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A SOCIAL HISTORY OF CHRISTOFASCISM

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Abstract

Recent literature on Christian nationalism by sociologists of religion in the United States identifies a perceived novel phenomenon: the fusion of authoritarian governmental forms with Christianity. However, the socio-historical origin of this international trend has been left relatively unexplored. Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to create a single international account that lends itself to future comparative theoretical frameworks and analyses through the term "Christofascism."

Introduction

Sociologists of religion have recently identified what appears to be a novel phenomenon: the fusion of seemingly incompatible political and religious identities, particularly, the fusion of authoritarian governmental forms with Christianity. Groups attempting this amalgam have gained power through democratic processes across the Western world (Donald Trump in the United States (US), Viktor Orban in Hungary, Andrzej Duda in Poland, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, etc.). The deep roots of this social movement have been left relatively unexplored by this flurry of inquiry, which has understandably tended to focus on modern incarnations rather than the generation of the idea itself. This is likely due to threat avoidance of over-generalization present in academic discourse – it is wiser and less controversial, perhaps, to focus only on Christian nationalists in the US. However, the reality remains: there is a generalizable global and historical trend worthy of introduction into the academic discourse surrounding the sociology of Christianity. Some of this has already been explored, though piecemeal, by various theologians, political economists, journalists, political scientists, and others. The goal here is to assemble these pieces into a single parsimonious account that lends itself to future theoretical frameworks and analyses of what has been termed "Christofascism."

The byzantine work here of tracing the social history and lineage of Christofascism begins with the questionable inheritance of European Middle Age political theology and ends with modern Christian nationalist literature, including Dorothee Sölle's (1982) version

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of "Christofascism." Once grounded in context, the final section marshals these contributions to advance greater awareness and applicability of the concept moving forward.

The Social and Cultural Roots of Fascism

Authoritarian populism arises from the mass disenfranchisement (Hiebert 2020) inherent in the capitalist mode of production. American sociologists have recently been scrambling to understand the populist impulse within American politics with the advent of Donald Trump. However, a theoretical framework inherited from mostly Latin American studies, in which populism has been more active and prevalent in political movements, already exists to make sense of this tendency. Scholars such as Ernesto Laclau (2005), Chantal Mouffe (1999), Marco Revelli (2017), Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1994), and Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986) have cataloged populist movements from their initial mass leanings into late authoritarian/fascistic incarnations.

Their conclusions are clear: populism naturally morphs into fascism when unchecked. In today's globalized world, these populist movements have developed into international nationalistic incarnations across the world. Blake Stewart (2020) recently discussed transnational nationalism through the lens of far-right civilizationism, which is helpful for the analysis here. Whether and how these authoritarian tendencies are legitimated becomes the primary concern of leaders, which is where religion comes into play.

By appealing to religious discourse, fascists wear the cloak of morality and are legitimated in the eyes of the majority, as individual commitment is generated through tension with society (Stark and Finke 2000). Institutional religion then has a choice: work with the conservative elite to protect original privileges or lose salience in an increasingly pluralizing world. Most churches choose the former rather than the latter (Gill 1998). This is not to say that religion itself is inherently fascistic, but it does imply that organized religion is likely to cooperate with traditional and hierarchical organization (Durkheim 1915).

Furthermore, religious beliefs are more likely to be salient in places with high existential insecurity. Like Pippa Norris and Ronal Inglehart (2011), Joseph Baker and Buster Smith (2015) have described at length the effect of existential insecurity on religious belief. "[C]ultural contexts with high levels of death, suffering, and uncertainty are typically characterized by higher average levels of religious belief and practice" (Baker and Smith 2015:103). Edwin Eschler (2020) has recently also demonstrated that in Latin America, those who experience existential threats are more likely to experience religious miracles. Countries with higher Gini coefficients (and, thus, the wealth inequality, shame, ostracization, etc. of the majority) are more likely to fall into traditional boundaries of belief such as institutional religion. This is the reason that Western proto-fascist leaders, such as Vladimir Putin in Russia or Donald Trump in America, have attempted to co-opt Christian legitimacy in an effort to win over a larger constituency. To understand this cultural process fully requires examining how the social history, cultural lineage, and context of Christianity allows it to be used by these fascists in specific Western international cases.

Christian Legitimacy and Political Theology

Any belief system is filled with the opportunity to construct *floating signifiers* (Laclau 2005), regardless of whether they conform to the ideological bedrock of the system. As Ernesto Laclau suggested,

> the same democratic demands receive the structural pressure of rival hegemonic projects. This generates an autonomy of the popular signifiers different from the one we have considered so far. It is no longer that the particularism of the demand becomes self-sufficient and independent of any equivalential articulation, but that its meaning is indeterminate between alternative equivalential frontiers. I shall call signifiers whose meaning is "suspended" in that way "floating signifiers."
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> *(Laclau 2005:131)*

Christianity is, of course, not exempt from this process. Initially a movement focused on empowering the poor, Christianity has now been symbolically co-opted by ruling class after ruling class throughout history, making its key symbols "float." Analyzing the political theological underpinnings of Western society facilitates an understanding of why floating signifiers are so readily drawn from Christianity to support Western fascistic incarnations.

The ultimate goal of Christofascism is to incorporate the religious into the political (Schmitt 2007). Christian idealism is, therefore, appropriated for this discursive legitimation, and institutional Christianity is no stranger to co-option by non-democratic rule for the purpose of legitimacy. A lineage to the beginnings of Western Christendom could easily be traced, but the literature surrounding this period is dubious and hotly debated by historians. A less contested marker is the unseating of the papacy as the hegemonic power of Christian legitimacy through the process of the Protestant Reformation in the Early Modern era. The papacy long served as the legitimizer of the divine right to rule. Originally a democratizing effort to liberate Christian idealism from the internationalists, Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin sought to establish community churches that determined the truth of Christ and the Gospels from the ground up (Mueller 1954). This significantly weakened central control of religious narrative, and individual state churches began to legitimate their respective national states in the face of the internationalist papacy. The first major example of this would naturally be the Anglican Church and King Henry VIII.

The decline of the absolutist monarch followed during the Enlightenment, the French Revolution in 1789, and the collapse of the *Ancien Régime*. No longer were traditional forms of legitimacy suitable to prevent hegemony from breaking down. Rulers had to turn to a new legitimizer: popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty, or rule on behalf of an "empowered" people, became the ideotype. In practice, this amounted to, at best, little more than representative parliamentarianism, which favored elite special interests to fill the gap left by the now absent absolute sovereign.

Even so, legalistic frameworks inherited by the Roman Empire, revised by the papacy, and preserved under the Napoleonic Code, instilled Christian political theology into democratic incarnations of governance. The people were "empowered" only through institutions that had survived the test of time, and these institutions carried Christian morality on into the modern era, in which fascistic leaders would later attempt to co-opt them. Some may, following this line of argument, conclude that Christianity is uniquely pre-disposed to producing fascistic tendencies and co-option; however, Sölle's (1982) concept of obedience can assist in dispelling this myth.

Obedience is the key to every organized faith, including Christianity; one must accept the moral authority and power of the belief system to become a member and practitioner. Sölle argues that this type of rigid and unquestioning belief system is not only misleading but also contrary to the teaching of Christ. Christ did not conform to the institutional expectations

of the Pharisees of the time who were legitimizing the unjust rule of Herod, and it follows that Christians today would presumably continue this tradition of resistance and independence of thought. To deny the influence of dominating political and religious movements, Sölle argues, is to pursue true and purer Christianity.

Recent Incarnations and Literature

Those who seek to establish a sort of Christofascism, or a co-option of fascistic politics with a Christian symbology and narrative, must lean on this obedience belief structure. There are plenty of potential case studies that can be marshaled to better understand this modern assemblage. The two most obvious cases of fascism in the twentieth century come from Benito Mussolini's Italy and Adolf Hitler's Germany, though focusing on these two cases ignores the wealth of knowledge on case studies from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. Suffice it to say that, in both the cases of Mussolini and Hitler, the Christian state church was used to legitimize their movements. It can also be argued that, in the case of Spain, Francisco Franco actively led a Christofascist political movement, though some have disagreed with the fascist label. After World War II, however, more active forms emerged in various areas across the globe which call for closer examination.

The United States

The US has a long-documented history of potential Christofascist movements, which are covered at length by a variety of scholars (see Diamond 1995; Kruse 2015). Largely emerging from appraisals of the dominionist movement (a political movement of the Christian Right to implement biblical law as social policy), theologians began to proclaim or reject the dominionist innovation in the 1970s. R.J. Rushdoony (1973) is a large figure in this proclamation push, which was later critiqued by multiple observers, particularly sociologists and journalists. Chris Hedges (2008) is a journalist who has viewed this movement well through a critical lens:

> Debate with the radical Christian Right is useless … It is a movement based on emotion and cares nothing for rational thought and discussion … Naive attempts to reach out to the movement, to assure them that we, too, are Christian or we, too, care about moral values, are doomed. This movement is bent on our destruction. The attempts by many liberals to make peace would be humorous if the stakes were not so deadly. These dominionists hate the liberal, enlightened world formed by the Constitution, a world they blame for the debacle of their lives. They have one goal: its destruction.
> *(Hedges 2008:202)*

The extremist dominionism movement has naturally begotten a Christian nationalist ideology which has become increasingly more prominent over the years.

Michael Emerson and Christian Smith helped begin the exposition of the racialized nature of evangelical Protestantism (and, thus, the Christian Right movement) with their work *Divided by Faith* (2001). They demonstrated that America's evangelical movement is uniquely structured along the systems of racial inequality present in the post-modern US. This means that white evangelicals do not intermingle with Black evangelicals, even though they supposedly share a belief system. More relevantly, the white evangelical ethic

of individualism poses a unique challenge to racially integrating the evangelical movement, an issue that fuels the in/out group distinctions of Christofascism to this day.

Philip Gorski (2017) aptly traced the post-modern Christian nationalism movement by identifying the lineage and involvement of Christianity within American democracy and argued for a reclamation of the civil religious tradition from religious nationalists. Gorski makes a compelling case for the right of religion to exist within the American public sphere, though perhaps he is a bit optimistic on the probability of its voluntary release from the hands of extremists who have had a taste of political power.

Similarly, Michele Margolis (2018) demonstrated that political identity is often more salient than religious identity, though the two are now inter-related. Using life-course theory, she makes a compelling argument surrounding the state of post-modern American polarization, showing that those who identify politically as conservatives are more likely to identify as Christian, regardless of their behavior surrounding worship. This is a dangerous synthesis of politics and religion and threatens the perceived separation between church and state.

Directly following, and related, is the seminal work by Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry defining the study of Christian nationalism in America, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (2020). In this revealing work, the authors enliven the discourse surrounding Christian nationalism with statistical data within the context of Donald Trump's administration. By doing this, they expose the social framework surrounding our most controversial social issues of late and how the conservative right is growing dangerously close to authoritarian movements. This unique contribution to the literature surrounding the intersection of politics and religion in the United States has spawned countless empirical articles solidifying its role as a significant and observant coinage.

While all these authors (and others) have done an excellent job describing the American proto-fascist movement, a broader theoretical lens is needed to make sense of these trends in other countries as well. Thus, what follows are examples of literature and cases that help analysts and ordinary citizens understand Christian nationalisms/proto-fascisms internationally so that this well-developed American framework can be expanded to explain similar incarnations globally. This lens, argued here, is Christofascism.

Latin America

Modern Latin American cases, while generally under-represented in the discussion of Christian nationalism within the sociology of religion, are just as susceptible, and perhaps more, to the co-option of Christian legitimacy by fascist leaders, *caudillos,* and military juntas. This is likely the result of the prevalence of the Catholic Church in state functions, which was deliberately built into the Spanish model of colonization and native segregation. This role of the Catholic Church (Penyak and Petry 2019) has clearly changed over the years and now varies country to country, especially where Protestant groups, such as Pentecostals, are growing in number.

Falangist groups, which are the cultural inheritors of Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain, can be generally labeled as Christofascist, though political scientists may disagree. Falangism, in this case, is defined as a fascistic totalitarian movement with strong emphases on nationalism, authoritarian control, charismatic authority, order, anti-communism, illiberality, and Catholic identity (Bowen 1996:4). Leaders, symbols, and ideologies borrowed from Roman Catholicism have been used to legitimize countless fascistic regimes, a good

example being Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina. A detailed treatment of these many influences is presented by Anthony Gill in *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (1998). Gill aptly describes the rock-and-hard-place scenario many Latin American Catholic bishops found themselves in when confronted with authoritarian rule: either cooperate and legitimize the fascistic movement to protect the integrity and continued existence of the church or oppose it and risk losing centuries of traditional privileges granted under Spanish colonial rule (the *patronato)*. Gill also questions the salience of the liberation theology movement which challenged the propensity of the Catholic Church to mix with fascistic/elite politics.

Likewise, many cases of Christofascist movements originating outside the Catholic tradition also exist in Latin America, the two most notable being those led by José Efraín Rios-Montt in Guatemala and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Both leaders have used their evangelical Protestant identities to re-inforce and legitimate their pushes for non-democratic procedure, and several scholars have written on them (see Egoshi 2018 for Montt; Zanotta Machado 2020, Barreto and Chaves 2021 for Bolsonaro). Latin America remains a good case study for Christofascism and its many incarnations.

Europe

After World War II, many popular movements on the right have actively sought to co-opt aspects of the Christian narrative and use it for non-democratic idealism. The biggest and most obvious modern cases can be found within what is currently known as the Visegrád Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). Both President Viktor Orban of Hungary and President Andrzej Duda of Poland have pushed a Christian-first narrative in their anti-immigration policy, which they see as the only way to protect the European character of Europe. Compounding this, they have attacked the free press and the independent judiciary. This movement is well described by Didier Fassin's term *ambivalent hospitality* (2012), in which refugees are admitted but only under challenging cultural conditions, and Craig Calhoun's description of the rejection in *Cosmopolitan Europe* (2009).

Outside of the European Union, Slavic states have also taken on the trappings of Christofascism. A key role in this push is Vladimir Putin, who actively legitimizes his authority through appeals to Russian Orthodoxy. This has been derived through various anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, additions of God and Russian Orthodoxy to the Russian Constitution, and the weaponization of Orthodoxy to justify (some would say motivate) the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia is not a stranger to Christian legitimation of authoritarian rule (see Ware 1993 for a good summary), and so, after its resurgent period post-USSR, it is only natural that this relationship should continue.

Criticism and Conclusion

The regional case studies which have been introduced briefly here indicate a strong likelihood that the American phenomenon dubbed "Christian nationalism" is only the local species of a global genus. Thus, a broader, more inclusive, and less regionally unique theory is needed to explain this international phenomenon, which has been dubbed "far-right civilizationism" by Stewart (2020). The literature has been hitherto dominated by national cases that are not related to globalization, and while the respective cases are very important, the oversight of creating a generalized concept needs to be addressed. The perspective of Christofascism is partial remediation of this omission.

Granted, it is understandable to critique this proposition and its supporting literature as flawed by over-generalization, given the foundational concept of fascism. Some may view the umbrella term "Christofascism" to be too extreme. However, without radical labels, the true nature of the phenomenon will continue to languish in euphemisms. Worse yet, tangible harms to human persons may not be prevented or abated. Whether this form of authoritarian rule, which denies popular participation in government, or totalitarian rule, which denies popular participation in government and extensively regulates the lives of all citizens, is actually instituted does not diminish the potential of current movements to become fascist.

Current research on Christian nationalism fails to acknowledge this movement to be as dangerous as it is – that is, as a step toward fascism or proto-fascism. While it is clear from history and experience that Christianity itself is not inherently fascistic, it takes conscious effort to ensure that Christianity is not co-opted for fascistic purposes. That is the role of this chapter, and that is the role of intellectuals in a free society pursuing an open dialogue (Hiebert 2018).

In 2021, a number of proudly self-described Christian nationalists stormed the US Capitol building. More recently, they have sought to ban the teaching of historically accurate descriptions of the American Civil War, the Reconstruction era, the lynching period, and the Civil Rights Movement. In the EU, shared immigration policy is tearing the political and economic union apart. One third of the Polish country has voted to convert their districts into "LGBT-free zones" (Hiebert 2020). In Russia, LGBTQIA+ people continue to experience harassment and detainment under the "gay propaganda law." Fascism in all its forms, no matter how cleverly shrouded in a thin veneer of religion, must be identified and resisted. Should these warnings not be heeded, the privilege of this chapter – intellectuals writing in a free society – may be lost.

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