



Christian Nationalism as an Illiberal Interpretation of Religion

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Abstract

Whereas Christianity can be read through different political lenses, conservative as well as progressive, the phenomenon of Christian Nationalism in the United States has taken a distinctly illiberal turn. Christian Nationalism has become the “deep story” behind the rise of Donald Trump and the transformation of the Republican Party, offering it a powerful millennialist political framework. In Christian Nationalism, executive authority is ordained by God, the nation is blessed by God’s special favor, natural-born citizens have claim to a unique status in God’s divine plan for his chosen nation, and social, racial, and gender hierarchies are a part of His plan. Social imaginaries such as these are tapped into by political organizations to mobilize supporters of Republican candidates. Similar “divine plans” can be found in other national political dynamics. This opening article provides an overview of the contributions to this special symposium on religion and politics around the 2024 US elections as it adumbrates an analytical framework for understanding a potential illiberal turn in the growing embrace of Christian nationalism.

Keywords: Christian Nationalism, Religion, Illiberalism, New Apostolic Reformation, spiritual warfare, nondenominational, charismatic

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This special symposium of the *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* emerges from a two-day conference that convened shortly after the 2024 US elections. The conference was hosted by the Illiberalism Studies Program at The George Washington University, and the Center on Faith and Justice at Georgetown University.¹ We organize our review of journal symposium contributions according to distinctions in methods and research questions that are represented in the work found in these pages and in the broader research landscape. The first of the two approaches focuses on evolving trends in religious beliefs, identities, and practices. With surveys and focus groups, researchers *map the contours of religious and political beliefs*. The second approach *explores the effects of religious organizations and networks on liberal democracy*. By considering the general conclusions of each of these approaches to the study of religion and politics, we argue that the decay of liberal democracy in the United States can be explained by an institutionalist or organizational framework.² According to this view, extremist beliefs and rhetoric, when used by organizations and networks of organizations, pull weak or porous political parties into illiberalism. We can foreshadow our more developed argument below with a brief summary.

In describing what we are calling the institutionalist approach, Daniel Ziblatt offers the example of “Agrarian Leagues,” the populist (and antisemitic) organizations that emerged throughout Western Europe in the late 19th century.³ According to Ziblatt, these “surrogate organizations” pulled various conservative parties into far-right extremism.⁴ By essentially usurping an allied party’s platform and candidate selection process, powerful surrogate organizations pull weak parties into illiberalism. We will argue that Christian nationalist churches and networks tend to erode liberal principles in the United States in much the same way. They do so by cohering (in churches, rallies, and online) and mobilizing supporters with millenarian rhetoric that casts their political opponents as the “enemy,” as “territorial spirits,” and as “Satanic principalities,” among other appellations.⁵ The shifting beliefs and anxieties measured by scholars and researchers in the first approach constitutes a kind of political fuel used by politicoreligious organizations.

We do not mean to suggest that religious convictions necessarily lead to illiberalism and democratic decay. Indeed, religious convictions are sometimes regarded as the bedrock upon which liberal democracy rests. As political scientist Charles E. Merriam put it nearly a century ago, religious convictions can provide democracies with the “essential dignity of all men and the importance of protecting and cultivating personality primarily on a fraternal rather than on a differential basis.”⁶ In other

1 We wish to thank our colleagues at Georgetown University’s Center on Faith and Justice for cohosting “Religion, Politics, and the 2024 US Elections: What Happened and What Comes Next?” (<https://smpa.gwu.edu/Religionand2024Election>). Special thanks go to Rev. Jim Wallis, the inaugural Desmond Tutu Chair in Faith and Justice and the founding Director of the Georgetown University Center on Faith and Justice; and to Jim Simpson, the Center’s executive director. We also wish to thank the Elliott School of International Affairs and to the School of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University for their generous support.

2 W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, “Platforms, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy: Connective Action and the Rise of Illiberalism,” *Perspectives on Politics* (2025): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724002123>; Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 174; Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020).

3 Peter G. J. Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Antisemitism in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964); Richard S. Levy, *The Downfall of the Anti-Semitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*, p. 214.

4 Ziblatt, p. 175.

5 “The Rank and File of Satan’s Kingdom,” n.d. Renner Ministries website, <https://renner.org/article/the-rank-and-file-of-satans-kingdom/>; C. Peter Wagner, *Territorial Spirits: Practical Strategies for How to Crush the Enemy through Spiritual Warfare* (Shippensburg, Pa.: Destiny Image Publishers, 2012).

6 Charles E. Merriam, *The New Democracy and the New Despotism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939).

words, religious convictions can promote civic virtues as they help build community.⁷ While we appreciate Merriam's observation, we also recognize that religion, especially contemporary Christian nationalism, can promote the *differential* over the fraternal. When this happens, social and political grievances are framed in a dark eschatological idiom that fuels illiberalism. In such a moment, political opponents are not fellow citizens with whom one happens to disagree; they are instead apostates in the grip of demonic forces who must be vanquished. Meanwhile, one's own leaders are thought to be anointed by God to lead the way in a divine quest to save the nation from Satanic forces.⁸ Sometimes taking phrases from Ephesians, political contests become existential battles fought against "principalities," "the rulers of the darkness of this age,"⁹ and "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" that are arrayed as "territorial spirits" and "hierarchies of demons with different tiers of influence."¹⁰

The efforts of political parties and their organizational allies to form winning coalitions is done by articulating political grievances as existential battles against malefic forces. Rhetoric of this sort repackages anxieties emerging from economic precarity that are exacerbated by perceived threats to racial and gender identity, or pride in class and regional culture.¹¹ And while there are varying shades of rhetoric, in extremist one finds the absolutist language of millenarianism. The embrace of millenarian beliefs and political rhetoric leads to political parties and eventually nations being drawn into illiberalism. Before reviewing the contributions to this symposium and offering our synthesis, we turn first to a discussion of what we mean when we speak of illiberalism.

Illiberalism

We see illiberalism as an ideological universe with a core set of beliefs that are stable but remain context-dependent, with different degrees of radicalism/moderation and predilection themes depending on the country's political culture.¹² What unites this ideological universe is the idea that liberalism—either as an abstract philosophy or, more often, as a really existing liberalism as Western societies experience it—has failed and should be replaced by a new social order. This new social order can be defined by four core values: (1) the aggrandizement of executive power and majoritarianism against intermediary checks and balances and minority rights; (2) the sovereignty of the nation-state against supranational institutions and some forms of globalization; (3) the cultural homogeneity of the nation against multiculturalism; and (4) the respect for some forms of traditional values and hierarchies. What gives Christian nationalism its illiberal potency is its assertion that: (1) executive authority is ordained by God, (2) the nation is blessed by God's special favor, (3) natural-born citizens have claim to a unique status in God's divine plan for his chosen nation, and (4) social, racial, and gender hierarchies are a part of His plan. Philips S. Gorski and

7 See also Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde, *State, Society, and Liberty: Studies in Political Theory and Constitutional Law* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

8 Brian Stelter, "Why the Christian Right Believes Donald Trump is 'Anointed by God,'" *Vanity Fair*, July 18, 2024, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/story/christian-right-donald-trump?srsId=AfmBOoq2hhaF-7L6-ajii5jEUTvxAn2_FRtkvni2vMIQsIdPL-qPqrVZ; Robert Tait, "Marjorie Taylor Greene Compares Trump to Jesus at Las Vegas Rally," National Public Radio, June 10, 2024.

9 Ephesians 6:12 (New King James Version).

10 Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy*. (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), p. 88.

11 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right* (La Vergne, Tenn.: The New Press, 2024).

12 See Marlene Laruelle, "Introduction: Illiberalism Studies as a Field," in *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

Samuel L. Perry call these beliefs the “deep story” of Christian nationalism in the United States.¹³

Illiberalism should not be understood as a black-and-white binary with liberalism and its ontological opposition—especially as liberalism is in itself a very broad family with many doctrinal streams that may excommunicate each other, and with a multiplicity of concrete embodiments. It is more heuristic to see illiberalism as a *gradient* of diverse ideological transformations and policy moves that backlash against the so-called liberal-democratic order. In this definition, we see illiberalism rising inside the liberal-democratic framework, not only because of the rise of the far right—the most commonly-named cause—but because pockets of illiberalism also appear in public policies of liberal democracies. In other instances, parties claiming loyalty to liberalism may move away from its core principles on some questions judged sensitive by public opinion, such as regarding immigration and identity politics, or in promoting a “militant democracy” that is using its legal power against opponents identified as problematic for the liberal-democratic order (think the cancellation of the 2024 Romanian presidential election).

Similarly, illiberalism rises as a symptom of the crisis of liberalism, not as its cause: by many aspects, the blending of political liberalism with neoliberalism, the failure of social democracy at resisting neoliberalism, the embrace by the left of identity politics to the detriment of a social class focus, etc. has created a fertile soil for political projects which challenge the cultural hegemony of liberalism. Illiberal parties and leaders therefore capitalize on a grassroots demand for being heard by whatever is identified as the “elite” and for reimagining a new social order that would be fairer, but also, in some ways, more exclusivist and focused on the local and the real more than on the abstract. The rise of illiberalism in liberal democracies confirms—if this was still necessary—the real end of the “end of history” argument:¹⁴ the political imagination has reopened, and liberalism is no more the only obvious, per default, normative system.

In the new illiberal constellation that emerges all across the Global North (and in some countries of the so-called Global South), the United States is experiencing an acute form of illiberalism, both in the radicalism of its political transformations and in the speed of change. The second Trump Administration’s political language now includes elements borrowed from messianic repertoires and with visible input from political theology, reintroducing the sacred into profane politics. It is where illiberalism as a political project meets religion, and especially Christian nationalism.

We have said that there are at least two general approaches to the study of contemporary religion and politics that can lead to illiberalism. We take up each in turn, beginning with efforts to map shifting religious beliefs and identities.

Mapping Religious Identities

Social scientists often rely on polling data to track evolving trends in religious identity, practices, and politics. Are the mainline Protestant churches, for example, in decline?¹⁵ Is the proportion of non-religiously-affiliated Americans (nones)

13 Philips S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). The “deep story” concept comes from Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

14 See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

15 Jeffery Jones, “Church Attendance Has Declined in Most US Religious Groups,” Gallup, March 25, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>; Ryan Burge, “The Assemblies of God: A Denomination That May Be Growing.” Graphs about Religion, February 10, 2025, https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/is-there-any-large-protestant-denomination?utm_campaign=email-half-post&r=oqbf&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

growing?¹⁶ Is nondenominational church attendance on the rise?¹⁷ In an effort to tease out possible causal relationships, the data are correlated with other demographic markers, such as race, gender, age, region of residence, issue positions, and political party affiliation, to name only a few. Various analyses have found, for example, that non-college-educated, white, male, and self-described Evangelical Christians tend to be strongly associated with the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement.¹⁸ Other studies have found that Republicans who attend church infrequently or not at all are, ironically, most likely to embrace the Evangelical label as an ethno-cultural identity marker.¹⁹

Survey research and historical analyses have also uncovered acute nostalgic yearnings for lost idylls.²⁰ Robert P. Jones, for example, describes how “lost-cause ideology” serves as a wellspring for many Evangelicals in the South. In its telling, the American Civil War was the consequence of the Northern states’ aggression; Confederate forces were not actually defeated on the battlefield; relations between slaves and slaveholders were amicable and even benign; and slave conditions were often actually humane and even generous.²¹ This ideology, argues Jones, is the foundation upon which much of Evangelical sociopolitical identity in the South rests. As he puts it, “White Christian churches have not just been complacent; they have not only been complicit; rather, as the dominant cultural power in America, they have been responsible for constructing and sustaining a project to protect white supremacy and resist black equality. This project has framed the entire American story.”²² In his contribution to this symposium, Jones reviews Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) data collected from 22,000 adult Americans. They reveal that nearly a third of Americans can be described as Christian nationalists. Majorities of two religious groups, white evangelical Protestants (65%) and Latino Protestants (57%), hold Christian nationalist views.

Sociologists Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry rely on survey data to argue that Christian nationalism is, essentially, an expression of white racial status anxieties.²³ They conclude that status anxiety fuels white Christian nationalism. In his contribution to the symposium, Perry notes that white Christian conservatives, especially Protestants, maintain a sense of perpetual persecution, claiming that they and their values are unfairly maligned by progressive cultural elites in the media and academia.

16 Gregory A. Smith, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, Michael Rotolo, Asta Kallo, and Becka A. Alper, “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe,” Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/01/PR_2024.01.24_religious-nones_REPORT.pdf.

17 “The State of Church Attendance: Trends and Statistics” Churchtrac, 2024, <https://www.churchtrac.com/articles/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023>; Gregory A. Smith, Alan Cooperman, Becka A. Alper, Besheer Mohamed, Michael Rotolo, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, Asta Kallo, Jeff Diamant, and Dalia Fahmy, “Decline of Christianity in the US Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off,” Pew Research Center, February 26, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/>.

18 Amanda Graham, Francis T. Cullen, Leah C. Butler, Alexander L. Burton, and Velmer S. Burton Jr., “Who Wears the MAGA Hat? Racial Beliefs and Faith in Trump,” *Socius* 7 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023121992600>.

19 Ryan Burge, “Religion as a Cultural and Political Identity,” Graphs about Religion (website), July 17, 2023, <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/religion-as-a-cultural-and-political>. In his contribution to this symposium and in other PRRI surveys, Robert P. Jones’ findings do not support this conclusion. Instead, he finds that self-described Evangelicals are *more* likely to attend church services on a regular basis.

20 Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020); Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2021).

21 Adam Domby, *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020).

22 Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 5.

23 Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, p. 4.

Andrew Thompson also notes in his contribution to this symposium that white Christian nationalists are motivated by anxieties associated with their own sense of identity. These anxieties, as he notes in this symposium, drive up support for the “use of political violence to protect their sense of a White Christian Nation.”²⁴ The sense of being looked down upon produces an acute susceptibility to narratives of outrage and resentment.²⁵ This is especially true of conservative Christians who pine for a traditional and divinely-sanctioned social order that in their view has been lost. As Whitehead describes, this often includes the call for strong ethno-racial boundaries around national identity and citizenship; comfort with authoritarian social control in a chaotic world; a propensity to embrace conspiratorial thinking; a sense of populist resentment of the so-called elites; and, finally, a desire for a traditionalist, gender-normative social hierarchy.²⁶

Jasmine Smith, in another contribution to the symposium, finds that black men were much more likely to vote for Trump than black women: 21% of black men voted for Trump, compared to 7% of black women. A similar gender gap was present for Latinos in 2024: 54% of Latino men voted for Trump, while 39% of Latino women did so.²⁷ In the end, however, she notes that the shift to the Republican Party by blacks and Latinos, especially among men, is not a new phenomenon. She has less to say about the religious dimensions of these trends.

In her contribution, Stella Rouse notes recent shifts in religious identity among Latinos, with those identifying as Catholic down to 43% in 2023, from 67% in 2010. At the same time, the number of Latinos converting to Pentecostalism is on the rise. In her view, Pentecostalism advances the “tenet that the ability to acquire wealth is constrained only by the limitations in a person’s faith in God. It promotes a provocative rhetoric that salvation and riches can be obtained on earth by simply believing and by monetarily contributing to the church.”²⁸ This might help explain the increase of male Latino support for Donald Trump in 2024. Whatever the explanation, the increased support for Trump and the shift to Pentecostalism (and one can safely assume variants of it found in nondenominational charismatic or neo-Pentecostal churches, as we discuss below) is in tension with the tendency to think of Christian nationalism as a phenomenon emerging from white status anxiety.

Cultural anxieties are not limited to the United States. Michael Minkenberg notes in his fascinating and thorough symposium article that, in Western Europe, one must consider the particularities of culturalized Christian references.

On the far right, a romanticized vision of a Christian nation or Europe emerges, here understood as a para-Christian identity which mixes ethnocentrist views with religious belonging and functions as an anti-liberal hinge between racist sentiments and pro-life stances—a European equivalent to the American logic that wants to “Make America Great (and Christian) Again.”²⁹

24 Andrew Ifedapo Thompson, “Only One Nation Under God: How White Christian Nationalism and Radical Threat Can Drive Sustained Extremist Belief,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5 no. 1 (2025): 31. <https://doi.org/10.53483/ZCPV3589>.

25 Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); see also Hochschild, *Stolen Pride*.

26 Andrew L. Whitehead, “Christian Nationalism, Illiberalism, Gender, and the 2024 United States Presidential Election,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5 no. 1 (2025): 37-44. <https://doi.org/10.53483/ZCPW3590>.

27 Jasmine Smith, “Explaining Demographic Changes in the 2024 Election,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5 no. 1 (2025): 46. <https://doi.org/10.53483/ZCPX3591>.

28 Stella M. Rouse, “Latinos and the 2024 Elections: Demographics, the Economy and Religion as Signals to Electoral Shifts,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5 no. 1 (2025): 55. <https://doi.org/10.53483/ZCPY3592>.

29 Michael Minkenberg, “Religion and the Radical Right in West European Democracies: Christian and Para-Christian Identities,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5 no. 1 (2025): 64. <https://doi.org/10.53483/ZCPZ3593>.

Religion and the Rise of an Illiberal Far Right in the United States

This is not unlike Ryan Burge's observation that being "evangelical" is becoming as much an ethnocultural identity marker as it is an expression of religious convictions. Meanwhile, Jeta Abazi conveys the complex and sometimes contradictory religious, secular, and ethnic identities playing out in contemporary Albania and Kosovo, and in the wider region of Southern Europe, while Marlene Laruelle explores the parallel between US Christian nationalism and the Russian case of a blending of the Russian Orthodox Church with the political language of the Putin regime.

This brief review of our contributions concerning trends captured by public opinion surveys hints at the much broader effort to gauge trends in religious identity and practice. We turn next to a review of contributions made by those relying on an organizational lens. We contextualize this literature in an institutionalist or organizational approach to explaining liberal democratic backsliding.

Politicoreligious Organization and Illiberalism

One of the challenges faced by those who study religion and politics through an organizational lens is defining the boundaries around the examined phenomenon. One of the more important examples of this involves followers of nondenominational charismatic Christianity. By definition, their nondenominational status creates fuzzy boundaries among affiliated and partially affiliated (often affiliated in terms of personal ties among pastors) churches. Even what to call them is subject to debate. In his contribution to the symposium, André Gagné calls followers of this fast-growing faith community Neocharismatic-Pentecostals (NCPs).³⁰ Matthew Taylor, on the other hand, refers to the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR),³¹ while Brad Christerson and Richard Flory refer to Independent Network Charismatics (INC).³² Whatever the name, nondenominational charismatic Christians represent one of the clearest and most fervent expressions of nationalist sentiment.³³ Indeed, Taylor has made a convincing case that the January 6, 2020 Capitol Insurrection was, in the main, organized and carried out by people affiliated with these types of Christian nationalists.³⁴ Many of those who participated in the Jericho March were present on Capitol Hill the next day. A Jericho March offers an example of spiritual warfare against territorial demonic forces.³⁵

Though differences emerge from one ministry to the next, in broad terms these devotional communities (we will in most cases use NAR in the balance of this article) are united by a belief in modern-day apostles and prophets—a belief that certain believers are blessed with special gifts that give them direct access to God's intentions and will. God speaks to them and through them. Other core NAR beliefs include divine healing and glossolalia (speaking in tongues). And as noted a moment ago, NAR and NAR-adjacent ministries are also united by a fervent belief in spiritual warfare, and territorial spiritual warfare. The former is the belief that demonic forces are loosed upon individual souls; the latter is the belief that a special style of prayer can heal entire nations of their control by demonic forces. As Taylor has put it, "Most Christians who practice spiritual warfare think of it as an individual or a communal struggle: battling one's own personal demons or, perhaps, exorcising demons from someone else." *Territorial spiritual warfare* is far more ambitious.

30 André Gagné, *American Evangelicals for Trump: Dominion, Spiritual Warfare, and the End Times* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

31 Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force*.

32 Brad Christerson and Richard Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 2.

33 Stephanie McCrummen, "The Army of God Comes Out of the Shadows," *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/new-apostolic-reformation-christian-movement-trump/681092/>.

34 See also Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC) and the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), "Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection," 2022, <https://bjconline.org/jan6report/>.

35 Emma Green, "A Christian Insurrection," *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/evangelicals-catholics-jericho-march-capitol/617591/>.

Taylor quotes a 1988 statement by C. Peter Wagner, the theology professor who is regarded as the founder of the NAR: “Could it be possible that Satan, frequently referred to in Scripture as ‘the god of this age,’ assigns certain demonic spirits under him to promote the kingdom of darkness in given nations, cities, regions, cultural groups, or other segments of the world’s population? ... I am very much interested in learning more about possible territorial hierarchies of demons.”³⁶ With this shift, saving souls becomes saving entire territories, even nations that are said to be in the grip of demonic forces.³⁷

From this belief in territorial spiritual warfare emerged Seven Mountains Dominionism, or the Seven Mountains Mandate, but sometimes also referred to simply as Dominionism.³⁸ In early 2008, Wagner published *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World*.³⁹ By using strategic spiritual warfare, adherents attempt to gain control of the seven mountains or spheres of influence: family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business, and government. By mapping the geographical strongholds of territorial spirits, and with the guidance of the movement’s prophets and apostles to determine the demons’ names and roles, followers are directed to undertake “intercessions” in which they pray on location to rid it of demonic forces. Demonology of this sort pulls the Republican Party and MAGA into illiberalism.⁴⁰ A January 2024 Denison University poll found 41% of American Christians expressed support for Seven Mountains Dominionism.⁴¹

Where do these beliefs come from? As Katherine Stewart describes in her article for the special symposium, Christian nationalism exploits an odd mix of cultural insecurity, bluster, and hubris. America was once great but is now oppressed by woke liberals; Christians are an oppressed and persecuted people; yet being Christian is to be the only true and authentic representatives of the nation; and that current exegeses require rule by a strongman. “They reject,” says Stewart, “the ideals of pluralism, equality, and rule of law upon which the institutions of democracy depend.”⁴²

In his contribution to the symposium, André Gagné offers a thorough review of much of this terrain while explaining the emergence of Dominionism. For example, he draws attention to Lance Wallnau, a nondenominational charismatic Christian business entrepreneur and promoter of the Seven Mountain Mandate. During the 2024 US presidential election, Wallnau claimed that Democratic nominee Kamala Harris’ political success was due to the demonic and witchcraft influence of a “Jezebel spirit.” In the Bible, as Gagné notes, Jezebel was the wife of Ahab, King of Israel. Through her seductiveness, she became politically powerful and manipulative. “In the New Testament,” notes Gagné, “she is also mentioned as a woman suspected of being a false prophetess, practicing idolatry, and indulging in sexual immorality (Revelation 2:20).” It is worth noting that in one of the last campaign appearances

36 Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force*, p. 59.

37 One of us spent much of 2024 attending a Christian nationalist church service each Sunday in a Michigan town. Each Sunday service in the election season included a parade of Republican Party candidates for office, from the United States Senate candidate to local library board. And each Sunday, the lead pastor never failed to call the Democratic Party the “demon-crat party.”

38 Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020). See also Katherine Stewart, *Money, Lies, and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025).

39 C. Peter Wagner, *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Chosen Books, 2008).

40 Will Carless, “As Trump Support Merges with Christian Nationalism, Experts Warn of Extremist Risks,” *USA Today*, March 7, 2024. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2024/03/07/trump-christian-nationalism-extremist-threat/72869355007/>.

41 Kiera Butler, “Christian Nationalists Dream of Taking Over America,” *Mother Jones*, October 2024, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/10/new-apostolic-reformation-christian-nationalism/>.

42 Stewart, in *Money, Lies, and God*, offers an extended discussion of these ideas.

before the election, Republican vice-presidential nominee J. D. Vance attended a Lance Wallnau “Courage Tour” event in Pennsylvania.⁴³

Tracing the complex and sometimes hard-to-distinguish NAR organizations and networks in this limited space would be impossible. Suffice it to say that the numbers of NAR adherents are large and growing. Taylor describes it as “a highly networked but loosely affiliated pantheon of charismatic preachers, pastors, celebrities, nonprofit leaders, and international entrepreneurs who understand themselves to be recreating the energy and vitality of the early Christian church.”⁴⁴ Ryan Burge describes nondenominal charismatics not by a label but by a unifying sentiment: “They are united by *what they reject*—the idea of organized denominations.”⁴⁵ Using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), Burge has tracked the growth of nondenominational charismatics. He finds that non-denominational Christians are the fastest – and perhaps only – Christian identity still growing. Few people identified as nondenominational Protestants in 1972 when the GSS first asked the question. With more prominent numbers beginning to show in the mid-1990s, by 2000 more than 10% of all Protestants identified as nondenominational and over 5% of the entire sample were non-denominational. The share of Protestants identifying as nondenominational reached nearly 20% a decade later, and by 2022, it was a third of all Protestants were nondenominational. Put differently, nearly 15% of all American adults now identify as nondenominational. That might not sound like a lot, until one considers that only a bit over 20% of Americans identify as Roman Catholic.⁴⁶ In short, one important manifestation of Christian nationalism is found in a loosely organized network of nondenominational charismatic churches and ministries that are united in their belief in special gifts and spiritual warfare designed to take over key institutions.

Growth in nondenominational charismatic Christianity is by no means limited to the United States. The Pentecostal/Charismatic movement is the fastest-growing religious identity globally, with strongest growth in Latin America and Africa.⁴⁷ One of the NAR most important prophets, Ché Ahn, founder of Harvest International Ministries, has over 25,000 churches and ministries in more than 65 countries worldwide.⁴⁸ In this symposium, Andre Pagliarini describes the evangelical Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, a rising charismatic religious community in Brazil. It has grown rapidly since its founding in 1977.⁴⁹ It operates, says Pagliarini, “a vast network of media outlets, including television channels and radio stations, which help disseminate its teachings and reach a broader audience.”⁵⁰ It uses these media outlets to mobilize political supporters of far-right politicians such as former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. These media outlets, ministries, prayer rallies, prayer networks (email listservs), and each Sunday sermon at NAR churches constitute elements of a vast organizational network. How do these widespread and culturally formidable surrogate organizations pull political parties and nations into illiberalism?

43 Peter Hall, “Who Is Lance Wallnau and Why is J. D. Vance Joining His ‘Courage Tour’ in Pennsylvania?” *Pennsylvania Capital-Star*, September 28, 2024 <https://penncapital-star.com/election-2024/who-is-lance-wallnau-and-why-is-j-d-vance-joining-his-courage-tour-in-pennsylvania/>.

44 Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force*, p. 3.

45 Ryan Burge, “Non-Denominationalism Is the Strongest Force in American Religion,” *Graphs about Religion*, January 9, 2025, <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/non-denominationalism-is-the-strongest>, emphasis added.

46 Burge, “Non-Denominationalism Is the Strongest Force in American Religion.”

47 A. Buttici, “Neo-Pentecostalism,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. Adam Possamai and Anthony J. Blasi, vol. 2 (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2020) p. 531–531.

48 Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force*, p. 127.

49 Maeva McClenaghan, “‘Exposed to Horrendous Things’: Young People in UK Speak Out against Evangelical Church,” *Guardian*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/29/young-uk-people-speak-out-against-evangelical-church-universal-kingdom-god>.

50 Andre Pagliarini, “Embattled Majorities and Ascendant Minorities: The Shifting Landscape of Religion and Politics in Brazil,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5 no. 1 (2025): 90, <https://doi.org.10.53483/ZCPD3597>.

Beliefs, Organizations, and Liberal-Democratic Backsliding

Scholars have offered conflicting assessments of the benefits of civil society organizations and other nonstate organizations for democracy. Robert Putnam famously laments the decline of civil society membership in the United States, seeing in it a great peril for American democracy.⁵¹ On the other hand, Nancy Bermeo notes that there has been concern over the potentially destabilizing effects of an overzealous civil society.⁵² While the terms used to discuss civil society are different, she says, the conclusion is clear: “an overly active society can harm democracy.”⁵³ Likewise, Sheri Berman avers that the “vigor of associational life” may well “undermine and delegitimize” the formal institutional structure upon which liberal democracy rests.⁵⁴

In his important study of liberal democracy and conservative political parties, political historian Daniel Ziblatt refers to various civil society, business, and even private individuals as *surrogate organizations*. These organizations help conservative parties promote campaign issues that mobilize a *cross-class coalition* of supporters, even during times of expanded suffrage and great social and economic inequality. Conservative parties, Ziblatt observes, face a dilemma. On the one hand, they must find a way to remain competitive in fair and free elections, even when voter eligibility is expanding. Yet they must do so without harming the status and privileges of their most natural allies, economic elites. By priming elections with non-economic but culturally significant hot-button issues, elite-aligned conservative parties are able to remain competitive in elections. But parties alone cannot hope to champion nonmaterial cross-cutting cleavage issues. Surrogate organizations are needed to help promote these sorts of issues.

In describing several instances of democratic backsliding in several late 19th century nations, Ziblatt notes that “outside interest groups and civil society organizations, which acted as surrogates for party organization, quickly and easily overran and captured weak and institutionally porous parties.”⁵⁵ Surrogates can “gain powerful leverage over a party in its most defining functions: selecting candidates, delivering programmatic statements to appeal to voters, and taking stances on issues in legislative bodies.”⁵⁶

In their adaptation of Ziblatt’s conceptual framework, Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson put the danger posed by powerful surrogates this way:

If these surrogates develop a zealous following among voters, a frail party may become their servant rather than their master. In a worst-case scenario, the party falls into a spiral of weakening control over the most extreme elements of its coalition. Ultimately, conventional politicians who are cross-pressured by competing demands may be outflanked, supplanted by demagogues who are happy to work with such elements and know how to do so. Reliance on surrogates can thus lead a party down the path to extremism.⁵⁷

51 Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

52 Bermeo, p. 10.

53 Bermeo, p. 11.

54 Sheri Berman, “Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic,” *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997), p. 414.

55 Daniel Ziblatt. 2017. *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 174). Kindle Edition.

56 Ziblatt, p. 190.

57 Hacker and Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets*, p. 25.

Religion and the Rise of an Illiberal Far Right in the United States

This danger is real. Investigative journalist Jane Mayer has chronicled the rise of billionaire-funded think tanks and astroturf advocacy organizations that shepherded in the neoliberal order characterized by business deregulation, corporate mergers, the rise of finance capitalism, union busting, the dismantling of social democracy, and the expansion of global free trade agreements.⁵⁸ The Koch brothers donor network of billionaire and corporate funders created a vast array of GOP-aligned and imbricated organizations that Mayer has dubbed the “Kochtopus.”⁵⁹ It along with the National Rifle Association, business organizations beyond the Koch network, and Evangelical and Catholic groups served as core elements of the Republican Party during the neoliberal era. Likewise, historian Kevin M. Kruse offers an account of the role of American corporations in revolutionizing the role of religion in American political culture. In part as a foil to threats of Communism during the Cold War, American business helped invent inaugural prayers, the National Prayer Breakfast, the introduction of “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance. “In God We Trust” was added as the country’s first official motto. In this climate, church membership was also soaring.⁶⁰

Trump and MAGA appear to have a different network of surrogate organizations, signally a break—at least to a degree—with the previous neoliberal order. Millenarian NAR churches, ministries, and online digital prayer networks are symbiotically joined with MAGA and the Trumpian Republican Party.⁶¹ Bridging links include Turning Point Faith,⁶² Project 2025 at the Heritage Foundation,⁶³ the National Association of Christian Lawmakers,⁶⁴ and the Clairmont Institute.⁶⁵ In radicalizing the Republican

Party, NAR is among the far-right set of surrogate organizations that are pulling the United States into illiberalism.

Note too that a part of the NAR/Christian nationalist network includes online organizations. W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston have argued that surrogate networks during the neoliberal era, far more than disinformation on social media platforms, led to democratic backsliding in the United States.⁶⁶ Later, they fitted this

58 Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017). On neoliberalism, see Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018; Mehrsa Baradaran, *The Quiet Coup: Neoliberalism and the Looting of America*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024). Gerstle introduces the notion of a political order. It signified periods of stable state/market relations and supporting ideologies or “imaginaries.” So the New Deal order became an order when Eisenhower continued with Frankin D. Roosevelt’s strong state hand in the regulation of the economy, just as the neoliberal order was instantiated when Bill Clinton extended and deepened Ronald Reagan’s economic policies and ideological commitments to globalization, deregulation, and the dismantling of social democracy.

59 Mayer, *Dark Money*, p. 141–156.

60 Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

61 Anne Nelson, “Jesus Is Just All Right? Christian Fundamentalists Have Taken Over the Republican Party,” *Times Literary Supplement*, January 22, 2021, p. 8–10, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/politics-by-region/north-american-politics/how-christian-fundamentalists-took-over-the-republican-party>.

62 Lisa Hagen, “Beyond Campuses and Churches, Can Charlie Kirk Turn Out Votes for Trump?” *Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/24/nx-s1-5009316/charlie-kirk-turning-point-christian-nationalism-trump>.

63 Alexander Ward and Heidi Przybyla, “Trump Allies Prepare to Infuse ‘Christian Nationalism’ in Second Administration.” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/20/donald-trump-allies-christian-nationalism-00142086>.

64 Tim Dickinson, “The Christian Nationalist Machine Turning Hate into Law,” *Rolling Stone*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/christian-nationalists-national-association-christian-lawmakers-1234684542/>.

65 Jason Wilson, “US Conservative Thinktank’s Links to Extremist Fraternal Order,” *Guardian*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/mar/11/claremont-institute-society-for-american-civic-renewal-links>.

66 W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, *The Disinformation Age* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

argument to Ziblatt's conservative dilemma model to a connective action account of organizational effects on politics.⁶⁷ The connective action framework understands routinized online communication, such as hashtags, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and subreddits, as a kind of surrogate organization. In this view, #QAnon and #StoptheSteal are "digital surrogate organizations," just as were #MeToo, #OccupyWallStreet, and #BlackLivesMatter.⁶⁸ This idea is especially relevant when considering the importance of online prayer networks and other social media instantiations of otherwise conventional churches and ministries, especially among nondenominational church networks and ministries.⁶⁹ It is also worth noting the considerable overlap between Christian nationalist beliefs and belief in QAnon, the far-right conspiracy theory about the so-called "deep state" and pedophilia rings.⁷⁰ In early 2023, PRRI survey data revealed that nearly six in ten QAnon believers were also either Christian nationalism sympathizers (29%) or adherents (29%). And among white QAnon believers, 31% are Christian nationalism sympathizers and 34% are adherents.⁷¹ When one includes Bennett and Livingston's notion of "digital surrogate organizations" in the analysis of the already robust array of conventional Christian nationalist organizations, the peril to liberal democracy appears even more acute.

Conclusion

We have argued that liberalism/illiberalism is not a binary condition. Democracies can become more or less illiberal according to the stability or erosion of liberal principles. We have further argued that such erosion of liberalism often involves a deep sense of grievance and anxiety that is given expression as hate speech and eschatological rhetoric about spiritual warfare and battles between good and evil. Rhetoric of this sort is in some cases used as what political scientists call cross-cutting cleavage issues that form cross-class coalitions. Put another way, elections are primed by dire warning about woke demonic forces, rather than about the lack of affordable healthcare and education, extreme wealth inequality, adequate and affordable housing, and more humane policing. Instead, citizen anxieties about economic precarity and social change are weaponized by Christian nationalist surrogate organizations to combat woke culture. Illiberal politics may therefore grow in connection with this renewed political theology and penetrate a large range of so far secular policy questions up to modifying the institutional status quo.

67 W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, "Technological and Institutional Roots of Democratic Backsliding in the United States," in *Connective Action and the Rise of the Far-Right: Platforms, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy*, eds. Steven Livingston and Michael Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025). See also W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston. See also Bennett and Livingston, "Platforms, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy: Connective Action and the Rise of Illiberalism," *Perspectives on Politics* (2025) <https://resolve.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/platforms-politics-and-the-crisis-of-democracy-connective-action-and-the-rise-of-illiberalism/A51164F80FB842AB578F8870C286ED35>.

68 Their argument applies the model developed by W. Lance Bennett and Alexander Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

69 Brad Christenson and Richard Flory, "The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

70 Steven Livingston and Michael Miller, *Connective Action and the Rise of the Far-Right: Platforms, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

71 PRRI staff, "A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture," Public Religion Research Institute, February 2, 2023, <https://www.prrri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>.