The Appeal and Perils of Religious Nationalism: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: The question of how Christians should engage politically is a matter of perennial debate. Ever since the time of Emperor Constantine and the "Christianization" of the Roman Empire, a particularly fraught question is the relationship between Christianity and political power. In Europe's medieval kingdoms, Christians wielded tremendous political power, and even after the rise of secular nation-states, a Christian worldview remained heavily influential. The process of secularization has meant that that influence has waned, and some Christians have adopted the rhetoric of "Christian nationalism" in a defensive effort to hold onto power. This article seeks to describe the appeal of this political ideology in Central and Eastern Europe, in the context of secularization, with reference to parallel trends in the United States. It also provides a theological critique of some of its problems, including its idolatrous tendencies.

Keywords: Christian nationalism, religious nationalism, political engagement, post-Christian.

In August 2022, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán traveled to Dallas, Texas, in the United States to give a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference, commonly known as CPAC. The venue, a regular gathering of American political conservatives, provided Orbán with an opportunity to claim that "Western civilization" was founded on "Judeo-Christian values" and to burnish his credentials as a fighter for those values in Hungary and in Europe as a whole. He also called for CPAC attendees to recognize that he and they were fighting the same battle. "I am here to tell you we should share our experiences," he said, to the cheers of the crowd. "I am here to tell you that our values, Christian roots, and family can be successful in the political battlefield, even nowadays, when political life is ruled by liberal hegemony."

The enemies that Orbán identified in his speech were familiar to anyone who has been paying attention to his political rhetoric during his career as leader of the Fidesz party. Political liberals and progressives, including Democrats in the United States, he said, "hate me and slander me and my country as they hate you and slander you and the America you stand for." George Soros, a Hungarian-born American financier who supports liberal and progressive causes, has a shadowy and dangerous army at his disposal, Orbán claimed. Illegal immigrants—many of

them Muslim—were invading Hungary and Europe as a whole, and Orbán compared the migrant "crisis" of 2015 to the Mongol army that invaded Europe under Genghis Khan.[1] He argued that progressives are anti-family, pro-abortion and in favor of the multiplication of genders. The fight against all these enemies, Orbán claimed, was a Christian fight. Citing The Fundamental Law of Hungary, enacted in 2012, Orbán noted that it obliges the government to protect the "Christian character" of Hungary.

"There is no enemy that Christ has not already defeated," he said, concluding his speech to an enthusiastic crowd. "So let's go out and do it."[2]

How many of the Americans in attendance at CPAC were familiar with Orbán's increasingly autocratic and xenophobic political career in Hungary is not clear. A few weeks before his trip to Dallas, Orbán claimed that "We [Hungarians] are not a mixed race...and we do not want to become a mixed race," adding that countries in which European and non-Europeans are mixed are "no longer nations."[3] In the years since 2010, when Fidesz was elected to a parliamentary supermajority, the Hungarian government has limited the freedom of the press, with Fidesz and its allies now in control of perhaps 70-80 percent of the media market in Hungary.[4] Hundreds of religious communities in Hungary have had their legal status revoked, thus depriving them of money taxpayers could previously designate to churches of their choice.[5]

The purpose of this brief examination of Orbán's rhetoric and the policy goals of Fidesz is not to dissect the details of Hungarian politics. Rather, it is to suggest that Orbán's attempt to blend Christianity and national identity—often referred to as "Christian nationalism"—illustrates one possible way of relating Christianity and politics. As will be seen below, I argue that a more accurate term is "religious nationalism," since this ideology has little about it that is distinctly Christian. The Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), or "Law and Justice," party in Poland uses this sort of rhetoric, in a heavily Catholic country.[6] For example, a document issued by the party in 2005, "A Catholic Poland in a

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[1] Orban's assertion of a "migrant crisis" may be somewhat overblown. "Despite registering 177,135 asylum seekers in 2015, less than a few thousand of these remained in the country, lending further suspicion to the state's manipulation of 'migrants' and 'Muslims' as the focus of their efforts to protect the nation." Nadia Jones-Gailani and Gabi Gőbl: "Islamophobia in Hungary: National Report 2019" in *European Islamophobia Report 2019*, edited by Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez (Istanbul: SETA, 2020), 388.

[2] "Conservative Political Action Committee, Hungarian Prime Ministry Viktor Orban Remarks," C-SPAN, August 4, 2022, accessed March 11, 2024, https://www.c-span.org/video/?522151-2/conservative-political-action-conference-hungarian-prime-minister-viktor-orban-remarks.

[3] Shaun Walker and Flora Garamvolgyi, "Viktor Orbán Sparks Outrage With Attack on 'Race Mixing' in Europe," *The Guardian,* July 24, 2022, accessed March 12, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/24/viktor-orban-against-race-mixing-europe-hungary.

[4] "Analysis: One Year After Election, Media Freedom in Hungary Remains Suffocated," *International Press Institute*, April 5, 2023, accessed March 12, 2024, https://ipi.media/analysis-one-year-after-election-media-freedom-in-hungary-remains-suffocated/.

[5] Armin Langer, Zoltán Ádám, and András Bozóki, "Religion and Authoritarian Legitimacy: The Hungarian Pentecostal Faith Church" in *The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks, and Denominations*, edited by Gionathan Lo Mascolo (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2023), 108.

[6] Julian Coman, "Family, Faith, Flag: The Religious Right and the Battle For Poland's Doul," *The Guardian*, October 5, 2019, accessed March 11, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/05/family-faith-flag-catholic-religious-right-battle-polands-soul.

Christian Europe," noted that it was committed to defend Poland's Catholic identity and values, which should govern the party's activities. Similarly to Fidesz, PiS and its allies have sought to restrict abortion and limit the activities of LGBTQ groups.[7] In Russia, too, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has cultivated a close relationship with the Russian state. As two recent scholars write, this "convergence" between the ROC and the state means that the Church "has already become the most vocal voice in the public arena, with a growing influence over Russian legislation, education, and culture as well as the shaping of the Russian historical memory."[8] Rhetorically, this can be seen through Patriarch Kirill's adoption of the term русский мир (*russkii mir*), frequently translated as "Russian world." While this term has been deployed in different ways throughout Russia's post-Soviet history, Patriarch Kirill's use of this term and the related term of "Holy Russia" indicate his support for Vladimir Putin's neo-imperialist aims.[9] In March 2024, the ROC declared that Russia's war on Ukraine is a "holy war."[10] Indeed, it seems that Putin sees this war not as rooted merely in post-Cold War grievances, but from the perspective of millennia and as an attempt to recover the Russian "spiritual space"—his phrase—which refers to the Christian conversion of the Kyivan Rus' in the 10th century.[11]

In this article, after some matters of definition of terms, I seek first to describe the appeal of this political approach in Central and Eastern Europe, with reference to parallel trends in the United States. In particular, this approach demands to be set in context of the trends of secularization and the "post-Christian" nature of Europe. Second, I attempt here to engage in theological critique of some of the pitfalls and problems of this approach.

Shared Themes

Orbán's speech at CPAC illustrates how the rhetoric, themes and policy goals of European and American religious nationalists cross-fertilize and reinforce each other. In the United States, the connection between Christianity and national identity is a bedrock belief of the so-called "religious right," a movement to which many American—especially white—evangelicals belong. This movement has deep roots in American history, although it began to gain more prominence in the politicization of white theologically conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists in the 1970s as they

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[7] Anja Henning, "The Diverse Catholic Right in Poland," in *The Christian Right in Europe*, 80.

[8] Gaziza Shakhanova and Petr Kratochvíl, "The Patriotic Turn in Russia: Political Convergence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the State?" *Politics and Religion* 15 (2022): 134, accessed April 22, 2024, doi:10.1017/S1755048320000620.

[9] Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of 'Spheres of Influence,'" *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 345, accessed April 24, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921.

[10] Brendan Cole, "Ukraine Is Now 'Holy War,'" Russian Church Declares, *Newsweek*, March 28, 2024, accessed May 7, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-war-holy-1884577.

[11] Jack Jenkins, "How Putin's Invasion Became a Holy War For Russia," *Religion News Service*, March 19, 2022, accessed March 11, 2024, https://religionnews.com/2022/03/19/how-putins-invasion-became-a-holy-war-for-russia/.

increasingly allied with the Republican Party.[12] This movement has now been largely subsumed into the "Make America Great Again" movement of former president Donald J. Trump, who has repeatedly claimed that he is protecting American Christians from the "radical left." Many of his supporters who stormed the U.S. capitol building on January 6, 2021, intent on overturning the 2020 presidential election, carried Christian symbols and signs.[13]

Clearly, these movements are not all the same in these different countries. Their historical context is different, since the experience of Communism shapes the religious scene in Eastern and Central Europe in ways distinct from the United States. But there are some similar themes in this ideology of religious nationalism, wherever it surfaces. Among others, Kristina Stoeckle and Dmitry Uzlaner have recognized the international nature of these movements and argue that a "transnational moral conservatism" allows for extensive cross-fertilization.[14]

First, and perhaps most importantly, it is an ideology that assumes that Christianity is essential to the national identity, and that Christianity should be privileged in the political sphere. While in the United States, religious nationalism is almost always just that—*national*—in Europe, this ideology can sometimes be used to argue for the Christian identity of Europe as a whole, or of "Western civilization," as Orbán noted in his CPAC speech.

Second, religious nationalists use this ideology to create a climate of fear among those who share this ideology. For politicians of any political persuasion, fear can indeed be a powerful tool to motivate voters. The list of political enemies identified by religious nationalists can include immigrants who are religiously and culturally different, "woke" progressives who seek to overcome long legacies of racism and discrimination, and those who call for the right to abortion and greater rights for LGBTQ people. In their rhetoric of fear, the purveyors of this ideology present a vision in which the Christian character of the nation is under attack.

Third, religious nationalists in Europe and the United States assume that Christians have the right to power, and that grasping the reins of political power is the way to bring about a Christian vision for society: the response to these cultural enemies is to fight back. In this regard, religious nationalists are part of the long tradition since the fourth-century "Constantinian synthesis" that brought together Christianity and

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[12] Joseph D. Harder, "'Heal Their Land': Evangelical Political Theology From the Great Awakening to the Moral Majority," (PhD diss., University of Nebraska, 2014), accessed March 14 2024, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ historydiss/67/.

[13] Emma Green, "A Christian Insurrection," *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2021, accessed March 13, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/evangelicals-catholics-jericho-march-capitol/617591/. For a recent and extended journalistic examination of the way that Christian nationalism has gained inroads among American evangelicals, see Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023).

[14] Kristina Stoeckle and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), viii. David P. Gushee is another observer who notes the global phenomenon of what he calls "authoritarian reactionary Christianity." Gushee, *Defending Democracy From its Christian Enemies* (Grand Rapids: Wiliam B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023). In particular, Gushee examines Russia, Poland, Hungary, Brazil and the United States.

political power. While the means are different—electoral politics rather than the sword—the impulse to enforce a Christian vision of society remains the same.

"Religious Nationalism" and "Political Therapeutic Deism"

Other terms can be helpful in clarifying what I am referring to here as "religious nationalism." One of these related terms is that of "populism," which Jan-Werner Müller defines as a political approach that is anti-elitist and anti-pluralist: populist movements and leaders claim to represent and claim power for "the people" against both a corrupt elite and outsiders. Thus, the discourse of populism is inherently a moral one, in that populists define the true people as righteous and elites and outsiders as immoral and perhaps illegitimate.[15] Because of this moral dimension, populist movements can use Christian rhetoric to sacralize "the people" as well as the nation's past, as is the case in Poland and Hungary.[16] Regarding the United States, Matthew Rowley describes a "prophetic populism," and details the role that charismatic "prophets" have played in rallying Christian support for Donald Trump by claiming that his rise to power was divinely inspired.[17] David P. Gushee suggests that another term, that of "authoritarian reactionary Christianity," provides a useful framework for understanding a type of religiously motivated politics that seeks to return to "a premodern world of Christian political and cultural hegemony."[18]

These terms can be useful, and illuminate important dimensions of the efforts to fuse Christianity with particular national identities. There are populist aspects to some of these movements, and the willingness of some activists to undermine democratic norms indicates that a tendency toward authoritarianism can underlie their activities. The term "Christian nationalism," however, remains one of the most prominent categories as scholars and other observers seek to explain this aggressive ideology that links Christianity with national identity. In the U.S. context, this is all the more true as some members of Trump's MAGA movement claim the term for themselves.[19] Yet some critics use the term with a certain amount of imprecision, and some of those opposed to Trump seem to think that *any* political stance informed by Christian values is a dangerous step on the road to theocracy. The comments of David French, an evangelical legal scholar and commentator—and no fan of Donald Trump—on the American scene are also applicable to European politics. French writes that many of America's social

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[15] Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 2-3.

[16] Marietta D.C. van der Tol and Matthew Rowley, "A Posture of Protest? The Search for Christian Identity in a Post-Secular Society: Between Secularised Eschatology and A Sacralisation of History," *International Journal of Religion* 2, no. 2 (December 2021): 110, accessed May 5, 2024, https://doi.org/10.33182/ijor.v2i2.1700.

[17] Matthew Rowley, "Prophetic Populism and the Violent Rejection of Joe Biden's Election: Mapping the Theology of the Capitol Insurrection," *International Journal of Religion* 2, no. 2 (December 2021): 145-164, accessed May 6, 2024, https://doi.org/10.33182/ijor.v2i2.1697.

[18] Gushee, *Defending Democracy From its Christian Enemies*, 68.

[19] For example, Marjorie Taylor Greene, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, in 2022: "I'm a Christian, and I say it proudly, we should be Christian nationalists." Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, "Faith Is Powerful. That's Why Christian Nationalism Is So Dangerous," *Time*, July 28, 2022, accessed March 12, 2024, https://time.com/6201483/christian-nationalism-threat-democracy/.

movements throughout its history have been "infused with Christian theology and Christian activism." For example, much of the civil-rights movement in the United States calling for equal rights for African Americans was profoundly Christian, and yet few of the critics of religious nationalism today would want to deny the positive benefits of that movement. Much the same could be said of the movement of Christian democracy in Europe, which sought to bring Christian social teachings to bear upon social problems. As French writes, Christians can and do disagree with each other on multiple issues, including immigration and abortion, "but it is no more illegitimate or dangerous for a believer to bring her worldview into a public debate than it is for a secular person to bring his own secular moral reasoning into politics."[20] It is not the case that every time a Christian advocates for a particular policy based on her Christian beliefs that she is a Christian nationalist.

Thus, definitions are important, and here I again use an American example in the belief that it is also germane to the European context. In a recent book, sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry examine the contemporary version of this ideology in the United States. In their definition, "Christian nationalism is a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life." Thus, Christian nationalists, in Whitehead and Perry's view, see Christianity and the United States as mutually supportive. A critic of Christian nationalism with a missiological bent might point out that another name for "fusion" here is "syncretism," or the blending together of religious systems to create something that is neither one thing nor the other. Indeed, Whitehead and Perry argue that the "Christian" part of "Christian nationalism" does not refer to doctrinal orthodoxy or personal piety. Some of the adherents of Christian nationalism they discover are even quite secular.[21] Rather, Christianity is used more symbolically as a marker of identity, and contains in their words "assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious."[22] Michael Wear, a former White House staff member during the presidency of Barack Obama, has recently argued that for many people, politics serves as a sort of replacement religion, and that "people are going to politics to get their spiritual needs met…[and it] is also true is that people are going to church to get their political views affirmed." This phenomenon he refers to as "political therapeutic deism," the idea that there is divine approval of one's particular brand of

[20] David French, "What is Christian Nationalism, Exactly?," *New York Times*, February 25, 2024, accessed March 13, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/25/opinion/christian-nationalism.html.

[21] Other observers also note a similar dynamic. Tobias Cremer, for example, writes that "national populists often paint themselves as staunch defenders of the Christian West, while remaining distanced from Christian beliefs, values and institutions." Cremer, *The Godless Crusade: Religion, Populism and Right-Wing Identity Politics in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 6.

[22] Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.

politics.[23] In this pseudo-religion, there is a God, but he is a rather distant, divine force more akin to Deism than to genuine Christianity. This divine being exists primarily to make one feel good about oneself and one's chosen political inclinations. I would agree with Wear that this is true for many Christian nationalists: their use of Christian language and their identification as Christians is less about a genuine identification as Christ-followers and more about claiming that God is on their side. Thus, "Christian nationalism" may be somewhat less accurate than a different term, whether "religious nationalism" or "sacralized nationalism," that does not imply a necessary connection with historic Christian belief.

How many people in Central and Eastern Europe hold religious nationalist views? While it's difficult to say with precision, it is clear that many people in this region link national identity with a particular version of Christianity. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017, 74% of Romanians, for example, said that being Orthodox is "very" or "somewhat" important to truly be a national of Romania. Somewhat lower percentages agreed in Russia (57%) and Ukraine (51%). A majority of Poles (64%) and Lithuanians (56%) said that being Catholic was very or somewhat important to be truly Polish or Lithuanian; a lower percentage (43%) of Hungarians held that belief about being Hungarian.[24] We can also use the United States for illustrative purposes: according to Whitehead and Perry's more precise definition of "Christian nationalism," their research indicates that about half of Americans have some affinity for this ideology that sees Christianity and the United States as historically linked, and that Christianity should be favored in some way by the national government.[25]

The Appeal of Religious Nationalism

The appeal for some people of religious nationalism is, at the least, a further demonstration of the inadequacy of secularization theory, which held that moder-

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[23] Michael Wear, *The Spirit of Our Politics: Spiritual Formation and the Renovation of Our Public Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books, 2023). Wear's use of the term "political therapeutic deism" is an intentional borrowing from the term "moralistic therapeutic deism," a term Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton used to describe the real religious beliefs of American teens who had grown up in Christian churches. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[24] "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," *Pew Research Center*, May 20, 2017, accessed March 13, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/. The link between national identity and Christianity is not new; as the idea of "nationalism" developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it intertwined with various forms of Christianity. See Hugh McLeod, "Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 15, no. 1 (April 27, 2015): 7–22, accessed May 13, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2015.1020009

[25] Whitehead and Perry asked survey participants to rate their level of agreement with the following six statements. 1. "The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation." 2. "The federal government should advocate Christian values." 3. "The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state." On this statement, levels of agreement worked in the reverse from those of the other statements; here, *disagreement* indicate a higher level of Christian nationalism. 4. "The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces." 5. "The success of the United States is part of God's plan." 6. "The federal government should allow prayer in public schools." Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 8-9.

nization would be accompanied by the decline or privatization of religion. Clearly, this is not the case, as can be seen in the continued salience of religious language in the public sphere. Because of this, many sociologists and other observers like Jürgen Habermas have argued that the situation in Europe and elsewhere is best explained by terms like "desecularization" or "post-secularization," in which religion maintains a certain authority and influence.[26]

Nevertheless, this idea of post-secularity can be exaggerated. Even thinkers like Habermas and Nicholas Wolterstorff, who are optimistic about the role that religion can play in the public sphere, acknowledge that religious reasons need to be translated into language accessible to non-religious people.[27] While there are many examples of vibrant faith and growing Christian communities in Central and Eastern Europe, Europe is also a region, in the words of Charles Taylor, that has changed "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[28] While Peter Berger has abandoned his earlier support of secularization theory, his comments decades ago regarding the loss of what he called the "sacred canopy" remain useful. In his description, the "sacred canopy" is the system of belief that legitimates and gives meaning to human activity.[29] Europe and regions influenced by European culture, including North America, are ones in which the former religious "canopy" has been largely abandoned and replaced by other values, usually ones rooted in convictions about human autonomy and the ability of individuals to create their own meaning, morals and values.[30] One of the results of this replacement, paired with this stress on freedom and autonomy, is a rapidly growing acceptance of non-heterosexual identities and gender fluidity. Part of the appeal of religious nationalism is surely rooted in fear of these large-scale changes and a desire to retain at least a religious veneer to national identity.

Thus, when Orbán and other religious nationalists on either side of the Atlantic claim that their civilization, culture or nation was founded on "Christian" or "Judeo-

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[26] For sketches of the debates regarding secularization theory and post-secularity, see Petr Kratochvĺl, "The Religion-Politics Nexus in East-Central Europe: Church in the Public Sphere of Post-Secular Societies," *Perspectives* 17, No. 2 (2009): 119-137; Marietta van der Tol and Philip Gorski, "Secularisation as the Fragmentation of the Sacred and of Sacred Space," *Religion, State & Society* 50, no. 5 (December 5, 2022): 495-512, accessed May 1, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2022.2144662.

[27] Kratochvĺl, 121-124. Even more strongly, Jens Köhrsen has argued that the "public sphere" remains largely a secular one. "[The reasoning and logic involved in public debates are fundamentally secular and alien to religious reasoning. That does not mean that religious actors cannot try to involve themselves in the public sphere. Obviously, they participate in public debates. But they do not deploy religious concepts to do so. Köhrsen, "How Religious Is the Public Sphere? A Critical Stance on the Debate About Public Religion and Post-Secularity," *Acta Sociologica* 55, no. 3 (September 2012): 282, accessed May 3, 2024, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23250523

[28] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

[29] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

[30] Several Christian authors are helpful in making sense of these trends, including Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021); Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); and Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking Books, 2016).

Christian" values, they are not entirely wrong, although this understanding of history is highly selective and limited: there is much in European history and culture that is not Christian. Tom Holland is only one in a long line of historians and philosophers who have asserted that many of the values that Europeans usually assume, including the belief in human dignity, equality, and the need to care for the poor and the weak, arose from a Christian worldview. Holland notes that these were not values that grew out of the worldview of pagan Europe, with its emphasis on honor and shame, nor the thinking of classical Greece and Rome, which valued power and domination. Holland, who is not a Christian, writes that "[t]o live in a Western country is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions…Whether it be the conviction that the workings of conscience are the surest determinants of good law, or that the Church and state exist as distinct entities, or that polygamy is unacceptable, its trace elements are to be found everywhere in the West."[31] Secularization, then, insofar as it involves the abandonment of a Christian worldview while attempting to maintain the values that grew out of that worldview, is ultimately an incoherent project.[32] Thus, the mistake that religious nationalists make is less about their diagnosis than in their proposed cure. As a Christian, I too want to see a Christian ethos and Christian values permeate all society. But, as I note below, the idea that these values should be enforced politically seems to involve a fundamental misunderstanding both of the way Jesus related to political power and of the nature of the gospel, in which meaningful ethics only follow a spiritual transformation.

For Christians living in a secularizing culture, these changes can result in a great deal of anxiety as they see themselves as part of an embattled and threatened minority. This is perhaps why religious nationalism is currently more combative in the United States than in some parts of Central and Eastern Europe. In the United States, theologically conservative Protestants have long believed that they were, in the words of one historian, the "moral custodians" of American culture, and now that the U.S. in their view has drifted from its Christian roots, their sense of victimization and their anger at those they hold responsible—LGBTQ activists, feminists, abortion-rights supporters, "liberals" in general—is palpable.[33] The situation for Protestants in much of Central and Eastern Europe seems a bit different. In many countries, this group is long accustomed to minority status, and that experience along with the persecution some of their communities endured during Communism, leaves them perhaps less inclined to lash out against perceived cultural enemies.

Nevertheless, given this fear of status-loss and influence amid secularizing trends, religious nationalism provides some reassurance for its adherents. It affirms that they are on the winning team and that their nation actually "belongs" in some sense to them.

[31] Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 13.
[32] Timothy Keller describes this phenomenon as "the ghost at the atheist feast," in modern western secularism's attempts to maintain moral convictions and values that the worldview of secularism does not support. Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 46.
[33] Grant Wacker, "Uneasy in Zion: Evangelicals in Postmodern Society," in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 22-24.

It provides them with a list of enemies, who can be identified and demonized. And it provides them with a path to "take their country" back, if they can only elect enough of the right people to positions of political power, which is of course what makes the adoption of this rhetoric so attractive to politicians like Trump and Orbán.

A Theological Critique of Religious Nationalism

From the perspective of Christian theology, religious nationalism poses a number of problems. One of these is simply the theological incoherence of the term "Christian nation." In the Old Testament, it makes sense to speak of Israel as God's "chosen people." God's covenant (Heb. b rî) with Abraham, announced in Genesis 12:1-3 and reiterated in Genesis 15:17-21, meant that God was working to bless the entire world primarily through a particular family. The Old Testament is the story of that family group as it developed first into a confederation of tribes and then as a monarchical kingdom with a particular political structure. The "new covenant," however, is different. Promised in Jeremiah 31:31 and ratified by Jesus Christ during the Last Supper, the new covenant offers promises and blessings not to a particular ethnic group or members of a particular political construct, but to all who trust in Jesus Christ. As Jesus says in Luke 22:20, the cup "is the new covenant in my blood," and salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ is open to all.[34] The Church, the entity created by the new covenant, is explicitly described in the New Testament as consisting of believers from all races, ethnicities and peoples (e.g. Galatians 3:28, Revelation 7:9). Given the New Testament centrality of repentance and faith for access to the new covenant, it makes little sense to speak of a "nation" as being "Christian"; as a political entity, a nation cannot repent. Nor is there any indication in the New Testament that God is specially working through any particular nation. The corporate body through which he seeks to bless the world is the Church (Matthew 16:18). Typically, when religious nationalists speak of their nation as a "Christian" one, they mean that it has been influenced by Christian values, or that its leadership at certain points in history claimed to be Christian, or that its governing system is Christian. None of these attempts are convincing enough to merit labelling a nation as "Christian." While it is true, as noted above, that Christianity has been influential in shaping European—and thus "Western"—culture, there are a variety of other secular sources that have also shaped every nation. Nor is it possible to assert that the New Testament demands a particular governing system; the New Testament assumes a monarchical context for its readers (e.g. I Peter 3:17), but does not mandate that system or any other, including democracy.

A much more substantive problem with religious nationalism is that it carries a serious danger of elevating the nation to a position of worship. It does so by conflating being a Christian with being a member of a particular nation. Political scientist David T. Koyzis has argued that every political ideology, in its centralization of something

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[34] Scripture quotations from the *New American Standard Bible*.

within the created order as supreme, carries within it the danger of idolatry.[35] Thus, liberalism gives "freedom" supreme importance; communism sees "equality" as the ultimate good; conservatism, the "past"; and nationalism, "the nation." Each ideology can serve a quasi-religious function for its adherents, in that it provides them with an ordering worldview and life goal.[36] Adherents of religious nationalism who claim that their nation is "Christian" run the risk of dividing their ultimate loyalty between Christ and their nation. An immediate result of religious nationalism is that it limits the ability of Christians to think critically about their nation and its history. If I, for example, think of the United States as a "Christian nation," I may be less willing to admit my nation's structural flaws and the sins of current or past Americans; this is part of what has driven the heated debate in the United States over the "Black Lives Matter" protests and the question of whether systemic racism still exists in that country. Simply put, religious nationalism has a tendency to lead its adherents to "baptize" their nation and its past. In Europe, this can cause religious nationalists to be unwilling to grapple with their nations' participation in various forms of oppression. Sociologist Philip Gorski is blunt: "[R]eligious nationalism is just national self-worship. It is political idolatry dressed up as religious orthodoxy. Any sincere believer should reject it, remembering that the line between good and evil does not run between people or nations; it runs through them."[37]

From a Christian perspective, a third problem with religious nationalism is its difficulty in dealing with pluralism. A recent book advocating for Christian nationalism illustrates the problem; in it, the author argues that "no nation (properly speaking) is composed of two or more ethnicities" and that "the most suitable condition for a group of people to successfully pursue the complete good is one of cultural similarity." [38] Clearly, one of the overriding tasks of our time is the question of how we live side-by-side in the same communities with people who are of different races, religious beliefs, political convictions, and cultural practices, to note only a few of the more obvious things that can divide us. We need to find ways to live together, and the Bible describes the Church as a body in which there is neither "Jew nor Greek" (Galatians 3:28), one that transcends barriers of division among people (Ephesians 2:14), and one that prefigures a multinational eschatological reality (Revelation 5:9-10). Advocating for a nationalism based on religious or ethnic similarity is not a Christian vision, as Orbán asserted in 2020: "In Hungary, we are very strict that we would not like to have a parallel society, or open society or a mixed-up culture. We don't think a mixture of Muslim and Christian society could be a peaceful one and could provide security and good life for

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[35] David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

[36] As Barbara-Ann J. Rieffer notes, both nationalism and religion can offer to individuals a necessary sense of identity and provide them "with a frame of reference by which they can navigate through an often confusing and complex world." Rieffer, "Religion and Nationalism: Understanding the Consequences of a Complex Relationship," *Ethnicities* 3, no. 2 (2003): 218.

[37] Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion From the Puritans to the Present.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 3.

[38] Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2023), 135, 201.

the people."[39] Orbán's rhetoric may be extreme, and it may be intended just to garner votes. But religious nationalism, because it conflates Christianity with national identity, is by definition exclusionary in two directions. It communicates that one cannot be a true citizen unless one is a Christian, and it also communicates that a true Christian is Hungarian, or American, or Polish, or whatever nationality. For Christians, this has missiological and evangelistic implications. Those who call others into a relationship with Jesus Christ should not imply that becoming a Christian means becoming a member of a particular nation.

Finally, religious nationalism has a problematic relationship with political power, in that it seeks to rule in a way that Jesus rejects. Clearly, we see in the New Testament that Jesus possesses great power, and uses it throughout his earthly ministry. His life, ministry and message were also intensely "political," in the sense that he represented a challenge to the existing social order and called people into a new "kingdom," with himself as king.[40] Yet Jesus consistently rejected the way of political rule that involved coercive power. We see this in the nature of his humble birth; his rejection of the kingdom during the satanic temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:5-8); his refusal to be crowned king (John 6:15); his explicit statement to Pontius Pilate that his kingdom was not of his world (John 18:36); and finally in the manner of his death, crucified in the Roman manner as a criminal. When religious nationalists seek to rule, and to privilege Christians above others in their nations, they are adopting a methodology and a way of being in the world that Jesus explicitly disavows.

As Christians, we are "in" the world, but not "of" it, as Jesus prays for his disciples; he has also "sent" us into the world (John 17:11-21). The nature of what it means to reside in the world as Christ's ambassadors has been and will remain a matter of continued debate, particularly as it relates to political involvement.[41] Religious nationalism, with its idolatrous tendencies, demonizing rhetoric, and coercive methodology is not a legitimate option for faithful Christians. But neither is retreating into isolation in a misguided attempt to create insular Christian communities. We are indeed called to engage with the *polis*, the community of which we are a part. We do so knowing that the kingdom Jesus announced has not yet arrived in its fullness (Matthew 25:31) but that as we live in faithfulness, we testify to its real and ongoing presence (Luke 10:9).

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[39] John Chalmers and Gabriela Baczynska, "Hungary's Orban Rejects Criticism Over Rule of Law, Says He Is a 'Freedom Fighter,'" *Reuters*, September 25, 2020, accessed March 12, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN26G281/.

[40] John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* remains a provocative examination of the "political"—and yet non-violent—message of Jesus. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

[41] For one insightful examination of what this looks like, see James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) In this book, Hunter calls for a focus not on electoral politics, which will always fail to bring about the real change Christians desire, but on what he calls "faithful presence" and the living out of kingdom ethics in all spheres of society. Hunter, 95.

Conclusion

Although there are differences in Central and Eastern Europe and the United States, the ideology of religious nationalism is nevertheless a transnational movement with some shared emphases. These include the belief that Christianity and national identities are inextricably linked, that these identities are under attack, and that political power is the appropriate means of fighting back. For some proponents with limited connection to genuine Christian beliefs and practices, this ideology has more to do with using Christianity symbolically as a cultural marker. For some Christian groups, it can be an attempt to regain through political power the cultural influence they think they have lost. Religious nationalism, it would seem, will continue to have a certain appeal to some Christians, especially as a defensive move in the context of secularization. Yet its theological problems are severe. One can hope that church leaders, pastors, theologians—indeed, all Christians—will continue to think creatively and act faithfully as they engage their cultures while avoiding these pitfalls.

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Привабливість і небезпека релігійного націоналізму: порівняльний аналіз

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Анотація: Участь християн у політиці — предмет постійних дебатів. Ще з часів імператора Костянтина і «християнізації» Римської імперії особливо гостро стоїть питання про відносини між християнством і політичною владою. У середньовічних королівствах Європи християни володіли величезною політичною владою, і навіть після виникнення секулярних національних держав християнський світогляд залишався дуже впливовим. Процес секуляризації призвів до того, що цей вплив зменшився, і деякі християни взяли на озброєння риторику «християнського націоналізму», намагаючись утримати владу. Ця стаття має на меті описати привабливість цієї політичної ідеології в Центральній та Східній Європі в контексті секуляризації, посилаючись на паралельні тенденції в Сполучених Штатах. Вона також містить богословську критику деяких її проблем, в тому числі ідолопоклонницьких тенденцій.

Ключові слова: християнський націоналізм, релігійний націоналізм, політична ангажованість, постхристиянський.