw the fight against communism in this light. In one election speech, he made his feelings explicit when he asked, “What is our fight against communism if it is not a fight against anti-God and a belief in the Almighty? Communists know this. They have to eliminate God from their system. When God comes in, communism has to go.”⁵³

It was in this same context that he gave his most famous, or infamous, declaration on American religion. After meeting with Grigori Zhukov, a Soviet officer and his former colleague and friend from the Second World War, Eisenhower hosted a press conference to discuss the meeting. He told the press that the two former allies discussed the nature of American faith and freedom. Eisenhower explained to his friend what he thought was the difference between the two nations and why the United States would inevitably triumph. America was founded on a belief that all people were created equal, and that belief, as described in the Declaration of Independence, was founded on the fact that God created all people in God’s own image. Eisenhower never identified the founders as particularly religious, but rather that the nation itself held this religious foundation as an essential element of its being. He then offered a further explanation. “In other words, our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is. With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept, but it must be a religion that all men are created equal.”⁵⁴

Considering that Eisenhower’s declaration came at the height of Jim Crow and almost two years before the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision upended America’s segregated society, it is clear that “all men are created equal” implicitly meant *white* men, despite any rhetoric to the contrary. In addition to conflating Christianity with religion, the discriminatory nature of America’s supposed unity in diversity is even more evident when one looks at the ways race was used, or ignored, in the religious campaigns of the mid-twentieth century. For instance, during the Second World War, the OWI worked closely with Hollywood’s movie studios to craft images of America and the war that would sway the public to support the war effort. One strategy was the suppression of racial discrimination and, in many cases, Black Americans, from Hollywood films. They achieved this by “writing out” troublesome Black characters who drew attention to racial divides. For instance, when MGM began producing a screenplay called “Battle Hymn,” the Motion Picture Bureau of the OWI recommended the omission of a group of African Americans in a scene set during the American Civil War. Although the film did not explicitly

52. Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (HarperCollins, 1997), 191–192. The incident with Claire Booth Luce is recounted in William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1906: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge UP, 2008), 265, and Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President* (Simon and Schuster, 1990), 16. For Eisenhower’s recollection of the events, see Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956* (Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1963), 100.

53. As quoted in Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Academie Books, 1988), 198.

54. Dwight Eisenhower, Address at the Freedoms Foundation (speech, New York City, NY, December 22, 1952).

designate them as such, the Bureau knew the public would interpret the men to be slaves, and they did not want to draw attention to that unfortunate period of America's past. The Bureau informed the production company, "The fact that slavery existed in this country is certainly something which belongs to the past and which we wish to forget at this time when unity of all races and creeds is all-important."⁵⁵ They did not deny that slavery existed but insisted that it be relegated to the past. Any attempt to bring up such a divisive subject, even in the background of a film, only served to weaken and disparage America and that could not be tolerated.

The OWI, Advertising Council and many Christian ministers even began casting "Negro" as a fourth religious class alongside Protestants, Catholics, and Jews during the war. For instance, one widely disseminated OWI-sponsored advertisement pictured an "Invitation to Commit Suicide" from the Nazis. The ad featured a revolver sitting above a card that read, "Hate the Negroes, Hate the Protestants, Hate the Catholics, Hate the Jews" with an R.S.V.P. at the bottom.⁵⁶ Similarly, the incredibly popular preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick, supported by the Advertising Council's organization and publicity, began advocating reconciliation dinners across America in 1945 as a way to get Americans of all stripes to unite under their common beliefs and values. He promoted them as including all four branches of American religion: "Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Negroes."⁵⁷

In many respects, the Advertising Council's assimilation into governmental messaging began precisely because of racial politics. Although the OWI and Advertising Council, then War Advertising Council, coordinated programs and messaging, the former was an official arm of the US government and, consequently, had far more influence in what Americans heard about the war and the nation, itself. That dynamic changed in 1943 when the OWI, pursuing African American support for the war, openly and explicitly referred to racism as un-American in several of their advertisements. The reaction was swift and decisive. Southern congressmen, joined by business leaders, challenged the OWI's efficacy and relevance in domestic affairs, noting that the Advertising Council was doing far more for the American cause at home.⁵⁸ Consequently, Congress all but disbanded the OWI's "Domestic Branch" in late 1943, greatly reduced their budget for direct "domestic propaganda" efforts, and transferred most of their old appropriations to the Advertising Council, which proved a better purveyor of the type of unity those leaders envisioned and, not coincidentally, made it clear that any discussion of racial injustices only served America's enemies.⁵⁹

After the war, as the Advertising Council became more entwined with governmental messaging, they were particularly concerned about placing race in too prominent a role. The dismantling of OWI and Strom Thurmond's defection from the Democratic Party in favor of the pro-segregation Dixiecrats during the 1948 presidential election demonstrated to the Advertising Council that race was simply too divisive of an issue to tackle directly. The Advertising Council actually refused to air their own United America campaign during the latter half of 1948 due to the tense political climate generated by issues of race. From 1949 on, they continually kept all groups that put a significant emphasis on race at arm's length, including the NAACP, the American Council on Race Relations, and the Council for Democracy.⁶⁰

55. Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (The Free Press, 1987), 179.

56. Wall, *Inventing*, 136–137.

57. As quoted in Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 3, *Under God, Indivisible* (University of Chicago, 1996), 65.

58. Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 229.

59. "Budget Cut 'Simplifies' Grandiose Plans for OWI," *Editor and Publisher*, August 21, 1943, 42.

60. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 72–73.

The Advertising Council did not ignore race in its programs, including its United America campaign, but it always paired race with religion and emphasized the latter as the primary definition of American diversity. Billed as a promotion of “the truly American benefits of inter-group, inter-faith, inter-American democracy,” the Advertising Council relied on patriotic duty, in an almost nonsensical form, to promote American unity.⁶¹ They also warned of the disastrous consequences of disunity. “In the present unstable condition of the world,” a United America radio advertisement declared, “the United States needs unity among its citizens perhaps more than ever before.” The country “simply cannot afford to be divided by religious and racial antagonisms.”⁶² Such antagonisms, the program explained, made America look weak abroad and, in a refrain that has resonated to the present day, insisted that racial antagonism was the tool of socialists and communist sympathizers.

United America was not explicitly racist; its overt message of racial cooperation and calls for the end of racial discrimination in business forbid such a conclusion. However, the Advertising Council carefully avoided any call for legislative or judicial action and promoted a version of colorblindness that did more to dismiss racial issues than confront them.⁶³ The point was not to end discrimination as much as to promote an innocuous unity. The Advertising Council realized that promoting American unity based on shared religious values not only allowed leaders to speak of unity in diversity without directly broaching America’s race issues but also proved to be incredibly accommodating to the promotion of capitalism and a free market economy. As historian Wendy Wall aptly wrote, “by casting pluralism in religious terms, public intellectuals, government officials, and others could stress America’s democratic diversity without reinforcing potentially divisive loyalties.”⁶⁴

What Now?

In the end, the nebulous nature of Christian nationalism is not a result of unrefined statistical analysis or an absence of theoretical tools; it was an intentional choice of politicians and the advertising executives they employed to sell their preferred policies through an appeal to a common religious heritage that they defined for the American people. In other words, Christian nationalism, as a scholarly and journalistic category, is nebulous because it was *intended* to be such from its very beginning. Likewise, the ambiguous yet subservient place of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities in America’s supposed unity in diversity was an intentional way to unify the country under white, Protestant terms, chiefly for the benefit of the same white Protestants who endorsed or, in the case of multiple presidential administrations, actively sold the ideology to the American populace.

There are certainly numerous differences between adherents of Christian nationalism, and Li and Froese’s division between Religious Traditionalism and Christian Statism at least has the potential to distinguish between the different approaches or objectives of its adherents. However, if Christian nationalism is, indeed, comparable to other forms of ideological religious nationalism throughout the world as Juergensmeyer and others have contended, then parsing between “types” of Christian nationalism will always be difficult, since scholars have already established that a great many Americans espouse the same

61. N.R. Howard, letter to newspaper editors in promotion of 1949 Brotherhood Week, folder 1460, Christians and Jews, National Conference of (1945–1949), folder 2, Official File, HST Library.

62. “Group Prejudice – A National Menace,” Advertising Council Radio Fact Sheet, February 14, 1949, folder 1460, Christians and Jews, National Conference of (1945–1949), folder 2, Official File, HST Library.

63. Lykins, *Total War*, 69.

64. Wall, *Inventing*, 284.

ideology regardless of whether or not they think the government should force that ideology on all. For instance, Braunstein's differentiation between those Christian nationalists who promote an explicitly "white Christian nation" and those who instead promote a "color-blind Judeo-Christian nation" is doomed from the start. As numerous scholars and activists have demonstrated, a great many Americans who champion a color-blind nation do so with an implicit or explicit understanding that a color-blind America would inherently privilege white Americans.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the fact that the architects of the mid-twentieth century's Christian nationalist ideology very clearly conflated the two means that conflation is endemic to the ideology, itself.

Although the inherently nebulous nature of Christian nationalism has confounded modern scholars, fruitful possibilities have emerged. First, Julie Ingersoll has noted that at least part of the public confusion about Christian nationalism, and scholars' inability to speak concretely about it, lies in "the untheorized way most people think about religion."⁶⁶ Rather than a set of clearly defined theological commitments, most people interact with religion in ways that have little to do with doctrine or theology, but are instead a mixture of political and cultural identities, social concerns, and even aesthetic preferences.⁶⁷ Religious affiliation clearly has a positive correlation with support of Christian nationalism, with the Public Religious Research Institute (PRRI) finding that fifty-four percent of white Americans who attend religious services weekly support the ideology. However, not only does PRRI not differentiate between different religious denominations, sects or traditions, they also found that the same correlation holds true for Black and Hispanic Americans who regularly attend services, with forty-six and forty-seven percent of those groups, respectively, supporting Christian nationalism.⁶⁸ If scholars want to understand Christian nationalism better, a fruitful first step would be acknowledging that terms like religion, faith, and church are just as nebulous.

Although they do not yet have much in the way of data or analysis, Li and Froese allude to another, more promising, avenue of inquiry. Based on the previous theoretical scholarship of Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Anthony Gill, and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, they propose that differences between Christian nationalists have as much, if not more, to do with one's feelings of power and control in relation to the state than any religious commitments.⁶⁹ They succinctly write:

[W]hite Protestants rhetorically supported a free religious economy and national inclusiveness when their dominance of American culture was secured by historical conditions. But in light of demographic changes and widespread church disaffiliation, white Protestants have begun to feel that they are losing their market share and now seek special protections and favoritism from the state.⁷⁰

65. For an overview of the scholarship on this dynamic, see Jacqueline Yi, Helen A. Neville, Nathan R. Todd and Yara Mekawi, "Ignoring Race and Denying Racism: A Meta-Analysis of the Associations Between Colorblind Racial Ideology, Anti-Blackness, and Other Variables Antithetical to Racial Justice," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 70, no. 3 (Apr. 2023): 258–275.

66. Julie Ingersoll, "From Christian Reconstruction to Christian Nationalism: What the Media Need to Know about the 75-Year Effort to Establish Theocracy in the U.S.," *Journal of Media and Religion* 23, no. 1–4 (Oct. 2024): 38–39, [DOI:10.1080/15348423.2024.2408124](https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2024.2408124).

67. See Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (Routledge, 2003).

68. Public Religious Research Institute, "Resistance to Christian Nationalism in All 50 States: A PRRI-Meanings of Democracy Lab Report," Oct. 30, 2024, <https://prri.org/research/resistance-to-christian-nationalism-in-all-50-states/>.

69. Li and Forese, "Duality," 795.

70. Li and Forese, "Duality," 795.

Although white Protestants might lend rhetorical support to inclusivity, that inclusivity is ultimately dependent on their own dominance, or, at the very least, perception of such. As America's demographic and religious landscape shifts away from that dominance, they "desire exclusive access to state power to protect their waning cultural influence."⁷¹ This helps explain why there is little rhetorical difference between Black and white supporters of Christian nationalism, even though white adherents are significantly more likely to advocate for state enforcement of that ideology. If Li and Froese are correct, then more and more Christian nationalists will likely move into their Christian Statist category as America's demographic and religious landscape continues to change. Regardless, it is doubtful that Christian nationalism will become less ambiguous, at least rhetorically. After all, it was intentionally designed to be nebulous from its inception.

71. Li and Forese, "Duality," 795.

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