Persuasive Communication Forum Presentation

Derrick Snow

Omega Graduate School

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Essay Title:

An Argument Against Christian Nationalism from a Christian Sociological Perspective

**Introduction**

 Christians should not support Christian nationalism because it is a political movement using the name of Christianity to gain political power and distorts the Christian gospel. However, Christians should support Christians' active civic engagement to help produce positive social change in society. What is Christian Nationalism? Should Christians support it? Many Christians misunderstand what Christian Nationalism is and may support it, thinking they are supporting Christian values within the nation. More to the point, they are confusing a nation of Christians with Christian Nationalism. This paper argues that Christians should not support Christian Nationalism because, in its essence, it is a political movement using Christianity as a form of legitimacy for political and legal power to subject its citizens to an “Christianized” legalism system.

Christian Nationalism is a framework that advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life, consisting of civil laws, social customs, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems, to procure earthly and heavenly good for the nation (Whitehead & Perry, 2020) & (Wolf, 2022). This paper aims to bring about the understanding and concerns of Christian nationalism from a Christian sociological perspective (a sociological perspective in light of God’s creation and interaction). The sociological perspective is an understanding of the social world in the larger social and historical context (Hiebert, 2023). Moreover, this paper aims to persuade well-intentioned Christians not to support the Christian nationalist movement, believing they are pursuing their Christian duty while undercutting the actual teachings of Christianity (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Christians are called to impact the world mainly through the gospel; we can also impact society through civic engagement and promoting human well-being based on Christian principles, but this does not necessitate through means of Christian nationalism.

**Defining Terms**

Grant it that the terms used surrounding Christian nationalism can be confusing because people may hold different understandings. First, nation or more precisely nation-state, “nation-state, a territorially bounded sovereign polity—i.e., a state—that is ruled in the name of a community of citizens who identify themselves as a nation” (Feinstein, 2024). Then, nationalism is “ideology based on the premise that the individual’s loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests” (Kohn, 2024). And then patriotism, “feeling of attachment and commitment to a country, nation, or political community. Patriotism (love of country)” (Baumeister, 2024). Based on these definitions, there is a difference between them, and nationalism does not equate to a nation-state or patriotism; rather, it is a social-political ideology. Finally, “Christian nationalism, an ideology that seeks to create or maintain a legal fusion of Christian religion with a nation’s character. Advocates of Christian nationalism consider their view of Christianity to be an integral part of their country’s identity and want the government to promote—or even enforce—the religion’s position within it” (Volle, 2024). As with nationalism, Christian nationalism is a certain social-political and legal ideology.

Often, nationalism and nation are used interchangeably, but they are actually quite different; a nation has to do with its people, and nationalism is ideological. Countries are sometimes identified by their predominant religion, such as India as a Hindu nation or the U.S. as a Christian nation. This means that most people within that country identify as a given religion, not necessarily the political system and religious system are one. So even though the predominant religion in the U.S. is Christian, this does not equate to that the U.S. is a Christian Nationalist nation.

**Arguments For and Against Christian Nationalism**

Well-meaning Christians generally may argue three points in support of Christian Nationalism: 1) Christian principles are good for all people, 2) It is right for Christians to be socially and politically involved, and 3) God especially blessed our nation. These all may very well be the case. However, these do not necessitate Christian Nationalism. In fact, Christian Nationalism would hold a modified view that “Christized” man-made laws would be good for society and that the “right” kind of ‘Christian’ should be socially and politically involved. To help clarify to Christians what Christian Nationalism actually is, there are four arguments presented in this paper: 1) The United States of America was not meant to be a Christian nationalist nation, 2) Christian Nationalism is a political ideology, not a religious ideology, 3) Christian Nationalism as a system of Christianized legalism, and 4) Christian civic engagement not Christian nationalism. In essence, attempting to separate out what is Christian nationalism (political ideology) and what is a nation (people), a nation of Christians versus Christian nationalism.

**The United States of America was not meant to be a Christian Nationalist Nation**

There has been debate as to whether the intent of colonization and the establishment of the United States was based on building a Christian nation; some of the colonizers and founders may have seen it that way, but not all. Christian nationalism holds the belief that the U.S. has been and should be distinctly Christian in its identity (Corbin, 2019), and “Those Americans who cling strongly to Christian nationalist ideology tend also to believe in an idealized American history centered around Christian heritage and preeminence” (Davis, 2019 p. 7). The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ” (National Archives). Derived from this is the concept of the separation of church and state. This means that our founders directly called out that they did not seek a distinct “Christian” or other religious nation and sought to separate the spheres of life, religion, and government so we would not have religion control the government or the government control religion.

**Christian Nationalism is a Political Ideology, not a Religious Ideology**

From the conflict theory perspective (a sociological theory in understanding social phenomena, which looks at conflict within a society competing for power and resources), we can see that Christian nationalism is in a social-political power struggle for dominance in society with other ideologies. Ideologies in themselves are not an issue; what is within those ideologies can be problematic. With this understanding, we can begin to see that Christian nationalism is not a religious movement but a political movement because of what is in its ideology and goals, competing not for the souls of people but for political and legal power. There are various views of Christian nationalism and various groups supporting Christian nationalism, such as God-and-country conservatives, evangelical Christian culture warriors, politicians, MAGA, QAnon, Proud Boys, white supremacists (Smietana, 2023), and well-meaning Christians. Though they all claim to be pursuing the same thing, their motives may be quite different. Nevertheless, this is the phenomenon of political cooperation, where people with various motives could be in support of the same political power. However, some may argue that there are distinct differences between these groups, “Conservative Christians who oppose abortion and same-sex marriage, and seek to use the political process to have these preferences enacted into law, may potentially be vindicated from the charge of Christian nationalism. Although Christian nationalists may have similar religiously grounded issue attitudes…” (Smith & Adler, 2022, p. 8). Nevertheless, it appears that Christians and right-wing hate groups are joining together in support of each vision of a “Christian Nation”, both fractions of Christian nationalism ideology seeks a certain view of “Christianity” to have greater influence in America’s elections and public policies (Perry, 2022).

It becomes very difficult for non-believers to distinguish between the different fractions of Christian nationalists, for example on January 6th, 2021, “On display among the crowds during the attack on the Capitol were numerous flags and signs with “Jesus Saves” in bold letters, and other Christian symbols proudly displayed alongside numerous blatantly racist ones, including a Confederate flag paraded through the halls of Congress” (Cooper-White, 2023, p. 1). The scriptures inform us that we should be discerning: “By their fruit you will recognize them” (New International Version, 2011, Matthew. 7:16), but for non-believers, these “Christians” nationalist represent Christianity, and Christianity is seen as an umbrella hate group. We as Christians should be cautious of religion and the political system coming to be unified; history has shown multiple negative results. For example, the 20th-century German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer resisted the German Christian nationalist movement that sought a union with the protestant church in Germany with the Nazi government, Bonhoeffer wrote, “The fight which we are bound to fight is not for subtle reasonings nor opinions of particular groups which might become reconciled through a certain amount of good-will. Nay, the fight is being fought for ‘dividing asunder the spirits’ for drawing the line between life and death, between obedience and disobedience to our very Lord Jesus Christ” (Slocum, 2023, p.17). Viewing Christian nationalism from a Christian sociological perspective provides an understanding of social phenomena from a broader social context; by seeing the social forces at work, one can see that political dominance overtakes religious concerns within the Christian nationalism movement. Outsiders see Christian nationalism as a political hate group movement, not as Christians spreading the gospel and doing good throughout the nation. We as Christians need to stand against Christian nationalism in order to make the distinction very clear that we are not looking for political dominance but hold to the way of Christianity informed by the gospel, no matter what political system we are within. Christian nationalism is not a religious movement of changing hearts and minds but a political movement seeking political and legislative power to dominate the nation's political sphere.

**Christian Nationalism as a System of Christianized Legalism**

As a proponent of Christian nationalism states, “Christian nationalism is a totality of national action, consisting of civil laws and social customs” (Wolf, 2022, p.7), meaning that Christian nationalists seek to legislate “Christian” morality. Some Christians may argue making a nation’s laws in agreement with Christian principles is good for all people of that nation, God’s laws are inherently good and thus good for society, believers, and non-believers alike (Delehanty et al., 2019). God’s laws are certainly good; the problem is that no one can obey them, hence the need for Christ. We, as Christians, cannot obey God’s laws, so why would we expect non-believers to obey them?

Some Christians believe that Christian nationalism is a religious movement seeking the favor of God upon our nation (Braunstein, 2021), because “God has a special plan for America, and that to live up to it, the country must govern itself according to God’s will.” (Delehanty et al., 2019, p.9), thus believing God’s will for that nation is within only the political and legal system. As one author puts it, “The main tenets of Christian nationalism are that God established the United States as a Christian nation, and, therefore, the country should essentially be a theonomy (= rule of laws) shaped by Christian values (as interpreted by an alliance of conservative Christian leaders and right-wing political activists)…” (Cooper-White, 2023, p.2). It may seem appealing to Christians to have the nation's laws in sync with Christian morality; however, it creates a

… process of othering, then, serves to create a moral distinction between the “us” (Christian nationalists) and “them” (criminals and deviants) …the creation of this moral barrier not only increases one’s distance from the “other,” but also fosters beliefs that the other deserves to be punished. Thus, in so far as one adheres to Christian nationalist ideology, one is more likely to draw moral distinctions between oneself and those perceived as outsiders, and therefore be more apt to support punitive responses to their deviance (Davis, 2018, p. 303).

The sociological concept of the othering is where dominant groups label and identify those outside the group as them (not one of us) or as the “others”. This is a common social phenomenon, but when taken to a moral distinction, it creates a hostile environment of superior vs inferior grouping, such as the case with racism. Christian nationalism has this social dynamic of creating othering based on a perceived moral superiority. This is a critical aspect of Christian nationalism as it pursuits to legislate “Christianized” morality, which ultimately yields a “Christianized” legalism system, such as in ancient Israel, where they strayed from God’s laws and created a human-derived legal system to make one righteous by following the letter of the law that missed out on the spirit of the law. This legalism framework Christ Jesus strongly preached against that hindered people from the righteous through faith found in Christ.

**Christian Civic Engagement not Christian Nationalism**

Christians are encouraged to participate in civic society, engage in the political system, and lobby to enact legislation, based on their religious convictions, this is not the problem. Christian nationalism ideology is the problem. In the U.S., the concept of separation of church and state does not preclude Christians or other religious people from engaging in civic engagement. Social and political action is a civic duty and should not be confused with Christian duty. However, our Christianity can and should inform our civic duty. Many Christians may hold that Genesis 1:28 is a cultural mandate that Christians are called to impact society; however, this does not mean Christians need to pursue Christian nationalism to make changes in society. Schmidt's 2004 book, *How Christianity Changed the World*, these changes were not done because of the political power of Christian nationalism but were done by Christians who had a genuine concern for people and acted upon it. We are social beings and have the agency to participate in socially constructing the social world around us (Beger & Luckmann,1966). Well-meaning Christians would greatly benefit from sociological thinking, which helps inform people of the larger social dynamics at work in our societies and how to negotiate within the social structures as a social change agent. By all means, let us as Christians make positive social change throughout the nation and the world, not by political might but by genuine concern for people; we can make positive social change within the existing social structures, no matter what they may be.

**Conclusion**

Christian nationalism is a political endeavor to make a nation “Christianized” by legislation; this is counter to the gospel of Christ and results in a manmade system of legalism, which non-believers and believers alike cannot abide by. Christian nationalism is not about bringing Christianity to a nation (a nation of Christians); Christian nationalism is a political movement seeking political goals in and of itself. In history, we have seen how Christian nationalism creates a political system that is far from representing anything Christian. We as Christians want to spread the gospel throughout our nation and the world, so people may come to the saving and living faith of Christianity through Christ not based on an imposed obedience to a political and legal system of Christian nationalism. The English historian Lord Acton of the 19th century pinpointed the issue with power, in particular the political power sought by Christian nationalists, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men” (Dalberg-Acton, 1887), when Christianity is politicalized, it no longer becomes the Christianity of Christ, it is a man-made political system using Christianity as a means to legitimize the sword of the state. Christians do not need to be in political control to enact positive social change in our nation; most of our impact on positive social change will be from others coming to Christ and submitting to the gospel of Christ, where people submit to God’s law not because they are forced to, but because they live in Christ and Christ’s love takes us beyond the laws.

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