

The ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA) Agenda and Right-Wing Christian Supports: A Threat to American Secularism

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Abstract

President Donald J. Trump is the 45th President of the United States of America. His remark “Make America Great Again” and its narrative promises America into its national reawakening and the golden Age. However, the narrative also contains dualism in its meaning, which threatens the principle of secularism and American democracy. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives and employing a qualitative interpretive research methodology, this research explores how Trump’s rhetoric and the support of right-wing Christians construct a morally exclusive vision of American identity, which leads to the notion of secular governance portrayed as a threat. This alignment redefines the role of faith in the public sphere and erodes the foundational separation between church and state, posing a significant threat to pluralistic democracy. The findings contribute to broader debates about political religion and the shifting contours of secularism in the Trump administrative era.

Keywords: *Donald Trump, Make America Great Again (MAGA), secularism, Christians.*

INTRODUCTION

During his presidential campaign and presidential administration, Donald J. Trump came up with a slogan that made him elected, “Make America Great Again” (MAGA). Coined from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign speech, “Let’s make America great again” (Engel, 2017), Trump immediately signed the trademark without even noticing that it has been used before by Reagan and he claimed he did not know that it has been used. In his speech, he said that he “will make America great”, but with that statement, he contemplated his decision as if America was never great before, whilst what he wanted to address was that he would make America great as before. Therefore, he came out with the slogan of “Make America Great Again” which also brought his winning on the election and become the 45th President of the United States of America in 2017 (Engel, 2017).

Trump’s election and presidential administration provoked concerns for civilians, especially threaten the American democracy and secularism. The concept of American exceptionalism has been the fundamental value of American self-perception as it shaped the American identity based on liberal ideas of freedom and individual rights. In the modern era, the concept of American exceptionalism has been modified and manifested in promoting liberal internationalism through institutions and alliances and also put America as the beacon of democracy through exemplary conduct (Nye Jr., 2020). During Trump’s presidential administration, he emphasizes on national self-interest and non-interventionism, neglected the cooperative aspect of American exceptionalism of modern era. His action consequentially menaced the American fundamental principle of secularism and democracy.

Right-wing Christianity played a significant role in Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan. The support from white evangelical Christians for Trump was driven by Christian nationalism and a defense of America’s perceived Christian heritage (Hummel, 2016). The United States of America presents a complex compromise between public rights and religion, which makes America a secular country. The U.S. government neither favoring nor interfering in any religious practice. On the other hand, the religious groups maintain significant

influence in the political sphere with both conservative and liberal traditions shaping various movement throughout history (Haynes, 2019). In the media, religious themes rarely become the main topic of discussion, despite the importance of faith for some parts of the American citizens. This indifference often clashes with the conservative Christians of the right-wing politicians, in which they claim it affects to the decreasing number of Christians in America.

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Several scholars have discussed about the intersection of Donald Trump's political rise and evangelical support. A common thread among the literature is the complex blend of theological, cultural, and ideological elements that highlight the support of the Christian Right for Trump, especially how it aligns with his MAGA agenda. Goldstein (2021) argues that Trump's religiousness reflects characteristics that align with fascist tendencies, including authoritarian populism, anti-intellectualism, and emotional manipulation. This research also underlines the support for Trump is based on susceptibility to misinformation that exploits religious belief for authoritarian. Additionally, Francis Burke (2021) expands this view by proposing that Trump has secularized the evangelical tradition of the Great Awakenings and transformed it into political theater form that maintaining the religious revivalism while replacing theological depth with ideological rigidity. In term of media study, Kim (2019) reveals that the evangelicals are often portrayed for their ideological and cultural aspirations for America. This portrayal in press aligns with the symbolism of Trump as a cultural restoration figure, rather than a spiritual leader. This perception unveils the shift from spiritual revivalism to political unitarianism amplifying their complicity in secular-nationalist project.

Similar matter to the previous research, Comer & Jacobi (2021) examines the internal conflicts among the evangelical pastors is reconciling their religious convictions with political loyalty to Trump. Their findings suggest that evangelical leaders often rationalize support for Trump through moral issue prioritization, such as abortion, and a sense of collective identity preservation. This reconciliation process reveals a shift among evangelicals towards political engagement that cost their spiritual and moral compromise. Moreover, the debate among the pastors happens in mostly conservative areas, which their support for politics is based on their theological fundamentalism. Shady, Hooghe, and Marks (2024) examines a troubling openness among some Republican pastors in North Carolina toward the use of force to defend their moral of "traditional American way of life". It based on their theological values influences support for political violence whereas their Christian nationalism and white grievance are much stronger predictors. The research highlights on the intra-group division within the religious right over democratic values and norms. Moreover, Trump's rhetoric reflects a secularization of the Great Awakening. John Francis Burke's paper (2021) explores the complex relationship between Donald Trump and conservative evangelicals, arguing that this alliance represents a secular transformation of the Great Awakening heritage. Burke synthesizes various scholarly perspectives, noting that Trump's appeal to evangelicals who supported him in 2016 and 2020 stems from a shared rejection of liberal values and a desire for political power. T Jeremy Gunn (2024) argues that Trump's MAGA movement effectively mobilized White evangelicals by reframing 'religious freedom' and 'religious identity' themes, despite initial skepticism, including addressing their concerns about Muslims, abortion, and Supreme Court appointments. The Trump administration further instrumentalized religious freedom to secure state benefits

while allowing discrimination under its guise. Another research by Warren S. Goldstein (2021) explores the rise of fascism in America through the lens of Donald Trump's presidency. It highlights Trump's use of misinformation, exemplified by his claim and the 'big lie' regarding the 2020 election, which resonated with Republicans post-election. It discusses the religious right's support for Trump, driven by a Faustian bargain for judicial appointments and alignment with white Christian nationalism.

However, a notable gap remains in theorizing how this alignment of evangelical Christianity and Trump political narrative reshapes American secularism. While prior works have examined Christian nationalism, authoritarian populism, and intragroup conflict, fewer studies examine the ways in which religion under Trump is transformed into a performative mode of secular-nationalist identity. The objective of this research is to examine how the MAGA agenda recasts religion as a political instrument within an emergent populist secularism, in which traditional theological authority is replaced by symbolic and strategic invocations of Christian identity. This study offers a conceptual bridge between theories of secularism, political religion, and populism, with a focus on the ways religious language is re-signified in contemporary U.S. politics to ponder the central research question: *How does the MAGA agenda redefine the boundaries of secularism through its strategic alignment with right-wing Christian populism?* By approaching this question through interpretative thematic analysis, the research contributes to understanding the evolving role of religion in populist governance and its function in constructing exclusionary visions of national identity.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs qualitative interpretative research (Given, 2008; Preiser et al., 2021), relying on inductive analytical process to explore the intersections of Trump's MAGA agenda, Christian populism, and secularism. This research is grounded in a bottom-up approach allowing themes to emerge organically from a wide array of textual data. The corpus includes Trump's public speeches, interviews, executive statements, and gestures referring to religious liberty. These materials analyzed thematically to uncover recurring patterns and ideological motifs. Special attention is given to how religious language is deployed to construct moral binaries, shape national identity, and frame secularism as an existential threat. By focusing on these patterns, this approach uncovers the deeper ideological structure of MAGA agenda and how it reshapes the public perceptions of America as a secular nation that not defined by Christian moral authority.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Make America Great Again (MAGA) slogan resonated with Americans, particularly conservative right-wing politicians longing for the return of the golden age of America economic prosperity and social conformity. Even though economic revitalization was the central purpose of MAGA, that slogan also contained deeper meaning in secularization and democratization. According to Haynes (2019), Trump's supporters, coming from the white Christian nationalist, mostly who want to bring back that great era for the modern society in America. He argues,

“MAGA brings together both strands of Trump's support in a yearning for supposedly halcyon days of a white Christian America. The desire was to return to a time when “American dream” seemed realizable, characterized by strong economic growth, rising prosperity and get-up-and-go-dynamism... For the Christian Right, MAGA implies a strong

social and political influence for the preferred brand of Christianity: right-wing, Protestant, and evangelical” (Haynes, 2019: p. 682).

MAGA implicitly signified a desire for an increased public role for their specific religious doctrines, which is purportedly for the Christian right. This vision embraced traditional gender roles, opposition to progressive social policies, such as affirmative action, and a skepticism towards any form of cultural influences perceived as foreign or threatening their Christianity values. Moreover, these urges for a more religiously infused societal order that could be defined as altercation with the fundamental principle of secularism enshrined in the United States Constitution.

Right-wing Christians and Trump’s “Make America Great Again”

The concept of Christian nationalism enjoys a long history within American national identity. Founding figures, though largely influenced by Calvinist thought initially, primarily subscribed to Unitarianism or Deism, prioritizing religious freedom over a specific Christian dominion (Rausch, 2024). Within American Evangelical Christianity exist a wide spectrum of beliefs. While some, particularly ecumenical members of established churches, exhibit openness to interfaith dialogue others, especially fundamentalists on the political right, adhere to a more rigid ideology. A significant portion of white evangelicals continue to embrace a narrative of American exceptionalism intertwined with a Christian nationalist perspective.

The United States of America, while upholding secular government, has typically allowed more space for religion in public life compared to European nations. Most of Western societies eventually consented to secularism that sought to coexist with other faiths. This often involved ensuring freedom of worship in designated spaces while maintaining a state that remains neutral on religious matters (Miller, 2012). In the U.S., American citizens are free to embrace any religious practices, and the government will protect them by separating religious matters from any government and constitutional matters. However, recent events in the U.S. have brought tensions around secularism and religious freedom to the forefront (Miller, 2012).

The MAGA slogan and movement has been associated with white Christian nationalisms and considered as a politics of resentment. The MAGA narrative also contribute to an idealized version of America rooted in specific cultural and ethnic identities, potentially excluding or marginalizing other groups of ethnic and race. Mukherjee (2018), in his article quoting from Reginald Horsman, stated that Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” resonates a historical narrative emphasizes the origin of America’s white Christian (Anglo-Saxon) and implicit claims of cultural superiority. He argues,

“American Anglo Saxons understood themselves as a separate, innately superior people whose were destined to bring good government, commercial prosperity and Christianity to the American continents... Under Trump and the promise to make America great again is a white political theology built on the racist Anglo-Saxon thesis, one whose defining narrative is what of a “magistrate of God” under siege by generally perceived ills of mixity, migration, and multiculturalism” (Mukherjee, 2018: p. 3).

This perspective draws on a coalition between evangelical and spiritual concepts, constructing an idealized exclusionary vision of Western civilization. During Trump’s administration, the term “white supremacy” risen following his agenda to manifest the anti-globalism (Haynes, 2019). President Trump and his administration embraced policies and made decisions that aligned with several key points for the Christian Right priorities. He appointed conservative judges to the judiciary, including Supreme Court indicated the eagerness for a shift in legal interpretations. Trump also decided to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem indicating their position globally, especially in the Middle East (Francis Burke, 2021).

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The MAGA agenda has significantly redefined the boundaries of secularism in American politics by strategically aligning with right-wing Christian populism, effectively merging nationalist rhetoric with evangelical policy priorities. Central to this shift is the movement's embrace of Christian nationalism which has been instrumental in reshaping political discourse and policy. As Gorski (2021) note that Trump's promise to “make America great again” implicitly meant making it both whiter and more Christian, a vision that resonated deeply with evangelical voters. Whitehead & Perry (2020) stated how MAGA's alignment with Christian nationalism blurs church-state separation, as stated in Francis Burke (2021) *“Christian nationalism seeks to fuse Christianity with American civic life, privileging a specific vision of natural identity that is white, patriarchal, and exclusionary. It is less about faith than about power—a political ideology masquerading as theology”* (Francis Burke, 2021, p. 82).

Threat to Secularism and Other Religious Community

Under Trump's administration, the United States of America claimed themselves as the international democratic principles and individual human rights, focusing on the notion of civilizational values, particularly representative democracy and religious freedom. However, the specific interpretation and application of these values contains different meaning, especially secular understandings. Trump focused on religious freedom of Christians, but not other religions. During his era, the potential bias arises from the false narrative of the Middle East which lead to the inconsistency with secularism principle. Quoting from Haynes (2019),

“Successive U.S. administrations have pursued international democracy promotion and religious freedom with limited success some countries democratized and improved human rights and religious freedom, and others did not... While the U.S. has not officially jettisoned its pro-liberal democracy and human rights preferences, they were overshadowed and to an extent replaced by a new goal: elimination of Islamism, especially violent extremist and terrorist expressions... [Steve] Bannon was a call-in participant in a conference at the Vatican in 2014 when he declared that the West is now “in an outright war against jihadist Islamic fascism”” (Haynes, 2019: p. 686).

In the United States, former president Trump's administration played on about the immigration, often associating it with specific groups, such as Mexicans and Muslims. This narrative connected to the previous discussions: the potential threat posed by economic globalization and the fear of Islamist terrorism. Within the Evangelical community, Trump offers insights for strengthen his narrative. He highlights their frequent use of phrases like "Believe Me". The supporters also rally behind Trump's promises like building the wall that dividing the United States of America and Mexico, and protecting the Christian values. This unwavering support exceeding 80% in the 2016 election from a long-standing approach on fear, power, and nostalgia (Haynes, 2019).

President Trump's policies and rhetoric often displayed a focus on national and cultural sphere related to Islam. It raises concerns about potential impacts on religious freedom and social cohesion. His administration's actions, such as travel ban targeting several Muslim-majority countries, were criticized for potentially exceeding legal boundaries and promoting discriminatory practices. Moreover, his public statement framing Islam as inherently violent were seen as fueling anti-Muslim sentiment and exacerbating existing societal divisions (Mukherjee, 2018).

Mukherjee (2018) in his also added that Trump has no hesitation to call all Muslims as terrorist, quoting an interview of Donald Trump with CNN journalist, Anderson Cooper, Trump states:

"I think Islam hates us. There is something there. There is a tremendous hatred. We have to get to the bottom of it. There is an unbelievable hatred of us... We have to be very careful. And we cannot allow people come in this country who have this hatred of the United States and of people that are not Muslim... It [radical Islam] is very hard to define. It is very hard to separate. Because you do not know who is who." (Trump, 2016).

From President Trump's statements following his policies regarding Muslim often raised concerns about potential prejudices on both religion and perceived origin. His generalization about entire group and community from his comments and statements suggest different standards for certain individuals based on their background contributed to anxieties and debates about inclusivity and equal treatment. This also leads to the principle of secularism in America, in which the government should protect any kind of religions and beliefs as well as the practices.

Trump's campaign strategy notably raised the notion of anti-Islam sentiments. He emphasized the concept of "Islamodiversion", defined as the practice of assigning blame to Muslim in order to deflect attention from adverse economic and political policies (Khan et al., 2021). A significant aspect of Trump's campaign was his differential treatment of white Americans compared to other segments of society, particularly Muslims, fostering a binary division within the populace and propagating the narrative that "white Americans were being victimized by Muslims" (Khan et al., 2021; p. 3).

The perception of entire communities being judged based on stereotypes or assumptions purposes important questions about fairness and the role of government in fostering harmonious relations among diverse groups (Mukherjee, 2018). Travel ban targeting Muslim countries emerged string objections due to its perceived discriminatory nature and lack of clear justification. Trump's policies, particularly the Muslim ban, disproportionately affected foreign students, scholars, and officials residing in the United States, leading to a drastic reduction in visa issuance to Muslim, exceeding 90% since Trump assumed office. Consequently, efforts to expand the travel ban across the U.S. states and Westerns countries have persisted, with 14 states implementing anti-Shariah legislation in 2017 (Khan et al., 2021; p. 3).

Trump appointed individuals with documented Islamophobic views to key positions further institutionalizing Islamophobia within the administration. Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric during the 2016 campaign and subsequent presidential campaigns has tapped into a historical vein of Islamophobia within American society, reflecting a longstanding pattern of fear and mistrust

towards the Middle Eastern and Muslim-majority countries, especially after the event of 9/11 as stated by Lyons (2014) and Saladin (2016) in Khan et al. (2021),

“Trump anti-Muslim remarks during elections are directly drawn upon the “orientalist” concept of “clash of civilization” which holds that “West” and “East” are inherently incompatible enemies of each other... Trump is similar to former U.S. President, Quincy Adams, who revealed his own anti-Muslim/Islam statements by referring to Islam as “brutish”, “violent” and “enemy of the West”. President Trump’s 2016 comments that “Islam hates us” is in fact orientalist stereotyping which seems to have hardly been transformed over the last 200 years of U.S. history” (Khan, 2021; p. 3).

Trump’s characterization of Islam as hating the U.S. mirrors historical narratives of a clash of civilization drawing upon the concept of Orientalism. Trump’s rhetoric perpetuates a polarized narrative of “West vs East” based on constructed differences in civilization. Moreover, the emergence of Christian populism with MAGA agenda represent direct challenge to secularism by reframing secular governance as a threat to Christian values. Trump’s rhetoric mobilizes resentment pluralist democracy which may lead in culture war issues, such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and religious education (Gunn, 2024, pp. 113–117), as quoting from Cisneros-Tirado & Babbili (2022): *“the concept of Trumpian populism, which is a type of right-wing political movement, grounded in nationalistic and xenophobic values, with a solif neoliberal economic orientation, which uses as inflammatory rhetoric to create an environment of permanent crisis...such as representing “the people”, being a “savior” to his nation, while craftily exploiting the new social media to directly appeal to his political base.”* (2022, p. 144). Phrases such as “God bless America”, “we worship God, not government” and the appearance of Bible symbols use during protests and rallies have cemented his image as the protector of Christian nation under siege. In doing so, he transforms Christianity into a political identity maker that distinguished “true Americans” from liberal, secular others.

Burke (2021) describes this as he secular transformation of the Great Awakening heritage, where emotional revivalism is emptied the theological substance and refilled it with civil religion. This transformation dilutes the sacred into populist symbolism, where the performance of faith replaces the practice of faith, and religious loyalty becomes synonymous with political allegiance. The erosion of secular norms under the MAGA agenda has significant implications for American democracy, such as threatens the pluralistic foundation of the nation by privileging one religious identity over others, delegitimizes dissent by framing opposition as “not true American”, and emboldens authoritarian tendencies by sacralizing political power (Greenawalt, 2009; Haynes, 2019). The shifting happened because of the support for extra-legal political action among segments of the right-wing Christian base.

CONCLUSION

Trump’s presidential slogan “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) has exerted complex and multifaced impact on the landscape of American secularism and democracy. Aside from its purpose on the American economic revitalization and national pride, it also threatens the American fundamental principle of secularism and America Constitutional Value. MAGA focuses on the Christian Right—supported by the white Christian right-wings. Coming from Evangelic Anglo-Saxon, they wanted to make a new life based on the concept of American exceptionalism and American Dream. Therefore, MAGA motivated the Christian Right and strengthen their political influence. By prioritizing the Christian and the conservative parties, it is resulting in marginalized other religious that consider as minorities and secular in the political landscape. By reimagining religious identity as a political category and moral weapon, Trump and his allies have transformed Christianity into a symbol of exclusion and cultural dominance

rather than religious and spiritual beliefs and community. This reconfiguration not only undermines institutional neutrality and pluralism, but it also fosters a climate in which dissent is demonized, non-Christian beliefs are marginalized, and democratic norms are weakened. While religious rhetoric has long influenced toward American politics, the MAGA movement marks a new era in which secularism itself is recast as a threat, and religious loyalty is tied explicitly to political allegiance. This secularization of religious discourse, where faith becomes a tool for populist power rather than moral reflection, poses urgent questions for the future democracy of the United States of America. It becomes imperative to defend the integrity of secularism, not as hostility to religion, but as a safeguard for religious freedom, civic and human equality, and democratic inclusion.

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