

Christian Nationalism Class at Northminster Presbyterian, Indianapolis
September 11, 18, 25, 2024
Dick Hamm

Slides: pic of Manifest Destiny, definitions as needed

Recommended books: "American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays The Gospel And Threatens The Church", by Andrew Whitehead; and "The False White Gospel", by Jim Wallis; "Baptizing America" by Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood; and "The Brothers", by Stephen Kinzer

My thanks to Pastors Brian and Karen for the invitation to be here with you tonight. Northminster is a great church with a great mission and ministry to its members and to the wider community. You have a long list of missional causes here in Indianapolis and beyond, which I greatly admire. One of those that I have particular experience with is Bread For The World, as I serve on the local Leadership Team. I hope to see many of you at an event on October 3, 6:30 – 8:00 pm at Light of the World Christian Church on Michigan Road. We hope to gather 400 citizens to impress upon Senator Todd Young the importance of the Child Tax Credit. The Child Tax Credit was increased during the pandemic and resulted in a huge number of children moving out of poverty. However, after the pandemic the Child Tax Credit returned to the pre-pandemic level and some members of Congress want to cut it even further. We hope that Senator Young will be present with us in this gathering, but you never know until you see the whites of politicians' eyes whether they will show up or not. But Senator Young has been more supportive of Bread's efforts than many others and we're sure he will be encouraged by a large turn-out to support increasing the Child Tax Credit.

Now I am a Disciples of Christ minister, but as you may know the Disciples of Christ came out of the Presbyterian Church on the frontier in the early 1800's. That said, we brought a lot of good things with us from the Presbyterian Church and we are good friends and mission partners in this century. As I like to tell my Presbyterian friends, "the nuts didn't fall far from the tree". As head of the Disciples, I enjoyed working with several PCUSA Stated Clerks during my time including Jim Andrews, Clift Kirkpatrick, and Gradye Parsons and I deeply appreciate Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Your recently retired Executive Presbyter, Alan Thames, and I were pastors together in Ft. Wayne long ago.

Well, that's enough of walking down memory lane! Thanks again for the invitation.

Introduction

The subject of this class is Christian Nationalism. However, for reasons that I hope will become clear, a more accurate phrase is “*White* Christian Nationalism.” Many of you have expressed interest in this class because you have relatives and friends who are deeply in the grasp of “white Christian nationalism”. I hope that by the end of these three sessions you will have the language and concepts you need to understand what white Christian nationalism is, why it is flourishing these days, and how to talk with relatives and friends about it.

Session I

I want to begin by making it clear that I am a patriot. I love the United States of America.

I love its freedom, the prosperity, the landscape, the city scape (for the most part), the innovation, and the increasing diversity of people. Mindy and I have visited all 50 states (when I was a kid, I wanted to visit the west and finally did in my 20's and I was not disappointed).

I was born in Crawfordsville, Indiana, and my family moved to St. Petersburg when I was 9 years old in 1957 where I lived till coming to Butler University as a sophomore. I love the south, I love the north. I still enjoy spending time in both places.

On one of the first Christmases I remember, I was given a U.S. Map puzzle, each state a plastic piece of red, or blue, or green, or yellow. That was one of my favorite toys, ever. I imagined what each of those states must be like. As young adults, Mindy and I hauled tents, and then pop-up campers and our kids, and now a travel trailer all over this great land. (The older we get, the higher above the ground we sleep.)

My family were members of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Crawfordsville, I was baptized at Mirror Lake Christian Church in downtown St. Pete, and then we became charter members of the new Palm Lake Christian Church on the west side of town. I loved Indiana and I still cry when we sing “Back Home Again in Indiana”, and I love Florida with its great mixture of backgrounds and cultures.

Of course, I was a white boy, with privilege. So, I could go almost anywhere without fear of being challenged. Nobody made me feel “less than”, nobody followed me around in stores assuming I was there to steal something, I didn't have to be taught exactly what to do if I was stopped by a policeman. I just assumed, correctly, that I would be able to go to college if I wanted to and where I wanted to.

Honestly, it **was** something of a culture shock to move to Florida. In Crawfordsville there might have been two black families. Nobody thought much of it. When I was 9 and new to St. Petersburg, I boarded a city bus to go downtown to the

Spa swimming pool, owned and operated by the city. When I got on the bus, I immediately walked to the rear of the bus and sat down.....

Yeah, there were things I did not understand, but I would come to understand soon enough. I learned not to go into the “negro” sections of the city and I learned to drink from the “whites only” water fountains and use the “whites only” restrooms.

At age 14, I became a cadet in the Civil Air Patrol. I learned to march, to salute, and learned some things about flying. The Space Program was growing up the same time I was in the 50’s and 60’s and I watched from my yard as rockets went into space from Cape Canaveral, just 90 miles away, and my heart swelled with patriotic pride.

I watched the TV westerns and assumed that the picture of Native Americans as savages must be true and that “civilizing” the west was a necessary action despite the unfortunate impact on the Native peoples. It was years before I learned the meaning of the word “genocide”.

I loved the church and I loved my country. I uncritically recited the Pledge of Allegiance, which included “one nation under God” at the behest of President Eisenhower in 1954 (“to fight Godless communism!”). In 11th grade I took the required course, “Americanism v. Communism” where I learned a bunch of hooey about Marx and Engels and never thought to question any of the assumptions behind the course. I didn’t know anything about the condition faced by workers in the early Industrial Revolution in England that had given rise to the legitimate complaints of labor.

I’ve always taken my citizenship responsibilities seriously, paying my taxes and voting in every election.

You get the picture. With all its flaws, I still love my country; and with all its flaws, I love my church.

But, in seminary, I began to think critically about the difference between my religious faith and my love of country; in fact, I began to think critically about *any* religion getting mixed up with *any* faith.

A fellow student a year ahead of me, was the first to express dismay about my naïve conflation of patriotism and faith.....partly because of her calling out my naivete, I gravitated toward Christian ethics as a major. That led to travels in Puerto Rico where I could see some of the impact of American imperialism, and India, where I had an opportunity to see both the impact of British colonialism and the dangerous brew of Hinduism and Indian nationalism.

The Viet Nam War ended while I was in seminary. (Oddly, the number of people in seminary dropped rather steeply about that time!) Having seen the toll it had taken on the nation, both those who fought in the war and those who fought over the war, I was deeply grieved for my country. I cannot yet sing the National Anthem without choking up: they are tears of grief for my lost innocence about my country, not simply tears of joy. Yet, I love my country.

Since those days I have had the opportunity to travel rather extensively in India, Pakistan, China, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, most of western Europe, a fair portion of Eastern Europe, Israel, Egypt, the Caribbean including Cuba, in Guatemala, Australia, and Oman. In each place I have sought to understand how the predominant religion interacts with the national and local governments.

But I'm ahead of myself. Let's go back and look at some basic definitions and history.

1. What is Christian Nationalism?

Christian Nationalism, as my friend Don Knebel puts it, is the idea that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and its laws should therefore reflect Christian values. (SLIDE – simple definition of CN)

The first obvious problem with this is the question, “Just who is going to be the one to define what Christian values actually are?”

According to Andrew Whitehead, author of the excellent book, *American Idolatry*, “White Christian nationalism combines a number of elements” (which, I will add, come from a particular religious perspective). The first element is a strong moral traditionalism based on creating and sustaining social hierarchies. (SLIDE – first element) Often, these revolve around gender and sexuality. The second element is a comfort with authoritarian social control. (SLIDE – adds second element) The world is a chaotic place, and at times society needs strong rules and rulers to make use of violence, or at least the threat of violence, to maintain order.”¹

(Now, I will add, there is a little trick that gets played here by authoritarians, a trick we see exemplified by Hitler, the ultimate authoritarian. That trick is this: first, you create disorder and chaos, then you offer the solution to it, that solution being authoritarianism. Thus, Hitler sent out his “Brown Shirts” to create chaos in the early 1930's and then used the occasion to consolidate his power by offering extreme law and order....as defined by him!)

¹ Andrew Whitehead, pp. 28-29

Andrew White goes on to say, “The final element is a desire for strict boundaries around national identity, civic participation, and social belonging that fall along ethno-racial lines. (SLIDE – adds third element) A “Christian nation” is generally understood to be one where white, natural born citizens are held up as the ideal, with everyone else coming after.”²

Let’s unpack this a bit.

A “cultural framework” is the scaffolding, so to speak, upon which a society forms. In the case of the United States, our cultural scaffolding includes stories about who we are as a nation. Can you name such stories that describe us as a nation?

(Stories are shared by class members: “Manifest destiny”, brave western pioneers”, “Light on a hill”, “we are exceptional as a nation because we were brought forth by God”, “we are a melting pot”, “we were chosen to have this land”, Europeans came to America on the Mayflower seeking religious freedom for all; the King of England was a tyrant who was heroically resisted by American patriots; George Washington and the cherry tree; Abraham Lincoln walked miles to return a penny; the land was occupied by hostile savages who had to be eradicated to make way for the white settlers who were moving west by the millions; America is a land of immigrants; slavery was brought here by the English and the slaves were better for it because they were made Christians.....)

White Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates for a fusion of a particular expression of Christianity with American civic life,” which means that to be truly *American* one must be a Christian, but more specifically, one must be a particular *kind* of Christian: that is, a Christian who identifies with the moralistic, literalistic understanding of the Bible that was prevalent on the American frontier in the 18th century. Today, those who so identify are most often referred to in the media as “evangelicals,” but to label them “evangelicals” is to do a disservice to those who are legitimately evangelicals, since a great percentage of those who identify with Christian nationalism do not even go to church, or have never read the Bible, or go to churches that are strongly identified with far right politics, or identify with the so-called “prosperity gospel”. While most of these people would identify as Independents or as Republicans, these are not like Independents and Republicans as we usually think of them, these are not what most of us, as mainline Protestants, would call legitimate Christian or economic conservatives.

2. Where did religious nationalism come from?

It has been with us a long time, about as long as there have been people. The Old Testament is full of religious nationalism as the Hebrew people identified

² Ibid.

themselves as worshippers of Yahweh and set themselves apart from the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and a myriad of other ancient peoples, each of which had their own gods and religions and cultural identities. The book of Deuteronomy contains the “Holiness Code” which provided rules for how to remain separate and distinct from foreign tribes and nations. Some of the early Old Testament writers understood Yahweh as wanting the Hebrews to conquer other peoples and to kill every man, woman, and child, and their cattle. It was not a “high point” of Hebrew ethics! (Deuteronomy, Joshua, etc.)

It was not really till the 8th century B.C. that some of the Old Testament prophets and writers began to recognize Yahweh as a *gracious* God who desired justice and mercy for all people, including those who were NOT Hebrews. For example, the story of Jonah is a parable which conveys this truth: though Jonah did not want to go to Ninevah because he hated the Ninevites, God used Jonah to *save* the Ninevites and to show Jonah that God loves *all* peoples. Another example can be found in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 which has been interpreted by modern culture as a condemnation of homosexuality. But, if one reads Ezekiel 16:49, we see that the Bible itself says the sin of Sodom was failure to extend hospitality to strangers. Jesus reaffirms this same interpretation in Matthew 10:15. This may seem frivolous to us today, but in ancient times, hospitality was *literally* a matter of life and death! There were no McDonalds or Holiday Inns. If the people of a community did not take traveling strangers into their homes, those strangers would be subject to sleeping in the streets, exposed to danger of many kinds.

So, Jewish nationalism is as old as Judaism itself, and the Jewish people continue to struggle with the temptation to mix religion and nationalism, most notably in religious Zionism. But the moment we can identify as the beginning of specifically **Christian nationalism** was probably 380 A.D. when Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. (SLIDE – the previous sentence) Constantine, who famously became a Christian, had legalized and encouraged Christianity in the Empire around 315 A.D. But Theodosius made Christianity the favored religion of the land. From there, the Roman Catholic Church developed rapidly, and Christian nationalism did also (at that point in history we Christians are ALL Catholics, so this is not intended as an anti-Catholic statement).

In the 1450's, a series of Papal bulls (SLIDE – Papal bulls issued in the 1450's) were issued that proclaimed the right of Christian nations to take possession of lands belonging to non-Christians, supposedly in the interest of saving their souls. In 1493, one year after Columbus's expedition and his “discovery” of the so-called New World, the best known “papal bull” was issued which made it clear that (SLIDE – the next phrase + Doctrine of Discovery) Christian explorers had a “duty” to seize lands from non-Christians for the purpose of Christianizing the inhabitants and bringing them within

European Christian civilization. This was known as the Doctrine of Discovery. This Doctrine was repudiated by the Vatican in 2023 (thank you Pope Francis!), but over the past 500 years, it has politically, religiously, and economically reshaped the globe.

The very next century, the 1500's, saw the Protestant Reformation, which was not only a *theological* revolution within the Catholic Church but a *political* revolution as kings and princes chafed against sending money to the Pope and thus supported the Protestants' separation from Rome. Thus, the Holy Roman Empire splintered into many different European nations. But the Doctrine of Discovery remained a part of the Protestant outlook, and thus colonialization by newly Protestant nations continued alongside that of the nations that remained loyal to the Pope, including Spain and France. It had so infused the thinking of Western Christians that it fostered an assumption of divine right of European countries to colonize in the name of Christianity.

That assumption, that kind of thinking, was brought to America by the European explorers, colonists, and immigrants from England, France, and Spain, and other places. It is the kind of thinking that inspired the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 (SLIDE – The Monroe Doctrine), articulated by President Monroe, which divided the world into spheres of influence and declared that the Western Hemisphere belonged to the United States and Europe should stop any further colonialization here. So, Americans were thinking much like the European forebearers, we just wanted to be sure that **we** would have hegemony – that is, political, cultural, and economic control of “**our**” hemisphere.

It was this same kind of thinking that inspired the idea of “Manifest Destiny” (SLIDE – Manifest Destiny), a phrase first suggested by an American newspaper writer, which proclaimed that it was the divinely ordained right of the United States to expand its borders to the Pacific Ocean and beyond. (SLIDE of picture) There is a lot going on in this picture by John Gast....



Americans felt justified in removing native Americans from their lands and “Christianizing” them in “special” schools. In recent decades we have learned how oppressive and even murderous those schools could be as unmarked graves of Native American children have been unearthed in the school yards.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s, we saw the United States meddle in the affairs of nations all around the world, as the Manifest Destiny mentality seemed to extend to the whole world in the minds of people like Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, and his brother John Foster Dulles, who was Secretary of State. (I recommend “The Brothers” by Stephen Kinzer). The U.S. has supported dictators and overthrown democracies! Such meddling brought about crises in Iran, Viet Nam, Indonesia, Argentina, and a host of other countries including Guatemala, where Americans owned United Fruit, and where both the PCUSA and the Disciples had missionaries accompanying native peoples of Guatemala back to their country from their sojourn in Mexico where they had fled, after the U.S. had supported a right wing government that was murdering its own citizens.

So, my point here is that religious tribalism, which became religious nationalism, which today includes *Christian* nationalism, has been with us throughout history. As Christians today, I think we can easily see that this represents evil thinking that has been responsible for huge disruptions, mass murders, and economic oppression throughout the world. It is, ironically, a non-Christian way of thinking and behaving. In the days of the New Testament, and throughout the first three centuries after Christ’s appearance and before Constantine, the Christian church grew rapidly, but there are no Biblical examples of evangelism by sword, or by economic oppression, or by genocide or force of any kind.

We have talked tonight about what Christian Nationalism is and where it came from.

We will start next week with a third question: **Why has such a movement, Christian nationalism, seen such growth in numbers and power in recent decades? And why is a similar trend toward religious nationalism and authoritarianism being seen in so many *other* countries around the world?**

(There was some group discussion before closing.) A question was raised to the effect of, “Can you give us some hope in the face of all of this?” In response, I recalled Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s comment that “the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice.” It doesn’t bend as quickly as we would like, and it doesn’t bend smoothly....it has ups and downs within the arc. But it does move and we, as people who seek God’s justice, help that moral arc progress. We are, in fact, called to participate in God’s desires and efforts toward justice for all people and all creation.

Session II

Last session we answered two questions: 1) What is Christian Nationalism, and 2) Where did religious nationalism come from? We traced its beginnings to earliest humanity. Today, I want us to look at some of the core questions that are pivotal to our understanding.

3. **Why has such a phenomenon, Christian nationalism, seen such growth in numbers and power in recent decades? And why is a similar trend toward religious nationalism and authoritarianism being seen in so many *other* countries around the world?** (Slide)

It isn't just in the United States where religious nationalism has grown: most notably perhaps in India, Hindu nationalism has grown under PM Modi; Christian nationalism in Hungary has grown under PM Victor Orban; Putin has cozied up to the Russian Orthodox Church to give the appearance of legitimacy to his rule; Christian nationalism in France is being expressed through the National Rally opposition party; nationalism is seen rising in Germany through the "Alternative for Germany" Party; and of course Islamic nationalism is now governing Iran, and Israel has extreme Jewish nationalism governing there.

All such expressions of religious nationalism have tended to favor authoritarianism, thinking that a time under a benevolent dictator might straighten out a nation's problems (which ignores the fact that there is no such thing as a benevolent dictator....dictators always turn to the dark side!); authoritarians always demonize immigrants and citizens born elsewhere as the cause of all the nation's troubles; and they usurp the faith tradition of the country in sometimes subtle but powerful ways. They wrap themselves in the flag and claim that they represent God's point of view or even that they have been *sent* by God to save the nation. All this while typically making themselves rich through theft, kick-backs, and misappropriation of government funds.

By the way, in Israel, Netanyahu has been trying to drastically weaken the judicial branch of the Israeli government. This is in large measure due to the fact that the courts have been attempting to hold him accountable for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust, and because he wants to be able to override the decisions of the Supreme Court. (Does any of this sound familiar?)

Why has religious nationalism in general, and white *Christian* nationalism in particular, been on the rise? I can name several reasons, **but they all basically come back to fear.** (Slide: first slide of session plus "fear") The post-modern world of today which we inhabit is a sometimes-scary place and time. Everything that seemed to be nailed down in the first half of the 20th century has been yanked up and loose. The Cold War continues in significant ways, even though the Soviet Union no longer exists. Social

media, and our news media generally, constantly feeds us stories of terror and danger of all kinds, and not only between nations and races and economic classes, but terror and danger of all kinds in your city, your neighborhood, and your house! If one depends upon social media and television news for your information, you can quickly come to feel that the world is headed to hell in a handbasket, even though both violent crime and property crime are actually down in the United States! Algorithms send you more of what you seem to want to see and hear, politically and socially as well as economically (we all marvel at how the Internet seems to “learn” what we shop for and thus sends us ads to encourage us to buy more of those things.....the same is true of political ideas, and stories of mayhem: we just don’t realize that we are being herded in such directions.

Fear among white Americans is also driven by the fact that so many things that until recently were held sacred or were common practice have been challenged in legislatures and courts across America: factory jobs have been sent overseas by corporations that have moved their manufacturing facilities as part of globalization (although many of those who feel victimized by globalization are nonetheless happy to go to stores where they can buy cheap goods made in other countries, thus failing to see the connection between their own practices and the impoverishment of American workers); the gap between rich and poor continues to increase; the weather is getting weirder and weirder; LGBT people can now marry in 37 states; women are increasingly able to work at any job or career they want and colleges and universities cater to their education; Black people have been enabled to get educations that have thrust so many of them into the mainstream of society; an increasing number of court cases are exposing police brutality; the number of Hispanic citizens has been increasing in recent decades so that they are the largest minority in the U.S. Many of us in this room affirm many of these changes, or are at least not so threatened by them, but it’s just **scary** to many people who fear that all stability is being lost in the midst of such rapid social change and that they, as White people, are going to be diminished or “replaced” in a country they have always thought of as **theirs**. It drives people to look for scapegoats and for easy fixes, of which there are none. Conspiracy theories arise to blame “them” (whoever “them” may be) for the changes. And in a vicious circle, social media reinforces the idea of conspiracies and fear. And politicians exploit these fears through “dog whistles” and unfounded accusations and characterizations, such as, “immigrants are poisoning our blood”, “they are rapists and murderers and gangsters”, and “parasites on the welfare system”: when, in fact, studies show fewer crimes are committed by unauthorized immigrants than by regular citizens and fewer social welfare resources are utilized by them as well. We *need* immigrants in the face of a dropping birthrate in the U.S. and because jobs need to be done that most citizens will not do.

(Check out this story on-line, for example): **Slide**

4 myths about how immigrants affect the U.S. economy | PBS NewsHour

As we think about racism, culturalism, and all the other “isms” that would keep some people on top and other peoples down, and that would keep different groups of people separated from one another, we need to come to grips with one fact of humanity: whatever our color, our culture, our particular physical characteristics such as facial features, bone structure, hair, and on and on, ***we are all homo sapiens!*** Though privileged groups of people attempted to use science in the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries to prove that some races are smarter than others, science has now confirmed that there is no appreciable differences in intelligence or capacity between our various homo sapiens communities. Any differences in intelligence and capacity are figments of cultural imagination, or the result of physical abuse, or deprivation while growing up, especially nutritional deprivation during the first 1000 days of life (which should drive us all as Christians to want to work against poverty in this nation and around the globe!).

Now we all have certain cultural preferences, of course. I prefer certain kinds of music, architecture, art, and language; I prefer pie to cake. But my point here is that religious nationalism, and in the case of the United States, “White Christian Nationalism” seeks to engender fear and to say that some humans are more human than other humans. But all of that is a sick figment of fear and cultural imagination! We can demonize others and gradually live in separatist ghettos that leave us culturally isolated and impoverished and that ultimately lead to violence and even warfare, or we can learn to live together, appreciating each other’s gifts and humanity in the spirit of Jefferson’s great declaration that, “All men are created equal”, rightly expanding it to a declaration that all homo sapiens are created equal! All *children of God* are created equal, *and we are all children of God!*

I John 4 says, “Perfect love casts out fear.” (Slide) So, spiritually speaking, the opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is ***fear***.

4. So, was the United States founded as a Christian nation?

Absolutely not. In fact, the exact opposite is true.

One of the reasons so many European colonists had migrated to North America was to escape religious persecution by the established religions of their homeland. As the Reformation spread across northern Europe, various forms of Protestantism aligned with the kings and other political figures of those nations and they often became abusive of those practicing forms of Christianity that were other than their own. When religion and politics mixed, as for example, when the King of England, Henry VIII, made himself head of the Anglican Church of England, over against the Catholic Church and the Pope, trouble resulted for the next 500 years.

However, not everyone who came to the United States for the sake of religious freedom came to grant religious freedom to *others*. More typically, they came to find a safe place to practice their *own* religion without harassment from other groups. That is, they didn't all come to seek religious freedom for *all* religions, most came to seek religious freedom for *themselves*. Thus, the first colony, **Virginia**, was founded by members of the Church of England and Anglicanism was the established religion just as it was in England; **Massachusetts** was founded by Pilgrims and Puritans (who came to be known as Congregationalists and who critiqued Anglicanism with John Calvin's ideas; **Maryland** was founded by Catholics seeking escape from Protestant persecution across Northern Europe, but did have a policy of toleration and eventually had a Protestant majority; **Pennsylvania** was founded by Quakers, seeking refuge from persecution from the Anglican Church in England, but also had a policy of toleration (as you would expect of Quakers) and thus Pennsylvania became home also to German Protestants and Catholics; **Rhode Island** was founded by Roger Williams who had been expelled from Massachusetts by the Puritans as a heretic in 1635. There were also small groups of Jews spread across early colonial America and some Muslims, many having come as slaves.

Again, the European nations from which so many came had what is known as "established religion". (SLIDE: "Established religion" is the official, legal religion of a nation) That means, one religion was the official religion of a country, the *legally established* religion, and they enjoyed certain political and economic privileges. For example, the established religion of northern Germany was Lutheranism, and if you were a Catholic, living in northern Germany was very uncomfortable and sometimes even dangerous. Likewise, being a Lutheran and living in southern Germany, which was predominantly Roman Catholic, could be uncomfortable and sometimes even dangerous. Thus, the Founders specifically embraced **disestablishment** in the U.S. Constitution. That is, there was to be no "official" religion, no mingling of one "brand" of religion with government. This is what the "separation of church and state" means. (Slide) The young nation recognized the need to make all religions safe from government, and government safe from all religions, and all religions safe from all other religions. At the time of the American Revolution, no religious group had more than one-fifth of the population's adherence (and *only* the Church of England had one-fifth of the population). The Great Awakening of the mid 1700's had both fanned religious fervor in the colonies and further fragmented the religious communities, so that by 1776 the rule was individual choice rather than conformity to one church or another. This is what the First Amendment means!

Now, I know that you may have seen or read books or pamphlets that claim that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, but this is absolutely untrue. Such books are written by people who do not know the actual history of this period of time in

the United States. Some of them may be devout Christians, often very conservative Christians, who, in their ignorance of American history, or in their desire to tear down the separation of church and state so their brand of religion can dominate the nation, have constructed elaborate tales of founders who believe exactly as they believe. How can you spot such ignorance and fabricated history?

Check to see where the author went to school. If he or she is a graduate of a college or university that is not accredited by an agency that is approved by the U.S. Department of Education, there may be a problem. So, for example, all state colleges and universities are so accredited, and most private institutions are also, but not all. One trick you have to watch out for is that right wing religious groups sometimes create their own accrediting organizations to accredit each other, even though they have no standing with legitimate accrediting agencies. For example, a number of so-called Bible colleges have created an accrediting agency so that they can give each other a stamp of approval based upon a mutual literalistic approach to the Bible or based upon mere mutual interest. (Some students go to schools that have been accredited by bogus accreditation agencies and when they seek to transfer to legitimately accredited schools find they cannot transfer any of their credits.) Often, a simple Google search will tell you about an author's credentials and thus you can see whether they appear to be a legitimate voice in the matter or not.

So, to return to the question, "was the United States founded as a Christian nation?" (Slide) The answer is "no" and, in fact, that notion *contradicts the intentions of the founders* because they knew that choosing one established religion, or any particular version of Christianity, would have led to the same strife and oppression as had been experienced (and was still being experienced) in much of Europe.

5. Was America founded on the basis of Christian ideals?

Well, let's take a look at the religion and philosophy of the Founding Fathers.

Most of the founders were Protestants raised in the three largest religious groups in Colonial America: Anglicanism, which would later be called Episcopalian in the U.S. (including John Jay, George Washington, and Edward Rutledge); Presbyterianism (including John Stockton and the Rev. John Witherspoon); and Congregationalism (including John Adams and Samuel Adams). There were other Protestant groups in America at the time including Quakers, Lutherans, Baptists (prominent in Rhode Island), and the Dutch Reformed Church (prominent in NYC, which was first called New Amsterdam). Three founders, Charles Carroll and Daniel Carroll of Maryland and Thomas Fitzsimmons of Pennsylvania were Roman Catholic. (Methodism began as a movement within Anglicanism and was not felt much in America until after the Revolution.)

But there was also a powerful school of religious thought called Deism which impacted the thinking of many.

What is Deism? Belief in the existence of a supreme being, specifically a creator, who does not intervene in the universe. (SLIDE)

Deists believed in a God that ordained laws and principles (we have such a God to thank, for example, for the law of gravity), but who is not active in people's everyday lives or in history. Thus Christianity, which believes in God's intervention into the world through the Christ, and God's day to day interaction in peoples' lives, does not fit with Deism. Deism uses "God *language*", but rejects the idea of God's *engagement* with the world, and thus Deism rejects the Christian story.

While most of the Founders were members of the Protestant Church, and most even *attended* church at least occasionally, many were not orthodox in their beliefs. Many were heavily influenced by Deism and other Enlightenment ideas. So, there were roughly three groups of people among our American Founders: 1) Those who were avowedly Christian and orthodox in belief; 2) Those who were Christians heavily influenced by Deism; 3) Those who were flat-out Deists.

Thomas Paine (who wrote "Common Sense", an influential book that argued for leaving English style Monarchy for a Republic elected by and for the citizens) was purely a Deist. Some of his language was drawn upon by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, perhaps the most notable being, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Jefferson was also a Deist along with his mentor, Benjamin Franklin.

Speaking of Jefferson, in 1786, Jefferson wrote a Virginia law forbidding the State from compelling anyone to attend a particular church or persecuting anyone for their religious beliefs. It meant the Anglican Church was no longer, in the legal sense of the word, the *established* church of Virginia. He was very proud of this accomplishment along with his writing of the Declaration of Independence which, it should be noted, contained no reference to God or Christ, and his part in writing the Constitution which contains no references to Christ, but only to God and that in a Deistic kind of way. At his bidding, Jefferson's gravestone has carved on it, "*Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia, because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered.*" Thus, he was apparently prouder of his law disestablishing religion in Virginia than he was of his role as President of the United States!

George Washington, John Adams, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton were Christians, but heavily *influenced* by Deism and by the desire, again, to keep all

religions safe from government, government safe from all religions, and all religions safe from all other religions. (Slide)

This sort of begs the question, “If the United States was not founded as a Christian nation, why are there so many Christians?” I would offer two answers to this question. First, most of the colonists who came to the United States came from Europe where most people *were* Christians. Second, because there was separation of church and state in the U.S., religions were free to compete with each other for the loyalty of the citizenry. The Christian story, though in many different versions, was being put out there constantly by the various Christian groups. Thus, as I view it, the First Amendment’s “separation of church and state” actually helped *grow* the Christian faith in the U.S. rather than stymying it, whereas today we see the attempt to fuse a particular brand of Christianity with government is actually driving people *away* from the churches.

Our government has sometimes operated out of ideals that could be described as Christian. One thinks of the Civil Rights Legislation that came out of the 1960’s; or of the Berlin Airlift after WWII. But the motives of government, better or worse, are never perfect like God’s. Civil Rights Legislation was in part motivated by fear of an uprising and by a desire to capture the votes of those who would benefit from the enforcement of Civil Rights. The Berlin Airlift was in part a way of keeping the Soviets out of West Berlin. The Marshall Plan, so often hailed as an unselfish act on the part of the U.S. after World War II was not simply unselfish. Because the war had been fought on other countries’ soil rather than in the 48 states, our manufacturing and financial infrastructure was still standing, but with whom would we be able to trade, who would buy our goods unless the economies of the war-torn world were restored? Thus the U.S. was *both* generous *and* self-interested in executing the Marshall Plan.

This is why I can never abide the mixing of the symbols of government, like the flag, with the symbols that represent the Perfect One, God. When those appear together in a sanctuary, it is just too easy (especially for children) to forget which one is which, to confuse the two and to fuse them in a lethal amalgamation. My nation is worthy of my patriotism and my allegiance, maybe even my life, but not of my worship.

(Slide) Substituting or confusing the human for the divine is called “idolatry.”

Mindy and I started a new congregation in Kansas City, Missouri many years ago. When we finally got out of a borrowed church basement, and then out of a school building, into our own facility, we had to decide what the policy would be regarding display of the flag. We had a congressman’s aide as a member of the congregation and so I asked her to secure an American flag that had flown over the Capitol (they raise and lower flags all day at the Capitol so legislators can gift them to constituents). We set that flag just outside the entrance to the sanctuary in order to celebrate the First

Amendment and our freedom to worship as we chose. I thought that was a good solution to the matter. We did not want to have the American flag in the sanctuary. I like the practice in my current home congregation, Central Christian Church, even better: we don't have an American flag anywhere on church property. This is not because we don't love our country, but because we don't want to tempt members and visitors to idolatry by mixing our symbols.

So, when I cry during the National Anthem, some of those tears are tears of gratitude and love for our beautiful country; but some of those tears will always be tears of grief for how our country falls short of its potential, how it sometimes goes for the self-interest of some rather than justice for all. And it sometimes falls short, as my Christian faith teaches me, because it is human, and as beautiful as humanity is, humanity is not perfect (as has been so well articulated by John Calvin).

Q and A

Session III

I want to finish up my presentations with a few last thoughts and then we can have discussion around the church statements and resolutions that have been passed recently, or around other questions or comments you wish to offer.

A question came up this week regarding theocracy. A definition of theocracy is *government by officials who are regarded as divinely inspired*. Slide: theocracy

Rome came to believe itself to be a theocracy as Ceasar came to be regarded as divine. Japan is an example of a government that until the end of WWII regarded itself as a theocracy, led by the Emperor who was considered divine. Iran is a current government that regards itself as being a theocracy, its leaders being given authority by God to rule that country. There are those on the far right who want to see the United States become a theocracy, exactly what the Constitution seeks to avoid. But "theocracy" is not usually the word used to describe it in this country: the word most often used is "dominion". So, if you see literature that talks about "Christian dominion", it is talking about the desire on the part of those who subscribe to the idea of "Christian dominion", for the leaders of the country to be *appointed* by God, and (sub-rosa) "we know who that is, so we'll make sure they are appointed."

I want to go back and name another nation that currently is a perfect illustration of Christian Nationalism: Russia. Putin is using the Russian Orthodox Church to build support for his war in Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill is encouraging Putin's use of the church. It points to the danger of a particular brand or expression of Christian religion being fused

with civic life. Russia is fighting a war, ironically, against another predominantly Orthodox country, but it is in this case the *Ukrainian* Orthodox.

Russia is another country in which we see “Christian nationalism” in the world today.” That’s what happens when a nation tries to identify its civic life with a particular expression of a particular religion (in this case Christianity; in the case of Iran, Islam; in the case of India, Hinduism; and so forth).

My problem with Prayer in Public Schools

I want to say just a word about prayer in public schools. Some of you are old enough, like me, to remember when we prayed every morning in school as part of our opening exercises, which included the pledge of allegiance, etc. First, as some wag has said, there will always be prayer in public schools so long as there are tests!

But the issue arises when you ask the question, “Who is responsible for the *content* of those prayers? Who is writing those prayers? *Which* Christian perspective will be represented therein? To say nothing of the Jewish or Islamic students in the room (or in this day of globalization, the students of *any* other religious traditions). Will it be anti-gay, anti-immigrant, anti-science, anti-other forms of Christianity and other religions? These are deep concerns to me and I think the best policy is simply for schools to keep their hands out of prayer. That’s the simplest solution. It is the responsibility of parents and the churches to teach children to pray and what to pray.

My Problem with Private Schools

I am not universally opposed to private schools because they do offer some competition to public schools, which provides incentive for public schools to be better. What I do object to is private schools that cater to a single race or socio-economic class. If private schools are providing a harbor for avoiding interaction with people who are different, then they have failed in one of the fundamental purposes of public education.

As well-to-do parents generate and support more and more upper-class private schools, there is also increasing pressure to privilege those schools and to take money out of the public schools. A lot of those private schools were created by “white flight” so their children could avoid interaction with people who are different from them in various ways.

Again, I am not opposed to all private schools, just those that serve a single population. But, I am opposed to *any* tax money support of *any* private school.

Did God create the United States?

We sing, “My Country Tis of Thee”. What does that mean? Do we really think God created the United States? This is an important theological question. 1) I believe

God works with whatever God has to work with and actively seeks to influence creation in accordance with God's vision for it (I am not a Deist, because a Deist would never suggest that God is actively engaged in the world today to bring the world into alignment with a divine vision). 2) But I don't think any human institution on earth is an absolutely pure expression of what God desires. As John Calvin would remind us, nothing human is perfect. Creation was declared good, but not perfect. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:22, all creation "groans in travail", or "in labor pains" striving toward perfection. God continues to shape and create the world, and we are all called to be co-creators with God! That's a high calling!

In the language of Process Theology (one contemporary way of understanding God), God lures and entices creation to follow God's vision. I like that image of God "luring and enticing us to do God's will." It reminds me of the great hymn, "Draw Us In The Spirit's Tether." God doesn't force or push us; God leads by *luring*.

So, I would say that when the United States helps bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice, it is more like what God wants it to be; when the United States is participating in the oppression of its own people or of people anywhere in the world, it is less like what God wants it to be.

Historically, there is no question that our country began amid the acrid smell of genocide and chattel slavery. But the more we move past the idea that all *white men* are created equal to the proposition that all *people* are created equal, the more the United States becomes what God is calling it to be. I am proud of the progress we have made as a nation, though it has often come at a very high price in lives and resources, but I am also committed to continuing the progress and not committed to some imaginary time in the past when everything was better.

I'd like to conclude my remarks here by quoting my favorite hymn. I'd rather sing this song anytime rather than "My Country Tis of Thee". I wish our National Anthem was "O Beautiful For Spacious Skies" instead of the National Anthem we have. But, let me lift up the hymn, "This Is My Song," by Georgia Okeefe (#340 in the "Glory To God" hymnal)

Verse 1

This is my song O God of all the nations
A song of peace for lands afar and mine
This is my home the country where my heart is
Here are my hopes my dreams my holy shrine
But other hearts in other lands are beating

With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine

Verse 2

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean

And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine

But other lands have sunlight too and clover

And skies are everywhere as blue as mine

O hear my song Thou God of all nations

A song of peace for their land and for mine

Verse 3

This is my prayer O Lord of all earth's kingdoms

Let thy reign come, come on earth thy will be done

In peace may all earth's people draw together

And hearts united learn to live as one

O hear my prayer Thou God of all nations

Myself I give Thee; let Thy will be done

This is a beautiful hymn. It recognizes we aren't perfect! But the more we work at seeking to realize the Reign of God in our part of the world, and to cooperate with the Reign of God around the world, we are closer to what God desires us to be as the United States of America.

Questions and Comments (a wide range of questions and comments were heard including questions about the Middle East, and "America First"; a few samples of typical questions I have heard are below)

Q: How can we reconcile the notion that we are a "Christian nation" with the U.S. Constitution?

A: We can't. The Constitution specifically prohibits the government from being the promoter or representative of one particular faith, including any particular expression of Christianity.

Q. Are we a Christian nation?

A. If you look at it from the perspective of which religion holds the allegiance of the most Americans, then in that sense we are a Christian nation. However, as has been pointed out, “nones” (those who claim no particular religion) are growing. Many of these are young people. This is one of the ways “Christian nationalism” is killing the church: young people are seeing Christian nationalism as the only form of religious expression that is given much attention publicly and they reject it and the Christian faith that they mistakenly suppose it represents.

Q. Richard Niebuhr said, “Patriotism is idolatry”. You described yourself as a patriot. How do you reconcile patriotism with your faith?

A. I think there is a difference between nationalism and patriotism. If by “patriotism” Niebuhr means “nationalism”, then I agree with him. But I think we all have an innate need to love the place we are from, the place in which we are grounded, however it may fall short of God’s desire for it. But true patriotism means we keep working to make it better. I like what the French philosopher Camus said: “I should like to be able to love both my country and justice.”

(see summary below)

SUMMARY

What are the most important things to take away from this conversation to help us confront the challenge of Christian Nationalism when we hear it being assumed or promoted by friends, family, and others?

1. The U.S. Constitution was intentionally constructed and amended so as to prevent a particular expression of Christianity (or any other religion) from being dominant in American government.
2. The founders of the nation were not all Christians. There were those (including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine) who were Deists. Deism was a philosophy that believed God had established natural and moral laws of order at the beginning of the world which were self-evident (“we hold these truths to be self-evident...”) and which the world should follow, but Deism did not believe that God is active in the world today (unlike Christianity which believes God continues to be active in the world). In addition to some of the founders claiming to be Deists per se, Deism also heavily influenced many of those who were avowedly Christians of various denominational stripes.
3. No one version of Christian faith can claim to be the sole “true faith”.
4. Was the United States founded as a Christian nation? The answer is “no”, and in fact, to say the U.S. was established as a Christian nation *contradicts* the intentions of the founders because they knew that choosing one established religion, or any particular version of Christianity, would have led to the same strife and oppression as had been experienced (and was still being experienced) in much of Europe.

The young nation recognized the need to make all religions safe from government, and government safe from all religions, and all religions safe from all other religions.

5. Whenever religion and nationalism are joined together, the faith will suffer and, ultimately, the nation will suffer also.

My thanks to the 50+ people who attended this class. There is, of course, much more that could be said, but time prevented it. I do recommend several recently published books to gain further insight and to shape our responses to Christian Nationalism whenever we see it.

1. [American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays The Gospel And Threatens The Church](#), by Andrew L. Whitehead, Brazos Press (a division of Baker Publishing group), Grand Rapids, 2023

2. The False White Gospel: Rejecting Christian Nationalism, Reclaiming True Faith, and Refounding Democracy, by Jim Wallis, St. Martins Publishing, New York, 2024
3. Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism, by Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood, Chalice Press, St. Louis, 2024
4. The Brothers, by Stephen Kinzer, Times Books, New York, 2013