Introduction

If you would be a true patriot, then become a Christian. If you would be a loyal American, then become a loyal Christian.

Billy Graham (1953)

On Interstate 65, in Alabama between Montgomery and Birmingham, a landowner posts two large signs along the roadside. The first warns, “America, love it or leave it,” the other demands greater respect for the Bible. In Effingham, Illinois, where I-57 meets I-70, a cross towers 198 feet over the intersection. In locations spread out across ten states, Whataburger franchise windows display an American flag proclaiming “One Nation Under God Indivisible.” Throughout the nation there are monuments and signs extolling religion’s importance in American society. It may be more overt in certain sections of the nation, but it is an ever-present force in American life. National pride is even more aggressively on display from sea to shining sea. American flags fly on homes, office buildings, and churches; in school gymsnasiums, classrooms, and athletic fields; and on lapels of aspiring politicians everywhere. And, indeed, some of the most overt expressions of national pride are coupled with religious language. This became most evident in the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001, the military response that followed, and the omnipresent fears of another attack. American flags proliferated as anxious citizens waved them from their car antennas and front porches and wore hats and shirts emblazoned with them – and with this outpouring of national affection, overt, public expressions of religious piety also increased. These religious expressions highlighted the connection, obvious in many Americans’ minds, between the nation and a higher power. The American proclivity to conflate nation and God is on full display during American sporting events where crowds sing “God Bless America,” an
incantation every American politician now reflexively uses to punctuate any public appearance.

That the divine and the nation are connected is not simply folk wisdom; it is an idea advanced by political leaders who argue this is the way the nation was intended. David Barton, former vice chair of the Republican Party in Texas and founder of the religious nationalist organization WallBuilders, has written several books arguing the Founders were highly devout individuals, justifying the conflation of religion and patriotism (Barton 1992, 2012, 2016). Michael O’Fallon, the CEO of Sovereign Nations and the owner of Sovereign Cruises and Events LLC, has created a set of cruise packages that promise customers the beauty of nature, which they can enjoy while attending conferences to “Honor the Lord” and reclaiming “our national heritage” (Jenkins 2019). These occurrences are part of a larger culture, including books, movies, and television networks, built around the belief the nation is divinely inspired (Stewart 2019; Du Mez 2020; Keddie 2020).

The leaders of this cultural movement are actively working to codify the connection between America and the divine. The phrase “God Bless America” is now the official slogan on Alabama license plates and is an option for license plates in a variety of other states. The Texas State Board of Education redesigned its curriculum to increase the prominence of religion in its telling of nation’s founding (Chancey 2014). In 2015, a group of White Christian conservatives launched Project Blitz, a package of state and national bills designed to reaffirm conservative Christian values in American public life. The bills would compel a range of “divine interventions,” from expanding the placement of “In God We Trust” to public spaces, such as schools and police vehicles, to offering classes on the Bible in schools. It also calls for greater recognition of Christianity through the creation of a “Christian Heritage Week” and proclamations recognizing the role of the Bible throughout history (Clarkson 2018; Stewart 2018). Project Blitz has found allies at the federal and state level, suggesting their hope for a national religious revival may not be far-fetched. Their efforts found an unlikely advocate in Donald Trump, who, lacking a sense of irony, urged the nation to reclaim its religious heritage and endorsed biblical literacy classes (Chancey 2019). As of mid-2020, six states – Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Tennessee – had enacted legislation mandating public schools to display “In God We Trust.”

Tempting as it is to attribute such trends to “Trumpism” and some new viral strain of right-wing populism, the fact is that Donald Trump did not
invent the intermingling of religious pride and national pride. He along with Barton and O’Fallon and others driving this agenda are simply the latest expression of deep-seated beliefs among Americans that have been fostered since the nation’s founding. White Americans’ visceral reactions to the September 11 attacks, to the nation’s changing demography, and to perceived increases in secularism and multiculturalism, have made this conflation more noticeable, but linking God with nation has always been a part of American social and political culture (Jones 2016). Rev. Billy Graham, who provides our epigraph, resonated with the nation because he touched on a belief system rarely discussed but commonly understood. Because it is generally accepted, Americans barely notice the religious nature of their national motto “In God We Trust,” the overt public expectation that political leaders end their messages with “God Bless America,” or the incongruence of “patriotic pulpits” festooned with American flags. They take for granted the piety associated with national holidays and the patriotism associated with religious holidays. One only need look at the rhetoric surrounding the “War on Christmas” to see how celebrating this Christian holiday has been linked to patriotism. Such instances, whether overt or subtle, are the manifestation of a national myth that has been reproduced for more than two centuries. The myth contends that the United States’ creation and purpose are part of a divine plan. The nation was not created by chance; it was created by a Supreme Being to stand above all others and to lead them to a higher form of being. This is the myth of American religious exceptionalism, and it has been a critical component of American thinking since the colonies and provides a wellspring to which every generation of American citizens can return to define themselves and their nation.

We do not use the word myth as an insult to its adherents. We realize that for many, the word myth connotes an entertaining story or at worst the example of the primitive or savage mind run wild (Lévi-Strauss 1981; Vernant 1988; Overing 1997). Where logos is the establishment of truth through logical and rigorous thought, mythos is based upon rhetorical skills and the ability to impress (Overing 1997). Myth believers are caricatured as childlike – believing in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, or imbecilic – believing Lebron James is better than Michael Jordan. To the contrary, we understand myths as crucial to identity formation and providing structure to how one perceives the world (Green 2015). As such, myths are important clues into how people interpret their world and the subsequent actions they take (Geertz 1973). We believe the myth of American religious exceptionalism buttresses many Americans’ sense of
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a complicated world. The purpose of this book is to understand how these “disciples” of the myth of American religious exceptionalism use it to understand themselves, their nation, and its place in the world.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MYTH

Claude Lévi-Strauss viewed myths as scientific emptiness, but also acknowledged their immense social power (1981). Their social utility comes from their ability to provide pleasure and emotional appeal to their audiences. The myth captures people’s attention and convinces them that this is how the world works (Vernant 1988; Overing 1997). Myths become the bedrock of a community. In Bronislaw Malinowski’s words, myth is “a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom” (Malinowski 1954, p. 82). Robert Segal states: “to label a belief as a myth is to elevate, not denigrate, it by noting the hold it has on those who accept it, no matter what the evidence” (Segal 2001, p. 173). Robert Bellah contends that myths demonstrate the power of an event to provide “moral and spiritual meaning to individuals and society” (1975, p. 3), while Richard Hughes describes myth as “a story that speaks of meaning and purpose, and for that reason it speaks truth to those who take it seriously” (Hughes 2004, p. 2). Some scholars go further to argue myths reveal the truth of a nation or group better than “accurate” historical accounts (Schöpflin 1997; Berger 2009). Acknowledging the difficulty of separating myth from “true” history, William H. McNeill titled his American Historical Association presidential essay, “Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians.” In it, he argued:

Myth and history are close kin inasmuch as both explain how things got to be the way they are by telling some sort of story. But our common parlance reckons myth to be false while history is, or aspired to be, true. Accordingly, a historian who rejects someone else’s conclusion calls them mythical, while claiming that his own views are true. But what seems true to one historian will seem false to another, so one historian’s truth becomes another’s myth, even at the moment of utterance. (McNeill 1986, p. 3)

In other words, that we label a belief a “myth” should not be understood as a judgment about its reality or “truthiness.”

Myths are the shared stories that shape the culture, politics, institutions, communication, method of coping, and identity of a community. Critically, myths are shared; they are public. They are “a cultural force” (Malinowski 1954, p. 143). Robert Doty argues that myths cannot be
private, they must be socialized and examined among the public (1980). Once a myth has taken a hold, it alters the culture of the people. Historical complexity is shaped by human reaction to the adoption of myth: “any theory of human life, if widely believed, will alter actual behavior, usually by inducing people to act as if the theory were true” (McNeill 1986, p. 4).

As “self-validating” beliefs, myths become core aspects of the culture and shape all aspects of society. As a way of providing a definitive understanding of how the world works and how it should be structured, myths also serve as ideology (Doty 1980; Segal 2001). Bruce Lincoln put it beautifully when he wrote myth is “ideology in narrative form” (Lincoln 1999, p. xii).

As a force for structuring values and norms, myths generate support for institutions and induce group members to adhere to the social order (Bruner 1959; Segal 2001). Consider Lauri Honko on this point:

Myths give support to accepted patterns of behavior by placing present-day situations in a meaningful perspective with regard to the precedents of the past. Myths provide a valid justification for obligations and privileges. Myths act as safety valves by making it possible for people to ventilate their emotions without socially disruptive effects. (1984, p. 47)

For nations, myth unifies disparate interests and legitimizes institutions and policies. A good example are the myths that underpin the self-enforcing nature of successful constitutions (Elkins, Ginsburg and Melton 2009). People must accept a constitution’s legitimacy for it to carry weight. Imagining constitutions and political institutions as sacred – courts become “temples” to justice and parliaments are “temples” of democracy – shames those susceptible to defection into contributing to the collective body. Thinking of the nine people who serve on the Supreme Court as the ultimate arbiters of the US Constitution, as being impartial guardians of “justice” rather than political appointees inclined to interpret the law as benefits their ideological preferences, is part of the necessary mythology that allows us to accept their rulings and to keep the faith in the constitutional process.

**How Myths Are Reproduced and Communicated**

The reproduction of myths by elites, institutions, rhetoric, symbols, rituals, and ceremonies enhances their accessibility (Doty 1980; Honko 1984; Schöpflin 1997). The reproduction of the community myth reinforces the core values of the community and encourages solidarity (Overing 1997; Schöpflin 1997). Even those who believe themselves to be objective, scientific historiographers of a community are influenced by the power of the myth as
they attempt to provide meaning to historical events (McNeill 1986; Lorenz 2008). Historians are core players in the reproduction of myth (Zelinsky 1988; Lorenz 2008; Berger 2009). McNeill’s term “mythistory” is incisive, revealing that because historians weave facts together into a story that has meaning, they allow myths to guide the meaning of historical events. Further, because groups like to be flattered, historians have an incentive to describe the group the way they see themselves. This leads to an amalgamation of facts and fiction, whether intentional or not, that reproduces the established myth (McNeill 1986, p. 8).

**Group Cohesion**

The accessibility of myths provides groups the assurance they will prosper, even during trying times (Malinowski 1954; Bruner 1959; Segal 2001). George Schöpflin contends that communities that express intense beliefs in their myths are more likely “to withstand much greater stress and turbulence” (Schöpflin 1997, p. 22). In his trenchant analysis of the race problem in America, Gunnar Myrdal argued the lack of group myth stymied Blacks’ sense of self-respect and their ability to fight back against America’s caste system. As he states: “It is more difficult for them to answer prejudice with prejudice and, as the Orientals may do, to consider themselves and their history superior to the White Americans” (Myrdal 1944, p. 54). Myths offer psychological and emotional resources community members can draw upon to sustain group cohesion in the most troubling of circumstances (Schöpflin 1997). Jerome Bruner contends that communities will fall into disarray when their myths no longer help members cope with the world they experience (Bruner 1959).

**Identity**

Myths bind communities; they also tell us who we are, providing a source of identity. Scott Leonard and Michael McClure’s definition of myth highlights its role as source of identity:

Myths are ancient narrative that attempt to answer the enduring and fundamental human questions: How did the universe and the world come to be? How did we come to be here? Who are we? What are our proper, necessary, or inescapable roles as we relate to one another and to the world at large? What should our values be? How should we behave? How should we not behave? What are the consequences of behaving and not behaving in such ways?

(Leonard and McClure 2004, p. 1)
The importance of the role of myth in identity formation is stressed by other seminal accounts too. Bruner asserts that myths provide group members with a “library of scripts” that they can use to comprehend their multiple identities and serve as the “criterion for the self-critic” (Bruner 1959, p. 353). He further argues that “the myths that are the treasure of an instructed community provide the models and the programs in terms of which the growth of the internal cast of identities is molded and inspired” (p. 357). Schöpflin contends that myths are “an instrument of self-definition” and provide individuals and communities with an identity that establishes their “special qualities” and boundaries (1997, p. 22). He also argues that “myth can be an instrument of identity transfer,” meaning it provides the community with the ability to adapt to major upheaval — circumstances might change, but the shared answer to “who we are” provides a north star that does not waver. And, as illustrated throughout America’s history, the preeminence of well-established myths of national identity accelerates the assimilation of outsider groups — anyone can be an American as long as they believe in freedom and apple pie (1997, p. 22). And that is perhaps the key American myth itself.

The Role of Power Justification

The fact-basis of a myth can be debated, but its power cannot. Myths serve as a basis for a community and provide its members with an understanding of their role in the world. Even though these aspects of myths are praised, scholars also acknowledge the inherent dangers in myths. Because myths emphasize the “virtue and righteousness” of a group, McNeill cautions of the power they grant those who would use them to denigrate outsiders and to increase resistance to intergroup cooperation. These myths can lead to intense ideological clashes, such as the Cold War, and were used to justify the genocidal bloodlust of the Nazis, who built their Third Reich using popular myths that dehumanized minority ethnic and racial groups (1986, p. 9). Schöpflin contends that the political and ideological nature of myths can enhance division in multietnic societies (1997). Also, the emotional nature of myths makes them cognitively delimiting, leading societies to make suboptimal, even inhumane decisions. Furthermore, when a society is faced with competing myths, it faces a higher probability of imploding upon itself. Some of the greatest internal crises that a group faces stem from having to reconcile competing narratives about itself (Bruner 1959; Lorenz 2008).
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A NOTE ON METHODS AND APPROACH

Students of nationalism have no shortage of source materials. The origin stories nations tell of themselves, the collective moments of pride (to some) that tell others—and ourselves—of how we came to be where we are today, and the dreams and ambitions of our collective future that animate us into action are repeated in classrooms and churches, around dining tables and campfires, and in movies, plays, art, and dance. We can read these stories in our daily newspapers and glossy magazines, see them whiz past on Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, and in each other’s Facebook feeds. And we see them, often barely noticing, when we drive down the streets and boulevards that connect and divide our communities, named for our national heroes, whose statues and monuments form the centers of our public spaces. Maps, museums, libraries, and oral history archives capture the voices and thoughts that form the master narrative of a nation.

In this book, we contribute to our understanding of what, who, and why America is by asking those who live here for their answers to these questions. Ours is a study of public opinion. We deploy the powerful methodology of random sample surveys to interview everyday residents of the United States. By carefully adhering to the best practices of sampling, we are able to generalize from these slices of survey respondents to the American public at large. Starting in 2008, and throughout the decade that followed, we implemented seven original national surveys and two original state-level surveys. Where feasible, we supplemented these original data with surveys conducted independently by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). We provide details for all the surveys we analyze in the appendix. Any one of these surveys would have been adequate for academic purposes; to have nine original surveys spanning three presidential administrations, including that of the first Black president and the first openly White nationalist one (at least in the modern era), is an embarrassment of riches.

To analyze these data, we rely on a technique called regression analysis. Widely used across the social and physical sciences, this technique allows us to estimate the prevalence and determinants of the American religious exceptionalism worldview in the public. Armed with a valid measure of this multidimensional concept, we can then use the same techniques to estimate its relationship with the concepts of interest that motivate this book: how people define what it means to be American, how they evaluate their leaders and the policies they enact when in power, and how they wish America to engage with the world. Importantly, we can account for a host
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of factors relevant to these relationships, such as a respondent’s political ideology and partisanship; their race, age, income, and education; and their religious affiliation and practice. This bolsters our confidence that we are uncovering meaningful relationships rather than spurious ones. And, importantly, because the statistical models are based on large quantities of data, we can calculate measures of uncertainty for our estimates that allow us to be transparent about which findings are statistically reliable and which are not.

If you have ever wondered what the equivalent of kids let loose in a candy store is for academics, it is three political scientists with a decade’s worth of surveys. Engaged in this project for almost thirteen years, there is no shortage of research questions we have generated and sought to answer. Literally hundreds of statistical models, refined and honed over years of sustained inquiry, form the spine of this book. All the results are available in the appendices, but it is our job to distill the results of this research to make our findings as easily digestible as possible for you, our readers, while honoring the integrity and rigor of the scholarly enterprise. To that end, we present all our results graphically and focus the textual discussion of our results on the core relationships only so that we do not get distracted. Furthermore, we focus on the differences in attitudes that result from varying levels of adherence to the American religious exceptionalism worldview, seeking to convey the relative impact of greater fealty to this founding myth on how citizens understand the United States and its politics today. Our hope is that these authorial choices make our research more accessible to those interested in these aspects of American public opinion, while convincing our fellow academics that we have cut no corners in our pursuit of reliable answers to critical questions.

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Given the recent events in the United States, many would see this book as a reaction to the rise of the Tea Party, Donald Trump, and other groups that have overtly mixed religion with their view of the nation. Such a reading would be incorrect. The phenomenon of Trumpism and its many acolytes motivate us to explain the larger phenomenon at work. As we will explain, the Tea Party and Trump were able to gain prominence because they tapped into a cultural reservoir filled by the myth of American religious exceptionalism. We uncover the role of religious belief systems in shaping the political attitudes and actions of citizens.
Much like other scholars who examine religious belief systems, we believe the most important differences are in religious thought, not religious tradition and denomination. In establishing this, we hope to expand our understanding about what people believe their religion calls upon them to be and to do.

To address the role of American religious exceptionalism in public opinion we report an expansive set of empirical tests to examine how adherence to this myth generates difference in the American public along a range of issues. We begin Chapter 1 by documenting the importance of myths in nation-making. Further, we examine how the myth of American exceptionalism became integral to American nationalism and subsequently American identity. Specifically, we pay attention to how religious institutions helped disseminate the myth and how religious language made it palatable for citizens. The reliance of religious institutions and religious language on American exceptionalism gave it a holiness that morphed into American religious exceptionalism. Using historical analysis, we conceptualize American religious exceptionalism and demonstrate its power throughout American history. With the core concept defined, Chapter 2 empirically establishes the unique role of religion in the United States and demonstrates why religious exceptionalism is such an important factor in American social and political thought. Most importantly, this chapter validates a measurement of American religious exceptionalism and provides an image of its adherents, whom we refer to as disciples, and those who reject it, whom we refer to as dissidents, by examining the relationships between religious exceptionalism, prominent American values, religious demographics, social demographics, and political leanings. Chapter 3 provides the first examination of how American religious exceptionalism influences Americans’ definitions about what it means to be American. Building upon the national attachment and identity literatures, we exploit multiple surveys to understand how the dissidents and disciples differ in their feelings of oneness with the nation and feelings of national superiority, as well as how they envision the ideal American. Whereas Chapter 3 establishes the American public’s response to the question “who are we?,” Chapter 4 addresses the question, “who can become one of us?” Specifically, it identifies those the disciples believe should be allowed to gain admission to the nation versus those they perceive as threats to it by examining immigration attitudes. Chapter 5 investigates the role of the nation on the global stage. It begins with a discussion of how the disciples of American