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## American Nationhood and Nationalisms (with Miles Smith)

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Dr Miles Smith, Assistant Professor of History at Hillsdale College (<https://www.hillsdale.edu/faculty/miles-smith-iv/>), joins me for a discussion of American nationhood and nationalism. We discuss the distinctive historical and cultural background that should ground contemporary discussions of so-called American Christian nationalism.

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### Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today for a discussion of Christian nationalism and all sorts of other things by Miles Smith, Assistant Professor of History at Hillsdale College. Thank you very much for joining me, Miles.

Thanks Alastair, appreciate you. So, Christian nationalism and other issues related to Christian politics have been very much in the national conversation of late. I'll be curious to hear some of your thoughts on the way we go about defining these terms, which have become quite controversial and controverted by sociologists, historians, and others.

What is your angle of approach to defining something like Christian nationalism? I think that when the discussion began, this has maybe been a year or so, more or so ago, Christian nationalism seemed to be people sort of working out the social framework in

which Protestant politics had been worked out. That's sort of, I think, what I sort of took from the beginning of the discussion. And so I wasn't reflexively, I wrote a couple pieces actually, sort of saying, okay, maybe there's something to this language.

And as the discussion developed, it seemed clear to me that basically there was sort of this totalizing influence, that sort of everything conservative Christians did like was Christian nationalism and everything they didn't like was a rejection of Christian nationalism. And then on the left, everything they didn't like was Christian nationalism, everything they did like was a rejection of Christian nationalism. So, I think that once the conversation became partisan, it became less useful for scholars and probably for clerics too to sort of figure out, okay, what does this actually mean? And I wrote an article in *Mere Orthodoxy* saying, okay, if we're going to talk about Christian nationalism as basically a social or socio-political framework in which kind of traditional Christian ideas are worked out, that's one thing.

But what it seems to me is it's actually become sort of a rhetorical tool to drum up the sort of red meat to drum up the masses. And I don't think actually Christian nationalism, if it is something, has ever actually been a mass movement. And that's something we can talk about.

I think it's been a pretty elite movement because I think state creation and high politics is usually an elite thing. So I guess I'm less convinced that it's useful now than I was a year or so ago. And it seems to me that there are a number of different angles of approach to these sorts of terms.

You can have the sociological approach, social scientific approach, which is very much focusing on the empirical reality, often in terms of electoral politics, very much concerned with ideas almost reduced to their social effects. So not actually understanding the ideas for their own sake and trying to investigate those, but just thinking, how does a movement arise and operate? What are some of its distinctive features? And the need to actually name some movement that's making an impact. Then there are more, it seems to me, sort of timeless approaches.

So you have this very abstract understanding of what Christian nationalism might be. And that can be sort of overly analytical approach, which is very detached from the actual historical particulars of tradition and the way in which a theological movement, for instance, an understanding of what that form of Christian politics might be, has developed over the course of the centuries. Then you have the more biblical or theological positivist position, which it seems to me has this biblical idea or theological idea that's almost imposed upon the reality as a law.

You have a primitivist approach. What did the founders think? What was the origin? And that actually determines what America truly is, for instance. Or you have historical descriptivism, it's just trying to describe historically what these things have been without

any sort of moral judgment or theological pronouncement upon what these things are.

And then you have these political movements, political expediency. And so you have the opposing movement is Christian nationalism or your movement is Christian nationalism and what serves or opposes is defined accordingly. And it seems to me that it's very hard to get anywhere where terms are being used in such an equivocal sense.

And maybe it's better to go back and think about what these different approaches have in their favor, what their limitations, and how can we maybe negotiate to a better understanding and terminology for speaking about Christian politics in our day. Absolutely. I think one of the big divisions is Christian nationalism, descriptive or prescriptive.

I think there's quite a few. I don't know if I'd call them intellectuals, but people engaged in religious life and in politics on the right who want to say, this is the program for Christian nations. And that's where you get, I think, sort of a prescriptive sort of definition of what a Christian nation is.

I'm not necessarily interested in that because I am an intellectual and I'm not a politician. For me, I think if I'm interested in Christian nationalism, it's merely sort of as a descriptive thing. What is kind of the received social, religious, and political tradition of the United States? What was its interaction with Christianity? And what does that maybe tell us about society today? I think that's actually a more fruitful conversation.

One, because it's more limited, its aims are more modest. And two, it's harder to sensationalize it. So I think you're absolutely right.

How to make sense of this is sort of actually to slow it down and parse it down and that probably won't mean it won't be as useful in a partisan electoral sense. But I think that's actually probably good to sort of keep it away from sort of the partisan realm, because otherwise you really just end up doing politics and sensationalism becomes almost a virtue if you're doing sort of electoral politics with an idea like quote unquote Christian nationalism. It also seems to me that when we're talking about something like nationalism it's very difficult to just define in an abstract sense because there's such a complicated history of that concept.

And certainly if you go back to the 18th, 19th centuries and see these developing concepts of nationalism, this is something that comes out of a very specific context and there are ways in which these concepts are operating, or the movement of nationalism is operating in ways that might seem antagonistic to many of the positions that would use that terminology today. So, for instance, very much a force of liberalism in certain contexts. It's a means or vehicle of liberalism.

It can be a means by which higher authorities imposed upon regions and they're

corralled into some sort of unity in ways that often can efface their distinctive character. And so you also see nationalism used in very different, with very different senses in different contexts. So, for instance, if you talk about Scottish nationalism or the sort of Basque nationalism or the various small regional claims to nationalism in somewhere like Spain, you have a sense of nationalism against this higher power that's being imposed upon you from a sector.

And nationalism is sectarian. Yes. And then other times you have this sense of nationalism.

I mean, if you thought about Spanish nationalism being opposed upon those regions. Right. And really ensuring that they get in line.

And so it is a slippery term, historically and also contextually. And I'll be curious to hear some of your thoughts on the history of the different uses of that terminology or that concept or nationalism as a movement within the US in particular. What are some of the concerns that a historian can bring this conversation? That's a great question.

My concern is really that a lot of nationalism is contrived. And what I mean by that is that a lot of this people educated in sort of evangelical and evangelical Calvinist backgrounds, I think, reflexively see an American nation that doesn't exist and didn't exist. So you think about this is downstream from I think you could call the Puritans.

I don't want to reflexively use that. But the idea, I think, is that there's a sort of unitary people in the United States that all think, act, and sort of eat, drink, sleep with kind of broad sort of unitary cultural presumptions. I don't think that's been the case.

And because of that, I think it's actually an obstacle to a lot of the moral politicking and religious part and the sort of Christian politic that people want to pursue. I think you were just in my former hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, which is a very different place than say Southern Michigan, where I live right now. And so I think the imposition of American nationalism is something that is kind of a dirty secret for a lot of people who are interested in pursuing Christian politic, because what you do is you kind of obliterate the nationalism that does exist in the United States, which is kind of this very strange sort of creedal constitutional almost legal nationalism, right? Like what is it that makes the United States the United States? Well, it's this kind of adherence to this sort of body of laws and to this particular creed.

I think that's probably true. I don't think that you can say there's sort of a more sort of a unitary social and moral foundation that gets all these people moving in the same way at the same time on the same things. And I think the people who do think that typically are downstream in various ways from New England in the beginning of the 19th century.

And I think this is why, I mean, I tend to think that modern progressives and modern

evangelicals sort of share an intellectual root in kind of this New England Puritanism, the idea of the benevolent empire, for example, that historians talk about in the 19th century. That's something that's at once progressive and it's at once evangelical. And so I think what we're seeing now is actually an argument between two tribes who really fractured in the beginning to middle of the 20th century, right? There's two visions of a benevolent empire.

One's this kind of sort of conservative evangelical benevolent empire that will make sure everybody's sex life is straight and make sure there's, you know, everybody has the right number of kids and the right number of families and there's the right type of churches. Another type, the progressives, I think nationalism of the day is sort of a benevolent empire based on sort of moral sentiment and the ideas of kindness and stuff like that. So my proposition is that what we experienced today is actually a fracturing of an idea that dominated really through New England's publishing prowess and then by just what happened in the middle of the 19th century, the end of Southern influence in the government, slave bought influence.

I think it's kind of people, Southerners need to be honest about that. So I think that we're kind of seeing a fracture point between two groups that actually share much more than they would ever want to admit. So there's always, there is an American nation, whether it's something that the people kind of a seed to or not, whether it's a popular nationalism or not, I think is a bigger question because I think people are a lot more interested in hot dogs and guns than they are sort of national moral ideology.

I recently read Gorski and Perry's *The Flag on the Cross* and their sort of genealogy of American white Christian nationalism, as they call it, and very much going back to 1690 is the date they set out and figures like Cotton Mather and others, their vision is one that roots all of this within a certain Puritan New England, and yet it seems to me that in many ways, they might stand more in the tradition of Puritan New England than many of the people that they're talking about. It's a sort of moral project for the nation. And the vision of American sociology, rooted in places like Harvard, is one that has a lot of the Puritan DNA within it.

And I'd be curious to hear some of your thoughts upon visions of American nationalism as regional projects, competing regional projects. That's a great question. One of the things I think about is kind of a certain amount of New England imperialism that's always gone on in the United States.

You think about you know, Thanksgiving being a nationalized holiday. Of course, Thanksgiving starts in Virginia as an Anglican feast. But you don't walk into any grocery store in the United States and see Virginia Cavalier.

You see what you see, you know, New England centric foodways and images. So I think the New England imperialism has always kind of been there. This question of

regionalism, though, is really important because I think that we presume mobility that I don't think has always been presumed, even in the United States's history, and certainly mobility that Europeans wouldn't presume.

Robert Penn Warren in 1979 wrote a little work on the legacy of the Civil War. And he was talking about the South. He was from Southern Kentucky.

But spent a lot of his life in Tennessee. He made this argument that essentially interstates had actually obliterated the United States's ability to think properly nationally, properly regionally. And so what that meant was, is that, for example, you can drive across a state in three hours.

And so a state doesn't mean what it used to. If I can just blow through it in three hours, that means it's a totally different form of formulation of what it is in my mind. And so regions are kind of like that, too.

We've got airplanes. We don't have a good train system. I envy, every time I go to Europe, I envy the rail system.

We don't have a good train system. That's right. Europe does.

Yeah, that's right. That's right. So you have this kind of question of what it means to be an American.

And I think that that's litigated very differently in different places. I spent most of my life in the South. And so I don't think it's artificial to identify as a Southerner.

I'm an American. I'm not anything less than American. But it means I relate to the national story very differently.

And so I think this relation to the national story is different everywhere. I think what makes evangelical Calvinists unique is that they actually have written a story that they think can be used for everybody. And it's a story based on a certain type of piety, a certain type of moral framework, and a certain type of sociology, too.

And so they sort of offer it to everyone. And I think this is what's interesting is it doesn't really work everywhere. Think about if you're thinking about your conceptualization of yourself as the benevolent empire, or you're sort of the godly warrior who's out there.

Well, it doesn't really work for the South, because a lot of the historiography in the United States are relatively well read person. Guess what? We were the baddies, we're the bad guys. And so I think it's hard to flip this switch and say, oh yeah, we're these kind of conquering knights of moral righteousness that are going out and, you know, getting rid of the libs or whatever the hell you say, like whoever you're getting rid of.

And so regionalism matters because people in the Midwest view themselves very

differently vis-a-vis the American project as, say, people in California. And so I think space and regions matter. And I think that is something that is glossed over in these conversations, because I think Christian nationalism is wedded deeply to an idea that there's a unitary moral and social framework that everybody kind of accedes to.

And that might be true in the sense that what everyone kind of thinks of biblical precepts as being worthwhile, the golden rule is going to be everyone's going to like that wherever you go. But it doesn't mean that sort of people have the same social relationship to those things. A lot of people might say, well, I've lived in a lot of places.

And I've experienced the same thing where usually those people are living in places where they're going to the same type of evangelical Calvinist church, you know, in all different spots. And so I think that's maybe something that doesn't get talked about, at least on the right, is that you're presuming a nation that doesn't really exist. And another thing I think it's just worth noting is that most people don't actually like Puritans, their historical legacy or the present idea.

They're not popular. Like people don't like them. There's a lot of conservative Christians that don't like them.

I talked to Pentecostals sometimes at work. They don't like the Puritan legacy. Baptists have some doubts about.

So I think that all of this, this kind of contriving of a national idea doesn't line up with either sort of regional life, which is still real. I think we tend to think that telemedia is obliterated. That's not true at all.

People in my little town in Hillsdale here feel very differently about things than in the city that I grew up in in North Carolina. So I think that regionalism still matters. I think this is maybe sort of the thing that the nationalist, the Christian nationalist project on the right hasn't dealt with.

And there's all sorts of things that probably go with it from the progressive reaction to it. I do wonder, you remarked upon the importance of the interstates and the way that that changes regionalism. It seems to me that America's history has coincided with incredibly vast changes in infrastructure, in transport, in media, and just the frameworks in which people would arrive at a national consciousness.

And so it's history has been in part a grappling with the fact that it hadn't yet arrived at a full national consciousness. It was evolving as a nation, its borders were changing, its composition was changing, and simultaneously you have these vast technological and infrastructural changes that it's having to work with. So, for instance, where you might have much more of a gravity in the local regional context, where those would be the context within which you are working out your life world.

Increasingly now you have this vast common spectacle that is not produced locally. It's mostly the average American as a consumer and doesn't really play much part in producing the culture as such. And so you have a lot of America depends upon organizations like Disney, which aren't elected, but they produce the spectacle that enculturates people, that presents the sense of what the nation is.

And America, I think, as a nation has always depended more than other nations upon the culture as a sort of spectacle and entity. And I mean, I think that can be seen in the degree to which American nationhood and nationality is performative. It allows a lot of people to join it and to assimilate to it.

But, for instance, national displays before sports games or the degree to which there are events that really express national identity. Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and these national myths, those bear a lot of the weight of what American nationhood means when the structures that primarily define the nation politically are more structures of contestation and compared to European countries, that's quite a difference. And it seems to me that one of the struggles that America has is grappling with these social, technological, and infrastructural changes and trying to understand what it means to be itself and how creatively to negotiate its identity in a context where that greater degree of regionalism is no longer so tenable.

I think that the idea of America grappling with itself, I think one of the things that strikes me as a truly American symbol is kind of the cowboy. Right, if I drop the image of cowboy, there's no ambiguity on it. And you think about the cowboy as a symbol was the creation of the middle of the 20th century at a time when there weren't very many cowboys left and people in the 19th century really didn't think about cowboys a lot.

So why do we start thinking about it? In the middle of the 20th century? Well, I think what's funny is the United States has always sort of found an identity when it has something to fight against. And this is what's interesting about Americans is that we are consumers. Like we kind of take and sort of the best of what we have to offer the world is based on our consumer.

That's kind of what the two-edged sword is. One of the things I think is worth noting is that even something like the cowboy, though, is this creation of telemedia. This creation of where Los Angeles area.

A lot of movies that were given to the rest of the country sort of say, okay, this is an idea, you like it, we think it's good for you to like it, take it in. But how many Americans live the experience of a cowboy? How many Americans sort of have ever actually seen one? I lived in Texas for a while, so I've seen a few actual cowboys, but that was an anomaly that had to go out and be shown, hey, this is a cowboy. Most people in Michigan or Indiana or Ohio, that's not their lives.



And so I think there's one of the things that I've thought through, James Fenimore Cooper is someone I think everybody should read if you're trying to understand the American nation. He goes to Europe in the 1820s, I think it's 1823, that goes and he comes back and he's written a sort of a book about what it was to be an American in Europe. And he reflexively tells Americans to have pride in themselves and pride in their own institutions.

And I think in the 19th century, what's strange is even though everything is new and unsettled and unstable and very federalized, there's some sort of unity that the United States has then that I don't think it even has now. So there was something about them working it out that made them actually feel like they had a sense of self that I don't think the average American has today. And so some historians, I think, say, well, that's that American desire to build.

Like we're not building something, we're not working towards something, then we don't really know ourselves. And this is also interesting because it goes to this kind of idea of almost this Calvinist need to be active, you know, actively doing something. Americans view themselves as the chosen people, now they have to confirm their chosenness with being active.

That's also interesting, but it's also deeply problematic, right? It means that Americans don't really understand the idea of leisure. And I think that is a national value. We're bad at leisure.

And we're bad at leisure because we always have to be fixing something. Edward Said's *Orientalism* is a book that won't be popular with a lot of people, but I think he gets it. He gets at something that's really important.

Americans have to have something to refract themselves against. They need an other and they typically need an internal other. And so every group of Americans, no matter what they believe, needs someone they're refracting themselves against.

So I think Christian nationalism has become a new tool by which to refract yourself against a group, so you can like confirm that you are right Americans in the best sense. You're chosen to do either God's work or the work of liberal democracy, kind of depending on where you fall. So yeah, I think there's a confusion about what it is to be an American.

And because of that, Americans look for causes. And I think conservative Americans and progressive Americans arrive at different causes, but we all have a cause. And E.M. Forrester said this was something uniquely bad about Americans, the British novelist E.M. Forrester.

So I don't know the answer, but there is something about the United States that's

particularly anxious and identity struggling in that sense. And also just note people with deep, deeply held regional identities typically don't struggle with that as much. What do you think that the USA struggles with these sorts of questions of national identity? What do you think it can learn from other American nations? In the in the Western Hemisphere? Yes.

Yeah, well, I so I study Latin America as my minor field. And I think probably the great lie that Americans tell themselves on the right and the left is that America is European. Brazil is a much more authentic peer country for the United States than the United Kingdom is.

Now, Europhiles will hate that, right? No one wants to think that. But the United States is a postcolonial polity and we sometimes forget that. So I think our interactions.

You know, on the on the right, I saw this, I think there's this this guy named Matt Walsh. I don't really know who he is. But Matt Walsh was holding up Singapore as kind of this ideal.

And on the left, you'll regularly see, you know, sort of a Scandinavian liberal democracy held up held up at the ideal. Well, actually, like the United States should always sort of compare itself to Brazil or Argentina or Mexico or Indonesia or India, instead of comparing itself to a Western democracy. That's counterintuitive for a lot of people.

But I think actually what we what we can learn is our neighbors are still working through a lot of the questions that we tend to think that we've worked out. But I'm not sure we've actually worked them out much more than say Mexico, Brazil, Peru have had all these countries are sizable geographically. All of them have a variety of people groups that are needing to be welded into some sort of unitary social, social reality.

All of them typically tend to have a group that thinks they are sort of the origin point that really isn't. And so I think we can learn a lot from from South America and a lot from our neighbors in the Western Hemisphere, particularly Brazil. Brazil is a big country that's figuring out, right, the relationship between liberal democracy and the fact it has a large conservative religious population.

The United States is in the same boat. And so I think both of these countries actually have a history of rebellion that are both slave based and based on religious fundamentalism. The Canudos War in Brazil is a fascinating conflict that people should read about.

It's essentially fundamentalist Catholics who think that St. Sebastian, this dead king, is going to rise up and sort of save them from the Brazilian Republic, which they're still loyal to the empire. So I think that Brazil is a much more appropriate analog to understand ourselves than Britain or France or Germany is. I'm sure I'll get pilloried for

that, but I tend to think it's the case.

And when we're talking about these sorts of issues, we're dealing with questions of the imagination, the imaginative frameworks that you take to your nation. And it seems to me that we've got, in these debates, maybe a neglect of the imagination's role in forming nationhood and the degree to which we can appeal to people or resource their imaginations in order to see things differently and maybe to overcome certain impasses of the imagination that lead to certain conflicts that we're experiencing. What are some of the ways that you think a historian can address the contemporary imagination of nationhood and maybe provide ways forward? So I think one of the things that would definitely be worthwhile is for people to conceive of the American nation along civilizational lines and not political ones.

So what I mean is our nationhood is vested in something like the English language. And sort of Anglo-American political habits that are bred out of this kind of Whig tradition, the 18th century. That's really what makes us who we are.

That's how we get the Constitution. That's how we get the fundamental rights that I think people appreciate about being American. I mean, one of the things that you find throughout the history of the 20th century is almost everybody loves the First Amendment.

Right. And so there's something about the First Amendment that's really special. It vests Americans with this particular type of freedom that's downstream from Whig thought in the 18th century.

I think that's a civilizational thing. There's a trust that the American Republic gives to its people on something like that. That's a good thing.

I don't think we should sort of sit around and the disposition, I think, on the right, especially on the religious right, is to say, well, everybody's antinomian and they shouldn't have these rights anymore. And on the left, the idea is actually the same. Right.

And so what you realize is kind of two dueling neonomian people who are saying no one's finding our perfect society. I think, at least as a historian and someone who's also religious, is understanding that the type of urgency to perfect society is not something that's shared by other nationalistic constructions throughout the world. Other nations don't necessarily feel like they need a mission.

Americans feel like they need a mission. I think reading about nationalism is a good place to say, like, why do Americans need to be doing something so much? That's one thing. And I also just think being honest about the history of the United States.

We are not some sort of Puritan Calvinist founded republic. Yes, deism was sort of a

powerful influence, but it wasn't a total influence. The left wants to sort of say, well, this is a deistic creation.

No, it's not. Right. It's a Protestant creation.

There's no doubt about that. It's something that's downstream from Anglophone Protestantism, but that doesn't mean it's the United States was meant to sort of affect a certain type of godly society à la New England Puritanism. And so I think just being honest, and this is a bad habit.

Religious people, I think they want a story. And so this is why you had the rise of people like David Barton or someone like that on the religious right sort of selling that story. It's just not true, though.

So I think as a historian, it's learned to be okay with not always being okay. I know that sounds kind of dumb, but the need to reflexively be kind of the hero of their own story is, I think it's a habit on the, at least on the Christian right. And it's also a habit on the Christian left or on the progressive left, too.

It's a pretty American habit that's cooked up, I think, artificially. I think there's parts of the country where they were just kind of fine to be. I live amongst a lot of Lutherans.

And guess what, there's sort of like the, you think about this sort of the German influence pub culture that's in the Midwest. That is very much a culture of just to be. You have sort of the old moonlight Magnolia's idea in the South, which wasn't probably a moral paragon, right, because of slavery.

There was a sort of to be-ness there. I think there's overwhelming influence from New England for so long that kind of the to do became kind of a marker of American nationalism. And I just don't think that was that was on the ground everywhere.

I think it's kind of something that's created through textbooks and whatnot, through New England's intellectual preeminence in the 19th century and handed off. So I think just being honest about there's massive difference in the United States. Not everyone feels the same way about quote unquote a moral or social nation.

I wonder, talking about those things, whether part of the problem is that America's reality and its idea of itself, of what it should be, that would justify being a nation, have not coincided. And so there's always that sense that you must strive to be, to do, to actually be. For America to be what it is, it needs to achieve something, whether that could be seen in terms of manifest destiny, or just simply in terms of being a truly multicultural, multiracial society where people are living at peace.

There's a sense of we haven't yet become what we're supposed to be, that would justify us claiming to be a nation. There's always that sense of we need to achieve in this

particular area. And I wonder whether that is part of the struggle.

And also the fact that America has, not just for itself, but for other nations, represented a horizon of possibility, a horizon of possibility beyond this whole... People talk about racism in the US. Racism is far worse elsewhere in the world, and sectarianism and religious conflict, all these sorts of things. And America has represented a horizon of future possibility that has been, in many ways, a beacon of hope for other nations, even if they prefer being rooted in their, very much their original national context.

America has always represented a possibility of something beyond that, a possibility of even a place where different nations around the world, even if they remain in their own place, where there is a sort of diaspora and confluence of these different traditions that enriches nations where these people are very much distinct from their neighbors. And so the sorts of things that America can produce, even artistically, things like jazz or the sort of media that it produces that have the ability to speak to people and resonate with people all over the world, even its fast food, its culture, more generally, has been a sort of cosmopolitan vision for the world. And so there's a certain sort of exceptionalism baked in, it seems to me, in the way that America is seen as the new world.

And America seeing itself as somehow having to justify the hopes that are invested in it. And I wonder how to negotiate on the one hand, America's general, genuine exceptional character, but also its unexceptional character. To what extent is it a nation just among other nations? And to what extent is it a nation that represents a horizon for sense of possibility for other nations or beyond other nations? I think that that's a great question.

I, you know, when I was in college, my roommates were men who had been born in South Carolina, but their parents were South Asians. In grad school, I lived with an Iranian American. And so you think about just that kind of cosmopolitan-ness that exists, and yet all of us were Americans.

Like all of us shared a pretty substantive amount of human experience, simply by being Americans. It really didn't matter where our folks had been from. There were certain things about American society, right, either pursuing undergraduate, you know, your time as an undergrad in college or in grad school.

And there's particularly American expressions of those things that made it so that we did not think about kind of, you know, ethno-social differences very much, even if they existed, which they didn't exist to the extent, I think, that we presume those things do now. So there is something exceptional about that, right? I mean, that doesn't happen in a lot of places. I mean, the remarkable racial diversity of the United States is a good thing.

And it's not actually it's not actually a reason for any social, it's not the reason for anarchy. I think that United States needs to be okay with the fact that you can't achieve

a sort of perfection. And the reason why I think that's important is that you have a lot of, at least people who are maybe a bit younger than me, who kind of have this disposition, I think, to burn everything down.

Right, you know, it's not good. Nothing's ever been good. I grew up in the 1990s.

It was a very good time. The United States was probably a little decadent, just like most major Western liberal democracies were at the time. So we should kind of just accept that, guess what, yeah, we're just a normal country that has kind of ebbs and flows morally too.

I think that the sort of reformist spirit in the United States is usually what causes its worst happen. So I think the stuff you see on the left, the kind of just almost grotesque stuff about human sexuality today comes from a reformist disposition. It's an attempt to fix something.

And I think the stuff you will find on the right, the excesses, will almost always be from reformist disposition. American need to fix something usually breeds its worst habits. So I think just under, if America could just be okay with like being a B plus country, you know, that would be good.

America doesn't need to be great. America just needs to be good. That line, I think, is a really important one.

America just needs to be good. Doesn't need to be great. Doesn't need to be greatest.

This kind of constant, I think, pursuit for some sort of political perfection in that sort of a messianic nation, a sociological perfection, sort of like outpacing. The United States, for example, doesn't have particularly low birth rates compared to the rest of the developed world. That's not hard, though.

Right, that's not hard. But for example, if you were to talk to just people on the right, you might think that the United States was at the bottom of that list. It's actually among developing nations closer to the top.

Even so, on a question like that, we tend to sort of, I think, presume that we need to be leading the pack in any given, because you see this, you'll see this. The United States is now this on this list and this on this list and this on this list. And at some point, constantly litigating yourself sort of against other countries like that gets you to not think about the more substantive things that you might actually need if you are a meaningful nation.

So I think some of it's just kind of turning off the fix it ring. There are things that need to be fixed. I'm not denying that.

But the American disposition to tinker I think is important. Also, the American disposition to overstate. There's a wonderful set of books by Walt McDougal.

He was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania for years and he wrote a kind of a two volume history of the United States. And the first volume is called Freedom Just Around the Corner. They're very readable, they're delightful books.

And he basically said the one national value of the United States is that they're all hucksters. They're all selling some. And I think you see this even tied to the reformist sort of disposition.

You always have to overstate what's wrong. And that's, there's something typically American about that. McDougal says.

And so that's sort of a cop out answer. Because it's not programmatic, but I'm not a historian. I'm a historian.

So it's not my job to figure out the social programs. So that's, that's my sort of cop out answer. I'll be curious also when we're talking about Christian nationalism.

Often people focus upon electoral politics and who gets into the White House. But it seems to me a lot of it is driven more by America's civil life and the degree to which, for instance, the place formerly occupied within the civil sphere of Christian faith, not necessarily as established religion, but as just the normal structure of civil values and the most visible form of faith and religious commitment, the most fundamental source of values, these sorts of things. The way that that's been usurped by a progressive set of movements, particularly things like the LGBTQ movement and the degree to which a certain type of anti-racism that's connected with that.

And these sorts of movements are filling the space where the Christian faith formerly occupied. And so there was a piece a while back on Slate's Star Codex, gay rights are civil rights. The way that a traditional Corpus Christi parade, for instance, has been usurped by the gay pride parade.

And the sense that flags that would formerly have been American flags in people's backyard are now hate has no home here. It's Black Lives Matter. And so there's the sense of this civil faith that's being that's displacing the traditional faith in America as a place that America is good, that America is a realm of possibilities.

America is not perfect, but it can it can strive towards these things. And we are bound together in part by a common commitment to Christian faith and its goodness. And it seems to me that while there's all this talk about Trump and other things like that, that may be the real issue and the role of corporations and other things in really squeezing out the Christian faith and the values associated with it from American public life.

And so people feel embattled around those sorts of cultural issues. And so the political battles are means to address that civil conflict and so leverage Trump and others against big business that's forcing everyone to wear rainbow flags or whatever. Well, I think this goes to two things.

One, I think one of the things that Americans presume is that Americans are individualistic. Americans aren't individualistic. They're actually pretty good conformists.

And so I think one of the things that's pretty easy to get Americans going in one direction when there is sort of a capture of civil society. People kind of fall in line. Americans they are probably more willing to be conformists than most Europeans assume, but in different ways.

So, for example, Americans won't do something the government tells them to. But if everyone kind of feels the same way about it, there's a social expectation in the United States that doesn't probably exist, even in some places in Europe. So, for example, you think about the Seinfeld episode of like, you know, he's not wearing the ribbon.

Americans pick up on that. And so I think that actually the fact that Americans are relative conformists actually is what tricks us into thinking we're individualistic because we really know who those individualists are. They stick out.

The capture of civil culture and the relationship between civil religion, corporations, and government I think also belies the point that the United States is somehow libertarian in a meaningful way. It's not. I mean, government and corporations have lived in a pretty symbiotic relationship for a long time.

And so there's kind of this shared I think high culture that they impose regularly. And I think that the kind of the key to understanding all of it is telemedia. And telemedia corporations.

And because of like we take in so much television, so much of what they produce. This is where the consumer point you brought up is really important. We all get programmed via companies that actually have this big relationship with the government through the bureaucracies that mitigate telemedia.

So I think that I mean, one quick way to change that is to not watch as much TV. But the question of how Christians kind of interacted with it is interesting because what it is to be publicly Christian and telemedia's relationship with Christianity is still considered important by a lot of people who identify as Christians. You know, we like to see Christian precepts presented in what we think is a good way on television.

I do find it interesting, the degree to which the language surrounding the screen is increasingly political. Talking about representation of particular groups. There's a sense that the television is playing a democratic role.



It's actually standing for you. People get more exercised about seeing people like them with their values, etc. on the screen than they do about their elected representatives often.

So there is something about the role of telemedia that just is under explored politically, I think. Oh, I mean completely. Our addiction to it, I think, is a part of the problem.

Donald Trump's rise is a creation of television. You know, a figure like Trump getting into politics shows you just how political TV is and how it relates far more to the political realm than I think we tend to assume. I'll be curious to hear some of the ways that you see positive developments in various American approaches to nationhood, to thinking about what it means to be an American from a Christian perspective, and political movements, whatever it is.

What are some of the things that you see as positive, encouraging developments that maybe you'd want people to put more weight into? Yeah, so I am completely interested in the work of someone like Michael Lind. And the idea that American nationhood can be litigated prudentially instead of necessarily on some sort of biblicist framework, I think, is really important. Michael Lind, did you say? Yeah, Michael Lind.

The other thing about his approach is thinking about America in terms of class, which doesn't think about itself in terms of class enough. Oh, completely. I mean, we are a classist society.

We are particularly bad at it because we lie about it. I have that feeling reading sociologists on these sorts of debates. It's very clear they're an expert class with regional interests, with a particular project, etc.

And yet there's the sort of objective scientific expert image that they project as if they were just disinterested, nonpartisan observers of the true reality. Yeah, and so much of this, I think, got sort of restarted in the Bush years. The years of the mid and late 1990s, I think, because business was booming in a particular way, did kind of flatten out.

People from working class and middle class environments were able to make money. I think that kind of went away, particularly during the Bush years. I think what makes me interested in someone like Michael Lind is he's a good challenge to someone like me, who is not particularly statist in their approach to economics.

I wouldn't define myself as a protectionist or anything like that. Nonetheless, there's prudential cases that are made instead of ideological ones. And I think that is a really good development for the United States.

Like, look, if we like our kind of liberal democratic life, small o liberal small d life we live here, we're going to have to make hard choices to preserve it. And so I think that that is probably my favorite development is it helps us understand that you have to act

prudentially in ways that might be seen as nationalistic or even quote unquote status. And so the prudential nation is something that I think is enormously important.

Because it's that prudential nation, I think, that preserves a lot, excuse me, a lot of the best of what we are as a people who, while not European, do have, right, a culture of arts, a culture of letters, a culture of media in a good way. So I think if I want to preserve the best of what the United States is, I should want the prudential nationhood that is coming out of groups to some extent, like so called national conservatives. I might not be an ideological national conservative, but on some level, I have to be a prudential one.

And so I think that is probably the best development I see offering substantive prudential cases for why the nation has to act nationally and in ways that are distinctly sometimes small c conservative, even small s status. And so the development of that polemic, I think, is one of the best developments. I'd also be interested in, to move towards the conclusion, to hear some of the bibliography that you'd recommend for people who are trying to think through the question of what Christian nationalism means, what it means for America to be a nation, and what Christianity's role within that has been, could be, and is, and just generally what are some of the authors that people should know of? So I think, I say the 19th century, and I think those are still really useful.

So in the 19th century, there were a few works that guys wrote to kind of say, this is who we are. This is what I think it means. Sorry, I was trying to frog in my throat.

What I think it means to be an American. James Fenimore Cooper wrote *The American Democrat*, which is a sort of precursor to the next book I'm going to mention, which everyone knows, which is *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville. One perspective that's completely fascinating is this kind of, dare I say, trad Catholic perspective of Orestes Bronson, who wrote a book called *The American Republic*, and sort of from this almost like neo-traditionalist mindset, James Bryce, by count, James Bryce, a British observer, wrote *The American Commonwealth*.

Another book I think is worth reading, it's a recent book, it's by a man named Jackson Lierz, it's called *The Rebirth of a Nation*. Lierz is a, is maybe, was a professor at Rutgers. And he basically talks about how so much of the United States as we know it, the idea of nationhood as we know it, is created really in the 1870s.

And he has this idea of a white, small w, n, small n, nationalist, militarist, capitalist, you know, Protestant Republic. And there's something to that because that does determine how the United States acts over the next really, really century. So Jackson Lierz's book is incredible.

I think that those older books really kind of give the frame for what people conceived of as an American nation. And it wasn't necessarily this kind of Hegelian nation that we tend to assume that's sort of an analog of Europe. It's quite different.

I rather enjoyed reading some of Leah Greenfield's work recently where she just talks about how different notions of nationhood were in France, in the US, in England, in Germany. And then as the idea has spread overseas to places like China. They're very distinctive notions of what national identity is.

Leah Greenfield, Benedict Anderson, I think is still worth reading because, I mean, the United States, we tend to assume kind of an ideological creation. But so much of what we think of as nationhood is really a creation of media, in this case print media that he talks about in his book, *Imagine Communities*. And so I think there's so much that we can read to kind of understand what it means to be the foundations of an American nation, if an American nation exists.

I think those books, Greenfield is exceptional. Some of it too is I think learning to maybe be more discerning in how we chronologically impute the past to ourselves. I know it's in vogue right now to sort of, to sort of, like I figure like Teddy Roosevelt is popular for national conservatives.

And yet, Teddy Roosevelt, his success is immediately overshadowed by Woodrow Wilson. So like the same people who are sort of saying rah-rah Teddy Roosevelt are saying rah-rah Woodrow Wilson, even though the men personally hated each other. So I think we have to, we can't just say Teddy Roosevelt's views and then put them here.

We have to deal with the fact that well a lot of people who were into Teddy Roosevelt, were into Woodrow Wilson too. And so we kind of, I think there's a, there's a habit of mine, where we kind of slice and dice what we want and take it directly to ourselves when that's, that's not how history works. And also many of the things we were discussing earlier that people would take as definitional for the whole nation or these events that really characterize the origins of the peoplehood are regional stories that have been imposed upon the whole nation and whether that, and also whether it's the narrative of 1609 or 1690 or 1776 or Ellis Island, whatever it is, these are stories that are true for particular people, groups within the nation, not necessarily for the nation as a whole, and there may not be one single narrative that fits for everyone.

And even a story like 1776 will, for people who appeal to it, function in very different ways depending upon how they relate to it. Is it the ideology that's introduced at that point, the vision of nationhood that could become something that was hospitable to them, or is it something that they feel very much was representing their peoplehood from the outset? And all of these questions I think are ones that complicate the notion of a single story. Yeah, you know, what is the American nation? The answer is always going to be, well, it's complicated.

Which isn't, I think, the question that people want, especially if we're looking for a consequence or a sort of a program from American nationalism. All these conversations are really good. I think that people will, you know, a certain type of person gets

impatient.

Well, what does it mean, what do we do with it? And again, I think that's that American tick, like, well, maybe we don't need to do anything with it. Maybe we just need to kind of sit and learn. So, yeah, that's probably the best answer I have as a historian.

This has been a fascinating conversation. Thank you so much for joining me, Myles. Thanks, Alistair, I appreciate it.

God bless and thank you all for listening. I look forward to joining you again soon with further conversations.