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THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE EXPRESSION "CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM"

What exactly is Christian nationalism? Ever since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, a tight little clique of prominent academics and journalists have been on a campaign to convince Americans that riding on the narrow Republican success in electoral control of the House of Representative that year is a murky, but extremely malevolent political fifth column that seeks to end democracy as we know it – something called “Christian nationalism”. Journalist Catherine Stewart has been the most vehement in sounding the tocsin. Writing last July in *The New York Times*, Stewart warned that the would-be Christian nationalist agenda “should terrify anyone concerned for the future of constitutional democracy”.¹ The controversial SCOTUS decision is merely the first step in prosecuting “a war on individual rights” in every sector of American political life from imposing Christian doctrine in the public schools to mobilizing Bible-waving brownshirts to behave in future close elections even more violently than certain Trump supporters did on January 6, 2021. In a more recent article Stewart argues that what makes the movement even more dangerous is that “Christian nationalists” don’t even know how dangerous they really are, and that those leaders who have the inside view go out of the way to deceive both the public and their own followers about what they are really up to.² Indeed, Christian nationalism is the secret agenda of the entire Republican party, so far as Stewart is concerned. If Republicans take over Congress, she opines, “we can be sure that they will pursue the authoritarian agenda laid out for them by the Christian nationalist movement’s leadership and its allies.”

To be fair, “Christian nationalism” is an expression that has been around for quite a while. Although scholars have rarely reached any kind of real consensus on what it means, the term has been historically associated with a wide spectrum of conventional as well as fringe politics that seek to foreground “Christian” symbols values, broadly understood, in the shaping

¹ Katherine Stewart, "Christian Nationalists Are Excited About What Comes Next", *The New York Times* 5 (2022).

² Katherine Stewart, "Why Are Some Christian Nationalist Leaders Opposed to Being Called Christian Nationalists?", Oct. 27, 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/168314/republicans-scared-called-christian-nationalists>. Accessed Feb. 5, 2023.

of both domestic and foreign policy. Both Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., who invoked Biblical imagery in their speeches, could be considered Christian nationalists in this fairly generic sense. Sociologists Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead in an oft-cited study, however, stipulate a more precise signification for Christian nationalism, characterizing it as "an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture." That particular ideology just happens to correspond in most details in their work with what since the Reagan era has been known simply as "the religious right."³ At the same Perry in a piece for *Religion News Service* takes it one step further, conflating Christian nationalism with the violent anti-government militia movements of the 1990s, some of whom were openly neo-Nazi, as well as David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, who died in a fiery standoff with federal agents in their compound near Waco, Texas.⁴

In a similar essay for *Time* his colleague Whitehead equates Christian nationalism with "authoritarian control" that "includes the threat and use of violence."⁵ In going far beyond their earlier, more modest claims about what is Christian nationalism, Stewart, Perry, and Whitehead are clearly engaged in not-so-subtle agitprop to throw shade on what in the 2004 election were blandly construed as "values voters," that is, religion-minded members of the American electorate who opted for George W. Bush over John Kerry, because the former came across to them as endorsing their traditional views of faith and family.⁶ In contrast, the Christian nationalist alarmists wield a rucksack of rhetorical subterfuges aimed at equating the same perennial set of conservative voters with all sorts of negative political stereotypes. Some, particularly on the trending Twitter thread #Christian Nationalism, even go so far as to gashlight them with the label of "Christofascists".

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

⁴ Samuel Perry, "After Trump, Christian Nationalist Ideas are Going Mainstream - Despite a History of Violence," *Religion News Service* (Aug. 5, 2022), <https://religionnews.com/2022/08/05/after-trump-christian-nationalist-ideas-are-going-mainstream-despite-a-history-of-violence/>.

⁵ Andrew Whitehead, "3 Threats Christian Nationalism Poses to the United States," *Time* (Sept. 26, 2022), <https://time.com/6214724/christian-nationalism-threats-united-states/>. Accessed Dec. 11, 2022.

⁶ See my own analysis of this phenomenon in Carl Raschke, "Catholics as 'Values Voters'," *Guernica Magazine*, Oct. 27, 2004, https://www.guernicamag.com/catholics_as_values_voters/. Accessed Feb. 10, 2023.

The litmus test for whether someone is a Christian nationalist, according to Perry and Whitehead, is whether they agree with the proposition that America is a "Christian nation". A recent inquiry by Pew researchers found that almost half of the country does, in fact, agree. Accordingly, such a finding would suggest half the country is on the verge of goose-stepping us all into a dire, dystopian, Handmaiden-like future. However, what the Pew data actually shows is that the same respondents have wildly divergent views concerning what a "Christian nation" actually means, ranging from whether the United States should be "guided by Christian values" to allowing words from the Bible to be inscribed in public places.⁷ Furthermore, a sizable majority of these purported "Christian nationalists" in Pew's inquiry have no interest in breaching the fabled "wall of separation" between church and state. notwithstanding some random off-the-cuff comments by attention-grabbing politicians such as Lauren Boebert of Colorado and Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, whom the alarmists constantly cite as proof of the underlying conspiracy to turn this country into an Iranian-style theocracy.⁸

The other ambiguity in the polling question, of course, is whether America is statistically a Christian nation (it is), or whether it should be in perpetuity. Most of the change in recent years has not come from a surge of other religions to shift the historic balance between dominant and minority faiths, but between those who identify as Christians and those who consciously do not embrace any religious view whatsoever. Between 2007 and 2012 alone, according to Pew, the proportion of so-called religious "nones" swelled from 15 to 20 percent of the population, and since then has accelerated even faster.⁹ Today it stands at about a third of the population and continues to accelerate.¹⁰ The data does not show by any significant measure that "Christian nationalism", as the alarmists

⁷ Gregory Smith, Michael Rotolo, Patricia Tevington, "45% of Americans Say U.S. Should Be a 'Christian Nation'", Pew Research Center, Oct. 27, 2022.

⁸ The most common of these targets is a previously obscure author named Stephen Wolfe who has authored a book entitled *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow ID: Canon Press, 2022). Wolfe's author bio on amazon.com states that he is "is a country scholar at Wolfeshire in central North Carolina where he lives with his wife and four children. He recently finished a postdoctoral fellowship at Princeton University's James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions. Wolfe is co-host of the *Ars Politica* podcast and has written for *Mere Orthodoxy*, *First Things*, *Chronicles Magazine*, and *History of Political Thought*. *The Case for Christian Nationalism* is his first book."

⁹ "'Nones' on the Rise: One in Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation", Pew Research Center, Oct. 9, 2012.

¹⁰ "Modeling the Future of Religion in America", Pew Research Center, Sepr. 13, 2022.

use the term, is on the rise to the degree that it is a clear and present danger to democratic norms. If one examines even Perry's and Whitehead's own data closely, it rarely supports the exaggerated and increasingly reckless claims they are routinely making in the media. What does seem to be happening, however, is that some very prominent spin doctors from among the academic and media cognoscenti are going out of their way to convince us that what not so long ago was garden variety cultural conservatism must now be reimagined as an apocalyptic plague on humanity.

In many ways "Christian nationalism" has simply become an all-purpose branding term used to derogate the more conservative forms of Christianity in America, which have flourished since the first Puritan settlers arrived in Massachusetts in the early 17th century. Academic arguments against conservative Christianity, depending on the era in which they appear, are not only nothing new, they are simply boilerplate. Furthermore, attacks on "Christian nationalism", regardless of the presumed connotations of the expression can be traced back several generations. They were especially during the administration of George W. Bush, who frequently employed triumphalist Christian language to justify American military expeditions into the Middle East as well as domestic policy on certain occasions and who was, of course, a self-proclaimed evangelical Christian.¹¹ But the term has always lacked precision and is used far more indiscriminately these days than in the past. What is different nowadays, however, is that in the aftermath of the Trump era it seems to be wielded as a rhetorical weapon less against the overt politicization of religious assumptions in the pursuit of partisan aims than as a smear against whole swathes of Christian belief and practice itself, which have nothing to do with "nationalism" per se in the sense it is normatively deployed by political researchers or theorists.

Sociologists Jesse Smith and Gary Adler, Jr. make a extremely well-documented and meticulously argued case against the current "overdetermination" of the term by such prominent authors as Whitehead and Perry. Smith and Adler point out that much of the ongoing hype concerning "Christian nationalism" derives from the systemic misuse of quantitative

¹¹ For a collection of scholarly essays on the influence of evangelicalism on the Bush presidency, see Mark J. Rozell and Gleaves Whitney, eds., *Religion and the Bush Presidency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). The influence on a militaristic foreign policy is closed analyzed in one of the essays, Kevin R. den Dulk, "Evangelical 'Internationalists' and U.S. Foreign Policy During the Bush Administration", 213-34. A collection of essays critiquing Bush's religious efforts to influence domestic policy can be found in Amy E. Black, Douglas L. Koopman, and David K. Ryden, *Of Little Faith: George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

methods that elicit sweeping inferences from vaguely worded polling queries. Such polling fails to distinguish between Christian nationalism in its obvious manifestations, "civic nationalism", and generic "religious conservatism".¹² For example, Whitehead and Perry have established something known as a "Christian nationalism" scale that consists in such anodyne questions as "the federal government should advocate Christian values" and "the success of the United States is part of God's plan." If one were to ask such questions of the typical American citizen in the 1950, the answer most likely would have been overwhelmingly affirmative. Such attitudes have historically belonged to the strain of religiously tinged "civic nationalism" that the sociologist Robert Bellah identified in the late 1960s as America's "civil religion".¹³

Whitehead and Perry do not break down how Americans might parse in different dimensions the wording of the polling questions, but blithely assume that they somehow increasingly advocate the *inseparability* of church and state or somehow prefer authoritarianism to electoral politics. Smith and Adler note the former worry that the fact that the majority of Americans are becoming "Christian nationalists" definition and scaling, which therefore constitutes "an existential threat to the democratic process." However, they wryly conclude that if one considers the implications of this analysis, "It seems to follow, paradoxically, that American democracy can be secured only if the political will of more than half of the electorate is decisively thwarted."¹⁴ Of course, it is easy to sound the alarm that Christian nationalism is not only on the rise, but consists in an "existential threat" if, as Smith and Adler remark, one simply frames "Christian nationalism as an explanatory mechanism...with few theoretical resources for explaining differentiation between groups who reject the scale items to different degrees."¹⁵ There is an abundance of literature – and of course historical evidence – highlighting the close correlation between Protestant sectarianism, Christian messianism, and American democracy¹⁶.

These trends are not growing, nor are they simply becoming more apparent. They were always there, and they never abated. As Reinhold Niebuhr so poignantly put it in 1952 at the beginning of the Cold War and the height of the "Red Scare", the American redemptive "myth" was simultaneously

¹² Jesse Smith and Gary J. Adler, Jr., "What Isn't Christian Nationalism", A Call for Conceptual and Empirical Splitting," *Socius* 8 (2022); 1-14.

¹³ Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967), 1-21.

¹⁴ Smith and Adler, op. cit., 12.

¹⁵ Op. cit., 11.

¹⁶ Redeemer nation.

secular and religious. "Whether our nation interprets its spiritual heritage through Massachusetts or Virginia, we came into existence with the sense of being a 'separated' nation, which God was using to make a new beginning for mankind."¹⁷ The idea of a "new beginning" is inscribed to this day on the American dollar bill – *annuit novus ordo seclorum* ("now begins a new order of the ages"). If we are to go out on a limb, we can perhaps go so far as to claim that "Christian nationalism," regarded not as a specific policy agenda but as the broader notion that historical Christianity is inextricably interwoven with what Anatol Lieven has dubbed "America's creed."¹⁸ Of course, that is not to make the companion assertion that Christianity, even in the broadest connotation of the phrase, *should* be the touchstone of the American ideal overall. The notion, however, that the American "thesis", as Lieven alternately describes its "creed", has always been some kind of thoroughly secular, multi-religious pluralism of utterly diverse and privatized practices and convictions is *prima facie* absurd.

Such a seemingly intuitive concept was inconceivable in all cultures prior to the second half of the twentieth century and, despite familiar polemics seeking to anchor the architecture of American constitutional government within some kind of pure, "secularist" vision of the European Enlightenment, the hard, historical evidence connects it straightaway to the prevailing traditions of English common law and Lockean liberalism. Locke, of course, was himself a devout Puritan, and the vast majority of American colonists were Biblical foundationalists, or what in the present era we would label "evangelicals". As Mark Lilla underscores in a groundbreaking, but controversial book over a decade ago, it is only recently – and largely in that part of the world that regards itself as "Western" – that the political and the religious aspects of human life could have been imagined as in any way "separate". Lilla dubs this phenomenon "the Great Separation," which he traces to the thought of the English political theorist Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century as a reaction to the devastating English Civil War between monarchists and Presbyterians.¹⁹ Indeed the very idea of the "secular" as an autonomous political space can be traced to the various Wars of Religion that ravaged the European Continent throughout much of the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribners, 1952), 24.

¹⁸ Anatol Lieven, *America Right of Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ See Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

The inconclusive outcomes of these wars turned out to be the motivating factor behind the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which brought an end to the devastating Thirty Years War that left dead a fifth of the entire German population. Likewise, it was the Peace of Westphalia that did not simply establish the modern framework for international relations among sovereign nation-states but also for more generalized theories of secular governance and the subordination of the role of religion.²⁰ In short, secularism is not a timeless sort of proposition. Only in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has it become embedded, and even then its permanence or viability remains in doubt. With the eclipse of Anglo-European hegemony on a planetary scale a moment that has been loosely labeled the time of the "post-secular" is perhaps upon us.²¹ Lilla writes:

For over two centuries, from the American and French revolutions to the collapse of Soviet Communism, political life in the West revolved around eminently political questions. We argued about war and revolution, class and social justice, race and national identity. Today we have progressed to the point where we are again fighting the battles of the sixteenth century – over revelation and reason, dogmatic purity and toleration, inspiration and consent, divine duty and common decency. We are disturbed and confused. We find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still inflame the minds of men, stirring up messianic passions that leave societies in ruin. We assumed that this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that fanaticism was dead. We were wrong.²²

The issue today is not really, if it ever was, the separation of religion from politics, but the question of *whose politics, whose religion?* As I myself have argued forcefully, the political

²⁰ The literature covering the subject area of the birth of secularism is profuse. However, two major books offer their own version of an aperçu into the broader topic. They are Robert Jackson, *Sovereignty: Evolution of an Idea* (New York: Polity, 2007) and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

²¹ The currency given to the term "post-secular" is usually traced back to a speech by Jürgen Habermas in 2001, even though it was clearly used before that juncture (See Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge – An Opening", Frankfurt, German Booksellers Association, Oct. 14, 2001). See Péter Losonczi and Aakash Singh, eds. *Essays on the Habermasian Post-Secular Turn* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010); Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan, ds., *Political Theologies in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); Roger Haydon Mitchell, *Cultivating New Post-Secular Political Space* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

²² Lilla, op. cit., 3.

struggle today is inherently one of progressive neoliberalism, which dominates the American academy, and populism. It is more a class issue than anything else.²³ The expression "Christian nationalism" amounts in many respects to a scramble for useful nomenclature that can be "weaponized" on the part of certain narrowly focused, historically benighted, and politically activist scholars to magnify their own anxiety about long embedded strains of cultural nativism, white racism, and religiously coded forms of working class populism that gained outside attention because of their support for the Trump presidency. These strains, combining classical Christian fundamentalism with anti-elitism, hark all the way back to early years of the twentieth century (cf. the political crusades of William Jennings Bryan) and have been the bulwark of rural and suburban American conservative politics for generations. But there is no evidence they have any greater, or more nefarious, impact now than they did twenty or fifty years ago. The problem arises when bad scholarship and sloppy methodology merge to conjure up a Marvel comic-style caricature of political villainy out of what is, in point of fact, a complicated, profoundly imbricated, and highly ambivalent genome of American cultural self-identification that has persisted for over the two and a half centuries. As the rudely disparate results of World War II and the Vietnam conflict attest, American messianic politics can in different circumstances prove to be either heroic or felonious.

Lieven stresses that the central issue is how an inherently "redemptive" nationalism plays out on the world stage. He writes: "Present in all the great powers in modern history has also been an American-style sense of themselves as 'universal nations', summing up the best in mankind and also embracing the whole of mankind with their universally applicable values. This sense allowed these nations to claim that theirs was a positive nationalism or patriotism, while those of other nations were negative, because they were morally stunted and concerned only with the interests of nations."²⁴ Does such a mission lead to social transformation or sustained and largely inconsequential conflict that leaves things much the same as they were at the beginning? Do we have in mind the glories of securing the beaches of Normandy or the inglorious pullout from Afghanistan in August of 2021? We revel through our "civil religion" in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, but we forget the failure of Lincoln's generals almost cost him re-election in 1864, and if it were not for the terrible military miscalculation on the part of the

²³ See Carl Raschke, *Neoliberalism and Political Theology: From Kant to Identity Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

²⁴ Lieven, *op. cit.*, 34.

Confederacy during the Battle of Gettysburg that is known as "Pickett's Charge," there would have probably been no address in the first place.

When John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address on January 20, 1961 exhorted Americans that they should "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty", he was offering a secularized version of what today is called "Christian nationalism" to the young Baby Boomer generation. Kennedy, a Catholic, was not invoking the parochial strains of American religious nativism. He was seeking to cast a wider net for the uniquely American millenarian politics that had been captured during the 1860s in Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic", which had also been sung routinely by the Freedom Riders and Civil Rights marchers were later manifested not in any great transformation of American society, but in the Vietnam debacle as well as the extra-legal entrenchment of African-American inequality that was slowly diagnosed and scrutinized by critical race theorists.

There are numerous factors that have contributed in recent years to the mounting alarmism among progressives about "Christian nationalism", including the most obvious one, namely, that American evangelicals in the presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 appeared to have willfully disregarded their habitual and historical scruples concerning the moral character of politicians for whom they vote when it came to Donald Trump. The blatant inconsistency, not to mention the perceived hypocrisy, of such large groups of "values voters" making such a glaring exception, cannot be easily dismissed. But given the traction from the "culture wars" that are now routinely assigned to presidential elections and the radical shift just in a decade in American party alignments the phenomenon is also readily decipherable. If conservative evangelicals have been patently guilty of doublespeak in endorsing certain candidates, their critics can be equally faulted for letting long-simmering social prejudice stand in the way of clear-headed political analysis. Aside from the tendency of the latter to confuse American exceptionalism, which technically has nothing to do with any particular religious confession, with "Christian nationalism," these same critics recently have betrayed appalling ignorance simply in interpreting the language of garden variety evangelicals whom they now want to tar as "threats" to democracy. The even more recent flap of the FBI targeting ultra-conservative Catholics as potential terrorists is simply one egregious illustration of the seemingly ludicrous inability of blinkered secularists to distinguish either meaningfully or intellectually between the sacerdotal and the temporal when it

comes to certain kinds of religious rhetoric that have been commonplace for millennia.

A recent example is a survey aimed at detecting "Christian nationalism" by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), which with slight variations both duplicates the Whitehead and Perry set of queries and generates by and large the same results.²⁵ The survey poses five basic questions, including the familiar one whether "the U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation" and "U.S. laws should be based on Christian values". The first question is the only one that patently implies support for a policy option, and only 10 percent of respondents agree substantially with the statement. Half of those polled, in fact, strongly disagree and barely a third give any credence at all to the proposition. Given the extreme vagueness of what it would actually entail to "declare" America a Christian nation (e.g., make a presidential proclamation, vote on a Congressional resolution, put Jesus on coins, change the wording of the Constitution, etc.), the question does not really measure anything other than the degree to which respondents feel strongly about their own faith.

If one were to substitute "Muslim" for "Christian" and ask the same question in Turkey officially a secular state, a "strongly agree" response would obviously turn out to be many multiples of the PRRI polling. Since the majority of most Americans reportedly self-identify as "Christian" in some sense, despite a significant counter trend over the past decade, the fact that only a tenth were unequivocally affirmative about making such a declaration could just as easily be construed as evidence of a decline in "Christian nationalist" sentiment. After all, the phrase "in God we trust" to this day remains the official motto of the United States, and given the demographics of the nation when it was approved by Congress in 1956, the expression undoubtedly had an overwhelming Christian connotation. As recently as 2005, a Gallup poll found that 90 percent of American were in favor of retaining it as the national motto.²⁶ If Christian nationalism were on the rise, one would assume the percentage would prove even higher today, which is ridiculous on the face of it. *What we have is a transparent example, whether witting or unwitting, of a seriously flawed research model deployed by its own*

²⁵ "A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture: Findings for the 2023 Brookings/Christian Nationalism Survey (Washington DC: Public Religion Research Institute/Brookings Institute, 2023), <https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PRRI-Jan-2023-Christian-Nationalism-Final.pdf> . Retrieved February 11, 2023.

²⁶ *USA Today*/CNN/Gallup poll, May 20, 2005, <https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/polls/tables/live/2003-09-29-religion-poll.htm>. Retrieved Feb. 4, 2023.

proponents to draw exaggerated and tendentious conclusions from a highly equivocal and exploitative Rorschach word blot.

The import the PRRI/Brookings is fulsomely deceptive and follows the logic of adversarial information warfare in so many ways. The coding of the term "threat" into the very title of the research assumes something that the data itself does not meaningfully evince. What is the "threat" precisely, and to whom? Is there some "Christian nationalist" militia that is covertly training in the wilds of Montana plotting to launch terrorist attacks? Are they planning this time to organize something like what happened on January 6, although something more massive and effective, even with support of 10 percent of the population that is supposedly "committed" to their agenda? If one asks exacting questions, the very logic of what is at stake appears increasingly bogus. Take the fifth formulary in the survey: "God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society." The survey results actually elicit the smallest margin of approval, even though the phrasing is designed to gauge "Christian nationalist" leanings. Interestingly, the term "dominion" in this instance is supposedly the key indicator- even the smoking gun - for a respondent's nefarious, "anti-democratic" proclivities.

But hold on. The English locution (Greek-*kyriarchia*) actually occurs 44 times in the Bible, and routinely references the authority of God in both the Hebrew and Greek version of the Bible. It is also used in certain portions of the New Testament to characterize the messianic character of Jesus and his "dominion" over all creation (e.g., Ephesians 1:21-22). The Greek word outside the New Testament context often is translated as "sovereignty", a key concept in the history of political theory. Without going into superfluous language exegesis, it is fairly well-established among generations of scholars that such verbiage is not an aberration, but integral to the Christian theologian tradition for the last two thousand years. It could be found in virtually all Protestant religious confessions from the Reformation era. Any garden variety Bible believer, currently or in the distant past, would most likely look upon the fifth PRRI test for "Christian nationalism" favorably. So what gives? It is not unlike claiming that any Muslim who adheres at all with any inflection of meaning to the principle of jihad, which can be found in the Qur'an, is somehow a potential terrorist. Many anti-Muslim activists in the aftermath of 9/11 often went so far, but they were appropriately derided by religious studies scholars, many of whom ironically and shamefully participate in the same kind of nonsense when it comes to evangelicals, or to Pentecostals.

A flagrant illustration of the latter is a risible article by Concordia University Professor André Gagné, co-authored in the fall of 2022 with Frederick Clarkson of Political Research Associates in Somerville Massachusetts. The piece, entitled "When It Comes to Societal Dominion, the Details Matter", was published in the online news service *Religion Dispatches*, which unlike much of the mainstream media purports to be infused with the views of credentialed academics.²⁷ Its subject matter is the so-called New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a particular movement within charismatic Christianity at a global level that was founded over a generation ago by the late Fuller Theological Seminary theologian Peter Wagner. Wagner is also reputed to have coined the term "post-denominationalism" invoked frequently by social commentators to describe the present worldwide trend toward independent Christian churches and missionary groups.²⁸

The authors of the *Religion Dispatches* article spill most of their ink in Part II detailing the personalities, nomenclature, and affiliations of the NAR leaders as well as snarking at their deployment of traditional ecclesiastical titles as "bishop" and "apostle" (which of course African-American churches have always done as well). But it concludes with this ominous observation:

The NAR doesn't merit our considered attention because some of the leaders may sound nutty to those outside the movement, but because it's driven by theocratic notions of total societal dominion, including the end of democracy as we've known it; and it deserves our attention because it's developed the political capacities to make these ambitions a lot less of a pipe dream than they seemed even five years ago. This ought to be reason enough to end the era of glib dismissal and casual reporting of one of the most significant religious and political movements of our time.²⁹

"Total societal dominion"? Really? The article offers no evidence whatsoever for this assertion other than a hyperlink to a different article by Clarkson in 2016 on U.S. Senator Ted Cruz (R-

²⁷ Frederick Clarkson and André Gagné, "When It Comes to Societal Dominion, the Details Matter: A Reporter's Guide to the New Apostolic Reformation, Part II", *Religion News Service*, Oct. 11, 2022, <https://religiondispatches.org/when-it-comes-to-societal-dominion-the-details-matter-a-reporters-guide-to-the-new-apostolic-reformation-part-ii/>. Accessed Oct. 28, 2022.

²⁸ See inter alia Peter Wagner, *The New Apostolic Churches* (Raleigh NC: Regal Publishing, 1998); *Churchquake: How the New Apostolic Reformation is Shaking Up the Church As We Know It* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1999) *Apostles and Prophets: The Foundation of the Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Publishing, 2000).

²⁹ Clarkson and Gagné, op. cit.

TX), whom he accuses of "dominionism" and in the same breath acknowledges that he coined the term itself in the late 1990s to connote "the theocratic idea that regardless of theological camp, means, or timetable, God has called conservative Christians to exercise dominion over society by taking control of political and cultural institutions."³⁰ In other words, anyone who is a "conservative Christian" is ipso facto a "theocrat" - and by extension a "dominionist" - who implicitly wants to reimpose sodomy laws on LGBTQ+ people or ban any other expression of religious faith besides a specific version of Christianity.

Frederickson of course distinguishes his own murky notion of "dominionism" from the well-known sectarian initiative known as "Christian Reconstructionism" introduced by the Armenian hypercalvinist thinker R.J. Rushdoony (1916-2001), who gave currency to the word "dominion theology" during the height of his influence in the 1960s and 1970s. Until recently, "dominionism" usually implied among researchers Rushdoony's very specific and draconian interpretation of religious conservatism, which included the imposition of Old Testament law upon civil society³¹. Fortunately, Rushdoony's actual political influence in American electoral politics has been quite minimal, although conflation of the vocables "dominionism" and "dominion theology" is increasingly standard practice among scholars who definitely should know better. Dominion theology has a manifest genealogy within late nineteenth century Calvinism. Rushdoony, an orthodox Presbyterian, was heavily influenced by the writings of Cornelius van Til, the Dutch-American philosopher and theologian considered the progenitor of Reformed apologetics. The NAR, however, has its origins in Pentecostalism, which historically has nothing to do with Calvinism, let alone dominion theology. The latest data indicates there were at the turn of the millennium more than half a billion Pentecostals on a global basis.³²

The red flag, if we follow the account of NAR by historical theologian Dale Coulter, was Wagner's incorporation before his death of the Calvinist idea of the "cultural mandate" into the traditional Pentecostal preoccupation with spiritual

³⁰ Frederick Clarkson, "Dominionism Rising: A Theocratic Movement Hiding in Plain Sight", *Political Research Associates*, August 18, 2016, <https://politicalresearch.org/2016/08/18/dominionism-rising-a-theocratic-movement-hiding-in-plain-sight>.

³¹ Rushdoony's most significant works include *This Independent Republic: Studies in the Nature and Meaning of American History* (Nutley NJ: Craig Press, 1964); *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Nutley NJ: Craig Press, 1971); *Law & Liberty* (Vallecito CA: Ross House Books, 1986).

³² See David Martin, *Pentecostals: The World Their Parish* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

warfare and the gifts of the spirit.³³ In his 2008 book *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World* Wagner adopted, according to Coulter, the rhetoric of Christian reconstructionism to place a conservative version of "the social gospel" (even crediting Walter Rauschenbusch himself) within a "charismatic framework" to emphasize a civic responsibility to bring "heaven to earth".³⁴ In an interview in 2011, five years before his death, Wagner in a magazine interview took on his critics by challenging both the common canard among some conventional evangelicals that NAR was a "cult" (many Southern Baptists with their doctrine of "cessationism" still regard many Pentecostals in this light) and the incipient prejudice, now rife today among certain academics, that it was a covert form of theocratic conspiracy to abolish democracy. Wagner opined:

The way to achieve dominion is not to become "America's Taliban," but rather to have kingdom-minded people in every one of the Seven Mountains: Religion, Family, Education, Government, Media, Arts & Entertainment, and Business so that they can use their influence to create an environment in which the blessings and prosperity of the Kingdom of God can permeate all areas of society.³⁵

Whether Wagner's assurance are legitimate or a form of deliberate deception or "denialism", as Frederickson argues in an earlier essay, cannot be easily sorted out. In the earlier essay Frederickson argues that "turning a blind eye to the theocratic implications of the NAR's theology of political power is of a piece with earlier denials of the existence or significance of Dominionism. These denials had partly to do with the role of Christian Reconstructionism ...in providing a theological rationale to engage in politics along with biblical justifications for an evangelical public policy agenda."³⁶

³³ See Dale M. Coulter, "Neocharismatic Christianity and the Rise of the New Apostolic Reformation, *Firebrand*, January 18, 2021, <https://firebrandmag.com/articles/neocharismatic-christianity-and-the-rise-of-the-new-apostolic-reformation>. Accessed Feb. 13, 2023.

³⁴ Ibid. See also Peter Wagner, *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2008).

³⁵ Peter Wagner, "Year in Review: The New Apostolic Reformation is not a Cult," *Charisma*, Aug. 24, 2011, <https://www.charismanews.com/opinion/31851-the-new-apostolic-reformation-is-not-a-cult>.

³⁶ Frederick Clarkson and André Gagné, "Christian Denialism is More Dangerous Than Ever: A Reporter's Guide to the New Apostolic Reformation," *Religion Dispatches*, Sept. 7, 2022, <https://religiondispatches.org/christian-right-denialism-is-more-dangerous-than-ever-a-reporters-guide-to-the-new-apostolic-reformation/>.

If one wades through all the dense detail and convoluted theoretical verbiage of the three-part *Religion Dispatches* series, one observation is itself undeniable, namely, that the Frederickson and Gagné, are not so much concerned about threats to democracy per se, but paranoid about conservative Christianity in general. The fact that a majority of NAR leaders and influencers supported Donald Trump in the 2016 and 2020, as did of course other evangelicals, is their main argument for the movement's "danger". But what is even more disturbing to the authors is that NAR does not at all fit the usual academic stereotypes about evangelicalism – or "Christian nationalism" – reflecting the views primarily of white, male, Americans. The leadership of NAR, as the authors make plain in naming its leadership, is equally female and male (which is typical of Pentecostalism, but not at all when it comes to Calvinism) and its "nationalism" – or its "patriotism" as they call it in the third installment – is actually *transnational*.³⁷ In this case the article refers to NAR not as "Christian nationalism" but as "Christian globalism", even though obviously the two terms contradict each other within the same polemical space. The familiar charge that evangelicals are subtly "antisemitic" does not even wash, since the NAR leadership is intimately intertwined with global Jewish organizations, not just "messianic Jews" or would be "Christian Zionists".

Admittedly, I myself spent a lot of "participant observer" time with Pentecostals, including the actual NAR organization in the late 1990s and 2000s, and still have close relations with many of them to this day. I wrote favorably about them in two largely well-received books in 2004 and 2008.³⁸ Both books were invited by the same publisher as Peter Wagner's works. I have always been drawn to charismatics and Pentecostals because they are obviously and unself-consciously multiracial, transcultural, and transnational of all Christian populations today, who do not share the presumed "hierarchical" and meritocratic politics of today's globalist elites. It is one more ham-handed as well as *underhanded* attempt of what I have called "progressive neoliberalism" to demonize the legitimate grievances and aspirations of the working class on a planetary scale.³⁹ The

³⁷ See Frederick Clarkson and André Gagné, "Call it 'Christian Globalism': A Reporter's Guide to the New Apostolic Reformation, Part III, *Religion Dispatches*, Nov. 30, 2022, <https://religiondispatches.org/call-it-christian-globalism-a-reporters-guide-to-the-new-apostolic-reformation-part-iii/>. Accessed Nov. 13, 2023.

³⁸ See Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2004); *GloboChrist: Commission Takes a Postmodern Turn* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker 2008).

³⁹ See Carl Raschke, *Neoliberalism and Political Theology: From Kant to Identity Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). See also my forthcoming

customary explanation among scholars regarding the purported appeal of "Christian nationalism" is that it represents a kind of ideological revanchism as well as an unconscious social anxiety among lower class whites incapable of accepting such demographic trends as the growing electoral importance of black and brown America. But the opposite is more likely the case. The current scare about "Christian nationalism" indeed mirrors the progressive neoliberal anxiety about the growing appeal of populism among previously marginalized racial groups.

Movements such as NAR are not so much a threat to "democracy" per se as to the urban meritocratic conviction among the so-called "knowledge class" that they speak exclusively for these marginalized groups, especially when it comes to political and religious matters. That hauteur is equivalent to the proverbial "civilizing mission" of historic colonialism, and it is finally being called out for what it is. Pentecostalism is the real "specter" that is haunting the West today, and it has little to do with "Christian nationalism".

book *Sovereignty in the 21st Century* where I take up the historical symbolism of "dominion" in an even more thorough manner.