



**THE RELIGION  
OF AMERICAN  
GREATNESS**

**WHAT'S WRONG  
WITH CHRISTIAN  
NATIONALISM  
STUDY GUIDE**

*With thanks to Professor Craig Wansink of Virginia  
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## Definitions

**Ideology** is a linked set of normative ideas about the social and political order, specifically ideas about how society and politics *ought* to be ordered. It is a set of beliefs about justice, the right ordering of human societies.

**Religion** is “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”<sup>1</sup> Religion is a set of beliefs and practices about what is most basic, fundamental, and important in human life.

**Heritage** is our inheritance, a thing passed down from generations and valued for its representation of the past and its ability to give us a vicarious linkage to our ancestors.

**Culture** is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” More concisely, “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs.”<sup>2</sup>

**Nationalism** is the belief that: (1) Humanity is divisible into mutually distinct and internally coherent cultural units called “nations.” (2) Each nation deserves its own state. Political and cultural boundaries should, ideally, align perfectly. (3) Governments have rightful jurisdiction over the cultural life of their nations. They have a responsibility to preserve and defend their national identity and cultural inheritance because: (a) national identity is intrinsically valuable and its preservation is part of the reason governments exist; (b) humans need a cohesive national community for fulfillment, flourishing, and meaning; and (c) every country requires a strong, cohesive, predominant culture to survive.

**Christian nationalism** is the further belief that: (4) America’s predominant culture was, and substantially still is, Anglo-Protestant (or generically European and Christian). (5) We must sustain our Anglo-Protestant culture for the reasons listed above, and also because: (a) our Anglo-Protestant culture was the essential precondition for the American experiment in liberty, and American democracy would become unsustainable without it; and (b) God blesses nations who honor him with symbolic gestures of reverence, and our Anglo-Protestant culture honors him.

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<sup>1</sup>Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

<sup>2</sup>Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 89, 5.

## **Chapter 1: Christianity and American Identity**

1. Is America a Christian nation? What does that mean?
2. Before reading this book, what role did you think the government should play in defending or sustaining America's identity?
3. What is "culture"? How would you describe America's culture (or cultures)?
4. Which audience are you? Are you sympathetic to Christian nationalism? Are you a Christian searching for the right way to understanding the relationship between your faith and American politics? Are you not a Christian but curious about these debates?

## **Chapter 2: Nationalism and the Love of Country**

1. Do you consider yourself a patriot? If so, what do you do to demonstrate patriotism and celebrate your country? What traditions do you observe around national holidays, like Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Thanksgiving?
2. If you do not consider yourself a patriot, why not?
3. What role do you think churches should play, if any, in demonstrating patriotism and celebrating the United States? Should the church commemorate patriotic holidays, display the American flag, or publicly honor veterans during Sunday morning services? What message might such displays imply about the relationship between the kingdom of God and the United States? What does your local church do?
4. What does it mean to be an American? Before reading this chapter, how would you have answered this question?
5. What are the defining elements of nationalism, as outlined in this chapter? What does the chapter say is the difference between patriotism and nationalism? Do you agree or disagree that there is a meaningful difference between the two?
6. After reading this chapter, would you consider yourself a nationalist? Why or why not? Which elements of nationalism do you support or oppose?

## **Chapter 3: The Case for Christian Nationalism**

1. Which arguments in favor of Christian nationalism are most persuasive to you? Which are least persuasive?

2. Samuel Huntington writes about the importance of “Anglo-Protestant” culture for American identity. What features of American culture do you feel are most indebted to Anglo-Protestantism? Do you see non-Anglo-Protestant cultural influences on American life? What are the most admirable features of Anglo-Protestantism? What are the least?
3. What do you think R. R. Reno means when he argues that public life “requires the aroma of the sacred”? Do you agree or disagree?
4. Nigel Biggar argues that a nation must have an official religion, like Britain’s Anglican Church or America’s de facto “ecumenical monotheism,” to sustain democracy. Do you agree or disagree?

#### **Chapter 4: The Case Against Nationalism**

1. Which culture or cultures do you consider “yours”? What culture were you raised with? How did you learn or absorb it?
2. What experience do you have encountering a different culture? How did it make you feel? Have you spent time learning another language, visiting a different country, studying another religion, or reading history?
3. Think about how you answered the first two questions: How easy or hard was it to define “your” culture, or to describe “other” cultures? How easy or hard was it to draw a clear line separating them?
4. For White Americans: have you ever been in a situation in which you were, or felt like, a minority? For all readers: have you ever been in a situation in which you felt like an outsider, like you were not a member of whatever group you were in? How did it make you feel?
5. What risks are there in entrusting the government to define our national identity? Can you think of specific examples of how a government could do so in a way that does not treat everyone fairly?
6. Before reading this chapter, were you aware of the history of democracy in non-Western countries? How does this history affect your view of the relationship between Christianity and democracy?

#### **Chapter 5: Nationalism, Cultural Pluralism, and Identity Politics**

1. Do you agree or disagree that free speech and free religion also imply “free culture”? What does “free culture” mean in practice?

2. What are the benefits of having a single, strong, unified culture? What are the risks or downsides?
3. What does the constitutional theory of viewpoint neutrality mean? Do you believe viewpoint neutrality is a good idea or a bad idea? Regardless of whether it is good or bad, do you believe viewpoint neutrality is *possible*?
4. What are the risks and dangers of the government striving for viewpoint neutrality? What are the risks and dangers of the government *not* striving for viewpoint neutrality?
5. What are identity politics? Do you think identity politics are good for democracy or bad for democracy?
6. The book argues that nationalism is identity politics for the majority tribe. Had you thought of identity politics and nationalism that way before? Was the argument persuasive? Does it change how you think about nationalism?
7. After reading this chapter, do you think nationalism is practical, effective, and unifying?

## **Chapter 6: Nationalism and the Bible**

1. What does the Bible say about nations? How does God view the nations, according to the Bible?
2. Should we look to biblical Israel as a model, not just of morality and righteousness but of political organization and national formation?
3. Have you ever felt that America was “chosen” in some sense to play a special role in the world? Or heard someone give voice to that feeling?
4. Have you ever heard a church leader, a politician, or a pundit cite 2 Chronicles 7:14 or Psalm 33:12 and apply it to the United States? How did it make you feel? How do you think Christians should respond when people use those verses that way?
5. Have you seen examples of nationalist idolatry? What do you think is so attractive about nationalism that can lead people to idolize their nations? How should Christians respond?

## **Chapter 7: The Christian Right's Political Theory**

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have characterized the Christian Right? When did it start and what was its agenda? Why did Christians organize into a political movement? After reading this chapter, how would you answer those questions? Did this chapter change how you understand the Christian Right?
2. How does the earlier history of conservative Christian political activism (from the 1920s through the 1960s) influence your view of the Christian Right from the 1970s onward?
3. Summarize Jerry Falwell Sr.'s argument. What is republicanism? What is Christian republicanism?
4. Summarize the book's argument about Falwell.
5. What are the five observations about the Christian Right in this chapter? What do you think of them?

## **Chapter 8: The Christian Right's Illiberalism**

1. Does the description of "Jacksonian America" ring true to you? Would you recognize yourself, your family, or any friends as a Jacksonian?
2. What stood out to you the most in the statistics about Americans' attitudes about religion and American identity? Whitehead and Perry argue that Christian Nationalism and Christianity are two different things. What are the main differences between them?
3. Of the four manifestations of illiberality (words, historical narratives, church and state, racial inequality), which have you seen the most? The least? Can you think of any other manifestations?
4. The book argues that there is no universal vantage point. The Bible is universal truth, but our interpretations of it are always historically and culturally conditioned. Americans' religion is often shaped by their racial identity, instead of the other way around. This can be hard for some believers to accept. It should be easy to recognize that some religious practices—like worship style, the order of service, or preaching styles—are different in different racial or ethnic traditions, and that many differences are innocuous. But the book also argues that our racial and ethnic identities influence *how we think*, including how we think about God, how we interpret the Bible, and how we define justice. Do you agree or disagree? Can you think of examples of how race or ethnicity influences biblical interpretation?

5. What are the unique features of Anglo-Protestantism compared to other theological traditions? Compared to other ethnic groups? What are its best contributions to American life, culture, and religion? Its worst?

## **Chapter 9: Evangelicals and Donald Trump**

1. What was your first impression of Donald Trump's candidacy for president in 2015 and 2016?
2. Why do you think 81 percent of self-identified White evangelical voters cast their votes for Trump in 2016, and 76 percent in 2020?
3. In your view, what were Trump's best accomplishments in office? What were his biggest failings?
4. The book argues that the education divide explains a large part of evangelicals' attitude toward Trump. Those without a college degree—a majority of Americans and a large majority of evangelicals—supported Trump at notably higher rates than those with a college degree. Which side of the divide do you fall on? How many friends do you have on the other side of the divide?
5. What has been your experience or observation about the way race and ethnicity are talked about in evangelical circles? In White evangelical circles? Did it change after 2016?
6. What was your reaction to the events of January 6, 2021, at the US Capitol in Washington, DC? Were you aware of the Christian symbolism and rhetoric on display? Do you see the riot as a natural outgrowth of Christian nationalism and Trump support or as an aberration?

## **Chapter 10: How to Think of Nation, Gospel, and Creed**

1. Are nations important? Is being an American an important part of who you are? Should it be? Should Christians strive to de-nationalize themselves in pursuit of a singular identity as citizens of the kingdom of heaven?
2. What does it mean to be an American? Before reading this book, how would you have answered this question? How has your view changed?
3. What is the American Creed? How would you define it?
4. Tell a short version of American history. What do you think are important aspects of American history that must be included in the telling? What aspects do you think are sometimes left out? What aspects are overemphasized?

5. What was Reinhold Niebuhr's main point in his essay "Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility"? What do you think America should use its position of outsized power and influence for?
6. How did Frederick Douglass define American identity? How did he relate his Christianity to his American citizenship?

### **Chapter 11: Conclusion**

1. Do you see evidence of Christian nationalism at your church or among your circle of friends and associations? If so, what opportunities do you have to confront it?
2. What role should churches play in confronting Christian nationalism? Give examples of how your church has done so, if any.
3. What is the gospel? What are the gospel's implications for our lives beyond the home and church?
4. How can churches and Christian leaders convey the gospel's full import, including its implications for our social, cultural, and political lives?

## **Addendum: Talking Points for Responding to Christian Nationalist Arguments**

Assertion: “American is a Christian nation.”

Response: “Can you tell me what you mean by that? I agree that Christianity is the most influential religion in our history, that most Americans even today profess some version of Christianity, and that Christian principles influenced American leaders throughout our history. Do you mean anything more than that?”

Assertion: “American democracy won’t survive if we stray from God.”

Response: “I understand that God brings blessing for obedience, but the Bible seems to have in mind the blessings of life, salvation, and God’s Spirit more than the blessing of political liberty. In fact, God does not promise any specific kind of political blessing to us—except the reign of King Jesus in the kingdom of heaven.”

Assertion: “The left hates God, murders babies, and endorses radical gender ideology.”

Response: “Then don’t vote for them, if that’s what you believe. But two wrongs don’t make a right; whatever faults the other side has do not make faults on your side okay. Jesus told us to examine the plank in our eye first. Have you spent time thinking about the problems on your side that contribute to our political crisis?”

## Christian Nationalism Test

This is a short quiz that can help you see where on the spectrum of Christian nationalism a person may be. The more questions to which one answers yes, the further along the spectrum he or she is toward Christian nationalism.

1. Do you believe that America is a Christian nation *and* that the US government has a responsibility to keep it that way?
2. Do you believe the US Constitution should be amended to formally recognize the God of the Bible or to declare that the United States is a Christian nation?
3. Do you believe America has a special covenant with God that other nations do not have?
4. Do you believe most Americans have to be Christians for American democracy to survive?
5. Do you believe that Americans need to be Christians to be fully American?
6. Do you think there should be a religious test for public office?
7. Do you believe public school teachers should lead students in prayer?
8. Do you believe public school teachers should lead students in Bible study (studying the Bible as God's Word, not just as a work of history or literature)?
9. Do you believe public school teachers should be Christians? Do you believe atheists, agnostics, progressives, Muslims, and/or gays and lesbians should be prohibited from being public school teachers?
10. Do you believe that US immigration law should prioritize admission for immigrants who share Judeo-Christian values?
11. Do you believe Muslims should have more restrictive laws, ordinances, and zoning rules for building mosques in America than what apply to churches and synagogues?