

What Has Alexander Campbell to Do with Christian Nationalism?

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In his book, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, historian John Fea argues that, if there were ever a time in history when Americans believed they had a Christian nation, it was during the years of Alexander Campbell's life. Central to American identity from the founding to the Civil War was the idea that the United States was a Christian nation.²

Of course, not everyone in antebellum America agreed. Some people favored more religious liberty, while others “dreamed of a homogenous Protestant culture.”³ In some ways, as social ethicist Harold Lunger argued, Campbell moved from advocating more religious liberty in his early days to valuing a common Protestant Christianity in his later days.⁴

Campbell's change over time is important for what I will say today, but my primary aim is to explore Campbell's answers to several questions on current Christian nationalism surveys. To do that, first, I will provide a definition of Christian nationalism. Second, I will list four statements that are common among polls measuring Christian nationalism today. Third, the majority of my article analyzes Campbell's responses to each of those four statements.

Before we begin, let me note a foundational starting point. Like all thinking human beings, Campbell changed his positions over the course of sixty years in public life. In fact, a prominent debate among historians centers on the extent of continuity and

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² John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*, revised edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 4. People during this era used “Christian nation” as both a descriptor of the typical people in the nation (Christian) and also with the notion that God had a special role for the nation to play.

³ Fea, 7.

⁴ Harold L. Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1954), chap. 9.

change in Campbell's thought.⁵ When we combine Campbell's own development and change with the diverse and changing contexts in which Campbell spoke from the 1810s to the 1860s, it is unreasonable to expect Campbell to have only one consistent answer to questions on today's surveys. Further, Campbell's change and development over time make any assertion about "what Campbell thought" tentative at best. But by the end of the article, I think you will have a good idea of Campbell's changing opinions about Christian nationalism.

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry defined Christian nationalism in their groundbreaking 2020 study, *Taking America Back for God*: Christian nationalism is "a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life."⁶ In other words, Christian nationalism "blurs distinctions between Christian identity and American identity, viewing the two as closely related and seeking to enhance and preserve their union."⁷ I am using this definition of Christian nationalism.

To determine a person's commitment to Christian nationalism, Whitehead and Perry used people's responses to six statements in surveys to create a Christian nationalism scorecard.⁸ Here are the statements:

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 strict separation of church and state.
- [reverse coded]

⁵ James L. Gorman, "Campbell's Core Continuity, Change, and Complexity: A Historiographical Reflection on Douglas Foster's *A Life of Alexander Campbell*," *Restoration Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 31, 2022): 193–200; Linger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*; Richard T. Hughes, "From Primitive Church to Civil Religion: The Millennial Odyssey of Alexander Campbell," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44, no. 1 (1976): 87–103; Douglas A. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 88–89.

⁶ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.

⁷ Whitehead and Perry, 15.

⁸ Other ways of analyzing a person's commitment to Christian nationalism exist. Several of these would be interesting to measure Campbell's political theology. For example, Philip Gorski's history of civil religion in America argues that American civil religion has been a middle way between the two extremes of religious nationalism, on one end, and radical secularism on the other. Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), XVII–XXII, chapter 1; J. Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer, *Religion and Nationalism in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, 2016; Kevin Michael Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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.⁹

Every person surveyed chose one of five responses to each statement that got a score: strongly disagree (0 points), disagree (1), undecided (2), agree (3), or strongly agree (4). Whitehead and Perry then added all six scores together. Respondents whose score totaled 0 to 6 were "Rejectors" of Christian nationalism—that's 22% of Americans at the time of their study. Resisters of Christian nationalism (scoring 7-12) were 27% of Americans. Accommodators (13-18), the biggest category, came in at 32% of Americans. And 20% of Americans were Ambassadors (19-24).

I compared Whitehead's and Perry's statements with several other surveys and studies of Christian nationalism to distill a list of four statements to which Campbell's writings respond in some way or another.¹⁰ The statements are:

1. The United States is a Christian nation.
2. The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state.
3. The federal government should advocate for Christian values in its policies and laws.
4. God chose the United States for a special role in the world.

I will use Campbell's thoughts about these statements to answer the broader question, what has Alexander Campbell to do with Christian nationalism?

STATEMENT 1: THE UNITED STATES IS A CHRISTIAN NATION

Christian nationalists today "strongly agree" that the United States was founded as, and remains, a Christian nation. Campbell made his position on this statement clear in his famous "Address on War" in 1848, after the Mexican-American War claimed thousands of lives. Campbell's primary argument was that Christians should not participate in war or any other kind of violence. But along the way to that conclusion, he asked, "Has one

⁹ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 7–8.

¹⁰ Laura Silver et al., "Comparing Levels of Religious Nationalism Around the World" (Pew Research Center, January 28, 2025), 2–4, 7–10, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/01/28/comparing-levels-of-religious-nationalism-around-the-world/>; PRRI, "A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture," *PRRI | At the Intersection of Religion, Values, and Public Life* (blog), February 8, 2023, <https://www.prii.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>; Richard T. Hughes and Christina Littlefield, *Christian America and the Kingdom of God: White Christian Nationalism from the Puritans through January 6, 2021*, Updated and Expanded edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2025), 22–32.

Christian nation the right to fight a war against another *Christian* nation?" But that question required a prior question, "Is there a *Christian* nation in the world?" And, if there were such things, he asked, "At what font were they baptized?" He admitted that one could rhetorically say that, because there are Christians in a nation, that nation is a Christian nation. But rhetorical and literal meanings were vastly different. "A proper literal Christian nation," he said, "is not found in any country under the whole heavens."¹¹

Campbell's rejection of the idea of a Christian nation was rooted in his understanding of the kingdom of heaven. He believed that Jesus had inaugurated the kingdom of heaven when the Holy Spirit arrived at Pentecost in Acts 2.¹² In fact, he argued that there was only one Christian nation: it was a kingdom that the Apostle Peter called "*a holy nation—a royal priesthood—a peculiar people.*"¹³ For Campbell, Pentecost marked the beginning of a new era in God's plan for history. In this era, all Christians were united in the kingdom of heaven with Jesus as the one sovereign—Jesus headed up all three branches of his kingdom's government.¹⁴ The primary citizenship of Christians since Pentecost is in the kingdom of heaven.

For Campbell, earthly nations were not that important: they were places where Christians lived while doing Christian work until the millennial age—that 1,000-year period of peace and prosperity on earth before Christ would return. Campbell argued in his *Christian System* (1839) that, since the foundation of the kingdom at Pentecost, "the governments of this world have either been directly opposed to [the kingdom], or, at best, pretended friends; and therefore their influence has always been opposed to the true spirit and genius of the Christian institution."¹⁵

But there is more. When Christ returns in the future, all earthly governments will be destroyed, not by violence but by the Spirit of God. For example, when Campbell gave an address about July 4th in 1830, he ironically spent nearly the entire address celebrating the kingdom of heaven that would bring to an end all earthly nations—including the one whose birthday he was supposed to be celebrating!¹⁶

¹¹ Alexander Campbell, "An Address on War," *Millennial Harbinger*, July 1848, 364–67.

¹² Mark G. Toulouse, "Campbell and Postmillennialism: The Kingdoms of God," *Discipliana* 60, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 87–89.

¹³ Campbell, "An Address on War," 364–65; Alexander Campbell, "An Oration in Honor of the Fourth of July (1830)," in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen & Son, 1863), 367–78.

¹⁴ Campbell, "An Address on War," 370.

¹⁵ Mark Toulouse's excellent piece on Campbell's kingdom theology brought this to my attention. See Toulouse, "Campbell and Postmillennialism," 84; Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System, in Reference to the Union of Christians: And a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation* (Bethany: Forrester & Campbell, 1839), 166.

¹⁶ Campbell, "An Oration in Honor of the Fourth of July (1830)," 371–78.

In sum, Campbell “strongly disagreed” that the U.S. was a Christian nation. On this statement, Campbell scores a zero.

STATEMENT 2: THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD ENFORCE STRICT SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE.

Christian nationalists today “strongly disagree” that the federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state. They believe the Founders did not intend a strict separation. Instead, they argue that the emphasis on separation is part of a liberal conspiracy to rid American culture of Christian influence.¹⁷ So, where does Campbell land on this statement?

Lunger, in his study on Campbell’s political ethics, argued that Campbell was “almost fanatical in his insistence upon the radical separation of church and state.”¹⁸ From Campbell’s earliest writings, he praised the United States for its freedom of religion in contrast to the religious and political tyranny of European nations. Campbell believed that separation helped both the nation and the church fulfill their missions. Relying on John Locke, Campbell thought a central goal of the nation was to protect natural rights. And a foundational natural right was freedom of religion. In other words, the nation’s goal was not to coerce people’s religious beliefs and practices but, instead, to protect every person’s right to practice or not practice religion in whatever way they preferred. In this way, separation of church and state served the goals of the nation.¹⁹

Campbell illustrated his separationism when he served as a representative to the Virginia Constitutional Convention in 1829 and 1830. All his speeches and votes at the Convention were liberal at the time, including support for eliminating property qualifications to vote, popular election of judges, and a stringent separation of church and state. Although some members at the Convention wanted to exclude ministers from serving in the Virginia legislature, Campbell did not go that far.²⁰

Complementing his Lockean political philosophy, Campbell’s ecclesiology envisioned the church as completely independent, voluntary, and local—not established by the state. Like his father Thomas before him, Campbell regularly praised disestablishment

¹⁷ Paul D. Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness: What’s Wrong with Christian Nationalism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 59; Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 7–8; John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 59.

¹⁸ Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, 18.

¹⁹ Lunger, chaps. 1, 3, 5.

²⁰ Lunger, chap. 6; Harold L. Lunger, “Alexander Campbell’s Political Activity and Views,” in *The Sage of Bethany: A Pioneer in Broadcloth*, ed. Perry E. Gresham (Joplin: College Press, 1960), 152.

and religious freedom in the United States.²¹ Often, he noted that this freedom allowed for a movement to restore the ancient order of things, which he believed would catalyze the millennium. That is, he thought restoring primitive (i.e., New Testament) Christianity would start the 1,000-year period of peace and prosperity on earth before Christ would return. America was the perfect setting for this religious work.²²

And Campbell's vision of separation, in some matters, was a two-way street. He did not want the government messing with religion, but he also did not want religious people enforcing their views on society. He illustrated this in his opposition to moral reform societies, which sought to enforce Christian practices like keeping Sabbath (i.e., Sunday) holy. Keeping Sunday holy meant people should attend church, not engage in pleasurable entertainments, not use profane language, not drink excessively, and not "practice any unlawful game, hunting, shooting, sport or diversion whatsoever."²³ In Pennsylvania, such actions were punishable by fine and imprisonment.²⁴ Moral societies were an outgrowth of evangelical activism through voluntary societies intended to Christianize culture.²⁵

Campbell wrote a series of articles in the Washington, Pennsylvania, *Reporter* from 1820 to 1822 that opposed these societies because they were "anti-evangelical" and

²¹ Thomas Campbell considered America a "highly favored country" in which to procure Christian unity because "the sword of the civil magistrate has not as yet learned to serve at the altar." A nation with religious freedom provided the best opportunity for the church to "resume that original unity, peace, and purity, which belongs to its constitution, and constitutes its glory." Campbell's eschatology and reading of the times influenced his understanding of America's unique opportunities juxtaposed to the "baneful influence" of Europe's civil establishments of Christianity, which Campbell describes in apocalyptic language that is not specific, without commentary, and thus uncertain in meaning.²¹ In connection to his point about America as a "highly favored country," it is clear that he sees civil establishments of Christianity as thwarting God's plans and the objects of God's eventual wrath, from which America had gained an exemption. See Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Washington: Printed by Brown & Sample, 1809), 7–8, 55; Hans Rollmann, "The Eschatology of the Declaration and Address," in *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address: Text and Studies*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Hans Rollmann, ATLA Monograph Series 46 (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 341–60.

²² Foster, *A Life*, 59–60, 78, and chap. 19; Toulouse, "Campbell and Postmillennialism," 78–96; Campbell, "An Oration in Honor of the Fourth of July (1830)," 367–78.

²³ Alexander Campbell and Keith B. Huey, *The Candidus Essays By Alexander Campbell: First Published in The Reporter, Washington, Pa., 1820-1822*, ed. Keith B. Huey (n.p.: Keith B. Huey, 2001), chap. Introduction, https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/ce/CE00A.HTM.

²⁴ These were in the tradition of Wilberforce's society for suppressing vice and promoting good morals. See Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 133.

²⁵ On the evangelical impulse to Christianize culture, as inherited from the magisterial Reformations, see Richard T. Hughes, "Why Restorationists Don't Fit the Evangelical Mold; Why Churches of Christ Increasingly Do," in *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 194–213.

“anti-constitutional.”²⁶ He said they were anti-evangelical (i.e., anti-scriptural) because no such societies existed in the OT or NT, making them modern inventions.²⁷ Further, he said the biblical ideal precluded the imposition of Christian morality upon broader society—Sunday observance was not a civil or moral matter but a religious matter and thus a matter of conscience.²⁸ And he said the moral societies were unconstitutional because they violated liberty of conscience and religious liberty. In the end, the societies subverted “the principles of true religion and civil liberty,” making them a moral evil.²⁹ The church and society were two distinct institutions, and the one should not control members of the other.³⁰

In sum, Campbell strongly agreed with the separation of church and state. And since this one is reverse coded, Campbell scores a zero on this category as well. I will say, though, what Campbell said and what Campbell did were not always aligned. We’ll begin to see this in the next statement.

STATEMENT 3: THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD ADVOCATE FOR CHRISTIAN VALUES IN ITS POLICIES AND LAWS.

Christian nationalists “strongly agree” that the federal government should advocate Christian values in its policies and laws. This is a complicated question for Campbell, because he shifted over the course of his life from what sociologists call sectarian to denominational.³¹ In his later denominational period, from the late 1830s, Campbell worked for unity with other Christians and sometimes suggested that a “common Christianity” should shape the policies of the nation, especially public education. Campbell believed the “immediate goal of education should be the religious and moral endowment of the individual person.” Further, he thought the Bible “contained the basis of all morality.” Any person of whatever faith or no faith, with the right rules of interpretation, could access and appropriate the universal moral principles in the Bible.

²⁶ Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, 46.

²⁷ Candidus, “For the Reporter. No. II.,” *The Reporter*, May 22, 1820, 1–2.

²⁸ For example, Campbell argued that “no precept was ever more definite, more authoritative, or more perspicuous than” that in 1 Cor. 5:12 which he interpreted to mean Christians should judge Christians but not people outside the church. See Candidus, “For the Reporter. No. III.,” *The Reporter*, June 5, 1820, 1.

²⁹ Candidus, “For the Reporter. No. I.,” *The Reporter*, April 17, 1820, 1; Candidus, “For the Reporter. No. II.,” 1–2.

³⁰ Candidus, “For the Reporter. No. VI.,” *The Reporter*, August 21, 1820, 1; Candidus, “For the Reporter. No. 10.,” *The Reporter*, March 19, 1821, 1.

³¹ Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*; Lunger, “Alexander Campbell’s Political Activity and Views,” 147–63; Hughes, “From Primitive Church to Civil Religion,” 87–103; Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, “From Primitive Church to Civil Religion: The Millennial Odyssey of Alexander Campbell,” in *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008), 170–87; Gorman, “Campbell’s Core Continuity, Change, and Complexity,” 193–200.

Therefore, the Bible should be the basis of all public education, including in tax-supported public schools.³²

Campbell put all this together in his 1841 address “On Common Schools,” urging the state to advocate for Christian values in public education. Campbell asked, “What sort of an education is adapted to the common wants of the whole community, to the happiness and prosperity of the State?”³³ For one, the Bible should be the foundation of public education because it was the safeguard of “all human rights” and “the only strong and safe guarantee of our social immunities and privileges, whether political, moral or religious.”³⁴ He said the ablest politicians and philosophers in France, England, and America now affirm “that education in universities, in high schools and common schools, without the Bible and moral training is a national calamity rather than a public benefaction... All concur... in recommending the Bible as a universal school-book, from the first lesson in the reading class to the last recitation in the college course.”³⁵ In fact, he continued, “education without the Bible, and without moral training, is not to be tolerated by any civilized community.”³⁶

A broad agreement of denominational leaders about the necessity of the Bible in common education, among other things, led Campbell to promote a “*common* Christianity” that would help usher in the millennium. He said that “fundamental matters,” such as piety and morality, provide a “common ground on which all Christian people can unite, harmonize and co-operate in one great system of moral and Christian education.”³⁷ In an 1852 address, he added that common education had the power to dispel “the demons of priestcraft and kingcraft” among European immigrants by showing them “our religion” and “pointing to our common schools, our common churches, our common colleges, and our common respect for the Bible, the Christian religion, and its divine and glorious Founder.”³⁸

Campbell believed Protestantism was essential to preserving civil and religious liberty; Protestantism by definition embraced protest of unjust laws and unholy requirements.³⁹ The chief threat to civil and religious liberty, in Campbell’s mind, was Roman Catholicism, because he thought Catholics rejected freedom of religion and separation

³² John L. Morrison, “Education, Philosophy Of,” in *ESCM*, 2004, 292; Foster, *A Life*, 136; Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, chap. 11.

³³ Alexander Campbell, “On Common Schools: An Address Delivered at Clarksburg, VA (1841),” in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen & Son, 1863), 247.

³⁴ Campbell, 258.

³⁵ Campbell, 258–59.

³⁶ Campbell, 259.

³⁷ Campbell, 259.

³⁸ Alexander Campbell, “The Destiny of Our Country,” in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen & Son, 1863), 181.

³⁹ Campbell, 171, 174.

of church and state.⁴⁰ For both Protestants and Catholics, education provided the means of influencing society, so the destiny of the country depended on the success of Protestant education.⁴¹ “Under Protestant colleges... and Bible literature and morals,” Campbell claimed, “are the solid sub-basis of a free and enlightened government, in the church and in the state.”⁴² In other words, the destiny of American civil and religious liberty depended on Protestant public education.

Throughout his writings on common Christianity and public education, three beliefs seem to drive Campbell’s inconsistency (i.e., he endorsed separation yet advocated for Bible-based public education): (1) Protestantism by nature supported religious and civil liberty, (2) Catholicism inherently rejected religious and civil liberty and was thus anti-American, and (3) the Bible provided universal, non-sectarian morals that all could access. Because of these beliefs, by the 1840s, Campbell believed the destiny of American civil and religious liberty depended on Protestant public education.⁴³

But it is difficult to determine how Campbell would have responded to the third statement on its face. Perhaps in his early years of writing, Campbell was “undecided” if the federal government should advocate for Christian values in its laws. Yet he always believed that the Bible should be the foundation of public education and moral training, and he asserted this conviction with a virulent anti-Catholicism by the late 1830s. Perhaps we can average scores of two (undecided) from his earliest writings and four (strongly agree) from his later writings to give him a score of three, which is “agree.” At

⁴⁰ Campbell, 178.

⁴¹ My understanding of Campbell in this controversial speech is that he believed God had a mission for America because of the nation’s love for the Bible and Protestantism. What we have here is Protestant supremacy more than White supremacy or American supremacy—though he clearly revealed aspects of the latter two. In word at least, he suggested that anywhere else and anyone else could have been supreme, if they had the Bible and Protestantism. Of course, his White supremacist ideology revealed in other places no doubt reinforced his view that God would choose Anglo-Saxon states for this mission. On his White supremacy, see Foster, *A Life*, chap. 18.

⁴² Campbell, “The Destiny of Our Country,” 178; Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, chaps. 10–11. Catholic education, Campbell claimed, made the church and the state one idea, threatening separation. And even though he said Protestant schools were basically state institutions in America, he did not seem to think this threatened separation of church and state in the same way Catholic educational institutions would. In the end, all of this was about liberty: Catholicism threatened liberty, but if Protestant education was a state institution, it would ensure liberty to protest and challenge authorities. He also believed America was founded by Protestants, so Protestant education was as natural as Catholic education in places colonized by Catholics.

⁴³ According to historian Richard Hughes, this common Christianity forged unity out of diversity by the 1840s and 1850s in ways that Campbell’s restorationist proposal alone had not been able to do. Foster argues that Campbell’s statements about the millennium’s start changed over time, but restoration of the ancient order remained the catalyst of the millennium in Campbell’s core theology. Hughes, “From Primitive Church to Civil Religion,” 87–103; Hughes and Allen, “From Primitive Church to Civil Religion,” 172; Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 21–46; Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, chaps. 10–11; Foster, *A Life*, 88, 308; Gorman, “Campbell’s Core Continuity, Change, and Complexity,” 197–200.

least in practice, he did agree the federal government should advocate for Christian values in some public policy.⁴⁴

STATEMENT 4: GOD CHOSE THE UNITED STATES FOR A SPECIAL ROLE IN THE WORLD.

Christian nationalists “strongly agree” that God chose America for a special role in the world. Campbell always believed America was a special place, especially for the nation’s role in ushering in the millennium. As Campbell’s religious periodical’s name, *Millennial Harbinger*, signaled, Campbell’s reform movement sought nothing less than to start the millennium. How would he do it? According to Foster’s recent biography, “To the end of his life, Campbell linked his view of unity and the beginning of the millennium inseparably with the restoration of the ancient gospel and order.”⁴⁵ Campbell believed God had prepared America as a place for true Christian reform: America provided the perfect context for his movement to restore the ancient gospel and order that would lead to the millennial reign.⁴⁶

Since the 1970s, historian Richard Hughes has argued that Campbell lost hope in restoration’s ability to create unity and, therefore, he increasingly turned to American “civil religion”⁴⁷ as a means of unity to usher in the millennium. In Hughes’s interpretation, Campbell saw that a “common Christianity” could serve as a uniting force, as in the case of public education.⁴⁸ Others have weighed in on this historical debate.⁴⁹ Did Campbell stick with restoration as the only means to a unity that would usher in the millennium, or did he turn to American civil religion as the best means to unity? What seems clear to me is that the inconsistency of Campbell’s statements is at the root of our historical debate. As Foster noted, “while Campbell truly believed that America had a unique place in God’s plan for humanity, his understanding of the precise nature of the millennium and the role the United States would play in bringing it in... fluctuated during his career.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, 54.

⁴⁵ Foster, *A Life*, 88; Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, chap. 4.

⁴⁶ Foster, *A Life*, xii, 290; Campbell, “An Oration in Honor of the Fourth of July (1830),” 373–75.

⁴⁷ For a definition, see Charles H. Lippy, “Civil Religion in America,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010), 468–75.

⁴⁸ Hughes, “From Primitive Church to Civil Religion,” 87–103; Hughes and Allen, “From Primitive Church to Civil Religion”; Richard T. Hughes and James L. Gorman, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), 28–37.

⁴⁹ Toulouse, “Campbell and Postmillennialism,” 78–96; Gorman, “Campbell’s Core Continuity, Change, and Complexity,” 193–200. Toulouse concluded, “though Campbell naively believed in human progress, and occasionally stated his optimism that America would contribute meaningfully to that process, his theological view of the kingdom of God did not allow him easily to combine nationalism, racism, and the millennium as a consistent expression of his eschatological views” (84).

⁵⁰ Foster, *A Life*, 290.

Perhaps the most provocative of Campbell's statements about America's providential role in history came in his address, "The Destiny of Our Country," in 1852 given to the Philo-Literary Society of Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, on their fiftieth anniversary. The address argued that God chose England and America to spread to the world freedom, civilization, enrichment, and evangelization. For Campbell, God "granted the possession of the new world" to Britain and America not because of "soil or climate, or national superiority, or blood," but because "these are the lands of Bibles and of Protestantism."⁵¹ Despite these claims, Campbell and others in his circle did reveal their belief in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon culture, Protestantism, and people.⁵²

God's mission for America and Britain was not for those nations alone but for the world: "In our country's destiny is involved the destiny of Protestantism, and in its destiny that of all the nations of the world. God has given, in awful charge, to Protestant England and Protestant America—the Anglo-Saxon race—the fortunes, not of Christendom only, but of all the world."⁵³ As Campbell neared the conclusion of his speech, he reminded readers that Christianity had no special place for patriotism, as patriotism was "only an extension of the principle of selfishness." America's mission was to be a blessing to the world. Campbell reasoned that love starts at home but cannot stay there. It should move out to needy immigrants and to people in need in other countries. In this way, he believed America's mission was not selfish but a global mission of philanthropy and Christianization: "The United States... can extend blessings to many nations...in promoting her health, her wealth and greatness, especially that natural characteristic of a paramount regard for the freedom, amelioration, civilization, as well as the evangelization of foreign lands." If the nation would do this, and would "stand out upon the canvas of time as the most generous, magnanimous and benevolent nation, we will...bless the nations and be blessed by them, and grow in every element and characteristic of a great, a mighty, a prosperous and a happy people."⁵⁴

Campbell did not remain so optimistic about America's role in Christianizing the world. As the Civil War grew closer, Protestant denominations and the nation divided. By the 1860s, Campbell abandoned "his more optimistic visions of God's plan for America."⁵⁵

Campbell strongly agreed that God had chosen the United States for a special role in the world. He scores a four on this category. The success of the United States seemed to be part of God's plan, though Campbell always differentiated the nation's mission

⁵¹ Campbell, "The Destiny of Our Country," 171.

⁵² Foster, *A Life*, chap. 18; David Edwin Harrell Jr., *Quest for a Christian America, 1800-1865: A Social History of the Disciples of Christ, Volume 1*, Reprint (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 48–53; Alexander Campbell, "Address on the Anglo-Saxon Language: Its Origin, Character, and Destiny (1849)," in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen & Son, 1863), 17–46.

⁵³ Campbell, "The Destiny of Our Country," 179.

⁵⁴ Campbell, 184–85.

⁵⁵ Foster, *A Life*, 308.

from the kingdom of heaven's mission—they were not the same. Neither the millennium nor the eternal kingdom of God relied on America's success. Indeed, the U.S. and every other nation would ultimately be laid aside when Jesus took the eternal throne.

CONCLUSION

Historians of Campbell disagree on many interpretations. But one thing that all the influential interpreters of Campbell's political theology agree on is that he was inconsistent. He changed some of his answers to our questions over time. As I said at the start, we should expect nothing else from a thinking human being who led a new religious movement during six decades in a new national context that seemed more likely than any prior nation to foster a movement for the restoration of the ancient order of things. Of course, that nation did not—it could not—always live up to expectations people had for it.

So, what did Campbell think about Christian nationalism? Six very brief takeaways. First, there was no such thing as a Christian nation—that was a contradiction in terms. Second, Christianity was not about patriotism. The Christian's primary citizenship was always in the kingdom of heaven. Third, earthly nations were the theatre for kingdom work, and some nations were better than others for that work. Fourth, Campbell believed Anglo-Saxon Britain and America had a special mission from God in working to spread Christianity because, in his words, they were lands of the Bible and Protestantism. Clearly, his belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority influenced this vision of England's and America's chosenness. Fifth, Campbell believed throughout his life that America was the best setting for restoration of ancient Christianity because, from his perspective, it protected against civil and religious tyranny. Sixth, from the American home base, he believed a restoration of the ancient order and a commitment to common Christianity would move out to bless the world and move all creation toward the millennial reign.

And what about Campbell's score? On my four-question survey, Campbell scored a seven. If I am moderately accurate on his responses, that would put him in the "Resister" of Christian nationalism. However, one could make the case that he was an Accommodator: if we give him a four instead of a three on the third statement about advocating for Christian values in policies, and give him a one instead of a zero on separation of church and state, which would be fair, that puts him into the Accommodator category. Certainly, by his later years, this was true. The idea that he was a "Resister" of Christian nationalism in his early days and an "Accommodator" in his later years corroborates findings of many historians about Campbell's change over time.

Whatever the case, I hope my lecture has given you an opportunity to consider the complexities of religious and non-religious people living in modern states. The lines are often blurry. Present contexts often blind us to our own presuppositions. I hope all of

you will find the courage to rigorously test and question the ways you participate in the public square and the ways you use or do not use religion in your conception of the good society. Campbell did his best. I suspect (and hope) you find some of Campbell's ideas agreeable and some antiquated or downright wrong. I suspect we have much to disagree about here among this group. But we must bring our ideas into the public square for examination in order to distill what is good—and what is harmful—for us as a social community at this moment. We could surely use more people thinking hard about the relationship of religion and the state in our pluralist society today.