

OPINION
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Your Religious Values Are Not American Values

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Illustration by Carl Godfrey

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Whenever a politician cites “[Judeo-Christian values](#),” I find it’s generally followed by something unsettling.

Last month brought two flagrant instances. In both cases, Republican officials introduced state laws that formalize precepts of the Christian nationalist movement — in the words of the [National Association of Christian Lawmakers](#) (A.D. 2019), “doing everything we can to restore the Judeo-Christian foundation of our nation.”

On June 19, Gov. Jeff Landry of Louisiana signed legislation [requiring public classrooms](#) to display the Ten Commandments, a practice [struck down](#) as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1980. A rich endorsement came via Donald Trump, [who crowed](#), “I LOVE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, PRIVATE SCHOOLS, AND MANY OTHER PLACES, FOR THAT MATTER. READ IT — HOW CAN WE, AS A NATION, GO WRONG???”

One week later, Landry’s fellow Christian soldier Ryan Walters, Oklahoma’s superintendent of public instruction, announced plans to [mandate teaching the Bible](#) in public schools. Walters said learning the Bible is necessary to having “an understanding of the basis of our legal system.”

Forgive me for wondering: Is he referring to “[an eye for an eye](#)” or the [stoning of disobedient children](#)?

Either way, for both Trump and true believers, it hardly matters that the First Amendment was intended to protect religion from the state, not to have the state impose a religion. (So much for originalism.) Their goal is [to impose one form of religion](#), Christianity, and the underlying message is that those who do not share it will have to submit.

Not only have such moves been declared unconstitutional (“[I can’t wait to be sued](#),” Landry said), but they are also exclusionary and offensive to many.

Despite what the Christian nationalist movement would have you believe, America was not founded as a Christian nation. Nor is it one today. In a pluralistic country, neither the Bible nor Judeo-Christian values are universal, including in the two heavily Christian Southern states in which these laws were passed.

[In Louisiana](#), for example, 2 percent of residents are adherents of other faiths — including Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Hinduism. Thirteen percent are religious nones, including 4 percent who are atheist or agnostic. [In Oklahoma](#), a similar percentage follow non-Christian religions, and an even larger portion — 18 percent — adhere to no religion.

In a [suit](#) challenging the Louisiana law, Americans United for Separation of Church and State noted that among the state’s approximately 680,000 students, many do not practice any religion at all. In response, [Landry called](#) on his followers to “stand up for Judeo-Christian values.”

While most of the Ten Commandments involve universal principles, and moral precepts can be found in the Bible, not everyone draws ethical guidelines from religion. And when the Ten Commandments say, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” the implication is that there is one true god. That is decidedly not true for

all Americans. Some atheists and secular humanists embrace the ideal put forth by Felix Adler, the founder of the [Society for Ethical Culture](#), of [deed before creed](#) — that how we act is far more important than what we profess to believe.

Politicians, many of whom regularly flout Adler's ideal, rarely bother to include nonbelievers — those of us who are not what politicians refer to as people of faith — in their supposedly inclusive rhetoric. This is where leaders of both parties, with their public prayers and displays of religiosity, typically alienate people like me whose principles do not stem from belief in a god. Barack Obama was [an exception](#) in including people “with no faith at all,” though I would have preferred a more elegant phrasing. Many of us rationalists do have faith, but it's in science or humanity, as disappointing as humanity can be.

When it comes to the Ten Commandments, four of the 10 (three if you're Catholic) concern a specific form of worship with a specific god. I'm on board with a rule against killing, for instance, but somehow this god has given a lot of killing a pass in his name.

And there's a lot to explain in the Bible itself if you believe it's a holy book — like its acceptance of slavery.

For me, the Bible's primary interest is in its historical and literary influence, a work whose stories and metaphors have permeated literature. But it's also one that, throughout history, has inspired and abetted many of the world's most violent and deadly wars.

In their drive to foist their religious beliefs on others or to prove their [conservative Christian](#) bona fides, Republicans are leaning harder into exclusionary territory. Prominent and mainstream Republicans [increasingly support the tenets of the Christian nationalist movement](#), which often embeds antisemitism and anti-Muslim views into its creed. And it is probably no coincidence that this is occurring as [many Christians](#) are fleeing their religion — many, no doubt, because of the hypocrisy and intolerance they've witnessed.

In ordinary times, all this would be quickly swatted away by the courts. Unfortunately, the conservative majority of the Supreme Court has [demonstrated](#) that, like many Republican politicians, when it comes to freedom of religion — and yes, that must include freedom from religion — those justices are willing to put their own faith above all else.

This Fourth of July, let's bear in mind that what many Americans value in this country is its inclusion and protection of all, regardless of their beliefs.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/04/opinion/christian-nationalist-religion-america.html>