In the years following Donald Trump’s presidency, there has been an enormous rise in Christian nationalism scholarship (e.g., Butler 2021; Fea 2019; Joshi 2020). A burgeoning strand of quantitative research has linked Christian nationalism to a wide variety of right-wing cultural and political beliefs, touching on virtually every source of controversy implicated in the American “culture wars” (e.g., Whitehead and Perry 2020). One consequence of this explosion of research is that the concept of Christian nationalism has become highly elastic, first in that it encompasses a growing range of components and second in that it has been stretched to support a variety of arguments about what Christian nationalism is and does, while offering few criteria by which to evaluate those arguments. There is a need for theoretical and empirical refinement regarding Christian nationalism’s conceptual scope, definition, and relationship to other concepts. When a concept so quickly comes to influence research literature, not to mention public usage of sociology (e.g., Perry and Gorski 2022b), we should scrutinize its adequacy for both.

This article proceeds as follows. We first review the definitions of Christian nationalism as they have developed in the current wave of quantitative Christian nationalism (QCN) literature, explaining numerous shortcomings and conceptual confusions. Second, we examine the scale typically used to measure Christian nationalism in QCN research (Whitehead and Perry 2020), with a focus on its questionable face validity and how this contributes to the concerns raised. Third, we introduce conceptual distinctions from other research on religion and public life, especially those suggested by Gorski (2017a, 2017b) between Christian nationalism and (1) civic republicanism and (2) religious conservatism. We argue that QCN research, in its theorizing, measurement, and interpretation of findings, has generally ignored (and implicitly rejected) such conceptual distinctions, resulting in an amorphous concept with limited explanatory power. Fourth, we present results from a latent class analysis (LCA) of the items in the Christian nationalism scale and discuss the interpretive benefits of this typological approach. We conclude with a discussion of how future QCN research will benefit from greater incorporation of empirical and theoretical tools drawn from other sources in developing a more compelling and better supported account of Christian nationalism.

1The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jesse Smith, The Pennsylvania State University, Oswald Tower, University Park, PA 16802-1503, USA
Email: jus769@psu.edu
Conceptualizing Christian Nationalism

Although conceptualizations of Christian nationalism are diverse, it is minimally defined as an ideology that “idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity and American civic life” (Whitehead and Perry 2020:10). The Christianity involved is of a particular type: racialized, identitarian, and exclusionary. Measures of Christian nationalism have been found to predict a wide range of politically and culturally conservative views, and prominent QCN scholars theorize that Christian nationalism supplies the narratives, rationales, and strategies that support these views. It is argued to operate in a manner distinct from political party, political ideology, and personal and institutional religious commitment in driving the American “culture wars.”

It is not a coincidence that this body of work has flourished in the years during and after Donald Trump’s presidency. The concept of Christian nationalism has helped make sense of phenomena in our political moment that on the surface appear puzzling. How is it that ostensibly religious Americans purporting distress over a decline in national morality could throw their support behind such an impious, combative, and crass figure? What to make of the increasingly visible link between Christian imagery and political violence, as seen at the January 6 Capitol Hill insurrection (Gorski and Perry 2022)? QCN research offers an explanatory framework that seemingly helps us understand these developments. In its present state, however, that framework raises as many questions as it answers.

Theoretical Gaps in QCN Literature

The concept of Christian nationalism, as treated in QCN literature, is simultaneously under- and overtheorized. It is overtheorized in that a wide range of strong claims have been made as to what it is and does. It is undertheorized in that there has been little effort to sort through, synthesize, test, or adjudicate between these various claims, resulting in an indeterminate concept. In the case of QCN, conceptual indeterminacy has led to theoretical reification, which carries the danger of obscuring variable relationships and downplaying clear specifications (Ermakoff 2017). This is especially problematic for the QCN concept, which is an example of what Abend (2008) termed “theory2,” theory. The adequacy of a theory2 approach is its identification of explanatory factors (e.g., Christian nationalism) that account for a social phenomenon (e.g., vote choice, gun attitudes). However, if such factors are poorly constructed, or if the explanation of their analytic relevance involves the misapplication of other theoretical constructs, then the grounding of the theory is tenuous. QCN would benefit from greater conceptual specificity in order to produce clear and testable claims about the nature of Christian nationalism processes and the delimited conditions under which they operate (Merton 1968).

We focus here on three aspects of QCN research that are presently lacking in analytical specificity. First, the conceptual scope of Christian nationalism: What are its core and peripheral constitutive elements and how do they relate to each other? Second, its cultural manifestations: What forms does Christian nationalism take, and by extension, how does it operate? Third, other beliefs Americans hold regarding the role of religion in the public sphere: Can the endorsement of any presence of Christianity in civic life be understood as anything other than Christian nationalism?

Put differently, we ask three key questions about Christian nationalism: What’s in it? What is it? And, what isn’t it?

Conceptual Scope. As the QCN literature has unfolded, the range of political attitudes purportedly derived from Christian nationalism has become expansive. Christian nationalism has been linked to, nonexhaustively, white supremacy, patriarchy, xenophobia, heteronormativity, authoritarianism, militarism (Whitehead and Perry 2020), rejection of science (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020), small-government libertarianism, antiglobalist populism (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2021), antidemocratic tendencies (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2022), social conservatism, Islamophobia, protofascism, and orientations toward cultural dominance (Whitehead and Perry 2020)—and this list continues to expand. QCN scholars argue that Christian nationalism is not only correlated with but shapes, drives, or undergirds these other attitudes (e.g., Perry, Whitehead, et al. 2021; Perry et al. 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020). In some cases these claims go further, as when Whitehead and Perry (2020) wrote that Christian nationalism "includes [italics added] assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity along with divine sanctions for authoritarian control and militarism” (p. 10), thereby promoting these additional factors from outcomes to constitutive elements.

Even as the conceptualization of Christian nationalism continues to inflate, however, its measurement (about which more later) has remained static. As a result, purported components of Christian nationalism not represented in empirical analyses are nonetheless invoked to help explain findings in QCN studies. For instance, authoritarianism is regularly identified as a feature of Christian nationalism and theorized to help explain the development of other attitudes (e.g., Perry, Whitehead, et al. 2021; Perry et al. 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2019), despite not being measured in the QCN scale or included as a predictor in most studies.1 In this way,

1In one case, Whitehead, Schnabel, and Perry (2018) tested authoritarianism as a mechanism linking Christian nationalism and opposition to gun control and found that it does not play a role. This example should prompt caution in assuming either predictive or causal roles of unmeasured factors, even if they are found elsewhere to correlate with Christian nationalism measures.
QCN scholarship “smuggles in” interpretive elements that are divorced from its empirical demonstrations. In its present form, this literature makes stronger and more diffuse claims about the conceptual scope, centrality, and pervasiveness of Christian nationalism than the results from QCN analyses can plausibly sustain.

These concerns are exacerbated by the fact that some proposed elements of Christian nationalism are in tension with one another. It is argued to contain impulses toward both small-government libertarianism and authoritarian social control (Perry, Whitehead, et al. 2021; Perry et al. 2022). It is characterized as lacking in theological orthodoxy (Perry et al. 2022) but also representing “an ultra-conservative strain of Christianity” (Whitehead 2021). It is said to entail a narrative that idealizes the United States as “enshrining the highest moral virtues of liberty, justice, and equality; and heroically overcoming tyranny and establishing representative democracy to preserve the rights of individuals” (Perry, Cobb, et al. 2021:7) but, more typically, to be “fundamentally anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic” (Perry et al. 2022:8). These various claims are not necessarily irreconcilable but nonetheless point to a concept whose elasticity undermines both its plausibility and explanatory utility (Ermakoff 2017). A stronger account of Christian nationalism’s constitutive elements would facilitate improved specification of the nature and extent of its relationship to other attitudinal outcomes.

**Cultural Confusion.** What, fundamentally, is Christian nationalism? Its theoretical definitions are as varied as its proposed constitutive elements. It has been labeled, nonexhaustively, as a pervasive ideology, cultural framework (Whitehead and Perry 2020), convergent social identity (Whitehead and Perry 2015), constellation of beliefs (Gorski and Perry 2022), malleable set of symbols (Whitehead, Schnabel, et al. 2018), myth, discourse (Perry, Whitehead, and Davis 2019), movement (Davis 2019), political theology (Perry et al. 2022), and politicized religion (Baker et al. 2020). Some QCN studies lean more heavily on one definition or another, some draw from several, and others elaborate a meta-definition, as when Perry, Whitehead, et al. (2021) described it as “a pervasive ideology constituted by identities, values, and historical narratives” (p. 427). This list contains a diverse array of cultural forms. Christian nationalism might be all of these, but because cultural forms entail different theoretical processes such that culture “works” in different ways (Lizardo 2017; Lizardo and Strand 2010), it cannot be each of these for a given person at a given moment. Here, the problem for QCN is one of specification, as the question of what Christian nationalism is informs the further question of what it does. We examine three conceptualizations that are prominent in QCN literature, clarifying at what level and under which conditions they should “work.”

**Social identity.** Christian nationalism has been described as a convergent social identity that merges cultural Christianity and American nationality (e.g., Davis 2018). On the basis of this formulation, Christian nationalism should shape beliefs by reinforcing group boundaries and promoting attitudes that help the ingroup define itself or elevate its status relative to outgroups. This definition has some attractive features with respect to claims made in QCN literature. There is substantial research showing that politicized identities play a role in organizing various attitudes and behaviors, even those that apparently bear little conceptual relation either to each other or to the identity in question, for example, liberals drinking lattés (Barber and Pope 2019; DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy 2015; Johnston 2006).

In other ways, however, the social identity formulation creates problems for the claims found in QCN research. Christian nationalism is generally presented as operating through evolving connections between ideas. For instance, the belief that violence in the United States is the result of collective sin rather than ineffective public policy is argued to undergird the political view that there should be fewer firearm restrictions (Whitehead, Schnabel, et al. 2018). However, scholarship generally finds that ideas and issues organized by social identity are not connected through chains of ideational logic but through identity signifiers about “which team [people are] on” (Boutyline and Vaisey 2017:1378). Identity-based beliefs may develop through processes of social sorting (DellaPosta et al. 2015), affective polarization (Finkel et al. 2020), the drawing of symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002), cues from opinion leaders (Barber and Pope 2019), or some combination thereof, and thus be neither stable nor coherent. Beliefs themselves will not be “movers” of other beliefs, but instead contingent upon the situation of the identity group in social space relative to other groups. Christian nationalism could “work” as a social identity but not in the belief-centric, logical way QCN suggests.

**Cultural framework.** The cultural framework definition also has some attractive properties with respect to QCN claims. We can view a cultural framework as analogous to a cultural toolkit: a set of associated ideas, symbols, and strategies of action that people glean from their environments and use to make sense of everyday situations or resolve recurring problems (e.g., DiMaggio 1997; Lizardo and Strand 2010; Swidler 2001). People have multiple toolkits, the appropriate use of which is cued to institutional environments and social contexts. Posing Christian nationalism as a toolkit would help account for the wide array of concepts that appear to hang together in Christian nationalism, as disparate or even contradictory ideas may come to be associated schematically in people’s minds (DiMaggio 1997; Lizardo and Strand 2010). Notably, the cultural toolkit approach assumes a causal disconnection between meaning and action,²

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²Though see Lizardo (2017) for “weak” and “strong” versions of cultural toolkit theory.
providing a theoretical explanation for how religious symbols or stimuli external to persons may be drawn on or “used” even by those who are not themselves religiously devout or theologically knowledgeable (Delehanty, Edgell, and Stewart 2019; Rotolo 2022). Such a toolkit could be widespread without being deeply held.

This definition creates a problem for the QCN explanatory framework: Christian nationalism here would not be a “mover” behind most of the attitudinal or behavioral correlations that studies find. Cultural toolkit theory explicitly rejects the idea that action is motivated by deeply internalized and coherent sets of ideas or propositional logic (DiMaggio 1997; Swidler 2001). Different people may “use” Christian nationalist discourse for different reasons (Braunstein 2019; Rotolo 2022), or not use it at all in most situations, but either way, in a cultural framework understanding, it is not a “mover” of social action. Survey questions might measure cultural toolkits, but associations between a toolkit scale and an outcome would not be taken to indicate causality or motivation.

Ideology. QCN literature most commonly explains Christian nationalism as an ideology (e.g., Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2019, 2020). By this understanding, Christian nationalism is a set of beliefs people hold that carries both logical coherence and motivational force. For social scientists, ideology encompasses beliefs about the kind of social arrangement people would like in their society, the rationale behind their desire for that arrangement, and the means acceptable to achieving it (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009). If Christian nationalism is an ideology, then adherents will believe that the American state should explicitly privilege citizens who are (white, straight, male) Christians, hold an idealized and sacralized vision of the United States as embodying this identity, and be willing to use illiberal or authoritarian means to bring about this social arrangement (Whitehead and Perry 2020). QCN studies typically build their arguments by establishing logical ideational connections between Christian nationalist premises and particular conclusions regarding other issues. By this account, Christian nationalism is a conscious, coherent “mover” of attitudes and actions.

The problem with this account is that most members of the public are poorly informed and tend not to hold a stable ideology (Jost et al. 2009:310). Most Americans are not consistent in their beliefs, and most value social tolerance over ideological purity (e.g., Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Smith 2022; Wolfe 1998). Ideologically motivated action is a powerful, but rare, occurrence, appearing during “unsettled times” (Swidler 2001) and among a relatively small network, often of elites. The best possible evidence of Christian nationalism as an ideology that motivates attitudes and action comes from evangelical intellectual leaders (Whitehead and Perry 2020:1–3), “wholly supportive” ambassadors (p. 35), or avowed activists (Gorski and Perry 2022). However, QCN scholarship applies ideology as an explanation for attitudes in the mass public. It treats the Christian nationalism scale as a measure of ideological intensity, posing regression-based mean effects as evidence of the effects of ideology.

In brief, there is a need for more theoretically refined and empirically grounded accounts of what Christian nationalism is in order to advance our understanding what it does. If it is a complex and multimodal phenomenon, as seems likely, there should be greater focus on when it takes one form or another, why, for whom, and with what consequence. The most common explanations currently in use in QCN research are not well-supported by research or theory in adjacent disciplines (Lewis 2021).

Dimensionality in American Attitudes. Furthermore, QCN research ignores the possibility of diversity or multidimensionality of perspectives on the social role of religion, instead treating any endorsement of public religious expression as evidence of Christian nationalism. Historically, however, arguments about religion and public life have centered more on how religious influences should operate in political life, rather than merely how much (Smith 2014). In which settings should religion-state separationism be strict, and in which should it be relaxed (Green 2022)? How should we distinguish between privileging and accommodating religious concerns in governmental settings? Is there a meaningful difference for civic life between substantive versus cultural religious expression (Astor and Mayrl 2020)?

This problem with the QCN approach can be seen in Whitehead and Perry’s (2020) characterization of those who fall in the middle of the Christian nationalism scale. They state that most Americans are somewhere in the fuzzy middle on these issues. They recognize America’s vaguely Judeo-Christian past and Christianity’s numerical dominance in the United States. But they also celebrate the ideal of religious freedom and believe church-state separation to be a good thing. (p. 3)

Note that this perspective is characterized, not as a distinctive or principled position in its own right, but rather as a kind of partial Christian nationalism. This forecloses the possibility that many Americans may actively support a delimited role for religion (including Christianity) in public life and thus reject a thoroughly secularized public sphere, while nonetheless being strongly opposed to total church-state fusion. The diversity of views on public religion and religion-state relations is flattened onto a single axis of variation, and any given perspective is understood only with
reference to how much it reflects Christian nationalism (Davis 2022; Morrison 2021).³

These are not abstract theoretical concerns: the relationship between church and state is a recurring boundary negotiation, encapsulating many ongoing legal and political controversies, which admit to multiple and qualitatively distinct perspectives (Adler et al. 2022; Miller 2020; Smith 2014). Although its research subject is defined in terms of religious-civic fusion, QCN literature has surprisingly little to say about issues directly pertaining to the role of religion in public life and surprisingly little ability to disentangle multiple dimensions about what Americans think about these issues (Wilcox and Jelen 2016).

**Measuring Christian Nationalism**

If theoretical accounts of Christian nationalism in QCN research exhibit a problematic range and diversity, its typical measurement appears incongruously simple. Most QCN studies use a scale composed of six Likert-type items pertaining to a variety of views on religion in public life (see Table 1). It should be noted that the items used in this scale were not developed with the intention of measuring Christian nationalism but rather to capture views on the separation of church and state, a related but narrower topic (Paul Froese, personal correspondence, March 28, 2022). The use of these items in QCN research seems to be a case of that empirical approach common to sociology, namely, of researchers using “whatever measurement tools they can find lying around in secondary data” (Vaisey and Miles 2014:313). This ad hoc scale’s use has nevertheless proliferated and has been advocated by QCN scholars (Whitehead and Perry 2020:169).

The reasons for this seem to be twofold. First, the scale’s Cronbach’s α score regularly exceeds the usual standard in sociology, implying reliability (though see McNeish 2018). Second, and more important, it is associated with a wide variety of culturally conservative attitudes, implying predictive validity (though see Davis 2022). Indeed, it is often among the strongest predictors in any given analysis.⁴ This scale seemingly captures some attitudinal dimension(s) that correlate strongly with issue attitudes relevant to the American “culture wars.”

Despite (or because of?) the scale’s lack of theoretical derivation, its face validity seems to have largely avoided scrutiny in the academic literature (but see Lewis 2021; Morrison 2021). Because it has been mostly unchallenged, it has been mostly undefended. In some minor exceptions, Whitehead, Schnabel, et al. (2018) acknowledged in a footnote that some survey items could, in theory, be interpreted in ways that do not reflect the underlying Christian nationalism concept, but conclude,

Affirmative answers to these questions would almost certainly indicate that the respondent envisions the United States not as a religiously diverse or generally sacralized nation, but as a Christian nation, consecrated by the Christian God, and where Christian identity, values, rituals, and symbols are privileged by the federal government. (p. 4)

This claim reads more as assertion than argument and ignores well-documented American support for civil religion, ecumenical religious expression, and religious pluralism (Gorski 2017a; Kruse 2015). More recently, Gorski and Perry (2022) acknowledged that some of the statements from the scale seem anodyne on the surface but argued that in light of their larger historical context, they “evoke contentious political debates” (p. 17). But it does not follow that they are effective indicators of a unidimensional Christian nationalism (Morrison 2021).

In considering the scale’s face validity, we may first note that only two of the items reference Christianity at all. Item 2 in Table 1 does not specify the “Christian values” in question. Values attributed to Christianity are wide ranging and not always exclusively Christian. Regarding item 3, the precise meaning of “strict separation of church and state” is and always has been contested in the United States (Green 2022; Green 2022).

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³We may also wonder how it is possible to have a moderate perspective on Christian nationalism given that it is definitionally extreme. QCN studies claim, for instance, that “Christian nationalism…wishes for national and Christian identities to be as coterminous as possible [italics added]” (Perry et al. 2019:131), and elsewhere, that it is “hyper-partisan and ultra-conservative” (Perry et al. 2020:2). How is such a concept able to accommodate a “fuzzy middle”?

⁴This could be due to analyses’ lacking measures of other concepts (e.g., commitment to democracy), using nonstandard measures (e.g., collapsed party affiliation), or excluding reasonable model decisions (e.g., nonlinear treatment of continuous variables, interaction effects), which leave a large amount of unexplained variance that Christian nationalism “accounts” for. We are unable to explore these possibilities because of space limitations, but see Davis (2022) for more in-depth treatment of these concerns.

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**Table 1. Christian Nationalism Scale Items.**

| Item | Survey Question: “To What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree That…” |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1    | “The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation” |
| 2    | “The federal government should advocate Christian values” |
| 3    | “The federal government should enforce a strict separation of church and state”⁴ |
| 4    | “The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces” |
| 5    | “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan” |
| 6    | “The federal government should allow prayer in public schools” |

Note: Items typically take the form of Likert-type scales, coded as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

*Reverse coded.
Smith 2014). It may simply indicate a respondent’s level of resistance to a total banishment of religion from the public square, not their attitudes toward religious establishment in government settings. A similar interpretation might apply to item 4. Item 5 makes no explicit reference to religion’s role in civil society or government. QCN scholars presumably take it to indicate that respondents believe the success of the United States is dependent upon national adherence to conservative Christian morality (e.g., Whitehead and Perry 2015), but it might just as easily be read as a theological affirmation of God’s grand design inevitably unfolding in history. Finally, item 6 does not distinguish between private and teacher-led prayer and thus on its face concerns only toleration of private religious behaviors in a school setting (Lewis 2021). Delehanty et al. (2019) showed that although a majority of Americans support some form of prayer allowance in schools, only a small minority endorse organized Christian prayer, a key distinction for arguments about Christian nationalism that is not captured by this survey item. In short, of the six scale items, only item 1 offers a relatively straightforward endorsement of the idea of the United States as an officially Christian nation. The connection for the other five is plausible but not necessary or sometimes even obvious.5

Still, it may be argued that despite these concerns, the scale items seem to be picking up a signal of something. In the next section, we discuss potential “signals” the QCN scale may be capturing instead of, or in addition to, Christian nationalism.

**What Isn’t Christian Nationalism?**

Scholars might decide that problems of QCN outlined above are serious enough to eschew the existing scale approach altogether, as Davis (2022) argued. However, with its rapid spread in research literature and growing presence on surveys, the QCN scale items are likely to remain in use for the foreseeable future. How might scholars use these questions differently to address some of the concerns we have raised? In the remaining pages, we highlight one way. We review theoretical distinctions that offer greater conceptual clarity regarding the Christian nationalism concept, then connect these distinctions to a reanalysis of the standard Christian nationalism items on the basis of an alternative empirical method. Our results have implications for how scholars might consider using the items in the standard Christian nationalism scale.

**Three Rival American Traditions**

We draw from Philip Gorski’s (2017a) book American Covenant because it engages at length with the concept of (Christian) religious nationalism but does so by distinguishing it from two other traditions that produce alternative ideas for religious interaction with political life and government: radical secularism and civic republicanism.6 The Christian nationalist tradition seeks a total fusion of religion and politics, whereas radical secularism seeks religion’s total banishment. In contrast to both perspectives, the civic republican believes that each kingdom has its proper border, but that there is also a place where those borders crisscross with one another, creating a liminal zone where the ends of religion and the ends of politics overlap, and that preserving this space is of vital importance to both kingdoms. (p. 17)

By this account, the total separation of religion from politics is “neither possible nor fair,” nor is it desirable. From a civic republican perspective, then, the question is not whether religious influences will be present in public life, but rather where, how, and within what boundaries. Religious and secular Americans may dispute the precise placement of those boundaries while potentially still falling within the broad tradition of civic republicanism.7

In their primer on Christian nationalism, Whitehead and Perry (2020) briefly reviewed the conceptual difference between civic republicanism and Christian nationalism but did not linger on the point and, more importantly, did not discuss how they might be distinguished empirically. At the risk of doing some violence to Gorski’s typology, we might treat the three rival traditions as in roughly ordinal relation to one another. This means that, rather than viewing the QCN scale as representing levels of endorsement of Christian nationalism, we might instead treat it categorically, so that those at the lowest end are classified as radical secularists, those at the top as Christian nationalists, and those dominating the middle as civic republicans.

Making this distinction with the QCN items is not seamless, however. Just as the survey items are not at first glance equally reflective of Christian nationalism, they differ in the

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5Samuel Perry recently acknowledged some of these concerns and developed new measures in more recent data collection that appear to capture the theorized concept of Christian nationalism more effectively (Perry and Gorski 2022a). We view this effort as wholly laudable and hope it portends developments in QCN literature that can address some of the concerns raised in this manuscript. We nonetheless believe that given the size and influence of the existing QCN literature, a critical reexamination of its claims in light of growing recognition of the shortcomings of its measurement approach is warranted.

6Religious nationalism in this work is for present purposes synonymous with “Christian nationalism,” so the latter is used henceforth for consistency.

7Although the extent of religious and political overlap is a prominent component of Gorski’s typology, it should be noted that it contains other elements not addressed here, such as individualism among secularists and traditionalism among nationalists. We thank a reviewer for raising this point.
To be sure, QCN research has devoted considerable attention to attitudes relating to social conservatism. It simply does not recognize the possibility of a religious conservative perspective that operates apart from Christian nationalism. For example, where Gorski grants that conservative Christians have a legitimate interest in securing religiously sympathetic Supreme Court nominees, Whitehead and Perry (2020) flatly dismissed this concern as an effort to “defend a status quo that historically placed white, Christian men at the top of the social order” (p. 74). Any religious conservative interest in the makeup of the Supreme Court is defined a priori as Christian nationalism.

Elsewhere, Whitehead and Perry (2020) showed that both religious commitment and the QCN scale are significant predictors of opposition to same-sex marriage, divorce, and transgender rights. Seemingly uncomfortable with this finding, they explained it by drawing a sharp dichotomy: religious commitment leads to a private religious concern about the personal morality of others, whereas Christian nationalism drives a public sexual traditionalism oriented toward hierarchical cultural dominance. The possibility of a perspective that is both public and founded in religious belief is not recognized. They thus go out of their way to foreclose any “liminal zone” (Gorski 2017a:17) wherein conservative Christians might legitimately seek representation of their views on marriage and sexuality in American public or political life, thereby rejecting Gorski’s recognition of either religious conservatism or civic republicanism.

QCN survey items offer little leverage to distinguish between these perspectives. Although empirical approaches such as interactions may be used to make inferences regarding how respondents understand the items in the scale (e.g., Perry, Cobb, et al. 2021; Stroope et al. 2021), in general the standard scale is likely to conflate the “signals” of Christian nationalism and religious conservatism (see Table 2). An ideal-typical religious conservative and Christian nationalist may offer similar responses but with different meanings. For instance, in item 2, a Christian nationalist may interpret Christian values as entailing the restriction of civil liberties for religious minorities, where a religious conservative will be more concerned with banning abortion. Regarding item 4, a Christian nationalist may want Christian symbolism to exclusively dominate public spaces, while a religious conservative may simply protest its removal. Following similar logic, any of the scale items may be understood as indicators of either Christian nationalism or religious conservatism, except perhaps item 1.

### Table 2. Theorized Mapping of Christian Nationalism Scale Items onto Gorskian Civil Religious Typology and Religious Conservatism.

| Item | Radical Secularism | Civic Republicanism | Christian Nationalism | Religious Conservatism |
|------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1    | −                 | −                   | +                    | −                     |
| 2    | −                 | +/−                 | +                    | +                     |
| 3    | −                 | +/−                 | +                    | +                     |
| 4    | −                 | +                   | +                    | +                     |
| 5    | −                 | +/−                 | +                    | +                     |
| 6    | −                 | +/−                 | +                    | +                     |

Note: Scale items correspond to survey questions listed in Table 1. Cells with +/− indicate that the perspective indicated in the column might lead to either an affirmation or rejection of the statement indicated in the row, depending on how the question is interpreted. Empty cells indicate that the perspective in the column does not clearly entail any given response to the statement indicated in the row.

**Christian Nationalism or Religious Conservatism?**

One other distinction Gorski makes could be relevant to a reinterpretation of the QCN scale. In a 2017 paper, under the heading “The ‘Lesser of Two Evils’ Vote,” Gorski (2017b) examines the line between religious conservatism and Christian nationalism. Gorski appears to suggest that a conservative Christian who opposes abortion and same-sex marriage, and seeks to use the political process to have these preferences enacted into law, may potentially be vindicated from the charge of Christian nationalism. Although Christian nationalists may have similar religiously grounded issue attitudes, Gorski contrasts them from conservatives on four criteria: sacrificialism, apocalypticism, belief in “American exceptionalism,” and in the case of whites, racism. These characteristics may be correlated with social conservatism but are conceptually distinct from it (see Stroope et al. [2021] for a similar contrast).

This distinction is not acknowledged in QCN literature. To be sure, QCN research has devoted considerable attention

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8This interpretation is not fully consistent with their evidence, which shows measures of religious commitment are predictive of views on the legality of same-sex marriage, as well as whether transgender people should be allowed to use their preferred public restroom—that is, views about social order rather than personal morality.
A Typological Approach to Studying Christian Nationalism

Applying these alternative interpretations to the quantitative study of Christian nationalism requires an alternative empirical approach. We need a method that can capture differences in kind rather than merely degree. In the final section of this paper, we present results from a LCA of the scale items from the 2017 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey. QCN work has combined these items into a scale, wherein the individual contribution of each item is opaque, making the examination of distinctions outlined in Table 2 impossible. Throughout the middle range of the scale, we cannot know what role each item played in an individual’s placement on the scale, and people with very different response combinations may nonetheless exhibit similar additive scores (Davis 2022; Lewis 2021). LCA can address this concern by estimating a categorical variable on the basis of the most common response patterns among the survey items, producing a typology of respondents who answered the items in similar ways. This method is used to distinguish among types of people rather than merely relationships between variables and has proved fruitful in research examining religion and politics (e.g., Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Delehanty et al. 2019; Smith 2022). It offers the further benefit of aiding in the interpretation of potentially ambiguous survey items by seeing how they relate to responses on other items, and for this reason its use has been encouraged in quantitative cultural sociology (DiMaggio et al. 2018). Finally, because LCA treats responses to scale items as categorical rather than continuous, it makes no modeling assumptions as to whether undecided responses are better understood as nonattitudes or moderate attitudes, thus avoiding a source of measurement error present in the QCN scale (Davis 2022). With this approach we examine whether and how inductively derived classes relate to the civil religious and religious conservatism distinctions reviewed above.

Our analysis proceeds in the following stages. We first apply an LCA to the QCN survey questions, including all cases with data on any of the items (n = 1,462). From these results, we create a categorical variable in which each respondent is assigned to the class for which they have the highest probability of membership. Next, we conduct a multinomial logistic regression analysis examining the religious, political, and sociodemographic predictors of membership in each latent class. Finally, using logistic regression, we examine how latent class membership relates to three outcomes that have been the focus of QCN research: views on same-sex marriage (Whitehead and Perry 2015), views on racial discrimination by police (Perry et al. 2019), and voting for Trump in 2016 (Whitehead, Perry, et al. 2018). A survey weight is applied to all analyses.

Findings

LCA results support a six-class typology of views on the role of religion in the public sphere. Results are presented in Figure 1, with predictors of class membership shown in Figure 2. The structure of the six classes is roughly ordinal in terms of endorsement of the statements across the six scale items. However, some survey items are more effective at distinguishing between classes than others.

The class solution partially reflects categories theorized by Gorski but also suggests further distinctions. The first class, which selects the “strongly disagree” response for every item, might be characterized as representing radical secularism, though Figure 2 suggests diversity among persons in the class. It includes not only persons who are actively secular but also those in a minority religious tradition, with both groups appearing to oppose religious establishment and to limit religious free exercise in public settings, possibly out of wariness of Christian privilege. The second and third classes are relatively similar to each other in that both tend to reject items 1, 2, 3, and 5, while offering moderate responses on items 4 and 6. These groups oppose the explicit federal endorsement of Christianity and take a more pluralistic view regarding free exercise of religion in public spaces but differ in their desired amount of overlap between the religious and political spheres. They could both be characterized as civic republican, though one may be more secular than the other. The fourth class is defined by respondents reporting undecided for most survey items (with the partial exception of school prayer). This class appears moderate. However, the clustering of undecided responses supports the prospect that they represent a nonattitude rather than a moderate stance (Davis 2022), as it is unlikely that respondents with well-developed views would take a consistently middle stance across survey items with important conceptual differences. The significantly lower educational level of this class also suggests the low information and engagement associated with nonattitudes (Figure 2).

A fifth group affirms most of the statements, but not in the strongest way, suggesting they prefer a Christian-leaning public square and greater accommodation of religion in state settings, but not to the point of being “as coterminous as possible” (Perry et al. 2019:131). These might be identified as religious conservatives. Finally, the sixth group strongly affirms five of six statements, coming closest to the

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8Prior to second-stage regression analyses, we impute 10 data sets to address missing data for all variables (n = 1,501).

9Although the Bayesian information criterion favored a seven-class solution (see Online Appendix), one of these classes was both negligibly small (3 percent) and not sufficiently distinctive to warrant its inclusion.
Figure 1. Latent classes from Christian nationalism scale items.
Source: Baylor Religion Survey, 2017.
Note: N = 1,462. The y-axis indicates item-response conditional probabilities from latent class analysis results.

Figure 2. Marginal effect on predicted probability of class membership.
Source: Baylor Religion Survey, 2017.
Note: N = 1,501. Missing data were addressed via multiple imputation. Reference groups: male, white, high school or less, nonurban, Evangelical, nonbiblical literalist.
description of Christian nationalists. Figure 2 reveals instructive differences between these groups, with Christian nationalists being less educated and, unexpectedly, more likely to be religiously unaffiliated (see Online Appendix). The latter finding may support the prospect of a cultural, identitarian, and noninstitutional form of Christianity, as theorized in QCN literature, but only for those at the extreme end of the scale. Religious conservatives, in contrast, are the most likely of any class to be religiously affiliated. These sociodemographic and religious differences offer further reason to expect qualitatively different understandings of religion in public life even among those whom the QCN scale would place close together.

Results from logistic regression analyses using the latent classes to predict political outcomes are presented in Figure 3. For each panel, Christian nationalists are the reference group, indicated by the dashed horizontal line. Despite the roughly ordinal manner in which the six classes map onto the QCN scale, they relate to each outcome in a way that is neither perfectly linear nor consistently monotonic. Results are thus not consistent with a conception of scaled Christian nationalism as a unidimensional driver of individual-level political outcomes (see also Davis 2022).

Interpreting them as distinct categories, however, yields interesting findings. Opposition to same-sex marriage (Figure 3A) exhibits a tier-based structure, with the Christian nationalist group showing the highest opposition, followed by religious conservatives and pluralist civic republicans, with the least opposition among secular civic republicans. The similarity between religious conservatives and pluralist civic republicans, despite their very different response profiles for the scale items, suggests that Americans with divergent preferences for state endorsement of Christianity may nonetheless share common moral ground. At the same time, civic republican classes differ, as the “break” between the pluralist and secular groups indicates.

Regarding views on racial discrimination by police, the most striking finding from Figure 3B is that only one group, the radical secularists, differs significantly from Christian nationalists. Both groups of civic republicans differ from religious conservatives but not Christian nationalists (results not shown). This is not the pattern we should expect to see if greater endorsement of the scale items is a driver of antiblack prejudice (Perry et al. 2019), as these results indicate no differentiation between those who weakly and strongly affirm the six statements. Similarly, Figure 3C shows two tiers of
likelihood of voting for Trump, with a lower probability for secular civic republicans and radical secularists compared with everyone else. The remaining four groups do not differ significantly from one another (results not shown). These findings are consistent with those of Davis (2022), namely, that links between scale items and outcomes are subject to a “threshold effect” and lose predictive power past a certain point.

One notable pattern across outcomes is that the two classes most favorable to a secular public square are consistently the most extreme in terms of average distance from all other groups. This suggests that in seeking to explain their findings, QCN scholars may be looking at the wrong end of the scale. Because QCN research is primarily focused on Christian nationalism as an explanatory mechanism, it has few theoretical resources for explaining differentiation between groups who reject the scale items to different degrees. The fact that radical secularists are distinctive in their views on police discrimination while Christian nationalists are not may indicate not merely that different groups disagree about this issue but that this concern is more central to secular or non-Christian narratives than to Christian religious (or religious nationalist) narratives. An implication is that in this and perhaps other instances, what QCN studies have identified as effects of Christian nationalism may be better characterized as effects of politicized secularism, which should be understood not merely as rejection of Christian nationalism but a distinctive perspective exerting independent influence on political narratives and social issues (Campbell, Layman, and Green 2020).

This brief empirical demonstration shows how an alternative methodological approach integrated with a larger conceptual toolkit can improve our understanding of the U.S. religio-political landscape. This approach allows us to answer questions about how Americans believe the religious and political spheres should interact, rather than simply how much. This may assist in theorizing about how different groups of Americans think about the role of religion in the public sphere, and what implications this has for how they understand other political issues. Although we believe this empirical approach carries distinct advantages in understanding Americans’ views on the appropriate relationship between religion and politics, we emphasize that ultimately there can be no substitute for good measures of conceptually distinct phenomena.

**Discussion**

A burgeoning strand of scholarship has placed Christian nationalism at the center of conversations about how American Christianity is linked to right-wing politics (Butler 2021; Fea 2019; Joshi 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020). This literature has drawn attention to the ways Christian identity and symbolism can be used to reinforce existing power structures and produce inequality. However, the popular stream of QCN scholarship struggles to delineate its central concept. QCN lacks conceptual clarity or empirical demonstration regarding what Christian nationalism is, what forms it takes, and how it operates. Furthermore, QCN fails to consider how Christian nationalism relates to other ways that Americans connect religion, public life, and the state. Without greater attention to these fundamental issues, the explanatory framework offered by QCN literature remains incomplete, and the many and strong claims made about the central role of Christian nationalism in U.S. political conflict are insufficiently grounded. Assuming that the QCN framework will continue to influence research, we revisit our arguments to suggest some ways forward.

To produce conceptual clarity, we propose QCN literature would benefit from a deeper engagement with distinctions about culture, particularly because key authors mention so many types of culture. We suspect that Christian nationalism does exist in different cultural forms. However, these forms entail divergent theoretical assumptions, work through different cognitive and symbolic processes, and do not necessarily overlap. Researchers should clarify the form of Christian nationalism in their analysis and follow the theoretical implications (Lizardo 2017). For example, theorizing Christian nationalism as social identity may be important for understanding how new issues get linked to Christian nationalism—such as election fraud or adherence to QAnon conspiracies. Theorizing Christian nationalism as a cultural framework or toolkit would help make sense of “odd” patterns, such as findings from Stroope et al. (2021) about how Christian nationalism distinctively influences nonchurchgoers. A toolkit lens would also encourage greater reflexivity by scholars about the diversity of meanings attributed to QCN scale items among survey respondents, who are likely drawing on vague, even conflicting understandings (Wilcox and Jelen 2016). Particularly for respondents in the middle ground of the scale, who may be navigating multiple toolkits, it is a theoretical stretch to assume that Christian nationalism is “motivating” other attitudes. Theorizing Christian nationalism as an ideology may help explain the articulated agendas of activists or elites at the uppermost end of the scale, but is likely a poor characterization of the influence of Christian nationalism for most Americans (Jost et al. 2009). A stronger account of the distinctive modes in which Christian nationalism operates will allow a more systematic appraisal of the nature and extent of its role in American political life.

Similarly, QCN scholarship would benefit from a greater attempt at clarifying its relationship to nearby theoretical concepts. We highlighted contrasts between Christian nationalism and both civic republicanism and religious conservatism (Gorski 2017a, 2017b). Incorporating these concepts provides alternative interpretations of the correlations found in QCN studies that have generally been ignored. Our analyses further uncovered that a separationist or secularist
orientation operates in American politics in ways that are not sufficiently characterized simply as rejection of Christian nationalism (Campbell et al. 2020). By recognizing these distinctions, QCN research may begin to elaborate a framework that better reflects the actual diversity of perspectives on religiopolitical overlap and church-state relations in the United States. By developing a more focused conceptualization of Christian nationalism as one competing perspective among others in a large and diverse religiopolitical field, QCN scholarship may generate more coherent, plausible, and testable claims about its role in American cultural and political conflict.

This interrogation of nearby concepts is especially important regarding “nonreligious” factors such as race, nativism, or political affiliation, that may exist independently of Christian nationalism in theory but overlap in such a way among the public to constitute other concepts such as “white Christian nationalism” or “Christian political integralism.” By articulating conceptual differences, measurement differences, and potential relations between concepts, researchers of QCN are more likely avoid conflation and instead invite intersectional theorizing that makes sense of how these forces overlap and interact (Yukich and Edgell 2020).

Moving forward, efforts toward greater theoretical clarity will necessarily entail greater innovation with respect to both measurement and methods. Given the problematic face validity of typical QCN survey items as well as the inherent limitations in establishing causality using cross-sectional regression, studies whose arguments predominantly rest on the predictive power of the QCN scale have passed the point of diminishing scholarly returns. However, alternative methodological approaches may be fruitful in examining claims about Christian nationalism. In our empirical example we showed how a typology-based method (LCA) can illustrate and partially overcome problems with the QCN survey items. Methods such as belief network analysis may provide a better understanding of how beliefs about Christianity in public life relate to a wide array of other attitudes simultaneously (Boutlyline and Vaisey 2017). Survey experiments may offer insight into how different people respond to secular, civic, or religious nationalist discourses under manipulated conditions (Schnabel 2021). Through such innovations, QCN research can move toward a stronger contribution to our understanding of how religion operates in American politics.

We conclude by noting that although we have focused on theoretical and empirical concerns, the aims of prominent QCN literature are also explicitly normative. QCN scholars state that Christian nationalism is a threat to a pluralistic society that must be countered with a coordinated response (e.g., Perry et al. 2022). We believe that establishing better delineated boundaries around the concept will serve this end. The more expansive understanding of Christian nationalism currently in use is counterproductive from both an analytical and normative perspective. In a recent QCN study, Perry et al. (2022) stated, first, that “over half of the United States population embraces Christian nationalism to some extent,” and shortly thereafter, that “Christian nationalism is and will continue to be an existential threat to the democratic process” (p. 20). It seems to follow, paradoxically, that American democracy can be secured only if the political will of more than half of the electorate is decisively thwarted. Such pronouncements, irrespective of their social scientific merit, seem antithetical to efforts to transcend entrenched partisan divisions in the service of a political “vital center” (Gorski 2017a). Indiscriminately applying the term may in fact reinforce the threat of Christian nationalism by instantiating, and hence aggravating, political sectarianism (Al-Gharbi 2018; Finkel et al. 2020). Greater clarification of the concept along the lines set out here can yield more broad-based and concentrated approaches for upholding democracy in a pluralistic society.

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ORCID iD

Jesse Smith https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9730-200X

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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**Author Biographies**

**Jesse Smith** is a PhD candidate at Pennsylvania State University. His research examines religious and cultural processes as they pertain to family, moral formation, and political engagement. His work has been published in *Sociology of Religion* and *Sociological Forum*.

**Gary J. Adler, Jr.**, is an associate professor of sociology at Pennsylvania State University. His research has explored how culture in a variety of forms matters to civic organizations, political behavior, and religion. He is the author of *Empathy beyond U.S. Borders: The Challenges of Transnational Civic Engagement* (2019, Cambridge University Press). His current research is a collaborative study of local religion-state interaction in U.S. municipalities.