

# Developing a Multidimensional Measure of Christian Nationalism in the United States

L. Callid Keefe-Perry

*Assistant Professor of Public Theology*

Boston College's Clough School of Theology and Ministry

Callid.KP@bc.edu

Christian Nationalism (CN) has emerged as a significant force in contemporary American society, shaping public discourse, political agendas, and cultural conflicts. Existing measures of CN, such as the six-question Likert scale used by Whitehead & Perry and the Public Religion Research Institute/Brookings survey, often lack the nuance needed to fully capture its complexity and varied manifestations. As a scholar of religion and politics, I propose to develop a new measure of CN that addresses these limitations and provides a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon. Building on critiques raised by Li & Froese (2023), Smith & Adler (2022), and Davis (2022), my research aims to create the Multidimensional Measure of Christian Nationalism (MMCN), which captures the ideological, identity-based, and cultural framework aspects of CN while accounting for varying levels of commitment among different subgroups.

## Theoretical Framework

My project is grounded in the theoretical insights from my recent work on CN as a form of imperial religion that operates through the selective appropriation of symbols, rituals, and performances of power to sacralize a particular religio-political order. This perspective acknowledges the religious nature of CN while also recognizing its distinct characteristics and aims. By conceptualizing CN as a manifestation of imperial power adapted to the modern American context, I aim to develop and validate a measurement tool that captures the affective, psychological, and ideological dimensions of CN while distinguishing it from related constructs like religious conservatism and civil religion.

## Proposed Measure

The MMCN is designed to address the critiques of existing CN measures by incorporating several key enhancements:

1. **Subscales:** It is structured around three separate subscales—Christian Statism, Religious Traditionalism, and Opposition to Pluralistic Constitutionalism—that delineate the nuanced facets of CN.
2. **Specificity and Contextual Relevance:** Each item within the subscales is carefully crafted to be specific and contextually relevant, minimizing ambiguity and increasing reliability.
3. **Data-Driven Categorization:** Instead of using arbitrary cutpoints, I plan to employ data-driven methods like latent class analysis to ensure meaningful categorization.

4. Respondent Neutrality: The inclusion of a "No Opinion" option accounts for respondent uncertainty or neutrality.
5. Theoretical Framework: The MMCN is designed with a clear theoretical framework that distinguishes between instrumental beliefs, identity, and cultural values, allowing for iterative refinement based on empirical findings.

## **Methodology**

To validate the MMCN, I will conduct a national survey of American adults using stratified sampling to ensure representation across key demographic and religious categories. The survey will include the proposed CN scale alongside established measures of political ideology, party affiliation, religious commitment, and other relevant constructs. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses will assess the scale's dimensionality and reliability. Latent class analysis will be used to identify meaningful subgroups based on patterns of responses to the MMCN items. I am currently piloting the study and will be doing my first large sample this Fall.

## **Significance**

The rise of Christian Nationalism poses significant challenges to pluralism, democracy, and social justice in the United States and beyond. By creating a more conceptually rigorous and empirically valid measure of this phenomenon, my research will contribute to ongoing efforts to understand and address these challenges, while also advancing broader theoretical debates about the changing role of religion in public life. The MMCN has the potential to transform how scholars and practitioners approach the study of CN, providing a more nuanced and reliable tool for examining its prevalence, correlates, and consequences. This project directly contributes to the fellowship's theme of "Religion, Nationalism, and Internationalism" by providing a more robust empirical basis for understanding the interplay between religious and national identities in the United States.

There has been some significant criticism of the most-referenced current CN measure used, but no substantive work developing a new measure that addresses these concerns. My research is an attempt to do so. The CURA fellowship would provide an ideal platform to develop the MMCN in conversation with other scholars working at the intersection of religion, nationalism, and globalization. I am excited by the prospect of collaborating with the CURA community to pursue this timely and important work, and I believe that my project aligns closely with the mission and priorities of the fellowship program.