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The Eclipse of the Common Good: How American Nationalism Overcame Catholic Social Teaching in the 20th Century and How the 21st Century Might Reclaim It

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Abstract

This paper examines the theological, historical, and sociopolitical contours of American nationalism through a comparative study of Roman Catholics and Native Americans—two groups historically positioned as outsiders to the United States’ national self-conception, but into which Catholicism has successfully entered. It enquires into this success by establishing that American nationalism possesses a tripartite logic: (1) selective racial and religious superiority, (2) economic and military success read as divine blessing; and (3) advancing a teleological mission of global salvation. While white Roman Catholics were once viewed as anti-messianic threats, they eventually achieved integration by finding common enemies and warring to protect the American project and hierarchies, while Native Americans, by contrast, remain largely excluded, their presence disrupting foundational myths of nationalism. To evaluate this phenomena, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is deployed, using the principles of human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity to critique nationalism’s pillars of race, wealth, and militarism with a vision of the universal common good. In doing so, CST challenges any theological justification for exceptionalism, reclaims a global moral horizon, and refuses the role that Catholicism might play in US—or any—nationalisms.



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1. Introduction

Few nationalisms today are as globally influential as that of the United States of America. U.S. nationalism is hardly unique among the nations, nor is it necessarily the most fervent, but its history—of relatively recent construction—is eminently interpretable as a nationalism built “from scratch,” rather than in a homeland stretching back far longer than some three-hundred years. From the earliest colonization, the settlers of the U.S. purposed themselves to cosmic importance, and this oft-self-identified “New Israel” found its own “New Canaanites.” In this paper, we shall focus on two outsiders, Roman Catholics and Native Americans, since something curious occurred in the 20th century.¹ While white Catholics became increasingly involved in the “chosen people,” the Native Americans remained upon the margins. Today, two U.S. presidents, two vice presidents, and six of the nine supreme court justices have been Catholic. Of the 535 members of Congress, presently 150 are Catholic, 28%, which overrepresents Catholics, who make up approximately 20% of the U.S. population. Catholics have a median household income nearly matching the U.S. average distributions, at approximately USD 80,000 per year, with white Catholics taking more of that slice (Pew Research Center 2025). Their average life expectancy is higher

than the average U.S. life expectancy of 77 years (Sullivan 2010). In the 2024 election, most Catholics backed the explicitly self-described nationalist Donald Trump—61% of white Catholics and 53% of Hispanic Catholics (Royal 2024).

Meanwhile, there has been no Native U.S. president, only one vice president, never a justice or even any federal appellate judge at all, and only nineteen total members of congress.² The four present incumbents, 0.7% of congress, underrepresent the Native American population, which is approximately 1–2%. Natives have a median household income of approximately USD 60,000, which varies widely by reservation but leaves one quarter in poverty, with some reservations reaching as high as a 50% poverty rate (Lee 2023). Their average life expectancy is much lower than the average of 77 years, instead around 65–70 years (NICOA 2022; NCUIH 2024). In the 2024 elections, Natives faced difficult ballot access and little outreach, and supported the less explicitly nationalistic candidate, Kamala Harris, at 57% (Frey 2024). This demonstrates that while Catholics have largely integrated into American national identity, Native Americans have not. Recent political shifts and the global rise of nationalisms have sparked increased scholarly interest in U.S. nationalism, though most focus on evangelical Protestants, not Catholics—let alone Native Americans. Despite growing journalistic attention, especially around figures like Vice President JD Vance, and recently-appearing scholarly works like Mark Massa on Catholic fundamentalism, a gap remains. This paper aims to help fill that gap by exploring how both Catholics and Native Americans have engaged with U.S. nationalism, using Catholic Social Teaching’s vision of the common good as a critical lens.

This paper draws on civil religion scholarship, Native historians, and key civil religion texts—from Puritan sermons to presidential rhetoric, traced chronologically—to demonstrate how American national identity, boundaries, and destiny have developed. Part II identifies three recurring motifs of nationalism: (1) racial-religious identity, (2) divine affirmation in war and wealth, and (3) a world-saving mission—building on the work of Bellah, Bercovitch, Cherry, and Ebel. Parts III and IV contrast Catholic assimilation to these tenets with Native experiences, using scholars like Deloria Jr., Massa, and Irwin. Part V introduces Catholic Social Teaching’s critique through its principles of human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity. Finally, Part VI explores what CST might recommend for those already submerged in nationalisms, to move toward “the common good.”

2. What Makes a Messiah?

Fundamental to nationalist *identity* is race and religion. Though not yet regarding a nation, the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony under John Winthrop demonstrated a hope for a pure Protestant community whose divine example would shine forth. This identity was quickly maintained not merely through piety, but one’s genetic line, as found in the “Halfway Covenant” of 1662, wherein nonobservant children of the baptized could be baptized, too, and so receive political rights, though not communion (Rodgers 2018, pp. 80–81). Sacvan Bercovitch (2012, p. 64), a scholar of Puritanism, notes how this radically expanded the concept of “legitimate community” in New England, by detaching political life from traditional religious observance, thus forming a space where a civil religion could develop. Scholar of African-American studies Glaude (2000, pp. 13, 78) notes how firmly Protestantism was woven with Anglo-Saxon identity in America’s colonists (Bercovitch 2012, pp. 93, 160), made visible in how the Constitution’s original freedoms were identified mostly as ruling rights for the propertied, white, and mostly Anglo-Saxon protestants or deists, now quite far from rigorous Puritanism.³ Three Catholics were Founders, but the breadth of U.S. expansion was fueled by an explicit Protestantism, the self-proclaimed “advance-guard of civilization” (O’Sullivan 1845, pp. 2, 6; Stephanson 1995, pp. 46, 50, 54–56).⁴ As Princeton’s Stout (2007, pp. 10–11, 184–85) argues, the Civil War could rightly

be cast as a competition to be the “first-born” of this fused religio-racial identity, which granted national legitimacy (Glaude 2000, p. 75; Cherry 2014, p. 164; Palmer 2014, p. 186). By century’s turn, prominent senator Beveridge (2014, pp. 148, 156, 158) summarized, in the name of his party, that the “European and Teutonic” were those to whom “God has given the antipodes to develop their resources. . .regenerate their people and. . .establish civilization.” This whiteness, an epistemology of power, demonstrated divine capacity for “self-governing” (Beveridge 2014, p. 150). Though such explicit and universal claims have diminished in the modern day, still nearly one half of Americans believe the U.S. should be a “Christian nation” (though definitions vary as to what that means), with over 80% of white evangelical Protestants affirming this (Pew Research Center 2022). Combined with the significant racial benefits to whiteness recognized by the majority, the functional reality of a chosen identity implicitly maintains (Gallup Inc. 2025).

Second, nationalism grows by a unique *perception of victory* in wealth and war. Winthrop’s special covenant with God had been stamped, he believed, by their safe oceanic passage from the too-Catholic Great Britain (Rodgers 2018, pp. 306–7), and Revolutionary success led many to openly declare Washington a chosen Moses in his time (Street 2014, pp. 70, 80; Bercovitch 2012, p. 161). The steady advance of industrial capitalism fed upon near-infinite conquered land and resources, granting to the U.S. a sense of being a divinely-blessed “utopian source of radical potential,” in Bercovitch’s words (Bercovitch 2012, p. xxiii). Into every war won or profit extracted was read a divinely-starring role at the fulcrum of a cosmic story, for this upstart nation (Stiles 2014, pp. 84–85).⁵ Even failures could be subsumed as affirmation, by the process of Jeremiadic lament—in Bercovitch’s words (Bercovitch 2012, p. 157), “in all cases the idea of American revolution ruled out any basic challenge to the system. . .the summons to dissent, because it was grounded in a prescribed ritual form, pre-empted the threat of radical alternatives. Conflict itself was rendered a mode of control” (C. F. Thomas 2014, pp. 274–76). That is, critique of the United States came only to be speakable and effective primarily by appealing to a core part of the U.S. identity—such as the Declaration of Independence—rather than exterior standard, thus legitimizing the core of nationalism even in its critique. Prominent religious leaders heralded the U.S. Constitution as “the progress of mankind. . . the heiress of the civilized world’s blood, experience and wisdom” (Wise 2014, pp. 231–32).⁶ L. Beecher (1835, pp. 8, 43–44), for example, famously declared that “God had brought our fathers to this godly land to lay the foundation of religious liberty, and wrought such wonders in their preservation, and raised their descendants to such great heights of civil and religious prosperity,”⁷ and further that “nowhere does wealth so directly point towards virtue in morality and spirituality in religion than in America” (H. W. Beecher 2014, p. 246; C. F. Thomas 2014, p. 274). Such representative messianic hopes, our best stand-in for polling, found a climactic moment in Lincoln’s war-torn declaration that the U.S. was the “last, best hope of earth” (Cherry 2014, p. 166). Indeed, as Stout (2007, p. 456) astutely argues, the blood sacrifice of the Civil War functioned as a propitiation necessary for America to cement its nationalism, transforming a loose collection of states into one block of messianic identity. America’s covenantal identity came to be inscribed on its money, motto, speeches, rituals, and ceremonies—from Eisenhower affixing to the coinage that “in God we trust” to Biden’s consistent attempts to find unity in America’s “sacred documents” and invoking divine blessing on the American military, U.S. war and industry was tied to divine revelation; Reagan’s re-declared the “City Upon a Hill” (Reagan 1974). Warfare and capitalism function as new divine revelation upon the earth. Modern polling demonstrates that Americans still overwhelmingly think the U.S. to be exceptional and unique among the nations of the earth (Walker 2025).⁸ More specifically, three in four concur that American hegemony has been a global force for good, while among religious groups, 75% of white evangelicals, two-thirds of Black protestants,

and half of Hispanic Catholics all affirm that “God has granted America a special role in human history” (PRRI 2021).

Third, nationalism possesses a *sacred mission* or *teleology*. Bercovitch (2012, pp. 42–43) argues that the American imagination sees nothing less than a “cosmic and redemptive mission for the world” ordained by God. None more influential than Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mathers saw an eschatological Christian millennium to come from the U.S.’ work (Bercovitch 2012, pp. 102–3), while Langdon (2014, p. 98) preached “the great events in God’s moral government, designed from eternal ages to be displayed in these ends of the earth”, now free, in preacher Ezra Stiles’ words (Stiles 2014, pp. 84–86), from the “burden and vice” of Europe (Street 2014, p. 88). Influential colonial voices virtually united at the pulpit on this subject: to overthrow kings and carry a “new order of civilization” into all the fallen corners of the globe was the calling of the U.S., from war to war (Ebel 2014, pp. 22, 28; C. F. Thomas 2014, pp. 275–76).⁹ The American purpose was benevolent rulership, declared Senator Beveridge (2014, pp. 148, 152, 155) in 1900, to rescue the world from its “natural wilderness and from savage men” and “work out the salvation” of the lesser peoples. Planetary order has been the American *telos*, discernable in every Presidential inauguration from Wilson to Kennedy; from Obama to Trump—the lyrics have differed according to time and place, but all have harmonized to an underlying beat: providence intended an enduring United States to lead the world from chaos.¹⁰ American children are shown this every morning, when their earliest and most common association for the word “God” meets them contextualized within the Pledge of Allegiance, implicitly arguing for a common purpose between the United States and Divinity. In the words of the remarkable combination of Pius XII in 1946 and Reagan in 1974: “into the hands of America, God has placed the destinies of an afflicted mankind” (Reagan 1974; Pope Pius XII 1946).

3. What Makes an Anti-Messiah?

Nationalism could be called a theology of one’s own people as Ultimate Reality. As Vine Deloria Jr, Sioux theologian and historian, recognizes (Deloria 1999, p. 220): to dispute any of these three points—hierarchical identity, the experience of economic and military success, and the mission of global extension—ejects one from participation in “the people,” by placing the nation under judgment by a standard outside its own mythos. Roman Catholics and Native Americans have each lived this outsider role; twin enemies tied up together since the French [Catholic] and Indian War, as one of the earliest events that solidified an “American” identity apart from Britain (Bercovitch 2012, p. 122). One represented the threat of perceived monarchical oppression and the other the threat of supposed savage barbarity. Let us examine how both failed to meet America’s divine standards.

New England’s Puritan settlers perceived themselves as refugees of Britain’s religious civil wars, expelled in order to found their ‘City on a Hill’ as a “common front against global Catholicism,” writes Princeton historian Rodgers (2018, p. 71). Catholicism was the original anathema, as Winthrop’s colony termed themselves a Solomon *vis a vis* their own Queen of Sheba: visitors from Catholic Acadia (Rodgers 2018, pp. 20, 73, 80). Further on, to Edwards (2014, p. 55). Catholicism was that “ecclesiastical pride of the splendid European hierarchies”; it was Herod’s dying world, while a new world was swaddled in a New World manger. This was, of course, also intertwined with race—for “white” meant pre-eminently the Anglo-Saxon. The Catholic Irish, Spanish, Italian, Polish were races tended toward “bending the knee to foreign idolatry, false tastes, false doctrines, false principles,” so wrote famed columnist John O’Sullivan, the Confederate who, in 1845, coined the most central phrase of American nationalism: Manifest Destiny (Stephanson 1995, p. 41). As immigrants poured into the U.S., preacher L. Beecher (1835, pp. 49, 51) feared that the “street sweepings and prison houses” of Europe would be “unaccustomed

to self-government, inaccessible to education, and easily accessible to prepossession, and inveterate credulity, and intrigue, and easily embodied and wielded by sinister design.” Such language of suspicion and demonization toward the outsider was well-tread to establish the boundaries of American nationalism. In this way, the Catholic pseudo-racial identity was subjected to marginalization, dehumanization, and often violence.¹¹

Second, if America’s experience was of a uniquely chosen, blessed, and guided people, then a transnational church that made near precisely the same claim for itself would be of ultimate threat—in the words of founding father Paine (1837, p. 178), “monarchy. . . is the popery of government; a thing kept up to amuse the ignorant, and quiet them into paying taxes.”¹² If the U.S. was meant for universal oversight and the extension of democratic liberty to protect the backwards people of Earth, then Catholicism could only represent the “Luciferian chaos of the old world,” as Bercovitch summarizes (Bercovitch 2012, p. 134). This expressed itself in the worries of the 1830s of a “dark-minded population. . . a hive of clouds like locusts rising and going to settle”—an existential threat with the potential to overturn America’s light and return the world to hopeless “primeval darkness” (Bercovitch 2012, p. 51). Artwork commonly portrayed Catholic immigrants as animalistic: crocodiles, apes, and pigs, all thin veneers through which papal powers might snatch the operating levers of the world’s new messiah (S. J. Thomas 2004, p. 243). Before the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the bestselling book of the 19th century U.S. demonstrated well this anti-Catholic hysteria: 1836’s *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, which purported to expose Catholic abuses, orgies, and infanticide by an escapee nun (Yacovazzi 2018). Nationalism insisted on conversion: the Catholic must be taken “under our schools and institutions. . . and various powers of assimilation” or “punished by disenfranchisement and death”—so wrote L. Beecher (1835, pp. 60, 67), one of the most famous abolitionist clergymen of the 19th century.

Meanwhile, Native Americans were given the typology of the Canaanites surrounding and threatening “God’s new Israel” with their pagan ways (Rodgers 2018, pp. 80–81; Irwin 2008, pp. 106, 119). As religion scholar Lee Irwin notes (Irwin 2008, pp. 108–11, 126–27, 129–31), Native Americans held their own ancient customs, their own divine parentage, and their own distinct spirituality, with ever-present practice that imbued all of life—thus they generally resisted and resented assimilation. As Vine Deloria reflects (Deloria 1999, pp. 168–69), there was no theological space for alternatives; at best, even the Natives who saved the original Boston Colony were simply tools being used by God for the colonist’s blessing, with no inherent purpose of their own. The typical perception of a distinctively Native identity by 19th century American Protestants was of “lying, laziness, indulging the children, not emphasizing the family, and having no government” (Deloria 1999, p. 103). As Cherokee mixed-raced Methodist minister William Apess observed (Apess 1836), the Protestant religion and Native religion shared mutually the “racial” characters of their adherents. As the white race and religion alone could be “intelligent and peaceful,” Deloria declares (Deloria 1999, pp. 169–70), so too could the red man be only “lesser and wretched” (Stephanson 1995, pp. 38, 46).

Further, the Native’s very presence upon the land of North America was a living threat to American nationalism. They had existed before the colonists, prior to the divine mandate, and outside the myth (Apess 1836). Simultaneously, then, they functioned as a foil that American nationalism grew against. The Native presence permitted the earliest colonists to conceive of themselves as what Columbia historian Stephanson (1995, pp. 47–48) likens to an “Abraham among the Sodomites, a Joshua among Canaan, or Jacob and Laban.” In the very act of being challenged by the Natives, American messianism bolstered itself by interpreting the outbreak of diseases and sickness among the Native, or their economic, geographic, and cultural subjugation, as divine judgment and their

own chosen preservation. Thus, [Deloria \(1999, p. 169\)](#) quotes from colonial military leadership that “Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents” to create what [Irwin \(2008, pp. 115, 119–21\)](#) called a “clean slate for the millennial kingdom.” Despite being the cause of colonial survival, Princeton historian Kevin Kruse notes ([Kruse 2016, pp. 10–12, 26](#)) that Natives were ever-derided by capitalistic messianism as living a “non-competitive life,” failing to “rule” the land of North America in a sufficiently useful way. This justified their physical expunging by broken treaties, coercive threats, and the all-consuming violence of “Manifest Destiny.” Natives were made subject to the “process of assimilation”: missionizing, restrictions to their rights of movement, and the criminalization of their culture and religion ([Deloria 1999, pp. 172–73](#)). If this was not accepted, then only the Trail of Tears, forced starvation, Wounded Knee, and the “total war” tactics of the postbellum era were offered ([Stout 2007, p. 456](#)). By 1890, celebrated author [L. Frank Baum \(1891\)](#), of Wonderful Wizard of Oz fame, wrote widely in favor of genocide, with American safety depending “upon the total extermination of the Indians. . . we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow. . . up wrong by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.” The final solutions of nationalism appear alike across the world: that outsider groups, merely living in their historic homes, must be violently cleansed. Whereas Catholics presented a global counternarrative, the Native American presented a local counter-narrative—both dire threats to nationalism ([Apess 1836](#)).

4. How to Become a Messiah

What changed, then, that allowed Catholics increasing participation in the American identity in the last half of the 20th century? In general, American Catholicism had embarked upon a path of divergence from the global Catholic church—putting it often at odds with the very Magisterium that was developing CST across the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1839, Gregory XVI condemned the practice of slave trading, explicitly referring to the enslavement of “blacks” ([Pope Gregory XVI 1839](#)). This was loosely interpreted by the American bishops, whose center was in Baltimore, and rarely applied; it was the first Catholic Supreme Court Justice who affirmed that Black persons “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect” in the infamous Dred Scott case ([Taney 1857](#)). Separated by the “wide expanse of the ocean,” perceived democratization and accommodation to the modernity so thoroughly condemned in the *Syllabus of Errors* led Leo XIII to feel compelled to denounce the “Americanist” heresy ([Pope Leo XIII 1895](#)). Though the Vatican eventually came to support the separation of church and state and a deeper engagement with conscience, ideas which became key shapers of CST in the last half of the 20th century, the clear separation of the European church from the American church enabled a branching-path of growth, apart from Rome and in accord with Washington, while CST was yet in its infancy. This division began early enough, that it was no great event for 20th century American Catholicism, writ large, to sideline, or only selectively receive, the social teachings of Rome. But how did this development occur?

First, Catholic racial identity had begun to resolve itself. European Catholics, at least, increasingly came to “pass” as “white,” especially as the most essential boundaries between “White” and “Black” sharpened with the rumbling of civil rights. The hegemony of “whiteness” was reinforced by new buy-ins from among the previously outcast, as new social benefits were offered Irish and Italian Americans over-and-against Black Americans in the U.S. racial hierarchy.¹³ By 1900, Catholic parishes were fully institutionalized into segregation, justified by the system of “national parishes” that had served specific immigrant populations. Villanova History professor Shannen Dee Williams reminds ([Williams 2020](#)) us that “Following the abolition of slavery, the Catholic Church stood as the largest Christian

practitioner of segregation.” In 1941, of the relatively small black Catholic population, 63.7% were estimated to attend “colored churches” while the rest sufficed in mostly segregated seating (Vischer 2001, p. 206).¹⁴ The first church built specifically for African Americans opened in 1888, in Baltimore, to serve the religious and educational needs of freedmen, but under segregation (Archdiocese of Baltimore 2012).¹⁵ The largest urban disturbance in U.S. history occurred in 1863 New York, when Irish Catholic immigrants protested the disproportionate burden of the Civil War draft. But the unrest soon exposed a deeper anxiety in the Catholic Irish community. Fueled by New York’s economic dependence on exporting slavery’s cotton and fears that freed Black labor would challenge their fragile economic position, the riots swiftly turned violently racial, with Irish mobs lynching Black men in the streets and destroying Black homes, businesses, and abolitionist institutions. The violence triggered the mass Black exodus from Manhattan to Brooklyn, as America’s nationalist hierarchy demonstrated its more visceral and motivating reality than any religious principles (Harris 2003, pp. 279–88); its coercive power to drive even the lowest to seek whiteness over solidarity.

A similar exchange occurred in religious identity, too, as 20th century Catholicism began to accept what had long been pioneered in the U.S.: the pluralistic society and freedom of religion, culminating in Vatican II (Murray 2010, p. 449). No longer “mutually incompatible,” American Catholics could openly find common ground with Protestant democracy. Simultaneously, from the side of Protestants, American religion evolved toward a coalition of any “deeply held religious faith” with a “Judeo-Christian” core, in order to shore up the American–Capitalist–Democratic identity *vis a vis* the new great enemy of Soviet–Materialist–Socialism. Here, Reagan and Pius XII come together, both believing the Soviets to be a graver threat than any social or material ill of the United States and capitalist individualism (Kruse 2016, p. 68).¹⁶ The American melting pot melted even religions, orienting them toward the U.S. itself as a shared religious object, served by what the U.S. Supreme Court has called a pious “ceremonial deism”; the language of American civil religion (Kruse 2016, pp. 113–14, 220).

Nowhere is this more obvious or effective, scholar Jonathan Ebel argues, than in Catholic participation in and sacralization of American wars. The Civil War and World War I, especially, served to show Catholic dedication to America’s mythmaking—first as local, then as global, savior (Ebel 2014, p. 92). In fighting “the Great War,” argues Ebel (2014, pp. 275–76). Catholic Americans showed they were not loyal to “old Europe” and its monarchies, but rather made the messianic cause of America their own—over and against the continent of their ancestors. In 1960, John F Kennedy was elected President, having renounced papal allegiance by claiming himself for only “the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates” in order to oppose “. . .the spread of Communist influence” (Kennedy 1960). This represented the height of Catholic integration to the American story, now mirroring themselves the wide experience of a U.S. divided by desegregation. While the U.S. bishops had publicly endorsed the goal of the civil rights movement by 1963 despite the clamoring of many in their southern parishes (USCCB 1963), by the mid-1970s, Irish Catholics in Boston were reacting in much the same way nativist Americans had protested their ancestor’s arrival: now expressed by rioting against desegregation busing (Gellerman 2014). The Catholic outsiders had come to fill all degrees of the American story. Such was the power of possessing *common enemies*—of “atheistic liberalism” and the late 20th century cultural overthrow of conservative social ethics, which was given reified embodiment in the Soviet Union (Massa 2025, pp. 85–86).¹⁷ Thus were Protestants and Catholics united as relative beneficiaries: popular personalities like Bishop Fulton Sheen used anti-communism as a “vehicle of inclusion” to adapt Catholicism to American needs. Leaders like him sold “the American way of Life,” as Boston College’s

Mark Massa argues (Massa 2025, p. 92), as *the real religion of the world*—a gospel of capitalistic, civil, and religious individuality. Whether it was influential Catholics like William Buckley Jr. martailing anti-communist sentiment and suspicion against civil rights for American exceptionalism in the late 20th century, or Father Charles Coughlin proclaiming pseudo-fascist “national prosperity,” nativist fears, and seeding anti-communism in the early 20th century, those who aligned themselves with the American nationalist story commanded audiences in the tens of millions. This far eclipsed those leaders like Bishop Thomas Gumbleton who levied severe criticism of the Vietnam War, or other prominent critics of the U.S., such as Dorothy Day, who attempted to hold U.S. actions to standards higher than its own history (Donnelly and Chakrabarti 2025; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019, p. 31).¹⁸ A particularly colorful example was recently been explored by the Boston College History Professor James O’Toole (2025), who writes of the relatively quick cessation of radically unique Catholic practices, like confession, in the U.S. These examples demonstrate a widespread and consistent subordination of universal Catholic interests to the particular interests of the U.S.

On the other side, however, Natives “violate this basic reality,” writes Deloria (1999, pp. 227–28). Every bridge that American Catholics could pass over to join with the sacralized Anglo-Saxon majority, the Native American either generally refused or were denied. It was quite impossible for most Natives to ever pass as white, and if “lesser” whites like the Irish and Italians only passed by the slightest of margins, how much more would the Native or black human fail the Anglo-Saxon definition? (Whitman 2017, p. 47). Further, unlike the Protestant and Catholic, the Protestant and Native had not even “a shared metaphysic” (Deloria 1999, pp. 171–72). From the earliest engagements, Native prophets like Neolin, of the Delaware Lenni Lenape, had insisted that their ways required an intense distinction from the ways of invasive Europe; for America’s earth was a resource to be “subdued and ruled,” while the Native earth was a living entity that could not be “bought and sold” (Irwin 2008, pp. 126–27, 129–31).¹⁹ As Deloria argues (Deloria 1999, pp. 223, 225–26), extinguishing Native belief, ritual, and praxis was required by nationalism’s mythic aims. To this day, the lot left to the Native has been of ever-diminishment—of reservations, no less than Hitler could praise as having “gunned down millions to a few hundred thousand, and now kept the modest remnant under observation in a cage” (Ross 2018).

With the ingredients of nationalism’s religious mythos understood as *identity*, *experience*, and *mission*, we can see that such a cosmic identity permits no neutrality—after all, the stakes have been understood as nothing less than universal, cosmic salvation. American Catholicism was able to navigate a way into this chosen-identity by being “white enough,” metaphysically similar enough, beneficiaries-enough of American war and profit, with enough common enemies. Thus Ebel (2014, p. 187) rightly notes that American messianism can accommodate “a pantheon of vassal deities so long as ultimate sovereignty belongs to the nation.” Yet, did Catholics abandon their Catholicism in doing so? We turn next to Catholic Social Teaching.

5. The Evaluation of Messiahship

In the last century of Catholic Social Teaching, the three pillars upon which most nationalisms rest have been directly challenged. Perhaps the most key blow was struck by the Pastoral Constitution itself, in its famous opening lines: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. . . That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds” (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §1). This serves as a foundational statement of the Church’s fundamental concern with the common good,

understood as “The sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Pope John XXIII 1961, §65). In the modern world, this extends to the “rights and duties. . .even of the general welfare of the entire human family” which include “everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious” (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §26). The common good encompasses the basic economic needs, culture, political and civil freedoms, and an inward sense of kindness, for the person to participate in the orderly exchange of rights and obligations, each according to need and ability, in contrast to a purely individualistic morality. Thus, “the political community exists. . .for the sake of the common good. . .[which is] the source of its inherent legitimacy. Indeed, the common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection” (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §74)²⁰.

The common good is founded upon a particular anthropological conception, broadly termed personalism, summarized by the pastoral constitution as “the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things, and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable” and so “the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person” (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §26). Catholic personalism functions as “phenomena of reaction. . .not personalist doctrine, but personalist aspirations” (Maritain 2002, p. 66), not collectivist, nor individualist; neither materialist nor existential; not the totalizing atomism of capitalism, nor the all-encompassing definition by the state (Burgos 2018, pp. 1, 8, 11–12, 14). This puts personalism in tension with a liberal, autonomous anthropology, such as that of John Rawls, who understood society as a collection of individual interests, which cannot conceive of a common good other than toleration, as “A public and workable agreement on a single and general comprehensive conception [of the good] could be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power” (Rawls 1987, p. 4). Any aim beyond individual freedom “is no longer a political possibility for those who accept the constraints of liberty and toleration of democratic institutions” (Rawls 1993, p. 201). As Thomas Jefferson wrote in his first inaugural address: “A wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement” (Jefferson 1801). Catholic personalism finds this insufficient to a communal and transcending human nature.

Personalism prioritizes the person before society, and yet insists upon the person’s obligation to serve the society, making it “an option in favor of the person that took from individualism its defense of the right of the subject and from the collectivisms their ethical tension towards the construction of a common project. . .with its own presupposition” (Burgos 2018, p. 16). This is not entirely unlike the many schools of what is called “communitarianism.” But while Catholic personalism insists on universally true metaphysic, Etzioni (2018, pp. 61–62) writes that communitarianism “suggests that human beings are “multiple” beings, capable of acting in line with their internalized social norms (superego) and their pursuit of pure pleasure (id)” pointing out that “that social order requires a core of shared values” for the purpose of voluntary compliance, limiting conflicts, and resolution of differences. These do not begin with a metaphysical concern, however, but rather seek a collection of “share moral understandings” that make social life more peaceful, functional and effective, using moral dialogue to constantly re-evaluate deeper human relationality (Etzioni 2018, p. 84). In the words of Walzer (2015, pp. 55–56), “moral rights are subject to the vicissitudes of the common life” for only the “coming together of a people”

instantiates the boundaries of communal life. While its purpose is not inimical to Catholic personalism, communitarian relativism is unacceptable to Catholic personalism, which insists on a universal and all-binding conception of human dignity (Burgos 2018, p. 232)²¹. Needless to say, then, the personalist stands in stark contrast to the reactionary retreat to define the human person primarily in terms of one's nation, ethnicity, or other category of reductive identity—a temptation of the modern age, writes Hollenbach (2002, pp. 242–43), requiring in response “Fidelity to this ultimate, transhistorical vision of the common good” which enable us to live together *in* and *with* our differences.

This personalist common good is demonstrated by diligent work on “the national and international level which will everywhere recognize and satisfy the right of all to a human and social culture in conformity with the dignity of the human person without any discrimination of race, sex, nation, religion or social condition” (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §60). Thus, CST presents a principle of human dignity to answer the first nationalism pillar of the singularly chosen race. “Life is always a good. . .” writes John Paul II, “Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself. . .the life which God bestows upon man. . .transcends the very limits of time: “For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity” (Pope John Paul II 1995, §34). The arguments of CST for shared human dignity and internationalism are incompatible with the deifying claims of messianic nationalism. The entirety of the pastoral constitution's closing is dedicated to “Setting Up an International Community” for the sake of the “universal common good” (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §63, 65, 79, 80–83). The “true brotherhood” and “present solidarity of mankind”—derived from doctrines of creation and soteriology—demand “the realization of universal cooperation” which enables developing nations to “secure the total human fulfillment of their citizens” and the advanced nations to “respect” such development in the name of justice, from fairer allocation of land resources to redistribution from the luxurious excess of the richer nations to others (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §87–88). As Christ himself calls out as the poor, it is the Christian who must be scandalized when freedom and “amicable brotherhood” is stolen from the earth, by the few who live with enormous excess. With God as origin and end, and all made brothers, this “fraternal exchange” is egalitarian: “we have been summoned to the same destiny, human and divine, we can and we should work together without violence and deceit in order to build up the world in genuine peace” (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §89, 92).

Pope John XXIII (1963, §100) would doubtlessly have been proud of these conclusions, as he wrote in *Pacem in Terris* two years earlier how both the variety and similarity in humanity enables them to reach the divine destiny: “whatever their ethnic background, men possess, besides the special characteristics which distinguish them from other men, other very important elements in common with the rest of mankind. And these can form the basis of their progressive development and self-realization especially in regard to spiritual values.” Even the universal Catholic Church does not uphold itself as the enforceable religious identity which justifies a chosen political rulership of the world; rather, *Nostra Aetate* (Second Vatican Council 1965b, §2) declared: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. . . therefore, [she] exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” There is no chosen people, but a chosen humanity, in the eyes of CST—there can be no “discarding of others,” which is termed racism (Pope Francis 2020, §20).

In response to the second pillar of nationalism, the last century of CST was founded by arguing against wealth and war, and for solidarity. *Rerum Novarum* (Pope Leo XIII 1891,

§3) itself was occasioned, Leo XIII wrote, due to “the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class. . . isolated and helpless, [given over] to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition.” Thus, success or failure in capitalism can in no way be read as divine approval, for property is meant to “minister to the needs of all” (Pope Leo XIII 1891, §8). It is not ownership even of the entire North American continent which demonstrates God’s will, for it is rather that the “mass of the needy, should be specially cared for and protected by the government” (Pope Leo XIII 1891, §37). Without rejecting private property, Leo warns against the “cruelty of men of greed, who use human beings as mere instruments for money-making. It is neither just nor human so to grind men down with excessive labor as to stupefy their minds and wear out their bodies” (Pope Leo XIII 1891, §42). Yet, does Leo’s encyclical really answer the nationalist story of the United States? After all, part of its founding mythos claims to offer opportunity to all. This offer was, of course, underwritten by expansionism and war to generate wealth, thus why the divine will was also read into its messianic warring. But CST argues that war, like wealth, is no proof of divine favor. Rather, divine favor is represented in the interdependence of all peoples, solidarity, which is “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (Pope John Paul II 1987, §38).

John XXIII, in condemning the nuclear arms race, called for mutual disarmament to eliminate the fear that leads to war: “the realization that true and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments but only in mutual trust” (Pope John XXIII 1963, §112–13). Presaging what Francis expounds more severely, John XXIII writes that “In this age which boasts of its atomic power, it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice” (Pope John XXIII 1963, §127). Half a century later, Francis carried forward the same thought. *Fratelli Tutti* (Pope Francis 2020, §258) is severe in its condemnations: “We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits,” for “Every war leaves the world worse than it was before. War is a failure of politics” (Pope Francis 2020, §261) and “. . . what might appear as an immediate or practical solution for one part of the world initiates a chain of violent and often latent effects that end up harming the entire planet and opening the way to new and worse wars in the future” (Pope Francis 2020, §259). His inheritor, Leo XIV, has since followed in his steps: “War does not solve problems, but rather it amplifies them and produces deep wounds in the history of people that take generations to heal” (Wooden 2025). Their language is so strong, it must imply that even victors of past wars ought not be read as revelators of divine approval. Rather, as Francis was fond of reminding, God himself “became poor” and the “entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. Salvation came to us from the “yes” uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire” (Pope Francis 2015, §49).²² Indeed, Francis rejected relativizing Biblical warnings against wealth, for the text “summons us so forcefully to brotherly love, to humble and generous service, to justice and mercy towards the poor” (Pope Francis 2013, §194). It cannot be minimized, John Paul II wrote, that “a society becomes alienated when its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people (Pope John Paul II 1991, §844–45). Thus, “the true worth of the different countries of our world is measured by their ability to think not simply as a country but also as part of the larger human family. . . . Narrow forms of nationalism are an extreme expression of an inability to grasp the meaning of this gratuitousness” (Pope Francis 2020, §141).

Last, CST answers with a constant internationalism to the teleological claim of a nation to be, itself, in some manner, the planetary messiah and “vanguard of civilization.” The responsive principle of CST and the common good here is subsidiarity—which is both local and planetary. John XXIII wrote that our problems are “world-wide in their dimensions. . .[and] cannot be solved except by a public authority with power, organization and means co-extensive with these problems, and with a world-wide sphere of activity” (Pope John XXIII 1963, §137). John Paul II furthered this: “It is necessary to state once more the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine: the goods of this world are originally meant for all” (Pope John Paul II 1987, §42). A universal good requires a universal subject, by which subsidiarity properly accords authority to the local and international, for the aim of alleviation and development (Pope John Paul II 1987, §43). Interdependence and subsidiarity interact with nuance in John Paul’s thought, as all must cooperate, but all localities ought to possess their own local oversight, for the sake of “autonomy and free self-determination” (Pope John Paul II 1987, §45). Francis builds on this thinking, moving from top-down universal oversight to emphasize bottom-up universal solidarity, “for it possesses something that the global does not: it is capable of being a leaven, of bringing enrichment, of sparking mechanisms of subsidiarity” (Pope Francis 2020, §142). Francis writes that “Interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan. . .which cannot be resolved by unilateral actions on the part of individual countries” (Pope Francis 2015, §164). There is no place on the stage of CST for one star actor, the hero of history, and divinely-ordained planetary leader. Rather, “We need to develop the awareness that nowadays we are either all saved together or no one is saved” enacted across the world “without concern for personal gain or recompense” in imitation of God (Pope Francis 2020, §137–39). Francis indicts nationalism of this sin: “thinking that they can develop on their own, heedless of the ruin of others, that by closing their doors to others they will be better protected” for a country is measured by being “part of the larger human family” (Pope Francis 2020, §141).

Such thinking around subsidiarity finds root in Thomistic thought, where each level of human being finds its meaning as nestled in higher goods, each with their own corresponding law—the individual in the community, the community in the nation, the nation in the cosmos, and all in God. In Aquinas’ words: “The common good is the end of each individual member of a community, just as the good of the whole is the end of each part (Aquinas 1947, II–II.58.9). Thus no nation stands above or alone, and for one to plunge ahead, claiming eschatological value in itself, CST warns that it will forget the “sparking mechanisms of subsidiarity. That gaze is at the heart of the authentic spirit of politics” (Pope Francis 2020, §142). As Pius XI puts it: “every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the social body, and never destroy or absorb them” (Pope Pius XI 1931, §79). This is the satisfaction of the Pastoral Constitution’s call for peoples to “extend their thoughts and their spirit beyond the confines of their own nation, that they put aside national selfishness and ambition to dominate other nations, and that they nourish a profound reverence for the whole of humanity” (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §82) so that the rights of all “to live. . .to bodily integrity. . .to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services” may be maintained toward the end of virtue, both social and divine (Pope John XXIII 1963, §11). For CST, the only “chosen people” is all of humanity and the earth upon which we live, evaluated by how well the poor are cared for and true peace maintained, and all which has no end except the universal brotherhood of mankind, the cosmic common good—which, at bottom, is God himself, alone.

6. The Rejection of Messiahship

We have seen how CST's personalist principles challenge nationalist pillars: human dignity counters the idea of a chosen people, solidarity rejects divine sanction of war and wealth, and subsidiarity resists claims to ultimate, eschatological authority. But knowing is not the same as living. Action is required if one is to resist the improper adoration of one's own. To do this, CST urges solidarity with the poor—a position the pride of nationalism cannot long abide: "this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future" (Pope John Paul II 1987, §42). If "All forms of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997) then this means, "working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter" (Pope Francis 2013, §188). CST's principles of the "preferential option for the poor" and "just peace" require solidarity with those excluded from the American narrative—like Native peoples, whose identities and beliefs stood outside dominant Anglo-Protestant norms. Nationalism's felt force is received only by its beneficiary identities, which CST serves to disestablish. To be among any who live on the fringes and externalities of the American project as casualties, acceptable losses, or the forgotten, makes it impossible to sacralize U.S. wars and wealth.

Thus, Francis warns against accepting the "dogma of neoliberal faith" that "the marketplace, by itself, [can] resolve every problem." Financial speculation must become solidarity and organization "from the subsoil" of labor for redistribution, (Pope Francis 2020, §167–68, 186) and "might is right" domination must become a "far-sightedness" that seeks greatest sustenance than extraction (Pope Francis 2015, §36, 82–83). Concrete steps must be taken to impede and restrain those living luxuriously beyond their means, just as living among the "collateral damage" of war must mean concrete steps toward moving military expenditures into a "global fund" to end hunger and develop those countries most left behind, cutting off war at its root causes (Pope Francis 2020, §261–62). The steps Francis urges in *Laudato Si*—the restoration of social bonds from privatization, nurturing of biodiversity, perceiving the earth as a gift rather than a tool, the reversal of capitalist profit and private ownership without a 'social mortgage', the rejection of consumeristic throwaway culture and unsustainable industry—all are hallmarks of the traditional Native spirituality, which often kept the Native apart from the wealth-and-war work deemed divine by the chosen people of the United States.

Last, then, while subsidiarity must still refer to localizing functions and duties, CST urges more and more that subsidiarity also means to conceive of humanity as a "world community" which requires a "political authority" to deal with the problems of immense gravity and vast urgency (Pope John XXIII 1963, §141–42). The empowerment of the UN continues to be a theme of CST, "to maintain and strengthen peace between nations" (Pope John XXIII 1963, §143–45), though Francis expressed doubts about the UN's capacity to function as more than a co-opted tool for "a few countries" to impose and restrain others for their own self-interest (Pope Francis 2020, §173). This led Francis to call for reform, so that the truly universal mission of the UN might continue as a concrete means to oversee the universal common good which John XXIII presaged, and inaugurated at Vatican II's call for international order, to become "more and more conscious of being living members of the universal family of mankind" (Pope John XXIII 1963, §145; *Second Vatican Council* 1965a, §88)—over and against the claim any one nation might make to divine destiny. Instead, CST offers a conception of divine mission that includes a universally inclusive concern.

CST's refusal to compromise these key principles must be noted, as well. Elias Boudinot, a Cherokee born in 1809, envisioned a future where Natives could "save and compete her civilization," and be "admitted into all the privileges of the American family. . . which grows brighter and brighter, until it reaches its fullness of glory. . . a faithful ally of the United States"—that is, Boudinot hoped for precisely what Catholics received in the late 20th century (Boudinot 1826). But after negotiating a land cession treaty with the US, Boudinot was assassinated by fellow Cherokees, and the treaty was used by the US to justify the Trail of Tears. Nationalism, jeremiadically self-justifying and endlessly consumptive, reads both triumph and tragedy both as signs of its own righteousness. Only by rejecting the nationalist pillars at every point can CST sustain a critical resistance against nationalism's gravitational pull.

The spirit of CST is well-exemplified in the form of Sister Geraldine Clifford, a Lakota-born Sister of Saint Francis, who wrote openly of her struggle with her dual identity, brought about by living in an assimilationist boarding school. She mourned of what had once been naturally spiritual within her being killed, surrendered, so that her people could "live in the white man's world" (Clifford 1991). Yet, she saw no inherent conflict between being true Lakota and true Catholic: her personhood was not bound solely in one root, but in a universality which could encompass much more. One might easily draw tentative comparisons between Native philosophy and Catholic Social Teaching: human dignity is not unlike the Lakotan concept of *Mitákuye Oyás'íŋ*, which expressed the sacred and mutual interrelatedness of all things (Maroukis 2005, p. 160). Solidarity is not unlike what is expressed in the *potlach* ceremonies of the gift economy in the Pacific Northwest, wherein the wealthy held great ceremonies at the major events of life, wherein riches were competitively redistributed or destroyed, family and clan ties were reaffirmed, and the local resources were managed and negotiated among tribes and groups, building relational connection by music, dance, storytelling, and games (the practice was banned by Canada from 1885 to 1951, as missionaries reported its uncivilized prodigality) (Barnett 1938). Principles of subsidiarity are not unlike what underwrote the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which united various Great Lakes tribes in a Grand Council that worked to resolve internal conflicts and fight external enemies by decentralized community consent through supermajority (Richter 1992). One must be wary of romanticizing or totemizing such practices, just as CST cannot be abstracted from its context and history, but bridges of similarity may not require much seeking to find.

Nationalism draws its power from exclusive identity, deified military and economic success, and the belief in a divine mission to save the world in one's own image. Even outsiders can become beneficiaries and face common enemies—such was the case with Catholicism in 19th and 20th century America. Like early Christians under Emperor Constantine, many Catholics saw acceptance as a relief, without yet seeing how it might compromise the universalism at the heart of their faith. In so doing, even the most aspirational ideals of U.S. history become subservient to overriding national self-interest, for nationalism's *curvatus in se* adjudicates the cosmos in its own image. Important questions remain: How might such CST challenges enable a critical retrieval of American ideals of freedom, without affirming its messianic identity in Jeremiadic terms? Can CST offer a true alternative between capitalism and socialism? Is it possible to find subsidiarity in the modern state and also an ill-defined universal authority elsewhere? What real sacrifices are being made for solidarity with the global poor, especially regarding the Magisterium's relationship with the globally powerful, their historic partners? Is CST too-little and too-late to compel peoples by moral force, rather than shifting the material conditions of their lives? What of those torn between identities—particularly as white "Catholic nationalists" reject their fellow Latin American Catholics? How does nationalism in a colonial project—such

as the US, Canada, Australia, South Africa, or Israel—grow like or unlike the nationalism of long-established peoples, such as in Poland, Russia, India, Japan, or China? Nevertheless, CST stands as a formidable critic of nationalism. As Catholic social ethicist [Schneck \(2023\)](#) argues, CST is “the transcendent that can only belong to faith” thus it cannot “co-inhabit a political movement or political leader.” As various nationalisms continues to “immanentize” their own individual “eschatons”—whether in reaction to colonial trauma or the fearful internal fallout of former empires—Theology must keep interrogating our identity, history, and mission, because at its core, it is the study of Ultimate Reality and its ramifications, which is nothing else than what a sufficiently mature nationalism claims to be.

7. Conclusions

We have observed how American nationalism is a polyvalent experience—born from the need to invent a people who had severed ties to their own ancient histories and slaughtered the only local one, just as industrialization upended all self-understandings across the whole Earth. It forged a shared cultural language—an “imagined community”—that allowed disparate settlers to coexist, cemented finally by the North’s nationalist victory over the South’s own nationalism. At the same time, it was a top-down “invented tradition” designed by disparate minds across centuries to constantly re-sanctify the U.S. state and its capitalist power, justifying its monopoly on violence not merely at home, but globally, by ritual appeals to a mythical, common, and covenantal past and a glorious destiny. Like all successful nationalisms, it was born from both the bottom-up need for a reconstituting story to justify the bloody sacrifice of the slave and native, the Yankee and Johnny Reb, as well as stoked from above, thus to justify the immense accumulation of American capital and convince that the will of the US was meant for global dominance ([Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983](#); [Anderson 2006](#); [Marvin and Ingle 1999](#)). This nationalism forms the unspeakable and unstable core of American civil religion, which continues to express itself in further explicit, fervent, and supremacist forms, into our present day.

Today, white and Hispanic Catholics are split on whether God “has granted America a special role in human history,” but large majorities (85% and 73%) still view the U.S. as a global force for good—showing continued faith in the national project and its beneficiaries, even as divine attribution wanes, especially among the youth ([PRRI 2021](#)). In contrast, data on Native American views are remain appallingly scarce, but what exists shows overwhelming majorities who share a near total absence of trust in the US, with a longstanding disillusionment that it has ever lived up to its claims ([Sanchez and Foxworth 2022](#); [Secaira 2020](#)). This paper seeks to explain that discrepancy—how one outsider group embraced American nationalism, while another remains profoundly skeptical.

Part II of this work used the U.S. to demonstrate how messianic nationalisms commonly rests on three pillars: (1) a racial-religious identity, (2) covenantal interpretation of military and financial success, and (3) a cosmic mission of salvation. Parts III and IV explored how Roman Catholics, once seen as outsiders, assimilated into this identity through whiteness, anti-communism, and militarized patriotism—unlike Native Americans, who remained excluded due to their cosmology, resistance, and present threat by their relation to the land. Part V introduced Catholic Social Teaching and the common good as a counter-vision rooted in three responsive principles to the nationalist pillars: (1) human dignity, (2) solidarity, and (3) subsidiarity. Part VI proposed ways CST could help reshape American Catholic identity through global cooperation, ecological justice, economic redistribution, and sacrificial peace. In doing so, CST calls Catholics to reverse the eclipse of the common good—away from nationalism and toward solidarity with Native Americans, sharing a common vision of universal interdependence oriented toward a universal common good, in which “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first” (Matthew 20:16 & Luke 13:30).

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Notes

- ¹ We use here the U.S.OMB definition for Native, noninclusive of Native Hawaiians: “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.” See: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards/ (accessed on 14 July 2025).
- ² And a heavy toll was exacted for Charles Curtis to reach that Vice Presidential spot under Hoover: Curtis is infamously remembered for his work that broke up tribal lands, undermined sovereign governance, and support for assimilationist policies. We do not here include Native Hawaiians, of which there have been two U.S. representatives.
- ³ “Propertied” is an inconsistent “chosen” identity marker. Suffice it to say that, even when “land-owning” ceased to be a voting requirement, it still remained implicit that material wealth and success especially manifested chosen-ness, and so netted one more influence and power over the chosen people at large (Glaude 2000, p. 16; H. W. Beecher 2014, p. 246).
- ⁴ Indeed, it was a common opinion of the late 18th and early 19th century that democracy was nothing other than “Christianity effective in the political realm” (Stephanson 1995, pp. 40, 55–56; Glaude 2000, pp. 44, 129).
- ⁵ This is what Bercovitch calls the “contradictory and confounding correspondence of the horological and chronometric,” that is, the particular being and actions of America corresponding to a cosmically meaningful being (Bercovitch 2012, p. 30).
- ⁶ A consistently recurring—and increasing—theme will be the “inspired, immortal, divinely directed” power of these founding documents, crafted by authorized founders. See, for example, (Reagan 1974).
- ⁷ “The last order of civilization, which is the democratic, received its first permanent existence in this country A land separated from the influences of ancient arrangement, peculiar in its position, productions, and extent, wide enough to hold a numerous people, admitting, with facility, intercommunication and trade, vigorous and fresh from the hand of God, was requisite for the full and broad manifestation of the free spirit of the new-born democracy. Such a land was prepared in the solitudes of the Western hemisphere” (Stephanson 1995, p. 40).
- ⁸ Although the percentage claiming it to be *absolutely* superior to all other nations has been declining (38% in 2011 to 20% in 2024).
- ⁹ It was and is in this manner that America imagined itself in the Civil War and World Wars: the sacred defender, the last bastion, and the great worker for the defense of freedom, democracy, and civilization in the world—upon divine appointment—in order to comprehend the immense death.
- ¹⁰ One needs no footnote here, as its length would be utterly unwieldy. Rather, one need simply read any given inauguration speech of any given U.S. president and the religious language shall be found there. See, for primary example, (Bellah 1967).
- ¹¹ Irish Catholics (19th c.) were commonly portrayed as inherently violent alcoholics, backwards indolents with ape-like qualities, that sought to leech off of the superior civilization, industry and religion of the Anglo-Saxon. Organizations like the Know-Nothings and the Ku Klux Klan worked to oust the Irish and Catholics from the American public throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, often with mob violence. Italian Catholics (20th c.) were commonly portrayed as papal puppets, socialists, or anarchists, all agitators, and immoral criminals come to take advantage of American society. For further example, see (Curtis 1971; Carper and Hunt 2007; Mangione and Morreale 1992).
- ¹² Or for Lyman Beecher, that the Catholic problem lay in “political claims and character.” (L. Beecher 1835, p. 66).
- ¹³ This is not to say that these ethnic groups have ever ceased to experience discrimination, nor does it speak to the discrimination of the other great Catholic majority of Spanish descent. We note merely a general shift (Kruse 2016).
- ¹⁴ Vischer further argues that black Catholics did not often split off to form their own churches, as did most of the rest of American Christian denominations, precisely because of their small number.
- ¹⁵ The story of Black Catholics, such as the Josephites, and other mixed-identities in the United States, including recent Catholic migration at the southern border, are cases beyond the focus of this present article, which is mainly for the purposes of studying the largest picture in comparison with Native persons.
- ¹⁶ That is, the deistic, generalized God reaffirmed in the rash of “ceremonial deism” in the 1950s, particularly in the national motto and pledge of allegiance (Kruse 2016, pp. 99, 102).
- ¹⁷ It was irrelevant that, by this point, Stalin had long returned Russian Orthodoxy to power, the USSR was already embodied as enemy to both America’s hierarchical and capitalist divine story.

- 18 One need only compare the present-day subscriptions to Buckley's *National Review* with Day's *Catholic Worker*: approximately 75,000 to 25,000.
- 19 There was, though, inevitable syncretism, if only because of the European presence.
- 20 See (Second Vatican Council 1965a, §60, 65–68, 73–74; Pope John Paul II 1991, §13, 55; Pope Pius XI 1937, §29).
- 21 Similar may be said for the “capacities approach” of Amartya Sen, but in reverse: wherein personalism would concur with the necessity of developing the social and material capacities of human persons, it would argue for a more thick teleology of the human person than simply maximizing their capacity for freedom. See (Sen 2001, p. 264).
- 22 See also (Pope Francis 2013, §186–87).

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