



November 2023

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Recommended Citation

Staib, Grahm M. (2023) "Jefferson and Tocqueville on Christian Nationalism," *Compass: An Undergraduate Journal of American Political Ideas*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.jsu.edu/compass/vol7/iss1/1>

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Jefferson and Tocqueville on Christian Nationalism

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Introduction

The influence of Christianity persists in America despite a decline in the number of churchgoers and those who identify themselves as Christian (Smith 2022).¹ Given this context, the contemporary Christian nationalist movement can seem perplexing. For more progressive mainstream Protestants, like Episcopalians, the movement can be frustrating, as Christian nationalists present a more conservative moral code than that found in the Episcopalian's interpretation of Christianity. Progressive-leaning Christians tend to emphasize the importance of the separation of church and state, thus combating the movement for Christianity to become an established state religion that is defined in a manner foreign to their understanding. In contrast, Christian nationalists remain convinced that the United States was never meant to have a secular government, and they call for the nation to officially become Christian and be led by these values.

This debate can be better understood by looking at those who have formulated our current laws and those who have analyzed this nation and its relationship to Christianity. This paper will focus on the views of Thomas Jefferson and French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville for their insights on the plausibility and consequences of establishing the United States as a Christian nation. Through Jefferson's writing, such as the *Notes on the State of Virginia* and the *Letter to the Danbury Baptists*, he has been arguably the most influential American thinker and politician on the issue of separation of church and state. Throughout *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville examines the influence that the separation of church and state has had on American religious life, and contrasts this with the religious life found in France, as well as most of Europe during the early 19th century. Understanding the work of both men allows us to

¹ This survey indicates that since 2007, the amount of Americans identifying as Christian has dropped from 78% to 63%. The survey also indicates that while those identifying as Catholic have only dropped from 24% to 21%, those identifying as Protestant Christian have dropped from 52% to 40% (Smith 2022).

comprehend the principle of separation of church and state and the potential consequences of eliminating it in favor of Christian Nationalism.

Thomas Jefferson

Notes on the State of Virginia explain Jefferson's views on freedom of religion. There he describes what freedom of religion meant to minority religious groups such as the Quakers and Presbyterians: "They cast their eyes on these new countries as asylums of civil and religious freedom; but they found them free only for the reigning sect" (Jefferson 1853, 168). In this case, freedom of religion was used as a basis for the dominant religion to impose its religious codes and morality on unwilling religious minorities, as long as adherents of the reigning sect made up the majority or plurality of the electorate. Thus, the Puritans and their successors were not looking to escape the religious forces of Great Britain to create a cosmopolitan, inclusive religious environment, but to find a new environment where they could hold a position similar to those who pushed them from England. This view existed beyond Puritan-dominated New England, as illustrated by the many acts passed by the Virginia assembly in the mid-to-late 17th century that penalized those who did not baptize their children.

Seeing this, just three years after writing *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson assisted in formulating the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which banned any establishment of churches and any religious tax. This statute would serve as the basis for the First Amendment which says that Congress can, "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (U.S. Constitution). Jefferson later interpreted its meaning in a letter to the Danbury Conference of Baptists when he wrote that this amendment was effectively "building a wall of separation between Church & State" (Jefferson, 1802). For Jefferson, the issue was never a fight against organized religion and its influence on the private lives of American citizens. Rather he sought to protect the private element of religious belief and practice. In his Letter to the Danbury Baptists he affirms, "that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God" (Jefferson 1802). His influence regarding this issue would extend to Jeffersonian Democrats such as Joel Barlow, who authored the Treaty of Tripoli which stated, "the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion" (Treaty of Tripoli, 1796)

Alexis de Tocqueville

In examining the state of democracy in early 19th century America, Alexis de Tocqueville commented on religion and its place in the United States. In *Democracy in America*, he describes the Puritanical values by which the colonial era in the northern colonies was dominated, and he expresses a favorable opinion of their legacy on American democracy. In contrast to a country such as France, a nation-state with a history of feudalism, which a young John Adams viewed as mirroring the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church,² Tocqueville discusses how the Puritans treated one another with equal standing and most in the communities lived a middle-class lifestyle.³ Tocqueville contrasts the society of early Virginia with that of New England, and he finds that Virginia implemented a social hierarchy that mirrored those found in Europe. While Tocqueville views the Puritans as seeking religious and social freedom to implement their inherent democratic and republican values, he describes those in Virginia as “seekers of gold, adventurers without resources and without character, whose turbulent and restless spirit endangered the infant colony and rendered its progress uncertain” (Tocqueville 2016, Vol. I Ch. II). He also notes that the southern states had, “No lofty views, no spiritual conception, presid[ing] over the foundation of these new settlements” (de Tocqueville 2016, Vol I.Ch. II). Tocqueville clearly sees that having a spiritual connection is essential to creating a democratic culture, and without the spiritual influence of the Puritans, the democratic values that have defined the United States may have never come to fruition.

Given Tocqueville’s view that religious values were needed to support democratic values, what did he believe about laws concerning freedom of religion

² John Adams would write in his piece *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, “Since the promulgation of Christianity, the two greatest systems of tyranny that have sprung from this original are the canon and feudal law,” and later would state, “the most refined, sublime, extensive, and astonishing constitution of policy that was ever conceived by the mind of man was framed by the Romish clergy for the aggrandizement of their own order” (1765).

³ de Tocqueville (2016) states in Vol. I Ch. II, “The settlers who established themselves on the shores of New England all belonged to the more independent classes of their native country. Their union on the soil of America at once presented the singular phenomenon of a society containing neither lords nor common people, and we may almost say neither rich nor poor.” Thus, Tocqueville identifies the creation of a broad middle class within New England.

or the establishment of a state religion? One might assume that Tocqueville wanted to ensure that a state is tied to the religion that provides its moral backbone and makes its democracy function. Instead, he argues that the separation of church and state in the United States made its people more religious and devout. While in Europe most religious teachings focused on the “other world,” much of the preaching in America dealt with prosperity in this world, which was attractive to the ambitious people of the States, bolstering the spread of Christianity and religious principles. By adapting religious principles to American values by focusing on subjects such as the prosperity of the individual, religion as an institution began to flourish in America during a time of religious regression in Europe.

Regarding established religions, Tocqueville writes, “I have always held that if they are sometimes of momentary service to the interests of political power, they always sooner or later become fatal to the church” (de Tocqueville Vol II. Ch. XV). Thus, instituting a state religion works against religion itself, as in the long-term people's faith will diminish, and they may turn against the moral code that the state is trying to impose. As can be seen by polling of America's lack of trust in the national government, Americans have generally a skeptical and negative view of the government and those working within it on a national level.⁴ Given that Americans generally have a negative opinion of the national government, associating Christianity with the government would involve a trade-off between short-term political power for influential Christians to implement their desired policies and a long-term distrust of Christianity due to its relation with the government (RealClearPolitics 2022).⁵ While Tocqueville argued that a populace benefits from adherence to a common religious moral code, Galston (1987) asserts that Tocqueville makes it clear that this should be a private matter, not one forced upon the public through a state religion.

⁴ According to Pew Research Center (2022a), in 2022 only 2% of respondents said that the government does right “just about always” and 19% said “most of the time.” For more on this polling data Pew Research Center (2022a).

⁵ After combining a variety of sources tracking congressional job approval since 2009, the highest congressional approval rating has been 37.0% (RealClearPolitics 2022).

Analysis of Christian Nationalism in the United States

Jefferson and Tocqueville shed light on the debate over whether the United States should be a Christian nation. Jefferson points out that the rules that a dominant religion may impose on a minority intrude on others' religious practices and establish a condition of uniformity as a requirement for a functioning society. The example of Great Britain and the Anglican Church serves as proof that this does not work as intended, as despite it being the state church, dissenters persisted and many eventually fled. Despite dissenters leaving, the church itself could not maintain uniformity among its committed members. The modern Anglican church and its "broad" inclusiveness, ranges from those who consider themselves evangelicals who embrace the more Protestant elements of the Reformation to those who consider themselves Anglo-Catholics who embrace their Catholic roots. This shows how even religious institutions backed by the state have difficulty maintaining uniformity among religious beliefs and practices.

Maintaining a functioning Christian Nationalist state is not feasible, as demonstrated by both historical examples and the current status of Christianity within the United States. The problem of uniformity remains the major roadblock to implementing a Christian Nationalist state within the United States. One might argue that the American form of Christian nationalism would not consist of an established church, but of laws influenced by Biblical morality, this would still inevitably lead to an establishment of religion in the United States where religious actors would usurp influence.

Congresswoman Lauren Boebert (R-Colorado) suggested that despite the writings of Jefferson and the longstanding tradition of the separation of church and state in the United States, it was intended by the founding fathers that the United States was meant to be led by the church (Suliman and Bella 2022).⁶ This begs the question: who determines which church is "the" church? Following the Reformation and the adoption of the principle of *sola scriptura*, which recognizes the Bible as the sole authority of Christianity, there has been an explosion in the number of Protestant denominations. Even if the state religion is broadly

⁶ Quote by Congresswoman Boebert from the article: "The church is supposed to direct the government. The government is not supposed to direct the church. That is not how our Founding Fathers intended it" (Suliman and Bella 2022).

identified as Christian, being controlled by no single Christian denomination or church, there likely will still be an outsized influence by the conservative, evangelical base that is pushing for Christian Nationalist policies. It would likely not be a denomination that dominates, but a complex of influential individuals and entities in the white evangelical tradition which provides political power and legitimacy to those in office (Igielnik, Keeter, and Hartig 2021).⁷ Christianity and its ethics would be defined by those with the most influence over the state, which would force less influential Christian denominations to either cooperate with the new consensus or fight back. One can imagine the chaos and infighting between Christian churches in the United States over what it means to be a Christian.

Christian Nationalism would likely be subject to the same consequences experienced by the Catholic and Anglican churches in Europe, as described by Tocqueville. In contemporary America, many younger people have left religion altogether due to the perceived conflict between their particular liberal or moderate stances on social issues and the rhetoric used by Christian conservative politicians (Pew Research Center 2022b).⁸ If Christianity is becoming less attractive to people due to its perceived relationship with one political party or ideology, we can expect that this effect would worsen if Christianity became the established state religion. Given the multi-denominational nature of Christianity in the United States, people would likely aim their displeasure at Christianity as a whole and view it as inconsistent with their beliefs. A non-denominational version of Christian Nationalism would create a negative perception of Christianity as a whole.

⁷ This claim is based on the overwhelming support of evangelicals for Republicans (hence their influence over the party), and the fact that certain Republicans have been the only ones vying to become a Christian state. According to 2020 exit polls, Donald Trump won 84% of the White Evangelical vote (Igielnik, Keeter, and Hartig 2021).

⁸ 36% Americans aged 18-19 identify as unaffiliated with religion as opposed to 25% for those aged 30-49, 17% for those aged 50-65, and 12% for those aged 65 and above. Also, of those who identify as unaffiliated, 39% identify as liberal, 36% as moderate, 18% as conservative, and 8% do not know (Pew Research Center 2022b). Thus, it is clear that those in younger age groups, and those who identify as liberal or moderate are leaving Christianity and all organized religion at a faster rate than those who are a part of older age groups, and those who identify as conservative.

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