

The Weaponization of Religion: From Antiquity to the Present

Scholars note that throughout history, rulers have often manipulated religion to gain political power. Religious symbols and dogmas were deployed as tools of control and propaganda. For example, Roman authorities treated crucifixion itself as “for Rome, first and foremost, *a weapon of psychological warfare and a tool of propaganda*”. Cicero even argued that “the very word ‘cross’ *be far removed from... the bodies of Roman citizens, from their thoughts*”, underscoring how feared religious symbols were as instruments of oppression. In short, religion has been used to justify both violence and repression. A study of late-20th-century conflicts observes that “religious conflict has played an important role in shaping human history,” and that leaders like Slobodan Milošević and Bashar al-Assad “*gained political authority and maintained legitimacy by manipulating religion and pitting their countrymen...in violent conflict.*”. Classic historical examples include the Crusades, medieval “wars of religion,” and tyranny in various empires.

Modern Religious Extremism and Terrorism

In the modern era, extremist movements also use religion to justify violence. Jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS explicitly frame terrorism in Islamic terms (although most Muslims reject these views). For example, one analysis states that Osama bin Laden wanted to unite jihadists as “a vanguard of warriors” against perceived enemies, linking guerrilla warfare to religious meaning. Similarly, right-wing terror attacks are often associated with Christian imagery. Commentators have even called the January 6, 2021, Capitol riot a “Christian Nationalist domestic terrorist insurrection.” Notably, over half of the Capitol rioters with military backgrounds were connected to militant Christian nationalist or white supremacist groups like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters. Additionally, Fox News host Pete Hegseth’s “*Deus vult*” tattoo—Latin for “God wills it”—became infamous as a symbol from Crusader lore and is popular among modern extremist networks. These examples show how current militants hide violent politics behind apocalyptic religious language, portraying their fight as a cosmic battle between good and evil.

Christian Nationalism in U.S. Politics

In the United States, a growing Christian nationalist movement aims to incorporate conservative Christian values into government policy. Opinion surveys indicate its increasing presence. For example, 60% of Americans believe the Founders intended for the U.S. to be a “Christian nation,” and 45% think it *should* be. This belief is much more common among Republicans (67%) than Democrats (29%), highlighting a strong partisan divide. Far-right policy groups have supported this agenda. Interfaith Alliance reports that the Heritage Foundation’s “Project 2025” blueprint explicitly seeks to “*remake the United States into a so-called Christian nation,*” promoting laws aligned with a conservative Christian perspective (e.g., privileging Sunday as the Sabbath).

Prominent politicians and officials have also used this language. In 2025, the White House issued an executive order stating it was U.S. policy “*to protect the religious freedoms of Americans and end the anti-Christian weaponization of government.*” The phrase “weaponization of government” was used directly, showing how Christian nationalist leaders frame policy debates as a fight for survival. At the same time, critics of Christian nationalism warn that it weakens democracy. Berkeley scholars describe its followers as caught in an “*existential struggle*” against demonized opponents, framing politics in apocalyptic terms (for example, portraying liberals as agents of Satan). Professor Sarah Song notes that if the government “represents the interests of all...people of different faiths and with no faith,” then the rise of Christian nationalism—using minority rule to force one group’s values—is “*corrosive of democracy.*”

Education, Indoctrination, and Youth Culture Wars

A main focus of Christian nationalist strategy is youth outreach. Activists have actively targeted schools and youth groups. For example, Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk delivered campus speeches and events that, according to *Christianity Today*, “rallied young Americans to Donald Trump’s MAGA cause.” Kirk and others attracted young believers with political messages wrapped in faith. One student recalls Kirk promoting “conservative, biblical values” and saying “*I’m nothing without Jesus*” during public talks, inspiring many to get involved in politics.

Cultural battles over education and free expression have continued. Several states have enacted or proposed policies that blur the separation of church and state. Lawsuits by groups like the Alliance Defending Freedom have sought to redirect public funds to religious schools, such as requiring states to finance sectarian classes or private religious education. In 2023, a Supreme Court ruling (*Carson v. Makin*) determined that states cannot exclude religious schools from otherwise available tuition programs. Other conflicts concern the curriculum: proposals to mandate posting the Ten Commandments or teaching Bible lessons in public schools have been challenged or overturned. For example, a federal judge recently struck down a Louisiana law that required displaying the Ten Commandments in classrooms as unconstitutional. In Texas, parents received approval to implement a controversial “biblical worldview” curriculum in some public schools, raising concerns about indoctrination. Critics warn these efforts weaponize religious language in education; organizations like Americans United describe attempts to claim religious exemptions as abuses of “religious freedom” used to justify discrimination, such as allowing child welfare agencies to refuse service to LGBTQ individuals.

Religious Revival Among Young People

Ironically, demographic trends show that religion remains influential among American youth. A 2024 survey by the Springtide Institute found that 57% of young Americans say their religion “*at least slightly*” influences their political views. Additionally, recent research (e.g., *Vox* analysis) indicates that Generation Z is bucking the long-term decline in U.S. religiosity, particularly among young men. Observers report increasing church participation: the percentage of Gen Z identifying as Christian has risen from 45% to about 51% in recent years, reversing

earlier declines. This suggests that faith-based messages may be resonating with some youth, even as others remain secular.

In practice, the result is a polarized youth culture. Faith-based groups are open about their goals: Georgia Governor Brian Kemp and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis have publicly addressed students at Christian universities, encouraging them to advance a “Christian America.” Meanwhile, conservative think-tanks publish bills and guidelines (e.g. a proposed national “Education Choice for Children Act”) that would expand funding for religious charter schools and allow broad religious exceptions. Civil liberties advocates warn that if adopted, these laws would further blur church-state separation and channel public resources to partisan causes. For example, in 2024 Americans United and others decried a proposed North Carolina voucher scheme as forcing tax dollars to pay for private schools that exclude same-sex couples. The same critics use phrases like “*weaponizing religious freedom*” to describe how legal and legislative strategies are being used to impose narrow faith-based doctrines on society .

Historical Rationale for Church-State Separation

From the founding era onward, American leaders insisted that government stay out of religion to protect liberty. Having experienced persecution under official colonial churches, many Founders saw strict separation as essential. Thomas Jefferson famously told the Danbury Baptist Association (1802) that the First Amendment built “a wall of separation between Church & State,” noting that government’s powers “reach actions only, & not opinions”. James Madison made a similar point in his 1785 *Memorial and Remonstrance*, asserting that “the Religion of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man” and that this freedom is “an unalienable right”. In short, the Constitution’s framers intended no official church or religious enforcement by the state, so individuals of all faiths (and none) would enjoy equal protection.

Baptist dissenters were among the most vocal advocates of disestablishment. In colonial Virginia and New England, Baptists and other non-Anglican Protestants had been “discriminated against and seriously persecuted” by the Church of England or Congregationalist establishments . After independence, Baptist leaders insisted government give no special advantage to any religion. Baptist preacher John Leland declared in 1790 that “the notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded” and that government should “protect every man in thinking and speaking freely,” guaranteeing all – “Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians” – “equally free”. These views helped shape the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786), drafted by Jefferson and Madison, which declared that “no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship...nor suffer any disadvantage on account of his religious opinions; but that all men shall be free to profess...their opinions in matters of religion”. As Baptist Isaac Backus put it, religious matters were seen as “too high and holy” for the state to control. In sum, the U.S. founders enshrined church–state separation to guarantee that faith would be a personal conviction protected from government interference, ensuring pluralism and shielding dissenting believers from the kind of tyranny they had known.

Social Consequences of Youth Weaponizing Faith

Encouraging young people to treat their religion as a political tool carries significant social risks. In fact, many youths themselves resist this. A 2024 Springtide Institute survey found that 46% of Americans under 30 think religion should have “no influence” in politics. Interviews with students reveal that teens value America’s religious diversity and even characterize religion-based politics as hateful or hateful-sounding propaganda. One 18-year-old interviewee pointed out that unlike a theocracy such as Saudi Arabia, the U.S. is “so diverse...[and] religion should stay separated” from government. Young people in the Springtide study repeatedly described the use of faith in politics as a “misuse” of religion and an illegitimate way to push agendas.

Yet Christian nationalist youth movements often frame politics in stark “us vs. them” terms. This can give some young believers a sense of empowerment and moral certainty – but it also depends on demonizing others. Research shows that when faith is politicized this way, it quickly encourages prejudice. In fact, scholars find that people who hold Christian nationalist views tend to exhibit significantly more xenophobic and outgroup-hostile attitudes than others. For example, studies report that Christian nationalists express higher animosity toward immigrants, Muslims, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ individuals. When children are taught that politics is a battle for the soul of the country, they begin to see non-Christian or non-conservative neighbors as threats. As one analysis observes, modern Christian nationalist rhetoric often equates “Americanness” with whiteness and conservative Protestantism, casting non-white and non-evangelical Americans as the “other”. Critically, this kind of messaging is not just abstract: it “weaponizes religion to marginalize those who do not conform,” creating a “culture of intolerance, division, and exclusion”.

In practical terms, youth exposure to politicized faith can lay groundwork for real-world oppression. When one religious identity is equated with patriotism, policies can follow that privilege that group. Indeed, critics warn that legal campaigns by Christian nationalists – such as efforts to fund faith-based schools or teach a “biblical worldview” in public education – risk discriminating against minorities under the guise of religious liberty. Historically, similar patterns have led to persecution: once it becomes acceptable for government to favor one creed, dissenting worshippers and secular citizens lose protection and social standing. In sum, fusing faith with politics may feel inspiring to some young Christians in the short run, but it does so by excluding others. This alienates fellow Americans of different beliefs or backgrounds and undermines the pluralistic, democratic society the Founders sought to build.

Conclusion

Religious belief has long influenced politics, but American history shows that putting faith into government power has costs. The Founders learned from past European and colonial abuses that religious freedom must guard conscience, not impose dogma. As Jefferson wrote, the First

Amendment erected “a wall of separation between church and State” to protect belief from political coercion. Madison likewise saw freedom of religion as an “unalienable right” of every person. Today’s data and scholarship reaffirm those lessons: many young Americans still insist on keeping religion out of policy, and analysts warn that Christian nationalist ideology correlates with intolerance and marginalizing “others”. In other words, history and social science agree that strict church–state separation best safeguards a diverse nation. Upholding that principle helps ensure religious liberty remains a shield for individual conscience (Jefferson’s ideal) rather than a weapon wielded against neighbors.

References

- Americans United for Separation of Church and State. (2024, Nov 1). *17th to early 19th century church-state separation quotes*. Church & State Magazine.
<https://www.au.org/the-latest/church-and-state/articles/17th-to-early-19th-century-church-state-separation-quotes> (Accessed Sept 2025).
- Broeren, Z. D., & Djupe, P. A. (2024). The ingroup love and outgroup hate of Christian nationalism: experimental evidence about the implementation of the rule of law. *Politics and Religion*, 17(1), 40–57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048323000305>
- Buckser, J. (2023, August 15). *Andrew Seidel to discuss 'weaponization' of religion in American political life*. The Chautauquan Daily.
- Doherty, J. (2024, September 10). *Does religion play a role in young people's political views and civic behaviors?* Springtide Research Institute.
- Echele, K. (2023). *Eastern Orthodox vs. Muslim-Aligned Greeks in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Religion, Civilizational Identity, and the Politics of Resistance to Humanitarian Intervention* (Senior honors thesis). Fordham University.
- Gourley, B. (2025, January 2). *Armed, angry and apocalyptic: Christian nationalism and the U.S. military*. Americans United for Separation of Church and State.
- Jefferson, T. (1802). *Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association* [Letter to Nehemiah Dodge et al.]. U.S. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lcwa00.lcib011898>
- Leland, J. (1790). *Virginia Chronicle*. (Quoted in Americans United for Separation of Church and State, 2024).
- Lempinen, E. (2022, September 20). *Crisis of faith: Christian nationalism and the threat to U.S. democracy*. Berkeley News.
- Library of Congress. (1998, June). *Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists*. *LC Information Bulletin*. <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html> (Original work published 1802).
- Lilman, S. (2025, Sept 10). *Christian nationalist 'family values' exclude lots of families*. Americans United for Separation of Church and State.
<https://www.au.org/news/church-state/christian-nationalist-family-values-exclude-lots-of-families> (Accessed Sept 2025).
- Madison, J. (1785). *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*. (Founders Online, National Archives).
- Marina, M. (2023, October 20). *How did Jesus die? Who killed Him and why? Christianity in the first century*. Bart D. Ehrman's Blog.

McCracken, K. (2025, January 7). *“Totally Separate”: Young People’s Beliefs about Religion in Politics*. Springtide Research Institute.
<https://springtideresearch.org/post/religion-and-spirituality/young-peoples-beliefs-about-religion-in-politics> (Accessed Sept 2025).

Mishell, Z. (2024, July 23). *How Project 2025 threatens religious freedom & democracy*. Interfaith Alliance.

Monticello. (n.d.). *Thomas Jefferson and Religious Freedom*. Monticello.org.
<https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/thomas-jefferson-and-religious-freedom> (Accessed Sept 2025) .

Pew Research Center. (2022, October 27). *Views of the U.S. as a “Christian nation” and opinions about “Christian nationalism.”* (Referenced in original report.)

Quan, M. (2025, July 9). *Christian Nationalism in America and in our political education threatens the pursuit of justice*. Americans United for Separation of Church and State.
<https://www.au.org/news/church-state/christian-nationalism-in-america-and-in-our-political-education-threatens-the-pursuit-of-justice> (Accessed Sept 2025).

Smietana, B. (2025, September 10). *Charlie Kirk, who ‘plugged in’ young Christian conservatives, dies at 31*. Religion News Service.

Springtide Research Institute. (2024, Dec 30). *2024 Springtide Study of Young People and Civic Life*. (Data Survey).
<https://springtideresearch.org/study/2024-young-people-and-civic-life/> (Study cited in McCracken, 2025).

The White House. (2025, February 6). *Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias*. Executive Order No. (https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/eradicating-anti-christian-bias/)