

FAITH IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

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As has been widely reported, the ultra-right-wing activist Jack Posobiec welcomed attendees at the Conservative Political Action Conference ten days ago by saying, “Welcome to the end of democracy. We are here to overthrow it completely. We didn’t get all the way there on January 6, but we will endeavor to get rid of it and replace it with this right here.”

Posobiec held up a necklace on which dangled a Christian cross and added: “After we burn that swamp to the ground, we will establish the new American republic on its ashes, and our first order of business will be righteous retribution for those who betrayed America.”

What is this new American republic? Posobiec believes our nation must be governed and its citizens must live by laws derived solely from the Christian Bible, which he views as inerrant and infallible. It’s a belief known as Christian Nationalism, and it has migrated in recent years from the right-wing fringe of our nation’s political life into the mainstream of the Republican Party. Donald Trump isn’t a believer by any account, but he’s a master of political expediency.

On Wednesday, the Public Religion Research Institute published a survey of more than 22,000 Americans as a part of its American Values Atlas. One part of the survey assessed support for Christian Nationalism as defined by agreement with five statements: The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation. Laws should be based on Christian values. If the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore. Being Christian is an important part of being truly American. God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

Ten percent of the respondents either agree or completely agree with all five statements, a group the Institute describes as Christian Nationalist adherents. An additional twenty percent of respondents agree with most of the statements, a group the Institute describes as sympathizers. All told, thirty percent of the respondents believe America should become a Christian nation.

The belief that Christians should rule our nation based on Christian principles has been both codified and weaponized for the political battles that lie ahead. Writing in the New York Times, David French has pointed out that Christian nationalism lies at the heart of the Seven Mountain Mandate, which is described in a book published ten years ago titled *Invading Babylon*. Adherents to the Seven Mountain Mandate include Paula White, Donald Trump’s closest spiritual adviser, and Tom Parker, the chief justice of Alabama, who invoked “the wrath of an angry God” in his concurring opinion on the

court's recent ruling on in vitro fertilization. Previously, Parker had written, "When judges don't rule in the fear of the Lord, everything's falling apart." Seven Mountain adherents believe Christians should rule seven institutions: the family, the church, education, the media, the arts, business and the government.

Another Christian Nationalist manifesto — the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 — outlines what they describe as a fourfold Conservative Promise. As detailed by Andra Wadkins on msn.com, the first promise is to restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children, which to them means outlawing IVF, hormonal birth control, abortion, gay marriage, and no-fault divorces. The second promises is to dismantle the administrative state and return self-governance to the American people, which to them means the federal government is largely unnecessary because the Christian Bible should be the basis of all laws. The third promise is to defend our nation's sovereignty, borders, and bounty against global threats, which include threats not only from immigrants but also from elite liberal influences found in classrooms, libraries, and secular universities. The fourth promise is to secure what they view as our God-given right to live freely, which to them means overturning any law that contradicts the Bible, no matter the results of referendums or elections.

If you are not yet worried about the leverage a well-funded and well-coordinated effort by thirty percent of the population can apply to our nation's political system, I suggest you look at what has happened to the Republican Party over the past few decades or to the House of Representatives over the past few years. I'm deeply worried — in part because I have spent nearly half a century studying the relationship between religion and politics, especially their overlap. Christian Nationalists are trying to build a different nation entirely, one that fundamentally departs from the vision that animated the founding of our nation.

The First Amendment to the US Constitution makes clear that the basic concern of James Madison, its chief architect, was the protection of the right of freedom of conscience. The Virginia Declaration of Rights, on which Madison based his assertion in the First Amendment, declares that all persons have "an equal right to the free exercise of Religion according to the dictates of conscience." If all individuals are free to pursue whatever ultimate goals they as individuals judge best, then the Constitution and laws of our nation cannot define how individuals must live — what goals they must pursue, what relationships they must form, what activities they must engage in. These are matters for individuals to decide.

Of course, the founders also knew that almost all our nation's citizens were religious individuals. They were supposed to learn how to be worthy individuals and worthy citizens in homes and houses of worship. For this reason, the founders did not believe that our nation's laws and system of justice needed to provide a moral framework for life in the fledgling nation. The system of justice did not need to educate its citizens to distinguish right from wrong. It needed only to provide a procedure for dealing with individuals who overstepped the boundary of their freedom. People could

do whatever they wished in the pursuit of what the Declaration of Independence calls happiness. For its part, the state had no basis for deciding whether a particular action would make someone a happier person or a more fulfilled individual. Its only concern was that one person's exercise of freedom did not impinge on the freedom of another.

As religious participation has declined in our nation and the Christian Bible has receded as a guide to living, many Americans have found themselves at loose ends. Our public institutions are not well-equipped to provide spiritual sustenance and moral guidance, and the activities that have replaced spiritual community and spiritual practice, supported by the new scriptures of media and social media, have not been spiritually satisfying. The result is a moral vacuum into which Christian Nationalism has rushed.

Over the past few days, I've been pondering a poem by the jazz musician and poet Peter Cherches. It's a deceptively simple poem about raising your arm, but it packs a wallop in the end. He writes:

Lift your right arm, she said.

I lifted my right arm.

Lift your left arm, she said.

I lifted my left arm. Both of my arms were up.

Put down your right arm, she said.

I put it down.

Put down your left arm, she said.

I did.

Lift your right arm, she said.

I obeyed.

Put down your right arm.

I did.

Lift your left arm.

I lifted it.

Put down your left arm.

I did.

Silence. I stood there, both arms down, waiting for her next command.

After a while I got impatient and said, what next.

Now it's your turn to give the orders, she said.

All right, I said. Tell me to lift my right arm.

When human beings get patterned to obey orders, whether the orders come from a sacred scripture, a religious authority, or a political leader, it's fiendishly difficult to get people to think for themselves — to make their own decisions about which arm to raise or whether raising an arm is the right thing to do. It's far easier just to keep taking orders.

When it comes to the things that matter most, this nation was not designed as a place where the government gives orders about how we should live our lives as individuals. Its role is to ensure that each of us has as much freedom as possible to make our own decisions about how to live, consistent with equal freedom for everyone else.

What this means is that each of us needs to be religious in our own way. That is, we each need to decide on what basis we will live our lives. Some of us believe that these matters need to be explored within a community of seekers. Why? Because thinking for yourself about how to live is difficult. The freedom to think for ourselves means we are free to get things wrong, misunderstand human experience, and misapply lessons we think we've learned.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith for people who are willing to think for themselves about ultimate questions, but who also believe that companions are necessary in the journey of faith. In this sense, Unitarian Universalism is the ultimate American religion, because it respects the freedom of conscience enshrined by the founders, while also recognizing the need for a collective source of spiritual guidance and moral purpose.

This means we understand the public role of religion differently than the Christian nationalists. The Constitution insists that our religious and political institutions remain independent from each other, but it does not require us as individuals to leave our faith at home when we enter the public square. Our religious convictions are not irrelevant to our political views; indeed, our convictions are the source of those views. As people of faith, our obligation is not to jettison our convictions, but rather to justify our political purposes to those who hold different religious beliefs. This is the price of living in a democracy, and it is a price we must insist that the biblical literalists must also pay.

In a democracy, one cannot appeal to divine revelation to justify a political point of view. It is not enough to cite the Bible or the voice of God. In the public square, we must explain our political views in terms that everyone else can comprehend — especially those who do not share our religious convictions. The message to people of faith who live in a democracy is this: Don't leave your faith at home. But come into the public square ready to explain why people who believe differently than you should accept the political consequences of your religious convictions. After all the explaining and efforts to persuade, then we vote. That's the way democracy works.

The book of the prophet Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible begins with a phantasmagorical vision of four winged creatures coming out of a great fiery cloud in

the heavens. The body of each creature is shaped like a human being, but each also has four faces: the front face is that of a human, the right face is that of a lion, the left is that of an ox, and the back is that of an eagle. St. Jerome, the fourth-century church leader who translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, interpreted Ezekiel's vision. According to Jerome, the human face represents the rational part of humanity, the lion represents the emotional part, the ox represents the appetitive part, and the eagle represents the spark of conscience.

The Latin word for conscience is made up of the word for science, meaning “to know,” and the preposition meaning “with.” The word came to mean “I know myself” and then “I bear witness to myself” and eventually “I pass judgment on myself,” which led to our present-day understanding of conscience as a moral guide.

When it comes to describing the proper relationship between religion and politics, I believe communities of faith should be the conscience of the nation. We should bear witness and pass judgment. But the perspective from which we do so is important. I like St. Jerome's image of conscience as an eagle, and I imagine it soaring above the public square. From that vantage point, an eagle can see the larger picture. In this way, a community of faith can bear witness to the trajectory of our common life as citizens — see ends more than means, overall purposes more than specific plans. We are the moral compass, the voice of prophetic purpose.

While soaring above the public square, we can also see the work we must do on the ground. The bad news is that 10% of our nation fully adheres to the tenants of Christian nationalism, and 20% mostly sympathizes with Christian nationalism. The good news, however, is that 30% of our nation fully rejects the tenets of Christian nationalism, and 27% of our nation is skeptical of Christian nationalism.

The numbers are on our side. For every adherent to Christian nationalism, there are three Americans who reject it. For every sympathizer, there are two skeptics. This is a battle that I believe can be won, but we will need to be just as passionate, well-organized, well-focused, and well-funded as those who betray our nation by trying to turn it into a Christian theocracy. We have work to do.

I close with this reminder from the ancient collection of Jewish teachings known as the Talmud, which reminds us not to be daunted by the enormity of the task that lies before us. “You are not obligated to complete the work,” the Talmud says, “but neither are you free to abandon it.”