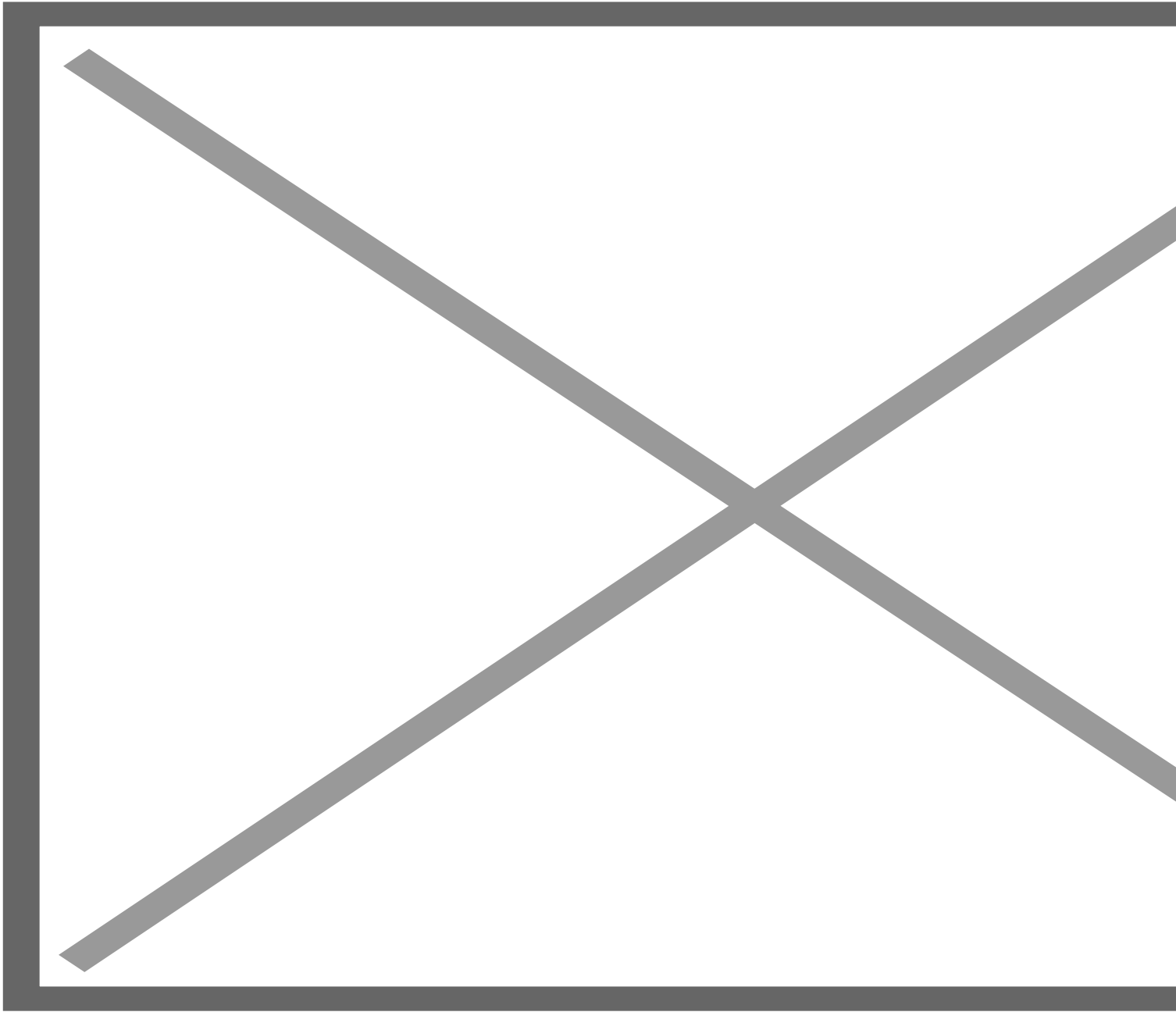


A religion too wild to nationalize

After 250 years, US Christianity remains too diverse, splintered, and strange to be conscripted into any one political project.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue  
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Century illustration (Source images: Getty and US National Archives)

The United States is about to mark 250 years of independence. And with our institutions and our global dominance seeming to teeter more than they have in my lifetime, I've been focusing on what I think of as my Ken Burns patriotism: I love jazz, baseball, Union generals in the Civil War, national parks, the civil rights movement. I love local public libraries, a legacy of America's unique strain of do-gooding busybodies who wanted everyone to read. I love our literary tradition, which isn't centered in one or two big cities, a dominant ethnic group, or the social elite but reflects and refracts our intrinsic hybridity. I love the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution, with their lawyer's theology of universal freedom, citizenship, and access to the franchise. And I love our rich and diverse legacy of weird Christianity.

This is something that Christian nationalism doesn't capture. Christian nationalists aren't wrong to claim that Christianity was extraordinarily influential in the founding and throughout American history. But what they offer in tribute to that influence is a thin gruel of Bible fan fiction. Liberals and secularists talk about Christian nationalism as a threat to liberty and pluralism, and I suppose it is that. But more importantly, it's dull. To listen to an interview with a Christian nationalist worthy like Doug Wilson is to feel yourself trapped on a long-distance bus next to a talkative passenger who is at once an obvious lunatic and an utter bore. Leave aside the comic-strip history the Christian nationalists rely on, with a covenantal founding at Jamestown in 1607 and with all the signers of the Declaration of Independence having religious views that would fit neatly into any suburban megachurch. Would anyone have crossed the seas from the Old World and braved all the deprivation, disease, and subpar carpentry of the New in order to follow the visions of Wilson or Eric Metaxas?

American Christianity was splintered from the start. Catholic missionaries and religious orders got to work before any Protestants did, a ticklish fact for evangelical Christian nationalists today. The Jamestown clergyman who supposedly dedicated the whole country to God was from the Church of England, which even then was considered stodgy, literally an establishment church. I don't think Anglicans then were much for the idea that you could make a covenant with God on your own initiative. But more enthusiastic sects of Christians followed soon enough. The Puritans, fleeing that same established church which planted a cross at Jamestown, made it to New England and promptly divided into different camps. Methodists, Quakers, Shakers, Baptists, and Unitarians all followed, spawning endless combinations of revival movements, new denominations, speculative philosophies, and utopian communal experiments. A distinctive Black Christianity developed too, of course, taking various forms and dispersing vast influence on American culture. Americans found new ways to fuse Christianity with health obsessions, pioneered idiosyncratic readings of the Bible, and sometimes found themselves talking to angels, foretelling an imminent Second Coming, or being struck with a thunderbolt of revelation and taking off into the wilderness to find the lost tribe of Israel, found a new godly community, or set up a financial scam.

The effects of this irreducible diversity, familiar to students of the history of religion in America, are still underappreciated. In England, until well into the 19th century, being either an Anglican or a Nonconformist (let alone a Roman Catholic) placed you in a social and political position more or less automatically. There are still normative Christian identities in many European countries, with political and cultural implications lingering long after belief and practice dwindle to a remnant. As a tourist abroad I have enjoyed this fact and allowed myself a moment of envy at the church aesthetics in a "throne and altar" Catholic society. But nothing like this was ever a realistic possibility in the United States.

Instead we have the endless potential of a landscape held open by the First Amendment's prohibition of established religion and the permanent absence of any true majority within the Christian population. Americans scramble all kinds of categories that are neat and distinct elsewhere. American Catholics can be left-wing pacifists or Francoist reactionaries if they want. Anglicans can be Brooks Brothers-clad gentry or pansexual anarchists. Low-church evangelicals can reclaim monasticism. Liberal Protestants can borrow Orthodox liturgy.

A revival in Los Angeles can explode across the whole world within a century. Hybrids unknown elsewhere can live here. You can be an “evangelical catholic Lutheran” in the United States, while in Germany these are mutually exclusive terms, like “dry water.” And these are only the fairly domesticated varieties, available in not just a few but in dozens, hundreds of church bodies. There is much in this history and in the present landscape to lament and deplore. But how can you fail to find it, on some level, loveable?

Every attempt—and there have been many, with Trump-era Christian nationalism only the latest and much the least—to cobble Christian sects into a proper majority is destined to fail. Like quicksilver, the harder American Christianity is pressed together, the more it liquefies. And this is, paradoxically, one of the most “Christian” legacies of our early history. There is a shard of anarchy in a faith centered on the absurdity of an incarnate God, a Roman cross, an empty tomb, the jumbled witness of friends recorded long after the facts, fenced with scriptures and doctrinal formulae that tempt everyone to claim one particular element as the true and only vista from which the whole can be understood. This is the place where every Christian tradition has to face that anarchy square on, to tussle over our claims as equals, and perhaps to make things together as friends.

I’m grateful for that fact and proud of it. And as we enter our 251st year, I’m less willing than ever to see anyone take away the best part of my religion and the best part of my country in the name of either one.