Opinion
NCR Voices



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Can everyone please stop talking about "Christian nationalism"? The phrase is way too polymorphous to be useful and all it does is exacerbate the disposition of believers to view liberals as their enemy, and to vote accordingly.

David Brooks, in an otherwise fine piece about how the partisan labels we use often convey a judgmental attitude, recently wrote "today we live in a political, cultural and religious war between two impoverished armies." The first of these "armies" are "Christian nationalists, who practice a debauched form of their faith. Christian nationalism is particular rather than universal. It is about protecting 'us' against 'them' — the native versus the immigrant. It is about power more than love. It is about threat more than hope. It is rigid and pharisaical rather than personal and merciful."

Take a break, pour yourself a cocktail, and relax Mr. Brooks. Yes, there are some people who exhibit these traits but why would he call them — and only them — "Christian nationalists?" As I have noted previously, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Christian nationalist. His vision of what the American nation should look like was grounded in and infused with his Christian values.

What Brooks means to say, I think, is that there is a segment of the American population whose politics have overwhelmed their sense of personal identity and permit it to reshape their beliefs, including their religious beliefs. There is nothing in the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures to justify the posture Brooks describes, so why assign them that label?

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The Pew Research Center's Greg Smith pointed out the difficulty in defining a Christian nationalist last year when, citing a Pew survey in 2022, Smith concluded: "More than half of Americans tell us they've heard little or nothing about Christian nationalism. Furthermore, even among those people who tell us they have heard of it, many of them tell us they don't know enough about it to express an opinion of it one way or the other."

That same 2022 survey indicated that 45% of Americans thought ours should be a Christian nation, but many people meant wildly different things in saying this. For example, two-thirds of Americans said that churches should stay out of politics. So, a certain segment of American society believes both that the churches should stay out of politics and that ours should be a Christian nation. Which is to say, the concept Christian nationalism lacks explanatory value.

The Public Religion Research Institute offered a five-part test of beliefs that define Christian nationalism in a 2023 survey:

- The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation;
- U.S. laws should be based on Christian values;
- If the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore;
- Being Christian is an important part of being truly American;
- God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

Well, I agree that U.S. laws, and all laws for that matter, should be based on Christian values properly understood. The traditional means by which Catholics have made such arguments is by invoking the natural law, written into the nature of things, but always in sync with divine law because God created the world that exhibits nature's laws. I do not think any one American has to be a Christian to be a "real American" but America, while never a Christian nation, has been largely a nation of Christians, especially during its colonial and political founding eras. Removing perspectives rooted in their Christian identity would definitely change American culture in significant ways, many of which might be bad.

By conflating a political category with a religious demographic, it is hard to know what is achieved except trafficking in the same kind of identity politics that has doomed the Democratic Party to minority status.

And what is arguably even worse is that the same 2023 PRRI survey indicated that only 10% of Americans could be designated as "adherents" of Christian nationalism. Hell, 10% of Americans still wonder who shot JFK. Another 19% are labelled sympathizers because they do not "totally agree" with those five markers. Does that make me a Christian nationalist?

Throughout history, commitments to one's faith and to one's nation have intertwined in all sorts of ways, sometimes nefarious and sometimes ennobling. The Polish self-understanding of theirs as a Christian nation was the moral ground from which sprang both opposition to communism and fascist antisemitism. Catholicism and anti-clericalism were at the heart of the Mexican revolution, but devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe bound Mexicans to one another across racial and political lines. Religion played a complicated, prominent, inescapable role in U.S. history.

Back to Brooks. Much of what he writes in his column is unobjectionable: We all have a lot to learn from each other, pluralism is great, Archbishop Rowan Williams is a gem. But Brooks ends on another sour note: "Somehow MAGA has swept in and made us a frightened nation, stagnant, callous and backward." Whatever else it is, MAGA is reactionary, and it is reacting to deformations and degradations of American culture brought on by the avatars of deconstructionism, critical theories, and identity politics.

As Richard Ostling recently explained at Religion Unplugged, Democrats still need religious voters. "Christian nationalism" joins phrases like "white privilege" and "heteronormativity," evidence of virtue signaling that may get one attention in academic circles, but which are deadly at the ballot box. Hurled as an epithet, voters who are Christian and who love their country will think they are being looked down upon for their dual commitments to God and country, and they are not wrong. Whenever anyone mutters the phrase "Christian nationalism" in your presence, thank them for helping to make MAGA inevitable.