Nicaea, American Populism, and Christian Nationalism

Lessons from the Field

Michael Reid Trice

Rev. Dr Michael Reid Trice is Spehar-Halligan Professor and executive director of the Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement (CEIE) at Seattle University and vice- chair of the Parliament of the World's Religions.

Abstract

On the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, this article reviews the history and leadership of the council by pursuing the following question: What does Nicaea teach us about best practices in adaptive leadership from the Christian past to help us address rising authoritarianism today? The article examines the November 2024 US presidential election as demonstrative of rising popular authoritarianism in the United States, acknowledging how an America First doctrine is reshaping the political and religious landscapes. The article purports that lessons from the field in the first centuries of Christianity, to Nicaea, can guide us today and tomorrow. The article also aims to be a resource that will assist leaders as they work tirelessly in a polarizing national landscape.

Keywords

Council of Nicaea, keystone value of unity, American Christian nationalism, four features of leadership, cosmopolitan faith

"It's the year 325 and it's a pretty chill time to be a Christian," according to the 2021 board game *Nicaea*, by Amabel Holland. In the game, up to six players battle for 90 minutes over conflicting theological truths amid a lack of Christian unity in their effort

DOI: 10.1111/erev.12884

to win the approval of the first Christian Roman emperor. In an hour and a half, the winner with the most "power, unity, and truth" sets the future course for Christendom.[1]

Games teach through whimsy and strategy. Historical review and leadership assessment teach lessons from the field, even centuries later. This year, on the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, this article will review key leadership lessons taken from Nicaea's relationship to emerging Christian orthodoxy, the unity of the Christian community, and the association of both to its political context. In the first section, we will follow the question "What lessons from the field does Nicaea teach us about best practices for leadership from the Christian past that also assist us in addressing religious challenges today?" The second part of the article will apply these lessons to the rise of populism and American Christian nationalism evident from the 2024 US presidential election. Current and strategic adaptive responses will also be highlighted from the Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement at Seattle University in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. We begin now with lessons from the field and the 4th century CE.

325 CE – Nicaea: Learning to Lead

The First Council of Nicaea (325 CE) was an ambitious ecumenical council at a formative time for establishing Christian theological orthodoxy, Christian ecclesial unity, and the association (for good or ill) of both within the Roman Empire. The Council of Nicaea is responsible for the Nicene Creed, the first- ever universally adopted and binding statement of Christian faith, completed and confirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE in the form that it is said in churches today as the Nicene- Constantinopolitan Creed. Pre- Nicene creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed and predecessor creeds or statements of faith, were important, albeit provincial, teaching tools with the specific aims of instructing recent converts or enduring successive persecutions.[2] The Nicene Creed, however, was the first creed to emerge from a universal, ecumenical council, always with the intent to articulate a standard of theological orthodoxy for the whole Christian Church – both West and East.[3]

[1] Sincere appreciation to Ms Camila Torres, Seattle University CEIE Spehar- Halligan Student Affiliate, fo search into this article, and to the CEIE team of students, staff, and faculty. This article refers to C doxy and truth interchangeably, intending the beliefs, teachings, and practices discerned via consensus church over the ages. For an exhaustive inclusion of the creeds, see John H. Leigh, ed., *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1980).

[2] Early creedal affirmations include the Old Roman Creed, the Rule of Faith, and additional acknowledgment faith.

[3] Emperor Constantine I gained control over the western half of the Roman Empire in 312 CE in the defeat o Maxentius; by 324 CE, his defeat of Licinius ended the historic division or Tetrarchy of the empire, rend Constantine the sole emperor of a new, unified empire and producing new complexities as the administrati political, and spiritual head of government.

Christian leadership decisions in this era reveal a growing (and even inevitable) need for recalling the Council of Nicaea.

In the first two centuries CE, the young Christian religion spread across the Roman Empire. In the first generation of leadership, house churches flourished yet were often unremarkably distinguished and less exotic than the mystical religions buzzing around them. Over time and for reasons of organizational need, Christian leadership helped to sinew these disparate house communities to one another through a stream of letter writing (epistles) and to enculturate house churches to the Greco- Roman culture as they grew, adopting forms of self- governance in structures (dioceses) and leadership over- sight increasingly organized and familiar to Roman life.[4]

From the earliest epistles, unity was the keystone Christian value.[5] The Greek word for unity is a feminine noun, *henotēs* (ἑνότης), which means a daily "oneness" that requires attention and diligence (Eph. 4:3 and 13). *Ο ἶκος* (oikos) is another Greek word that translates "extended household," popularized by the apostle Paul and also evident in the early Christian house church movement. Taken together, unity is an organic, maturing, even mystical oneness requiring the labours of its members, who are sinewed into one household and increasingly *across* households. Unity is a keystone value perhaps even better understood as the spiritual DNA of Christian identity, drawn up like water from the earliest teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Over time, the Christian community increased, as did the visibility of its leadership values and social ethos. These appeared extraordinarily odd and even suspect in the Roman worl- dview in several ways, including the following. The Christian message introduced radical new norms whereby slave and free were equals, inverting class distinctions. Unhindered, basic egalitarianism allowed for quick mobility of resources to major projects, such as the church in Rome's year- on- year financial support of 1500 poor and widows circa 250 CE. In addition, Christians professed love of neighbour but refused to pay homage to a neigh- bour's gods (an expected courtesy). Christians were also devoted to local unity, as three centuries of letter writing reveals, yet expressed a cosmopolitan faith that transcended local allegiances in favour of the whole church, as these same letters also reveal. What is more, skirting imperial obligations, Christians avoided perjuring their faith by taking state oaths, and yet Christians were increasingly administrators and thereby assisted the state in sending

[4] The narrative chronology in this section is wholly indebted to Leo Donald Davis, SJ, *The First Seven Ecumenic Councils (325–787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 11–80; Francis Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (Norcross: Trinity Press, 1993), 1–15; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Christianity through the Ages* (New York: Harper, 1965), 23–30; Ernest Trice Thompson, *Through the Ages: A History of the Christian Church* (Richmond: CLC Press, 1965), 20–89.

[5] Peter Heather, *Christendom: The Triumph of Religion, AD 300–1300* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2024), 27.

resources throughout the empire, such as to Africa and Cappadocia from the churches in Rome and Carthage in 254 and 256 CE. Finally, Christian leadership instructed their communities to avoid the public spectacle – "the madness of the circus, the immodesty of the theatre, the atrocities of the arena"[6] – and the irrationality of the mob within Roman life, which were to be reviled for the evil honoured and defilements produced. At stake in the spectacle was the violence, idolatry, and immorality of this kind of entertainment, which proved toxic to the keystone value of unity and anathema to a life of service to one's neighbour.

For many Roman citizens labouring under high taxes, civic corruption, and eroded private trust, Christianity was an enigma, but by the 4th century CE, it was an increasingly attractive enigma. Here was a religious community offering equal enrichment and organic unity to a new spiritual lifeline using familiar stated norms in four centuries of love letters rooted in distant fidelities and the hope of its founders, assuring promises from a God who cherished the world and who provided the divine offering of a son without cost or high tariff for life's redemption.

Three hundred years of Christian enculturation led to increasing cultural and theological disagreements, gaining the attention of the Roman Emperor, Constantine I, whose intervention prevailed in influencing the resolution of these conflicts and shaping the course of the Christian future. In fact, without Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 CE and his ultimate leadership intervention, social historians argue that the Christian religion might have remained a culturally influential yet continuously persecuted sect around the Mediterranean Sea, with additional modest expressions existent in northern Africa and India. [7]

Instead, a difference of opinion in the 2nd century between house churches emerged in the 4th century into a theological flash point on the nature of Christ. A public and irrepressible dispute – the Arian controversy – presented a painful crisis for a religion rooted in the unity of Christ. The dispute was ignominiously named after Arius, who cut a strident patriarchal archetype as a tall, handsome, theologically unflappable, wholly earnest, and popular priest from Alexandria. Arius argued that Jesus Christ was a created being and not co- eternal with God the Father. His theological position included a substantial followership and presented a direct challenge to the young orthodox theology of the church. In 325 CE, Emperor

[6] Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. T. R. Glover, rev. and ed. Gerald H. Rendall, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 250 MA: Harvard University Press, 1931).

[7] A year after his conversion (313 CE), Constantine I issued the *Edict of Milan*, granting Christianity legal sta ended its persecution throughout the Roman Empire.

Constantine convened a council at Nicaea and summoned the bishops to address these theological differences amid social and political unrest that was challenging greater unity.[8]

As a leadership decision, Constantine's timed intervention to convene the council at Nicaea gained a political advantage for both the present and the future. In the present, he positioned his leadership as a convener or arbiter for discerning Christian truth, bolstering his role both as the political head of the empire and as an expected divinely sanctioned spiritual leader. In the future, a unified Christian creedal affirmation would provide him with guiderails to controversies down the road, rendering Nicaea a further asset to his empire's stability. For the sake of present and future prospects, Constantine convened the council with the aim of producing a creed that would unify a people in theological, communitarian, and political ways.

Constantine's leadership – his ability to observe, to interpret, and to intervene – was effective for unifying Christian leadership and for setting a new method of conflict resolution. In particular, his familiar use of conflict mediation that acknowledged difference within greater unity bears its imprint to this day on ecumenical and Christian-initiated interreligious dialogues, first originating at Nicaea.

Nicaea in Review: Four Features for Leadership

If Christian leaders had misgivings about the unifying capacity of the synods and councils of the first few centuries of the church, then the Council of Nicaea offered a new opportunity and model for seeking theological clarity that sustained the unity of the Christian community. These leaders learned, in the intervening arc of 56 years to the first Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, that the labours of cultivating Christian unity and shaping theological doctrine were a continuous, deliberative process of creative theological nimbleness, requiring courage of conviction and an alloy of hope and faith. The keystone value of unity – of oneness and the household – was an organic, maturing, sinewed labour of love in the spiritual DNA of Jesus.

They modelled adaptability throughout, as is clear in the Nicene- Constantinopolitan creedal revisions of 381 CE. These revisions affirmed that Christ is "of the same essence as the Father" in response to the Apollinarians, who downplayed Christ's full humanity, while also acknowledging the co- equality of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity

[8] Constantine's trusted ecclesiastical advisor, Osseous, Bishop of Cordoba, moderated the Council of Ni
Constantine participated, drawing upon his experience of the Donatist Schism. Unfortunately, no full
proceedings exists of the Council of Nicaea, only notes later assembled from attendees and collated t
as full a picture as possible.

"who proceeds from the Father," in response to the Pneumatomachians, who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit.[9]

The first few centuries leading to Nicaea reveal a unifying, multi- generational Christian leadership that was, in its stellar executive moments, an enculturating force connected to its apostolic roots and open to emerging forms of local self- governance. These leaders proved able to overcome major divisions and to adapt to changing political and religious contexts, learning from new models, including a centralizing, governing power with a capacity to observe, to interpret, and to intervene at critical junctures. They effectively orchestrated and maximized appropriate levels of discernment to the advantage of unity, truth, and civic influence. These leaders excelled through synods and ecumenical councils for 700 years, with the last ecumenical council of its kind, the Second Council of Nicaea, taking place in 787 CE.

Above all, Nicaean and Post- Nicaean Christian leadership proved able to adapt to the changing conditions and harrowing challenges of history. Their leadership adaptability was a fundamental advantage during the Nicaean period and advanced both Christian unity and Christian truth, demonstrated today whenever the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is recited in Christian liturgies within local churches around the world.

Early Christian leadership in the first few centuries up to and including the Council of Nicaea was never unalloyed by human ugliness. It is important not to forget how, just prior to the council's formal opening, Constantine ceremoniously and publicly burned the many (unopened) letters he received from bishops and priests seeking to denounce one another; yet, open the council he did, on or around 20 May 325 CE.[10] Today, Christian executive leadership is still uniquely situated at the axis of responsibility in the areas of unity, truth, and civic engagement, as they must be. Thankfully, Christian leadership at Nicaea reveals much about the ethos of Christian identity then and now.

The historical lessons from the field on early Christian adaptive leadership are clear and include four features. These are (1) a keystone value of unity typified as oneness within an undivided house that is nimble, organic, and following in the path of Jesus; (2) a belief that the world and humanity are loved by God equally, individually,

[9] *The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church: Theological Consultation between Representatives of the USA National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs, July 6–7, 1965, in Baltimore, Maryland* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Association, 1965).

[10] The leaders of this era were born to an age of controversy. A principal figure and Arius' main adversary, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, railed against his opponents for nearly 50 years, surviving three exile death in 373 CE. See *Athanasius*, ed. William A. Clebsch (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980).

and collectively; (3) a faith life simultaneously personal and also cosmopolitan; and (4) a moral and creative faith life that accesses power to assist the neighbour while restricting access to the spectacle or toxicity of power that inhibits service to the neighbour and to the world. The church, then, was and is not a direct object, but a transitive verb – an organic and adaptive expression of unity in the present, always its own theatre of activity, awaiting its next best act in the unfolding reign of God today and tomorrow.

2025 – American Populism

In the past 40 years, the United States has been witness to the rise of a powerful ideological movement – American Christian nationalism – which treats rigid moral values and patriotism as an inseparable measurement of faithfulness. The history of the rise of American Christian nationalism is too complex to recount here. Suffice to say it is rooted in the American colonialist Christian mythology of regenerative violence that Richard Slotkin describes as the "structuring metaphor of the American experience."[11] In the past decade, American Christian nationalism and an emergent America First political platform, popularly understood as "make America great again" (MAGA), became two parts of an ideological platform, currently entangled with the authoritarian leadership of US President Donald Trump.

The United States has experienced popular authoritarianism within governance structures before. And yet, the rise of Trump leads to the fascistization of politics and society, as well as the weakening of the public sector and social welfare, and to unprecedented polarization through the instrumentalization of religion. A leader of this kind will convince the working class to accept the illiberal efforts of a minority of the empowered upper class in a temporary pact to secure expressed aims. Trump's efforts are illiberal because they undermine the US Constitution, the institutions and the leaders sworn to uphold the Constitution, and the protections of the citizenry that the Constitution affords, and in these ways destabilize the Republic. Trump's illiberal efforts today that tread on undermining democratic norms include the following: rejecting the 2020 election results; employing a strategy of dividing and scapegoating marginalized groups; challenging institutional independence (i.e., the Department of Justice) in a manner that serves his own political interests over the good of the Republic; attacking the media and the Democratic Party as "the enemy of the people"; encouraging public displays of loyalty around a cult of personality; gaslighting rogue, racist, and misogynist paramilitary

[11] For a fine historical treatment of Slotkin's analysis, see James Spickard, "Conflicting Civil Religio Lincoln, and the Alt- Right – Today's American Dilemma," in *Gratitude, Injury, and Repair in a Pandemic Age*, ed. Michael Reid Trice and Patricia O'Connell Killen (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2024)

behaviour that militarizes politics; eroding norms such as respecting judicial decisions or degrading transparency in financial matters; and stoking dissidence for democratic accountability.

What the United States is experiencing is not historically normative. Instead, a liberal democracy in the United States includes checks and balances of power guided by the US Constitution. The current illiberal democracy in the United States is shaped by three features: a conflated executive branch; acquiescing judicial and legislative branches; and commensurate weakened protections for the Constitution itself. The pre- eminent tools of a fascist regime for converting a liberal democracy into an illiberal democracy are threefold: the distortion of truth, coercion, and the flouting of the rule of law.

Given the mounting consequences of authoritarian leadership, why would a free electorate vote out its own democracy? This question wrongly presumes that the US electorate values the ideals of democracy weighted against mounting personal, financial, and societal insecurities. Indeed, the 2024 US presidential election reveals a rightward political drift that won Trump both the electoral and popular votes in the country because most working- class voters felt financially or socially undermined.

In recent years, the working class in the United States was undermined in two ways. First, although the US economy was stable and growing as late as November 2024, post- pandemic inflation eroded daily financial security for working- class individuals and families. Second, the left of the Democratic Party, having for years created a narrative of social moral responsibility (inclusive of Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights, and abortion as a fundamental healthcare issue for women) justified their narrative on a platform of minoritarian identity politics that valorized the particular experience of non- majoritarian voices, limited the unifying ability of empathy to cross bridges of difference in order to build greater prospects for understanding, and then did little to create collaboration within the commons in the United States.

For Christians participating in this national discourse, a moral foundation based on *ressentiment* instead of empathy spelled distrust, evident in Christian communities who argued for three decades about a biblical basis of understanding homosexuality, when life begins in the womb, and what constitutes gender, yet failed to hold the centre on the keystone value of unity in Christ. In the meantime, the pandemic accelerated the prices of food, fuel, housing, and more, which all rose and eroded financial solvency for the working class.

The political right capitalized on these procedural missteps from the left, offering a nostalgic narrative of an easier time of traditional values, even as both sides condemned one another as radicals undermining the progress or conventions of societal advancement. Since 2016, for many Americans Trump offered the more immediate, convincing

response in simple, clear terms that suggested relief to financial and societal insecurities. The books are not yet written for how the Democratic Party missed an opportunity to storyline in this way or what it will cost their future.

In its haste, the Democratic Party also failed to recognize how an electoral bloc would vote for Trump for reasons that sacrificed one security over another; for instance, the Democratic Party did not anticipate that scores of financially secure Latino voters nevertheless chose Trump due to his hardline stance on immigration. All of this bears a review of how religion, culture, ethnicity, and politics emerged in the 2024 US presidential election.

Of the 83% of married Protestant and Catholic Latino voters (ages 18–64) who voted for Trump, 47% noted that their family's financial situation was worse today than four years prior. Of the 70% from this demographic who stated the condition of the nation's economy was poor, 53% of that electorate voted for Trump. Financial security mattered in additional ways too: of the 27% of this demographic who earn less than US$50,000 per year, 55% voted for Trump. And yet, of the 73% of the same voting bloc earning more than US$50,000 per year, 50% *also* voted for Trump in support of his conservative stance on illegal immigration, a trend across securities noted above. Indeed, of the 27% of Protestant and Catholic Latino voters who believed that most undocumented immigrants in the United States should be deported, 87% of that bloc voted for Trump.[12]

As a bloc, the Native American vote also shifted to the right – a whopping 15% from the 2020 presidential election.[13] When asked in August 2024, Native American voters in the state of Arizona "felt like they have been left out of the state's growing economy." From King County in Muckleshoot tribal lands of Washington State to Sioux County, South Dakota, and from New Mexico's McKinley County to Mahnomen County, Minnesota – each with large Indigenous populations, *all* drifted to Trump. The same thesis holds regarding financial security. High unemployment, electricity, water, and good health care were all determining factors for Trump. Even though President Biden named the first Indigenous cabinet secretary in the history of the country, for reasons of financial security many Indigenous stated that the United States was moving in the wrong direction. "Some were willing to give [Trump] another shot."[14]

[12] "Election 2024: Exit Polls," CNN Politics, https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/exit-polls/national-general/president/7.

[13] Galanda Broadman, "Believe It: Indigenous Americans Shifted Rightward, Voted Trump," Galanda Broadman blog, 18 November 2024, https://www.galandabroadman.com/blog/2024/11/believe-it-indigenous-shifted-to-the-right.

[14] Jack Healy, "What's Uniting, and Dividing, Native Voters in Arizona," *New York Times*, 2 August 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/08/02/us/elections/arizona-native-voters.html.

Not only the Indigenous vote: indeed, an AAPI Data briefing analysis warned in August 2024 that the Asian American and Pacific Islander voting margins were softening to the right, as were the margins for the non- majoritarian populations identified above.[15] The consequence for a November presidential election meant a softening of all voting blocs caught in a populist upswing driven (by financial and societal insecurities) right into the uncharted waters of illiberal democracy and a leader whose own former cabinet members warned the American public as late as a week before the 2024 presidential election that Trump exhibited fascist tendencies *and* that a second term represented a threat to America's constitutional democracy.

Populism grows whenever society experiences widespread financial and societal insecurities *and* where an authoritative leader offers a clear, simplistic narrative to those who feel excluded, ignored, or betrayed by the existing system. In times like these, one must not underestimate the moral elasticity for voting blocs to bear assaults if the conditions for financial and social improvement appear on the horizon. Each of the voting blocs above and below endured racial slurs against Latinos in Madison Square Garden, or the memory of derogatory slurs against women's bodies, or calling an accomplished senator, Elizabeth Warren, "Pocahontas" at a memorial to celebrate the famed Second World War Navajo Code Talkers, and more.

On the majoritarian side of the US experience, most white Christians in the United States voted overwhelmingly for Trump. Republicans who are Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Methodist, and other mainline Christian communities, including the American Baptist and Southern Baptist Convention, voted overwhelmingly for Trump. The Republican Party in the United States is 70 percent white and Christian. Put altogether, 8 out of 10 white evangelical Protestants and 6 out of 10 white Catholics voted for Trump. Following the trend of the last four US presidential elections, and given the drift to the right of all other racial and religious constituencies identified above, the more surprising fact of the 2024 US presidential election is how *an even higher percentage* of the white Christian vote didn't hemorrhage into the Trump campaign. "It's hard to overcome the white God gap in a place like Pennsylvania, or Michigan and Wisconsin," noted Ryan Burge, associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University.[16]

The political left in the United States was not prepared to take a strategic interest in the working- class anxieties of their voting constituencies. For instance, throughout his

[15] "Briefing: 2024 Election Results and AAPIs: What Do the Data Tell Us?" AAPI Data, 5 November 2024, https://aapid ata. com/event/ briefing- 2024- election- results- aapis - what- do- the- data- tell- us.

[16] Bob Smietana, "White Christians Made Donald Trump President - Again," *Religion News Service*, 6 November 2024, https://religionnews. com/2024/ 11/06/white - chris tians - made- donal d- trump - president- again

presidency, Biden was a staunch defender of labour unions at a time when only 11% of the American working class belongs to one. Millions of working- class Americans were unimpressed with how Biden's efforts positively impacted their financial lives. A further glaring example of the left's misalignment to rising populism is evident in a report by the Working Families Party (WFP), a progressive political organization in the United States with a focus on advancing economic, racial, and social justice outcomes and an aim to promote policies and candidates that advocate for working- class families and marginalized communities.

The WFP report "constructed profiles of discrete clusters of the working- class electorate and built experimental knowledge about which messages perform best with each one." One cluster stands out, identified as "*diverse disaffected conservatives*." This cluster is multiracial, leans right of centre (conservative) on social and cultural views, and leans somewhat left on economic issues. Precisely, this cluster represents many of the voting blocs outlined above who care about financial and societal security, affordable housing, bringing back jobs, and a liveable economy. This cluster is young, disproportionately male, and includes a high rate of Black and Latino voters. And even though this broad demographic voted up 8 points for Trump in 2020, according to the WFP they were "*least likely to vote in 2024*." The report was a consultative misstep. In fact, this cluster swung over 10 percentage points for Biden in May 2024, as they did for Harris in August – yet began softening to the right first toward Kennedy and then voted Trump in 2024.

Precisely this cluster and similar demographics from the Bronx, New York, to Yuma, Arizona, are where the Trump campaign made strides. When Trump campaigned in May 2024 in the Bronx, a historically Democratic stronghold, the Democratic Party thought Trump was flexing a campaign stunt. Instead, the Trump campaign was focused on securing an electoral beachhead by using God- talk. True, financial and societal securities matter. Faith matters too. The remarks of Luis Guillen, an immigrant from El Salvador who credits his Christian faith as a main factor for voting for Trump, put it this way: "I don't believe that Trump is perfect, but I believe that if God gives him wisdom and he follows that wisdom, we're going to have a better country, a great America."[17]

Millions in the United States adopted a similar slippage into faithful patriotism and the glory of the empire. Christian faith is not the only determinant force driving American populism, but it is a major factor for this American moment. The world needs to know this lesson from the field.

[17] Bart Jones, "LI Hispanics Explain their Votes for Trump," Newsday, 12 November 2024, https://www.pro com/docvi ew/ 31268 42462.

2025 and Beyond: American Christian Nationalism

Christian apologists point out that American Christian nationalism and its claque is an ideology, not a religion. Fine, and yet a too quick defensive disaffection by authentic religious practitioners toward aberrant ideology misses an opportunity for understanding what is transpiring in the United States and around the world. Indian Hindu nationalism, Japanese Shinto nationalism, Israeli Jewish nationalism, and American Christian nationalism: these and more are each a distortion of the religion from which they sprang. Ideological distortions like American Christian nationalism are a spectacle or shadow of their former religion, to use a term of psychologist C. G. Jung. Ideologies are malformed, fasciated growths that retain qualities of the original idea but are mutated spectacles all the same. For the centuries leading to Nicaea, early Christian leadership warned against spectacles because these confuse one's moral compass, defile the neighbour, and honour frenetic reverie for the "madness of the circus."[18] At stake in the malformed spectacle is a culture of death that is toxic to the organic, patient growth of unity and oneness in all forms of life.

American Christian nationalists often project a shadow or a societal spectacle of scapegoats (such as immigrants, religious minorities, secular "woke" liberals), externalizing fears of cultural or moral decline rather than examining their own contributions to societal divisions. To do so, a fascist regime will adhere to ideological distortions that split the world into good and evil while failing to recognize the complexity and interconnectedness of human nature and history. In a time of growing global religious nationalism, the power of a collective shadow will erupt in destructive ways, such as in mass deportations, travel bans, the use of executive orders, and attacks on the press. These are all indicators of an authoritarian regime that resists pluralism and democratic values and instead foments societal and political unrest. This is not only an American problem: Christian values are used to justify a rise of national protectionism; in Austria, the Freedom Party explicitly identifies Christianity as the "spiritual foundation of Europe" in its opposition to relativism and support of nationalism; in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party emphasizes Hungary's Christian heritage to justify policies against immigration and to advocate for traditional family structures.

Many of the current self- purported architects of the American Christian nationalist codebook titled Project 2025[19] are powerful influencers within the Trump adminis-

[18] Tertullian, *Apology*.

[19] "Building for Conservative Victory through Policy, Personnel, and Training: Get the Facts," Project 2025, https://www.project2025.org.

tration. For Christian leadership in the legitimate legacy of Nicaea with its values of unity, social egalitarianism, and faith not reduced to an instrument of the power of the state, American Christian nationalism will disturb as a spectacle and a distortion.

Christians in the United States, like co- religionists around the world addressing their own ideological strains, need to take the spectacle of their violent shadow seriously. In the weeks and months following the inauguration of a second Trump presidency, the Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement (CEIE) at Seattle University has been hosting the president of the United States National Council of Churches, as well as Christian and interreligious leadership throughout the Pacific Northwest Region. Among other assets, the conciliar nature of these conversations will result in an interreligious on- demand resource for regional leaders to connect work zones across specific leadership platforms and societal or policy- based challenge areas, from offices that support immigration and refugee to educational services.

The earliest networking strategies of house churches continue to pay dividends today that are rooted in unity, adaptability, trust, and an egalitarian commitment to mutual engagement. The region is already discussing new forms of robust resourcing that meets the challenges of our current national and global moment. In addition, CEIE has hosted a reception at the United Nations Interchurch Center in New York, gathering international conciliar colleagues and addressing the challenges in ways that are rooted in a keystone value of unity. Nicaea continues to teach us; we must engage the future by exercising memory well.

Conclusion

At CEIE, our first responsibility is to remember lessons from the field at the soft pith of religious formation, long before religion risks becoming encased in defensive ideological contortions. Every religion has access to lessons from the field from which to draw for adaptive leadership and healthy growth. Christianity finds its lessons in the thread of the first few centuries up to Nicaea. Those early leaders still teach us. They reveal how unity requires careful tending, as it always did. They show us how brave leadership still comes with vocational wounds and regret. Their letters speak to long nights in the garden, hunger in the wilderness, and the unity of women who hold vigil at the tomb. They teach of the nimble, organic oneness that tends to the path of Jesus, to the way of Peter and Mary, and not an idealogue. They instruct on how cosmopolitan faith is in service to humanity, the whole world, and to all living things, who are each loved by God equally, individually, and collectively.

These leaders also teach us about trust in one another and when to bridle at ideological overallegiance that coopts trust in service to the state. They remind Christians that the church is a verb, as a creative expression of the unity of all believers in the now, delivering upon their next best act in the unfolding reign of God today and tomorrow. They beckon us to remain in service to others, to live and to grow in that soil, to plant and to root and to harvest and to die in those places, to strip it all away and to surrender everything merely to resurrect in the next season of growth for the sake of love that includes and transcends all of us after all, and for ever more, even when love is finally set down and done with us at the end of this and every age.

The work of religion we imagined for the years ahead is upon us now. With all the good we know possible, the precipice of authoritarian danger some people experience every day, and others read about only in history, is flanking the world once more.