

The Influence of Christian Nationalism on U.S. Foreign Policy

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This paper explores the influence of Christian nationalism on U.S. foreign policy, examining its historical roots, ideological foundations, and contemporary implications. Christian nationalism, an ideology that links Christianity with national identity, has shaped U.S. foreign policy in areas such as religious freedom, Middle East diplomacy, and national security. Through its emphasis on the moral duty to defend Christianity and its promotion of conservative social values, Christian nationalism has affected U.S. relations with countries around the world, particularly in the Middle East and with religious minorities. The paper discusses the complexities and controversies surrounding Christian nationalism, its impact on the U.S.'s global image, and the challenges it poses to religious pluralism. The future of Christian nationalism's influence on U.S. foreign policy is uncertain, as societal shifts and evolving global dynamics may prompt a reevaluation of its role in shaping America's international actions. Overall, the paper provides a nuanced analysis of how Christian nationalism has intertwined with U.S. foreign policy and how its influence might evolve in the future.

Keywords: Christian nationalism, U.S. foreign policy, religious freedom, Middle East diplomacy, American exceptionalism

Introduction

The United States has long been a nation of religious pluralism and cultural diversity. However, Christianity has always played a significant role in American society, with its nationalist variant occupying a prominent place in national identity and political decision-making. Christian nationalism is a socio-political ideology that emphasizes the close relationship between Christianity and national identity, and asserts that the nation's greatness and values are deeply rooted in Christian faith (Garrison, 2020). While Christianity and Christian nationalism are distinct concepts—one being a religious belief system and the other an ideological movement—Christian nationalism stresses the influence of Christian principles on national and political life. This ideology is often rooted in the belief that the U.S. was founded by “traditional” Christian white settlers and that the nation's founding documents were shaped by Christian principles (Smith, 2000). The belief that the U.S. is uniquely blessed by God and plays a special role in the divine plan is central to Christian nationalism (Gaffney, 2019).

This paper seeks to examine how Christian nationalism has influenced U.S. foreign policy, particularly in relation to issues such as religious freedom, Middle Eastern politics, and the War on Terror, and how its influence has reverberated within both domestic politics and international relations. In doing so, the paper explores the ideological roots of Christian nationalism, its role in shaping U.S. foreign policy over the past few decades, and the controversies it has sparked both within the United States and abroad (Kuo, 2017). Finally, the paper discusses

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the future outlook of Christian nationalism's influence on U.S. foreign policy in light of evolving global political dynamics and the changing religious landscape within the United States itself.

The Background and Definition of Christian Nationalism and Its Dangers

Christian nationalism is an ideology that intertwines Christianity with national identity, asserting that the success and greatness of the United States are intrinsically linked to its Christian values. This movement draws heavily from American history and culture, and its key features include the following.

Religion and National Identity

Christian nationalism views American identity as being founded upon Christian values and teachings. This ideology often refers to the belief that the U.S. is "God's chosen nation" or that its founding documents, particularly the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, reflect a deep Christian influence (Pew Research Center, 2022). Christian nationalists argue that the prosperity and strength of the nation have always been tied to its Christian roots (McClay, 2018). By emphasizing this connection, Christian nationalists seek to promote a vision of American identity that positions Christianity as central to its moral, social, and political values.

This belief has been particularly potent among evangelical and conservative Christian communities, who see the decline of traditional religious practices and values in American society as a direct threat to the nation's greatness (Juergensmeyer, 2015). These groups often advocate for the return of Christian principles to the public sphere, viewing it as essential for restoring America's moral and political standing on the global stage.

Cultural and Political Influence

Christian nationalism in the U.S. is not limited to religious discourse alone. It also carries substantial political weight. Christian nationalist groups have played an influential role in shaping public policy, particularly through lobbying, political activism, and election campaigns (Hamilton, 2019). In particular, the rise of the "Religious Right" since the late 20th century has brought issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and religious education to the forefront of U.S. politics. These issues, grounded in conservative Christian values, have driven much of the U.S. domestic political agenda and have had indirect implications for U.S. foreign policy, particularly in countries with similar conservative or religiously charged political environments (Puar, 2021).

Opposition to Secularism

Christian nationalism often finds itself in opposition to secularism, the separation of church and state, and what it perceives as a growing tide of moral relativism (Tushnet, 2021). Nationalists advocate for a return to what they regard as traditional, Christian-centered values—namely, the defense of the nuclear family, the sanctity of marriage, and the protection of religious freedoms for Christians. This view is often framed in opposition to the perceived secularization of American institutions, and Christian nationalists argue that the loss of religious influence in government, education, and culture is responsible for many of the social ills facing America today.

However, this intersection of religion and politics raises several significant concerns, particularly when religious principles are used to justify political action. As noted, Christian nationalism often involves the fusion of religious rhetoric with nationalistic politics, which can lead to a politicization of faith that undermines religious pluralism and freedom (Gorski, 2017). This can result in policies that favor certain religious groups over others, contributing to the marginalization of religious minorities, including non-Christian communities.

The Dangers of Christian Nationalism

The dangers of Christian nationalism arise primarily from its fusion of religion with nationalistic ideology. When Christianity is used as a tool for political legitimacy, there is the risk of distorting Christian teachings to justify political agendas. Christian nationalism's claim that it represents the "true" Christian political position ignores the reality of religious pluralism and the diverse ways in which faith can be practiced (Smith, 2000). This approach can also lead to the exclusion of non-Christian faiths, as well as secular viewpoints, from the national discourse.

Moreover, the nationalism embedded in Christian nationalism often leans toward exclusionary and xenophobic rhetoric, particularly when it ties the nation's identity to a specific racial or ethnic group. The connection between Christian nationalism and white supremacy in particular has been well-documented, and it has raised concerns about the ideologies of racial superiority and the demonization of minority communities (Philips, 2007).

Interaction Between Christian Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy

Christian nationalism has had significant repercussions on U.S. foreign policy, shaping both the principles and actions the U.S. takes in the international arena.

Religious Freedom and Human Rights

Christian nationalists in the U.S. often stress the importance of defending religious freedom, particularly the freedom of Christians who face persecution around the world (Gaffney, 2019). This position has influenced U.S. foreign policy, as both governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have worked to support persecuted Christians globally (Kuo, 2017). The U.S. has taken a leadership role in promoting religious freedom as a cornerstone of its foreign policy, advocating for the protection of religious minorities and the right to worship freely, particularly in regions where Christians are persecuted, such as the Middle East and parts of Africa (Green, 2016).

In practice, U.S. foreign policy has seen the implementation of programs and policies aimed at promoting religious freedom worldwide, particularly under the Bush and Trump administrations (Horwitz, 2020). The U.S. State Department regularly reports on the status of religious freedom in different countries, and religious freedom has often been a factor in U.S. diplomatic relations. However, critics argue that this focus on religious persecution—particularly the persecution of Christians—has often overshadowed other human rights issues, such as the rights of non-Christian religious minorities and marginalized groups (Modood, 2013).

Middle East Policy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Christian nationalism has also impacted U.S. policy in the Middle East. A number of Christian nationalists view Israel as a key player in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and support its right to exist as a Jewish state in the region (Garrison, 2020). This religious conviction has influenced U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the context of its unwavering support for Israel. Christian nationalists often frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a theological lens, portraying Israel's existence as part of God's divine plan. This has led to strong advocacy for policies that align with Israeli interests, often at the expense of Palestinian rights (Gaffney, 2019).

The American political landscape has been marked by a significant influence of Christian nationalism on U.S. policy toward Israel, especially during the presidencies of George W. Bush and Donald Trump (McClay, 2018). Trump's decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and his administration's staunch support for

Israeli policies were largely shaped by the influence of Christian evangelical groups, which see the establishment and prosperity of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy (Pew Research Center, 2022).

War on Terror and National Security

Christian nationalism has influenced U.S. foreign policy in the realm of national security, particularly in the War on Terror. Some Christian nationalists view the fight against terrorism as a moral and religious duty, seeing the protection of American values as a divine responsibility. This perspective has fueled support for military interventions in the Middle East, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Juergensmeyer, 2015). The ideological alignment of Christian nationalism with a sense of moral righteousness has helped justify these wars as part of a broader struggle between good and evil, with the U.S. positioned as the defender of freedom and Christian civilization (Garrison, 2020).

This moral framing of the War on Terror has contributed to a sense of American exceptionalism and the belief that the U.S. has a divine mandate to combat evil in the world. The rhetoric of a “clash of civilizations”, popularized after the September 11 attacks, further reinforced this narrative, positioning the West—particularly the United States—as the bulwark against the perceived threat of Islamic extremism (Green, 2016).

Policy Tendencies and Controversies

Policy Tendencies

Christian nationalism in the U.S. typically supports conservative social policies, including opposition to abortion and efforts to protect traditional family values. These positions have been reflected in U.S. foreign policy, particularly in regions where social issues like family structure and abortion laws are central to political debates. The belief that the U.S. should export its values globally has led to diplomatic efforts aimed at promoting conservative moral standards in foreign countries (McClay, 2018).

Controversies and Criticism

Despite its influence, Christian nationalism has been the subject of significant controversy and criticism. Critics argue that an overemphasis on Christian values in U.S. foreign policy can harm the country’s image abroad, particularly in regions where religious pluralism and secularism are more prominent (Horwitz, 2020). Additionally, critics warn that such an approach could undermine religious freedom, as it blurs the lines between state and religion. The prioritization of Christian interests can also contribute to the marginalization of non-Christian religious groups, both within the U.S. and abroad (Tushnet, 2021).

Furthermore, the association of Christian nationalism with white supremacy and nationalist ideologies complicates its place in a modern, pluralistic society (Philips, 2007). Critics argue that Christian nationalism fosters exclusionary and divisive narratives, promoting a hierarchical understanding of society that places Christians, particularly white Christians, in a superior position.

The Far-Reaching Impact and Future Outlook

The Far-Reaching Impact

The influence of Christian nationalism on U.S. foreign policy extends beyond specific policies. It shapes the way America is perceived globally, positioning it as a nation uniquely aligned with Christian values (Pew Research Center, 2022). Domestically, it also influences political discourse, as voters and political leaders increasingly align themselves with nationalist and religious ideologies. This has had a profound impact on

electoral politics, particularly in presidential races, where candidates appealing to Christian nationalist voters have gained significant traction (McClay, 2018).

Future Outlook

As American society continues to evolve, the influence of Christian nationalism on U.S. foreign policy may face new challenges. Changing demographics, shifts in global religious landscapes, and increasing secularism within the U.S. may prompt policymakers to reconsider the role of religion in foreign policy decision-making. However, the enduring power of Christian nationalism suggests that it will continue to shape American political discourse and foreign relations for the foreseeable future (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Conclusion

The influence of Christian nationalism on U.S. foreign policy is complex and multifaceted. While it has shaped certain policy areas, it has also generated significant controversy and criticism. The intertwining of religion with politics, particularly the use of Christian nationalism to justify international actions, raises questions about the ethical and practical implications of such an approach. In the future, policymakers will need to carefully balance religious convictions with other national interests, ensuring that U.S. foreign policy remains just, effective, and aligned with international human rights principles.

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