

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



(Pixabay/David Peterson)

Corey D. B. Walker

[View Author Profile](#)

THE
CONVER
SATION

The Conversation

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 27, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Supporters of both major U.S. political parties tend to claim their presidential candidate is the "real" Christian or the "better" Christian or just the "true" Christian.

For a [majority of white evangelical protestants](#), Trump is the good Christian. Christians for Kamala, a newly created group of self-identified Christians who support the Democratic nominee, say that her campaign embodies the "[compassionate heart of Jesus and his teachings](#)."

Yet, most American adults [agree that religion should be separate from government](#). This widely shared belief is a cornerstone of religious freedom. As a [scholar of religious freedom](#), I have studied the complex and ever-evolving role of religion in American politics. I argue that this election year, while the Christian character of each candidate is discussed everywhere, religious freedom, one of the core freedoms of American democracy, is not.

The case of Ezra Stiles Ely

America's history of religious freedom is filled with stories that are [instructive for our current moment](#). One such instructive lesson comes from the early 19th century.

The [Second Great Awakening](#) was an intense period of religious revival. Evangelical Christians sought to reform American law and politics to reflect what they considered to be true Christianity. According to legal scholar [Geoffrey R. Stone](#), it was at this time the claim that the "[United States is a 'Christian nation' first seriously took root](#)."

A striking figure from the period is the Philadelphia Presbyterian minister [Ezra Stiles Ely](#). On July 4, 1827, the Yale-educated minister delivered his infamous call for "a Christian political party" in the run-up to the 1828 presidential election.

Ely's oration, [The Duty of Christian Freeman to Elect Christian Rulers](#), is a 19th-century version of what is today called "[Christian nationalism](#)." In it, Ely lays out his view of a distinctly Christian vision of who should serve as political leaders and how they should govern.

Before an Independence Day audience in Philadelphia's Seventh Presbyterian Church, Ely declared, "Every ruler should be an avowed and sincere friend of Christianity. He should know and believe the doctrines of our holy religion, and act in conformity to its precepts." Ely also advocated for "a new sort of union, or, if you will, a Christian party in politics."

Ely closed his sermon by exhorting Christians to "awake ... to our sacred duty to our Divine Master; and let us have no rulers, without our consent and cooperation, who are not known to be avowedly Christians."

Advertisement

Critiques in defense of religious freedom

While Ely sought to wed Christianity and American politics, others voices responded against this move. Religious freedom was new for the young nation. Yet, its supporters recognized its importance for American democracy.

On Feb. 7, 1828, a pamphlet titled [Sunday School Union, or Union of Church and State](#), was placed on the desk of each member of the Pennsylvania Senate. The pamphlet contained excerpts of Ely's speech that advocated the union of Christianity and politics. Ely's speech was also the subject of debate in several 19th-century newspapers, including the Harrisburg Chronicle and The Pennsylvania Reporter.

Notable among these voices was Massachusetts-born and Harvard-educated [Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story](#).

In an 1828 speech delivered in Salem, Massachusetts, Story boldly declared his support for religious freedom. [He stated](#): "Religious freedom is the birthright of man; that governments have no authority to inflict punishment for conscientious differences of opinion; and that to worship God according to our own belief is not

only our privilege, but is our duty, our absolute duty, from which no human tribunal can absolve us."

"Wherever religious liberty exists," he argued, "it will, first or last, bring in, and establish political liberty."

Politics and American democracy

America is not the same as at the time of the Second Great Awakening. Yet, the role of Christianity in political life is seemingly as alive as ever.

The [steady decline in church attendance](#) has not resulted in a diminished Christian presence in American public life. The public square still contains powerful appeals to Christianity rather than a shared democratic heritage.

Former president and Republican nominee Donald Trump [recently stated](#), "We have to bring back our religion. We have to bring back Christianity in this country."

[Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito](#) has commended the [religious convictions of citizens, stating](#), "People with deep religious convictions may be less likely to succumb to dominating ideologies or trends, and more likely to act in accordance with what they see as true and right. Civil society can count on them as engines of reform."

A [2023 survey](#), in which the nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization PRRI interviewed more than 22,000 adults, found that approximately 3 in 10 Americans either supported or held Christian nationalist views. Christian nationalists tend "to see political struggles through the apocalyptic lens of revolution and to support political violence."

In my opinion, the linkage of Christianity and politics in the United States undermines American democracy. [Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#), a prominent public voice, explains how Christian nationalism undermines both Christianity and American democracy. In her 2024 book "[How to End Christian Nationalism](#)," Tyler writes, "Christian nationalism is the greatest threat to religious liberty in the U.S. today, as well as a clear and present danger to our constitutional republic."

While debates over the Christian virtues of the candidates may be important for Christian communities, religious freedom is important for American democracy. The

response to Christianity and politics is not more Christianity but more democracy.
And religious freedom is key.