

## Is politics the new religion?

By Linda Feldmann, *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 12, 2021 (shortened)

From MAGA devotees on the right to social justice warriors on the “woke left,” political activism that can feel “absolute” in a quasi-religious way is rampant. At the same time, American membership in houses of worship has plummeted to below 50% for the first time in eight decades of Gallup polling—from 70% in 1999 to 47% in 2020.

5 And as American politics has become polarized, so too has the nation’s religious profile. The mainstream Protestant center has hollowed out, its population shrinking dramatically. Today, religious Americans tend to choose their congregation with an eye toward partisanship—to the point where the choice of presidential candidate can lead a voter to move to a new church.

10 “Liberals and ‘nones’ went to the left; conservatives and Evangelicals went to the right,” says Ryan Burge, an expert on religion and politics at Eastern Illinois University, and author of a new book called *The Nones*. “There’s no middle anymore.”

Atheists, he says, are now the most politically active group in the U.S. They’re far from the largest, at 6% of the population, but statistically they are the most likely to engage in political activity.

15 “Our politics has become religion. It has a religious fervor to it now that it didn’t have even 20 or 30 years ago,” says Professor Burge, who is also a Baptist pastor.

Why is this happening? Some point to social media and news consumption habits that have cordoned Americans off into ideological echo chambers that are all-consuming and provoke emotional responses. The sense of connection some find online may be replacing social networks once formed by houses of worship.

20 Even for Americans of faith, the role of traditional houses of worship is shifting. The pandemic has given rise to “online church,” allowing some congregants to find a spiritual home far from their physical home. But the larger trend is clear: Americans overall are moving away from organized religion, particularly the mainline faiths. And that shift has dovetailed with the rise of an intense form of partisan politics that some see as quasi-religious, providing adherents with a sense of devotion, belonging, and moral certitude.

Calling partisan politics a form of “religion” can be offensive to believers and nonbelievers alike, as it seems to equate human activity with the spiritual. And not surprisingly, most atheists reject the use of the word “religion” to describe their beliefs. But many are well aware of their growing influence in American society as a political force.

35 Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) argues that atheists, agnostics, and otherwise nonreligious people have in the past been woefully underrepresented in public life. That’s changing as their numbers rise. Ms. Gaylor ascribes this shift in part to “antiquated” attitudes in some churches toward women and LGBTQ people, which have turned young people in particular away from organized religion.

For members of Congress, where a stated religious affiliation has long been near-universal, that’s changing. In 2018, the Congressional Freethought Caucus was founded to promote public policy “based on reason and science” and “to protect the secular character of our government.” Today the group has 14 members, all House Democrats, or 2.6% of the 535 members of both chambers. While that’s still a small percentage, those numbers in Congress—and in politics in general—seem almost certain to rise as younger generations grow into positions of power.

### “Worshipping at the altar of politics”

During President Trump’s time in office, even high-profile supporters asserted at times that he had been chosen by God to serve. “I think God calls all of us to fill different roles at different times, and I think that He wanted Donald Trump to become president,” press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said in 2019. Energy Secretary Rick Perry called him God’s “chosen one.” That belief grew

markedly among conservatives in his final year in office. Among white Protestants who attend church at least weekly, the portion who said Mr. Trump had been “anointed by God” to be president rose from 29.6% in May 2019 to 49.5% in March 2020, according to polling by Paul Djupe of  
50 Denison University and Professor Burge.

Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, rejects the idea that politics is replacing religion in America, instead characterizing the prevailing political dynamic as tribalism. “What we see is an overwhelmingly white and Christian reaction to the changing demographics and culture of the country,” says Dr. Jones, author of the book *White Too Long: The Legacy of White*  
55 *Supremacy in American Christianity*.

Mainstream evangelical leaders who support Mr. Trump recognize the risk that far-right extremism poses to their community’s image. Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council and an informal adviser to Mr. Trump during his presidency, has consistently condemned the assault on the Capitol—and makes clear in an interview that not all Trump supporters are alike.

60 Those on the right whom he calls “SAGE Cons”—spiritually active, government-engaged conservatives—know how to “keep things in perspective,” Mr. Perkins says. “Their allegiance to Trump was based on his policies, such as abortion and religious liberty. It’s not a personality cult, as some would like to explain it.”

“You have people saying, ‘Evangelicals are making politics their religion,’” he adds. “We’re just  
65 responding to what the left has been doing—worshipping at the altar of politics.”

### The Great Awakening

Dating back to Colonial times, religious “awakenings” in America have come and gone. At times of upheaval, a flocking to religion has often been a central feature.

70 Today, amid a once-in-a-century pandemic, major economic disruption, and upheavals around issues of race and sex, the reverse is underway. Instead of another “Great Awakening,” America is experiencing what some have dubbed the “Great Awakening”—centered on calls for social justice.

The term “woke,” slang for “awake,” came into common usage with the birth of Black Lives Matter in 2013 and became further entrenched last year after the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis, sparking a summer of racial unrest. At heart, “woke” refers to  
75 awareness of racial and social justice issues. Increasingly, however, it has been weaponized by conservatives mocking what they see as excesses on the left.

Even some Democrats express concerns about the larger movement promoting “anti-racism.” John McWhorter, an African American linguist and social critic at Columbia University, describes white people’s expressions of “wokeness” as a form of virtue-signaling that has morphed into a  
80 misguided civic religion. “White people—educated white people, especially—really enjoy the idea of showing that they’re not racists,” Professor McWhorter said in a recent discussion with *Reason* magazine. “It has slowly transmogrified into a kind of replacement for Protestantism ... where your grace is that you are not a racist.”

Some observers draw a straight line from the Puritans of Colonial times to the “woke scolds” of  
85 today who are quick to “cancel” transgressors and see no room for grace and forgiveness. Indeed, enforcement of progressive standards today can seem even harsher than Christianity’s approach, which allows space for sinners to atone and be given another chance.

Still, progressives argue it’s important not to lose sight of the goal of the “anti-racist” movement, which is to expose and uproot injustices that have been entrenched in U.S. society throughout its  
90 history.