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Pious Nationalism and its Implications for our Republic

BY BENJAMIN BROWN on NOVEMBER 29, 2018 • (0)

The United States of America was founded as an experiment in secular, representative governance. While early Americans certainly weren't irreligious, a multitude of documentation suggests that it was the founders' intent to construct a government functionally divorced from religious aims.

This goes beyond the obvious protection of religious practice embedded in the Constitution. The administration of John Adams, for instance, famously issued a declaration of friendship to Morocco which included the following clause: "The Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion." This document [was read aloud to the Senate and unanimously approved](#), demonstrating the comfort the senators felt in officially recognizing the secularity of the Republic. Furthermore, James Madison, labelled as the architect of the Constitution, warned against "[the danger of encroachment by Ecclesiastical Bodies](#)" on politics. Madison also [penned an objection](#) to the presidential practice of declaring national days of prayer, as it "implies a religious agency" and risks alienation of certain sects. Thomas Jefferson praised the "[building \(of\) a wall of separation between church and State](#)."

Religion has played an undeniable role in shaping the American conscience, and all three of these men, as practicing Christians, certainly understood this. However, it must be acknowledged that the prevailing sentiment among the founders was that [the religious element of our society should not influence political action](#). They sought to establish an arrangement of government [populated by religious men commanding secular institutions](#). I contend that perhaps the greatest threat to the secular tradition of American government is the rejuvenation of the Christian far-right — this worrying fusion of American exceptionalism and fundamentalist Christianity that has seized the American heartland.

Since entering office, Donald Trump has surrounded himself with an "[evangelical Cabinet](#)," capitalizing upon the [overwhelming Christian support](#) he enjoyed during the campaign. Stephen K. Bannon, who has since departed the administration, is infamous for his [explicit desire to engage in a holy war with the Islamic East](#), and our sitting vice president [infamously signed Indiana's "religious objection" bill](#). While ostensibly, the bill was designed to [reinforce](#) religious liberty, it enabled Indiana business owners to discriminate [on the basis of religion](#). Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos made the assertion that she intends to use America's public school system to [advance God's kingdom](#)." In 2014, acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker declared that American judges should adhere to a "[biblical view of justice](#)," and suggested that secular judges are unfit to serve. During the 2016 election, then-candidate Donald Trump encouraged Americans to [band together around Christianity](#)" in an explicit endorsement of Christian nationalism.

The Trump administration's assault on Jefferson's "wall of separation" between church and state is not without precedent. At the height of the Cold War, as part of an effort to combat "godless communism," the U.S. government engaged in efforts to emphasize America's religious heritage, including the adoption of "In God We Trust" as our national motto, and the addition of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. George



Academic – ish.

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W. Bush [maintained the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives](#) that was intended to increase the role faith groups played in providing social services. These measures, along with countless other religiously-driven policies, have evaded the gavel of the Supreme Court largely by being [accommodationist](#) — that is, by “presupposing the existence of a (general) Supreme Being” and not necessarily a Christian god. Ignoring this principle is what distinguishes the Trump administration’s pious nationalism from the theological themes that occasionally influenced modern presidential actions and statements. In its intensity, the Trump phenomenon is [without recent historical analog](#).

We must recognize the reality of Donald Trump’s movement; his rhetoric has empowered a radical bloc of voters and [legitimized an ideology](#) which frames the U.S. government’s authority as divinely-mandated. In an incredible departure from Obama’s State Department, President Trump has advocated a worldview which is [unabashedly black and white](#). Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for instance, is motivated by the idea that our world is [interlocked in a spiritual struggle](#) between the Christian West and the Islamic East. Domestically, the perception that the Trump administration functions as a vestige of Christian values in an America rocked by rapid demographic change [has flared nationalist agitation](#). It is maintained that through unyielding reverence to the President, the recession of white, Christian America can be halted and the values which underlie America’s beauty can be restored. This notion that Christian America is under assault [has facilitated the extent of this religious nationalism](#), and the upholding of its philosophies in the executive branch strengthens its legitimacy.

We are privileged to hail from a nation in which governors derive their authority from the consent of the governed. In theory, it ensures that our politicians are held accountable in their pursuit of popular interests. However, when a sizable portion of the American people began to advocate for an arrangement of government which fundamentally contradicts the [secular republicanism](#) our founding fathers intended to establish, the implications can be detrimental to the maintenance of the America envisioned in the Enlightenment. [A slew of American politicians](#) unassociated with Trump subscribe to the principles outlined in this 21st-century [resurgence](#) of Christian nationalism as well, reflecting the prevalence of this ideology in the U.S. and the ambivalence, if not outright support, harbored by the millions of constituents represented by these politicians.

At the heart of all religiously-motivated legislation, whether it be discriminatory restrictions on immigration or attempts to [entrust churches with political influence](#), is the marriage of our religious conscience with our political objectives. So long as we lend credence to the attitude that America’s resolve is of a religious character — that we are on a national mission to fulfill the aims and decrees of Providence, the secular tradition of our federal government will remain at risk. The power of this perception is compounded by fear and misunderstanding; the success certain groups have enjoyed in pressing distorted, prejudicial images of foreign peoples validates the conception that Americans can find refuge in a strong, uniformly Christian national identity.

By discrediting these narrow-minded perceptions, the rationale that underscores and legitimizes Christian nationalism in the U.S. can be weakened, thereby facilitating the downfall of the entire movement. It is vital that we take it upon ourselves to challenge the “crusaderist” notion that America must operate in fundamental opposition to anti-theists and Islamists who supposedly threaten the American way of life. I encourage my fellow Americans to question their preconceptions about “Americanism.” I believe the degree to which we can undercut the justification behind religious imperialism will be the degree to which we can preserve the secularity of our republic.

Now, of course, barriers exist on the extent to which we can purge religious nationalism from our national dialogue. Many older Americans enjoyed comfortable upbringings in an America thoroughly dominated by the WASP demographic and are inherently more skeptical toward definitions that incorporate a shift toward diversity in our national identity. It is tempting for them to perceive the unconventional conservatism promoted by President Trump and his proponents as a sort of call for further legitimizing a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant America. To fracture adherence to this movement, it is imperative that we challenge fears and undermine their opposition to diversity. If this is achieved, there will exist virtually no reason for Americans to cling to this brand of religious nationalism and the assault on the secular tradition of the United States shall cease. We must demonstrate that the present administration does not offer refuge from

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“enemies” of America, but instead it represents ideals that run contrary to the Enlightened republic our forefathers intended to construct.

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