

Welcome to

# CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM (UN)DEFINED

*Premise: American Christian nationalism is one of the most important and most poorly understood political topics of our time. We will be exploring this topic through three lenses:*

- 1) **Feb 21** – American history and demography – Why do some people claim the US was founded as or is essentially a “Christian nation”?
- 2) **Feb 28** – Some analysts prefer to talk about “white Christian nationalism.” How “white” is American Christian nationalism today?
- 3) **Mar 6** – As we face another contentious national election in 2024, what are the Christian nationalism trends we should be paying attention to?

# slido



**In one word, what is the greatest cultural (i.e., not economic or foreign policy) crisis facing the United States right now?**

① Click **Present with Slido** or install our [Chrome extension](#) to activate this poll while presenting.

# Matt's View: Our 3 Overlapping American Crises

A vicious circle:  
*Christian nationalism is amplified by all three of these while also aggravating and accentuating each of them.*



★ **Governance** – Due to polarization, our elected leaders can't/won't compromise, so we can't pass legislation or address real-world needs.



★ **Polarization** – Americans are divided and all issues are politicized: rural/exurban vs. urban/suburban; red vs. blue states; college-educated vs. everyone else.



★ **Epistemology** – Different kinds of Americans live in different informational universes, so that we can't even have a common conversation about shared facts.

# A few points about religious nationalism in general

- Religions are old. Nations are new.
  - Peace of Westphalia (1648) → Birth of the modern international system where nations are states with (fairly arbitrary) boundaries and total sovereignty within those boundaries over violence and religion
- The relationships between religions and states are perpetually being renegotiated through laws and policy.
  - Only about 25 nations (depending on your definition) are officially secular.
  - Most nations in the world have some “established” (officially recognized) religion. Established religions are sometimes vestigial and sometimes quite active.
- “Religious nationalism” is the ideological effort to blend religious and (ethno-)national identities.



## **“America is a Christian nation.”**

**In the chat, please type out a sentence or phrase answering: What does this statement mean to you? What is someone affirming if they agree with this statement?**

# “A Christian nation” – Four Possible Meanings:

1) Demography – “America is a nation of Christians.”

- If so, what percentage of Americans must be Christian for this to be true?

2) History – “America was established by Christians (or on Christian foundations).”

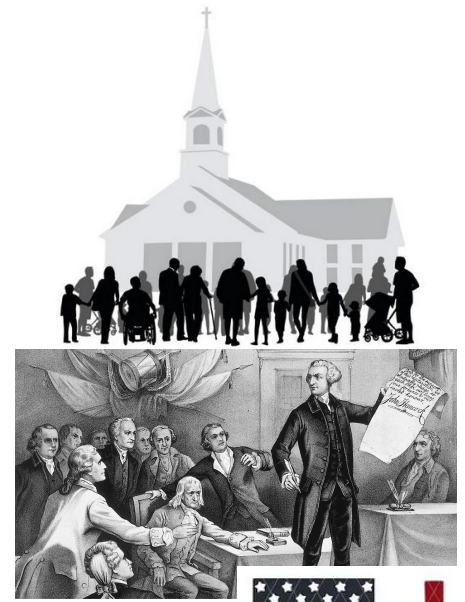
- If so, what historical data do we have to substantiate this?

3) Essence - “America is essentially (or spiritually) Christian.”

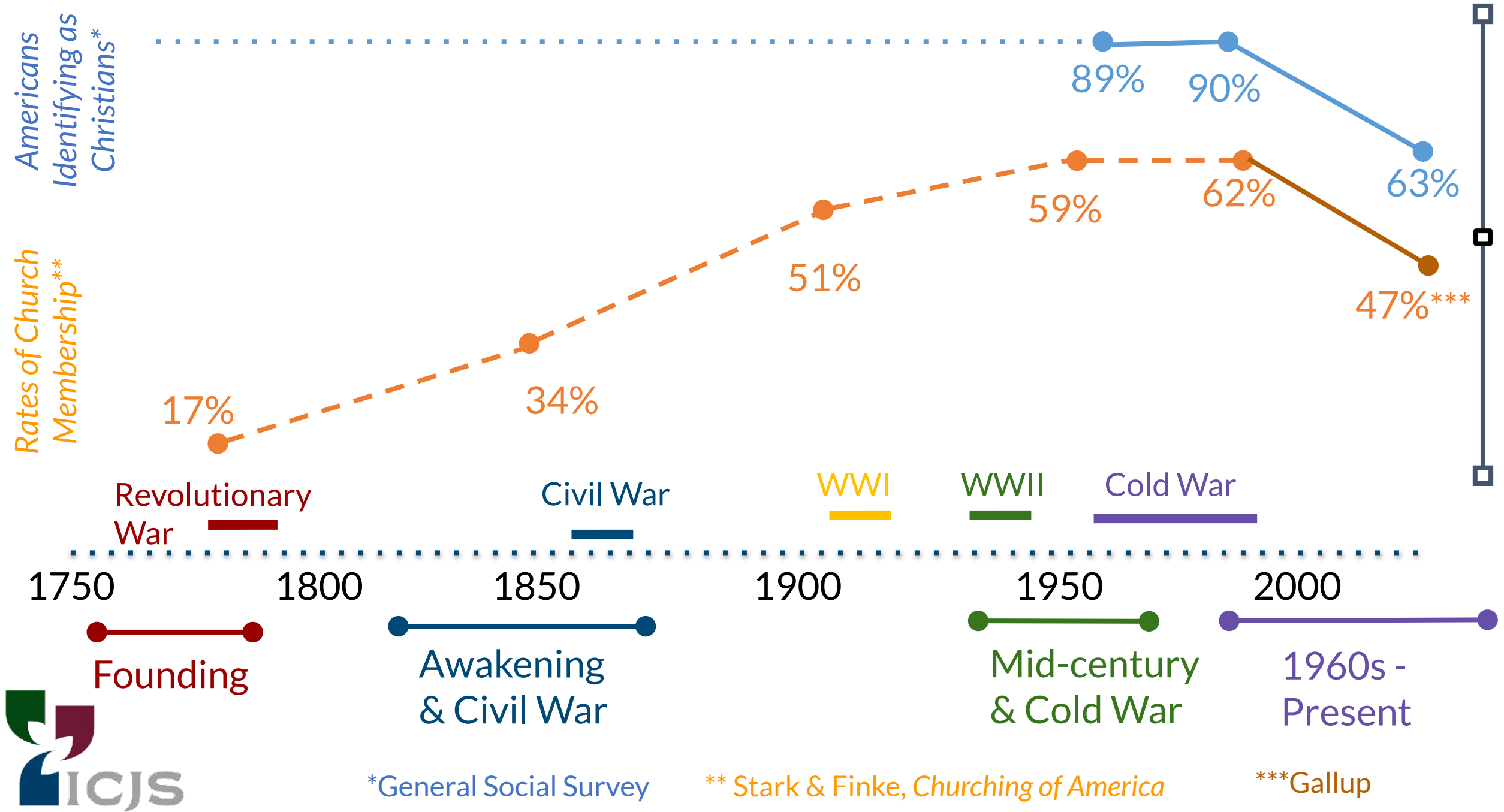
- If so, what does this mean on a practical level?

4) Policy - “Christianity and/or Christians should be privileged in the public square over other religious or non-religious identities.”

- If so, what about American values of equality and separation of church and state?



*Most people who agree with the statement “America is a Christian nation” appear to believe in some uncertain mixture of these.*



\*General Social Survey

\*\* Stark & Finke, *Churching of America*

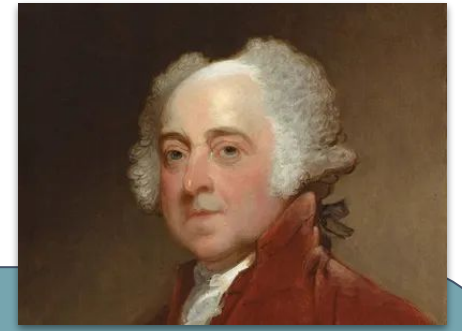
\*\*\*Gallup

- The late 18th century was a low point in American Christian piety, at least as measured by church participation and membership.
- Many American founders were influenced by the Enlightenment and deistic trends that disavowed supernatural claims.
- No Protestant sect was so widely influential to be a good candidate for national religion.
- The founders saw the religious / national wars of Europe and were skeptical of how established churches persecuted nonconformists.

أخترت من أسماء الرجال  
 على انه ميراثي الكرام من انصاره وسامع من مع العشر من الكون والكون  
 مع جودته العظمى من غير من العظام العظمى والذرية يكون والذرية يكون  
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*The Threat: A new concept of separating religion from the state.*

John Adams



### Treaty of Tripoli (1796)

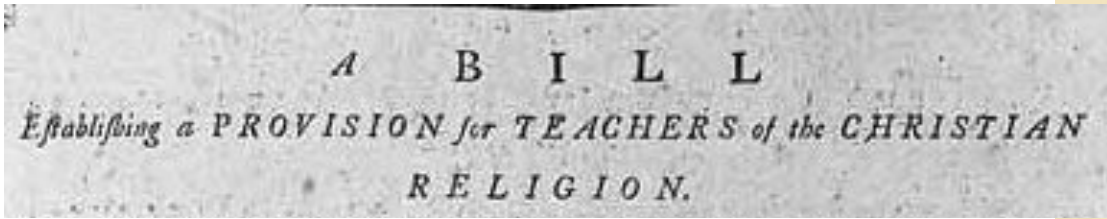
ARTICLE 11.  
*As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion,-as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen [Muslims],-and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan [Muhammadan] nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.*



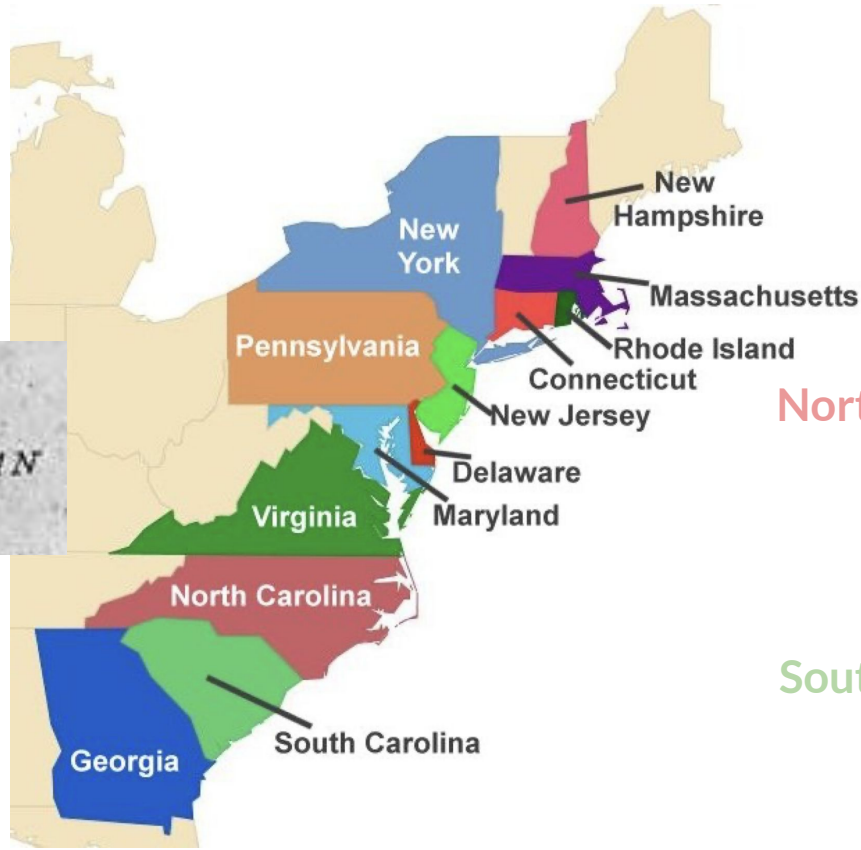
## Christian Nationalism at the U.S. Founding (18th Century)



- Most of the colonies had established churches, some of which carried over long after the US was founded.



- Patrick Henry advocated for a sort of generic Protestant establishment in Virginia in 1784, but Jefferson and Madison campaigned against his bill, championing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786), which became the forerunner of the First Amendment.



**No established church:**

- Delaware**
- New Jersey**
- Pennsylvania**
- Rhode Island**

**Early disestablishment:**

- North Carolina (Anglican) 1776**
- New York (Anglican) 1777**
- Virginia (Anglican) 1786**

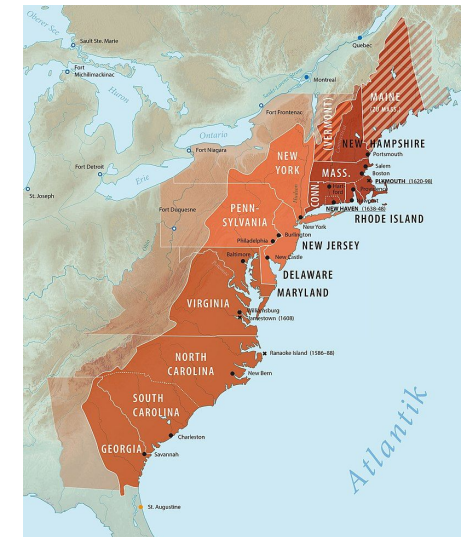
**Middle disestablishment:**

- South Carolina (Anglican) 1790**
- Georgia (Anglican) 1798**

**Late disestablishment:**

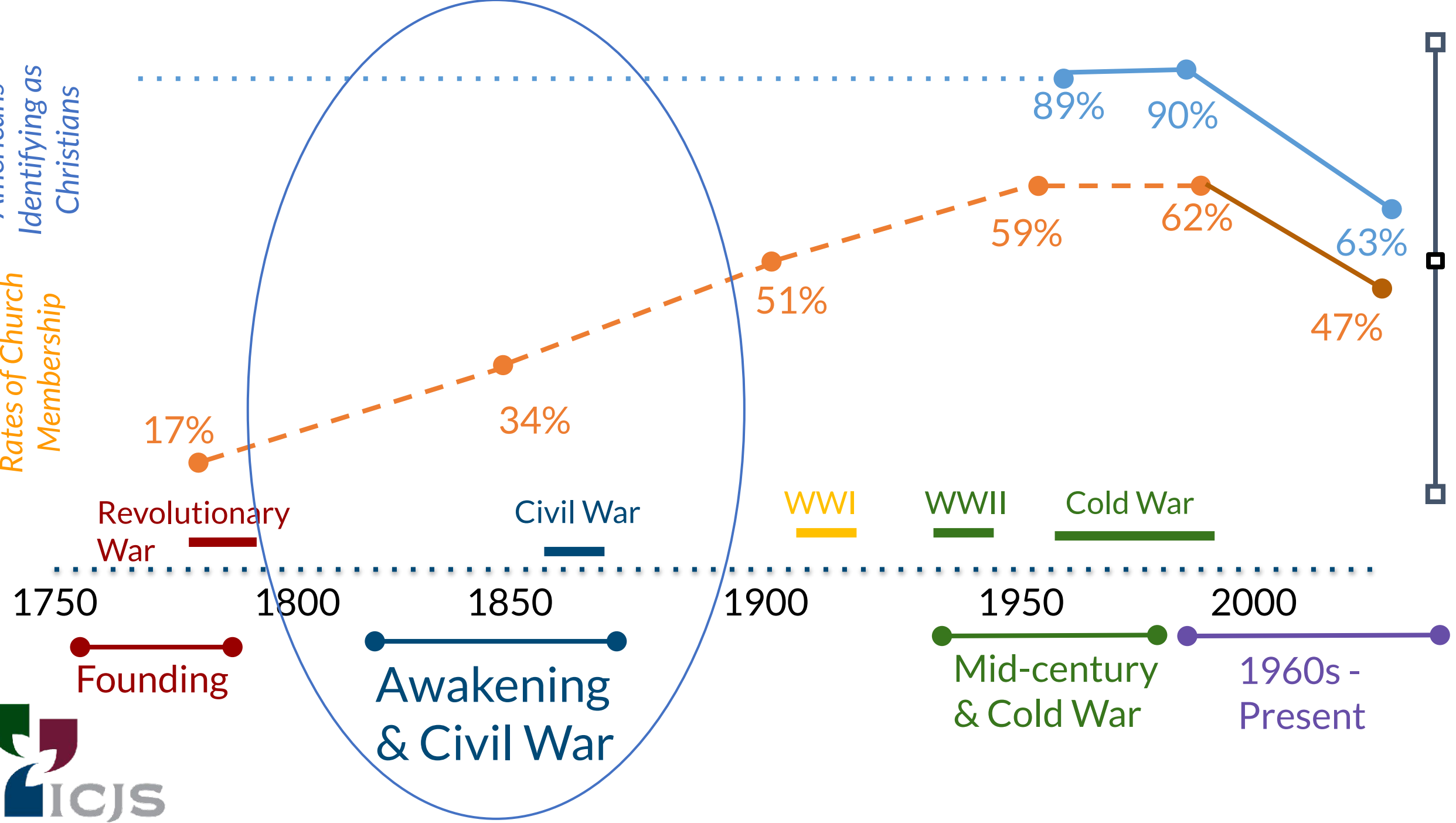
- Maryland (Anglican) 1810**
- Connecticut (Congregational) 1818**
- New Hampshire (Congregational) 1819**
- Massachusetts (Congregational) 1833**

- The American founders struggled to conceptualize and live into a world without an established state church.
- The First Amendment in both of its religious dimensions (barring any majoritarian national established state religion and protecting everyone’s free exercise of religion) was revolutionary in its time, forging a new model of a “secular” – as in separating church from state – government.
- Christian nationalists in this era were simultaneously a minority and the supporters of the old system, pushing back against the innovative experiment of not having an established church.



Americans  
Identifying as  
Christians

Rates of Church  
Membership



Revolutionary  
War

Civil War

WWI

WWII

Cold War

1750

1800

1850

1900

1950

2000

Founding

Awakening  
& Civil War

Mid-century  
& Cold War

1960s -  
Present



## *The Threat: Dueling North & South visions of Christian nationalism.*



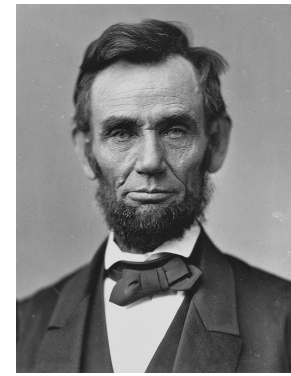
*Methodist Camp Meeting 1819*

- This era also saw the formation of many break-off sects & new movements: Latter-day Saints, New Thought, Seventh-day Adventists, Spiritualism, etc.

- What historians call the 2nd Great Awakening (~1810-1840) was mostly the spread of entrepreneurial Methodists & Baptists into the American frontier with revival camp meetings and itinerant preachers.
- This displaced the establishment churches (Congregationalists, Anglicans, etc.) and led to a surge in church participation.
- Many of the myths about the religiosity of the Founding Fathers and were created in this era to shore up the new religious sensibilities of the time.

“Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.”

-Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address



1864 - “In God We Trust”  
first printed on U.S. coinage



National motto of  
the Confederacy:  
“God is our vindicator”

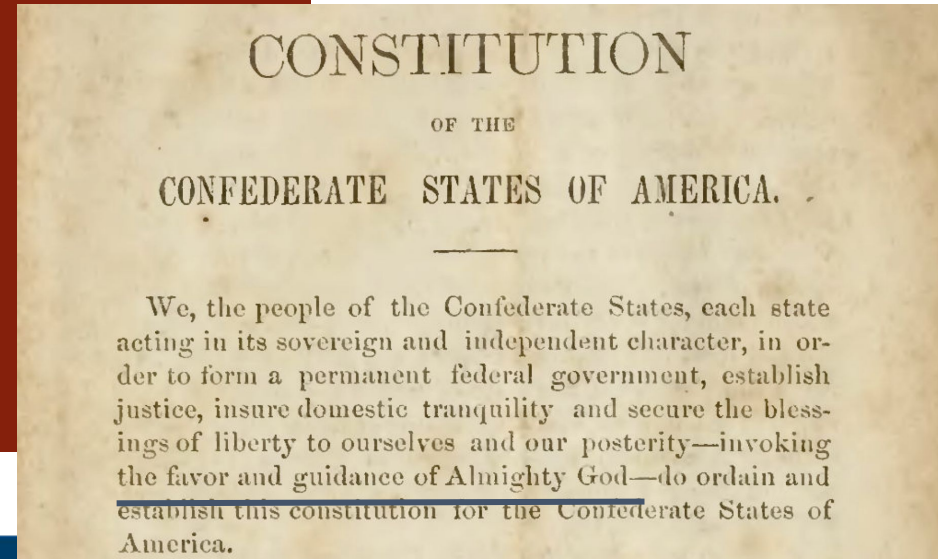
## THE BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC

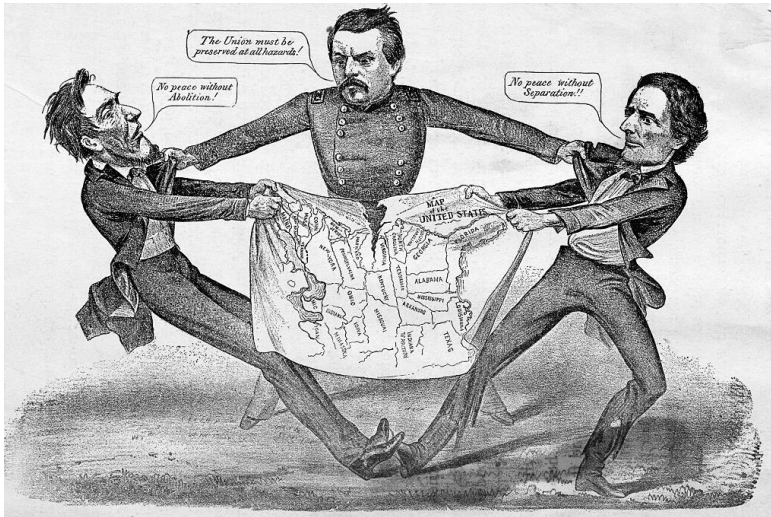
*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord...*

*I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps,  
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;  
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:  
His day is marching on.*

*Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
His truth is marching on.*

-Julia Ward Howe (1862)





- As the U.S. became more demographically Christian, we see a corresponding rise of Christian nationalist sentiment in the Antebellum period.
- But this Christian nationalism – not to mention most Protestant denominations – bifurcated into two regional varieties: a Northern vision of a liberatory and progressing America (with a lot of racism thrown in) and a Southern vision of an entrenched racial hierarchy.
- These two versions of Christian nationalism could only co-exist for so long before the South's aggressive impulse to protect and expand slavery led to secession and Civil War.

Americans Identifying as Christians

Rates of Church Membership

Revolutionary War

Civil War

WWI

WWII

Cold War

1750

1800

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1900

1950

2000

Founding

Awakening & Civil War

Mid-century & Cold War

1960s - Present



17%

34%

51%

59%

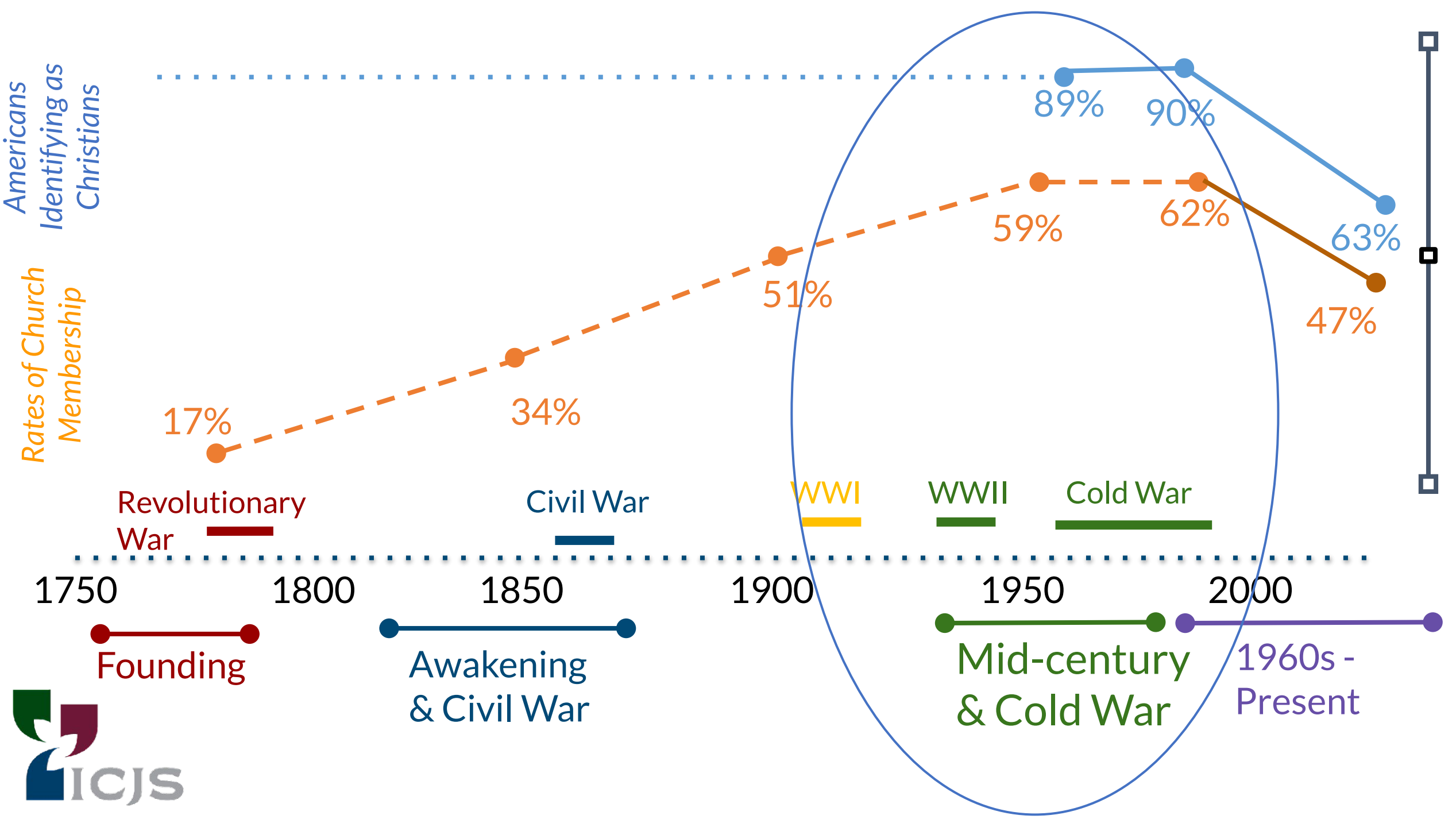
62%

47%

89%

90%

63%



Until the 1890s, when the term “Judeo-Christian” was used, it almost always referred to people, not ideas or traditions. It was appropriated by the interfaith community in the 1930s to describe an interfaith alliance (Protestants, Catholics, & Jews) against Hitler, Stalin, & Mussolini.

*The Threat: Fascism and godless communism.*



*The Christians of this land share with the Jews the tradition of the prophets... the Jewish tradition, the Christian tradition, the democratic tradition and the American tradition are all one.*



Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture 1940

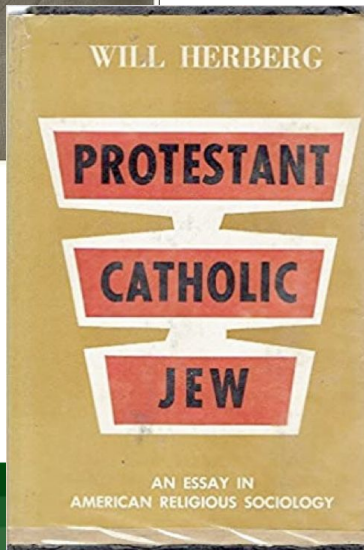
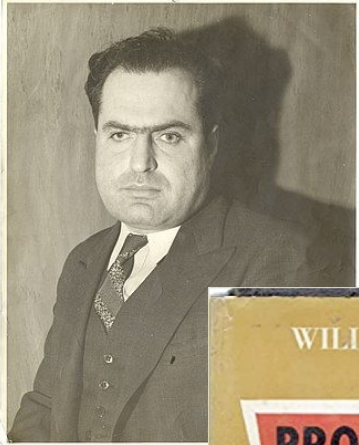


## Christian Nationalism in the 20th Century: Mid-century America & the Cold War



By and large, to be an American today means to be either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew, because all other forms of self-identification and social location are either (like regional background) peripheral and obsolescent, or else (like ethnic diversity) subsumed under the broader head of religious community.

Will Herberg 1955



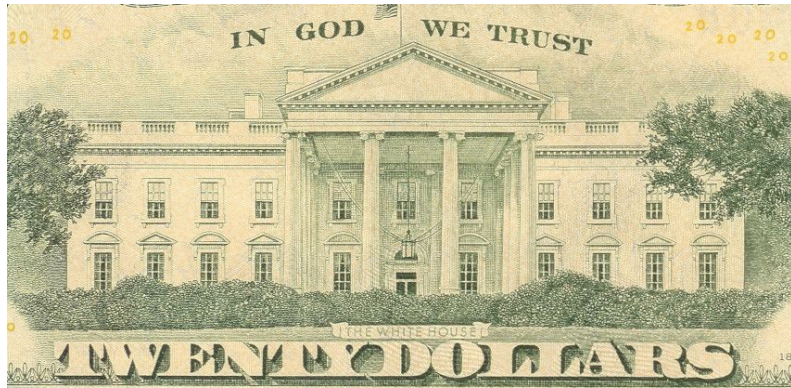
### Herberg's argument:

- The US in 1955 – 68% Protestant + 23% Catholic + 4% Jewish = 95% of all Americans – “America is a three religion country”
- substituting an (implicitly racialized) “Jewish-Christian” civic religion of “the American Way of Life” for conventional Protestantism as the backbone of American culture

1954 - phrase “under God” added to US pledge of allegiance



1956 - “In God We Trust” added to all US currency, replacing “E pluribus unum” (out of many, one) as the de facto US motto



- At the height of American religiosity & Christian power, “Judeo-Christian” became a way to re-brand American Christian nationalism as an inclusive, religious conception of America, but it also bolstered aggressive anti-communist foreign policy and downplayed American racism.
- Left out of this inclusive vision were American atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, African American Christians, etc.
- The 1950s heyday of Christian optimism gave way to a 1960s breakneck shift in American identity around assumed morality (sexual revolution), immigration (more non-Europeans), jurisprudence (Supreme Court decisions), and cultural power (Civil Rights Movement).

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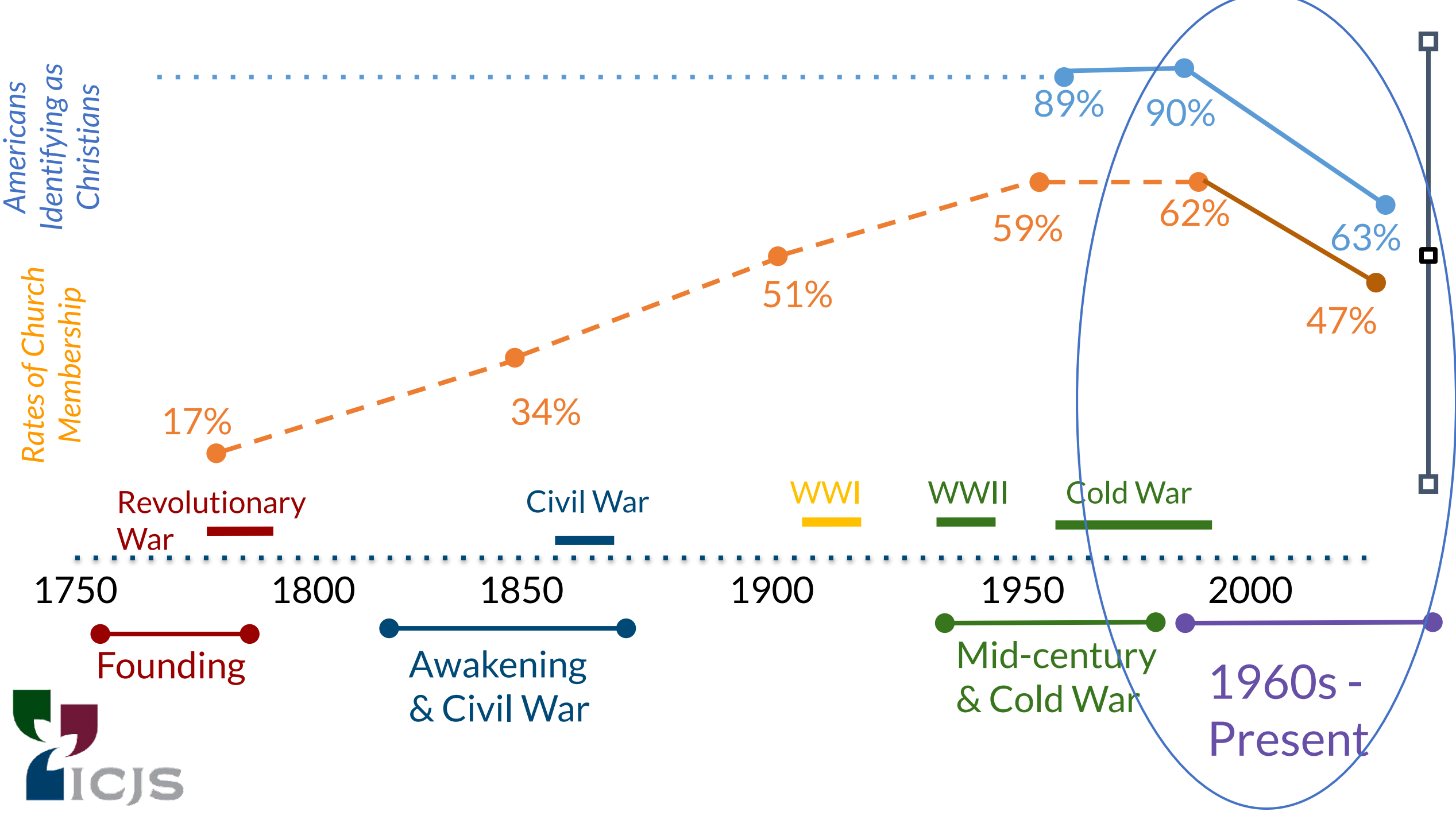
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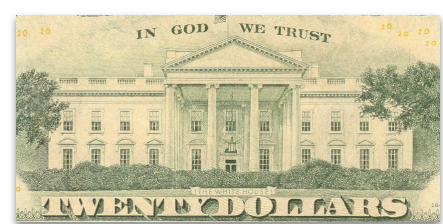
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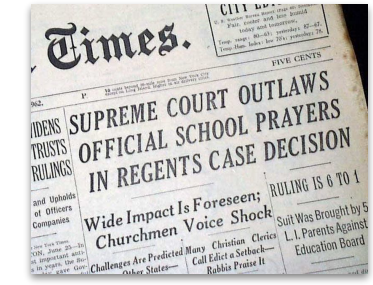




white American Christianity's zenith of power and influence in the 1950s

The Threat: ???

Warren Court's Supreme Court jurisprudence removes official prayers and Bible reading in public schools

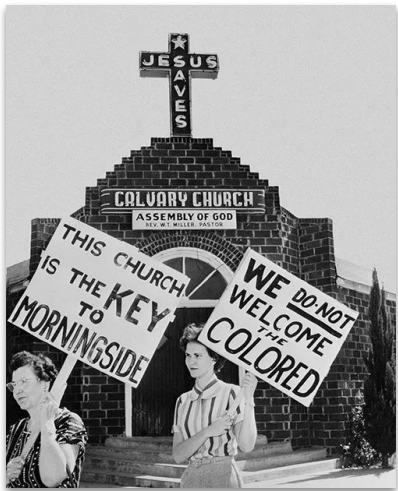


Engel v. Vitale (1962)



Abington Township v. Schempp (1963)

the Civil Rights Movement not only demands equality but exposes white Christianity's long complicity in oppression



beginning around 1990, church participation & Christian identification take a nose dive



Christian Nationalism in the 20th-21st Centuries: 1960s to Present

# Breakout Rooms

Given everything we've just seen, what would you predict about the (white) Christian reaction to this huge loss of power?

How would you characterize the Christian nationalism we see in the U.S. today compared with the historic forms we've just surveyed?

# Our 3 Overlapping American Crises

A vicious circle:  
*Christian nationalism is amplified by all three of these while also aggravating and accentuating each of them.*



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# AMERICAN SLAVERY

deeply embedded with race

a debate at the founding rooted in two  
different visions of the US project

tied to economic and regional concerns  
but also rooted in theology

undergirded by a rhetoric of violence,  
superiority, and self-defense for white people

became increasingly desperate, militant, &  
expansive in the lead up to Civil War



History doesn't repeat itself,  
but sometimes it rhymes

# CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

somewhat embedded with race (more next week)

a debate at the founding rooted in two  
different visions of the US project

tied to economic and regional  
concerns but also rooted in theology

undergirded by a rhetoric of violence,  
superiority, and self-defense for Christians

becoming increasingly desperate,  
militant, & expansive now

Predicting the future is a fool's game, but the lights  
are all blinking red on America's civic warning panel.

# Suggested Further Reading

