

# American evangelical nationalism: history, status quo, and outlook



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## Abstract

Evangelical nationalism is a new manifestation of American nationalism in the twenty-first century. Internally, it advocates the integration of national identity and Christian faith, claiming that “America is a Christian nation”. Externally, it pursues the “America First” and isolationist foreign policy. The early religious, political and social activities of evangelicals were mainly embodied in the religious revival called the Great Awakening. The rise of the Moral Majority in the 1970s and 1980s represented an essential exercise in or attempt at evangelical nationalism. The election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 marked the development of conservatism, such as evangelicalism in the U.S., from a religiously conservative force to a full-blown nationalism. Evangelical nationalism rose in the context of response to dramatically changing internal and external environments, the adjustment of traditional conservative strategies, the revival of white racism, the interplay between civic and ethnic nationalism, and the crisis of modernity. On the one hand, the momentum of evangelical nationalism will diminish with the relative alleviation of conflicts both within and outside the U.S., the corresponding adjustment of conservative strategies, and especially the growth of the civic nationalist camp. On the other hand, from the perspective of “identity and ultimate belief”, although the identity problem characterized by the “culture war” will be relatively relieved with the mitigation of internal and external conditions, the United States, as a “Christian nation” underpinned by Christian culture and faith, will see evangelical nationalism resilient. Evangelical nationalism will continue to play an important role in the domestic and foreign affairs of the United States.

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## Introduction

Nationalism is a controversial topic.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, nationalism in Western countries has roughly gone through three stages: Christian nationalism, ethnic nationalism, and civic nationalism (Zhou 2020). As a typical country adhering to exceptionalism, the U.S. has shown a distinct development path compared to other Western countries regarding nationalism. As is well known, the formation of the United States began with the union of Britain's 13 colonies in North America. However, the forces that propelled the union in the War of Independence and the establishment of the United States of America were not the same as the nationalist forces that underpinned the construction of nation-states in Western Europe. Nor was the U.S. established for nationalist purposes based on unity of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious identities similar to those of the Western European nation-states. Instead, it aimed for liberalism and universalism. In Thomas Paine's words, the War of Independence was about defending the ideal of "liberty" and protecting "the liberty of a nation". Additionally, the "liberty" that Americans were fighting for is vital to the well-being of humankind. He even asserted that "the universe would have no liberty without the United States of America."<sup>2</sup> Richard Price, a priest and political writer, vigorously defended the American Revolution in 1784, calling it "the revolution in favor of universal liberty" (1784), which opened up a new era in the history of humankind, disseminated legitimate sentiments for human rights, incited a spirit of resistance to tyranny, provided a refuge for the oppressed all over the world and laid the foundation for establishing a country which might be the "base of liberty, science and virtue" (Li 2017).

Since it was against tyranny and for universal liberty, the American Revolution could not be a nationalist revolution in any racial (ethnic), linguistic, cultural, or religious sense. In fact, in resistance to oppression and pursuit of independence and liberty, the people of the 13 North American colonies fought to the death against the white British, who shared a nearly identical identity. Moreover, to secure victory, the British colonists in North America allied themselves with France, the arch-enemy of their mother country.

Such counter-nationalist values in the construction of the modern American nation-state have made American nationalism, from the very beginning, distinct from that pursued by the traditional nation-states of Western Europe as well as late-emerging nation-states. The elites in the traditional nation-states in Western Europe upheld the principles of "one-nation one-state" and "ethnicity-based boundary", and established their nation-states with "imaginary nations", "real nations", or

<sup>1</sup> There are an overwhelming number of studies on nationalism in China and abroad, as well as a large variety of theories and schools, so they are not reviewed here.

<sup>2</sup> Paine also claimed that the liberty defended by the Americans was far superior to that of ancient Greece and Rome because "the slavery of others is exterminated". Thomas Paine. 1837. *The Political Writings of Thomas Paine*. *Middletown* (1):131, 149. NJ: G. H. Evans

“half-imaginary, half-real” nations. In this process, a highly potent form of identity politics—nationalism—was fostered.<sup>3</sup> Late-emerging nation-states took up the torch of nationalism from the traditional nation-states (and also the colonizers) to varying degrees and made it more splendid by adapting it to their national conditions.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, the forces or principles that underpinned the construction of the United States of America can hardly be described as nationalistic, nor, for most of its subsequent history, are the forces or principles that stimulated its massive expansion and foreign intervention (at least not in the same way as Western European countries). But it is important to note that behind the veil of “undifferentiated liberalism and universalism”, there has always been a shadow of “Christian nationalism”<sup>5</sup> half-hidden and half-embodied because of its genetically-rooted Puritanism.<sup>6</sup> In times of growing national strength of the U.S., this Christian nationalism is often overshadowed by undifferentiated liberal nationalism or civic nationalism. By contrast, when the country undergoes a major political or social transformation, or encounters severe social crises or setbacks, a particular form of religious nationalism or ethnic nationalism arises.

In the twenty-first century, liberal or civic nationalism that has been relatively dominant in the United States since World War II, especially since the 1960s, has been severely challenged by American Christian nationalism—evangelical nationalism<sup>7</sup> under the influence of various internal and external crises. Evangelical nationalism internally advocates the integration of American national identity with Christian faith, proclaiming that “America is a Christian nation”, and externally pursues the

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of nationalism as high-intensity identity politics, see Zhou Shaoqing. 2020. Neoliberalism in the twenty-first century: origins, characteristics, and trends. *Internal Manuscripts of Chinese Social Sciences*, edited by the *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* 2020(6): 11–15.

<sup>4</sup> In India, (Hindu) nationalism is not only a powerful political force, but also a fiery religious belief.

<sup>5</sup> Christian nationalism can be traced back to the Middle Ages when attempts were made to unite the nations of Christendom to create pan-Christian nations. For much of the Middle Ages, the people in Western Europe tried, though unsuccessfully, to establish a religious-secular state that would encompass all Christians to replace the departed Roman Empire. In the era of nation-states, Christian nationalism refers to the ideology and practice of trying to fuse Christian religion and national identity. See Louis L. Snyder. 1990. *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, 282. St. James Press.

<sup>6</sup> Puritanism is the genetic code of the United States. On the one hand, it upheld individual freedom and religious liberty. On the other hand, it emphasized individual devotion and attachment to and spiritual dependence on God and moral discipline. Regarding themselves as “the chosen people of God”, Puritans sought to make their values and ways of life into those of the nation as a whole through church reform. The former eventually gave rise to liberal nationalism or so-called civic nationalism, while the latter became the ferment for Christian nationalism or evangelical nationalism.

<sup>7</sup> Evangelical nationalism herein refers to conservative religious and political nationalism in contrast to traditional liberal or civic nationalism. With an evangelical backbone and identity, it is a mix of the right-wing (i.e., “factions with conservative views from all walks of life”), the religious right (including so-called Old and New Rights), and even the alt-right, or more specifically, the (neo-)conservatism integrating many forces. It is actually the nationalist turn of contemporary American conservatism, or rather its merger with nationalism, that has prompted the former religious evangelicalism, which aimed at transforming society and influencing the national political agenda, to make a full-scale shift towards state nationalism—evangelical nationalism, which aims to seize state power and subsequently shape government and society with evangelical Christian values. The term “evangelical nationalism” does not mean that all evangelical Protestants are supporters or adherents of evangelical nationalism. In fact, a number of evangelical Protestants are liberal, and many non-Christians are strong supporters of evangelical nationalism.

“America First” and isolationist foreign policy. Its formation and development mark a drastic change in the traditional political and social ecosystem of the United States.

## Methodology

This paper employs historical and comparative methods to clarify the characteristics of American evangelical nationalism based on a historical review and to define Trump’s rise to power as a sign of the formation of American evangelical nationalism. It then predicts the development trends of American evangelical nationalism through the comparison and perspective of multiple nationalisms in the United States.

## Results and discussion

### The early political and social activities of evangelical Christians

#### Connotations and major tenets of evangelicalism

The word “evangelical” originates from the Greek word “gospel”, meaning good news. Historians believe that William Tyndale, a leader in the Protestant Reformation, was the first to record the English word “evangelical”. In 1531, Tyndale wrote in a commentary: “He exhorteth them to proceed constantly in the evangelical truth.” According to the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, the famous Reformer Martin Luther first used the Latinized form of the word “evangelium” to describe Protestant churches that were separated from the Catholic Church.

Evangelicalism took shape in the eighteenth century. According to Catherine Brekus, a religious historian at Harvard Divinity School, the eighteenth-century Protestants “gradually created a new kind of faith” known as evangelicalism today. But even before the eighteenth century, Protestant reformers used the word to describe their faith. The three basic characteristics of evangelical Christians in the eighteenth century were the emphasis on direct personal communication with God, the practice of being born again, and the advocacy of gospel propagation worldwide. During this time, there was an emergence of theologians and evangelists who were committed to the evangelical movement, such as Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and later on, Charles Spurgeon.

Until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most of Protestants in the United States could be identified as evangelicals. Later, there was a stark division among Protestants around issues such as the truthfulness of the Bible—taking it literally or metaphorically and school teaching of evolution, etc. Those Protestants who leaned toward liberalism or modernism formed the mainline Protestants, while those who leaned toward conservatism were classified as fundamentalists, most of whom were considered evangelical Christians (Olson 2004). During and after World

War II, evangelicals became increasingly organized. The Youth for Christ and the National Association of Evangelicals were founded during this period.

Evangelical doctrines have five essential characteristics: 1) believing in “being born again” or a “new birth” by repenting and converting; 2) believing in the infallible Bible as the Word of God and its final authority for Christians; the National Association of Evangelicals declares that “we believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God”; 3) stressing Jesus’s crucifixion and its salvation; 4) insisting on propagating the gospel globally; the most typical example in this regard is Billy Graham, who is said to have converted more than 3 million people to Christianity; and 5) believing in eschatology, with the majority believing in the second coming of Christ and the rapture.

It is noteworthy that while evangelicalism has relatively straightforward lineage, organization and tenet, it is not easy in practice to tell “who is a true evangelical”. The religious historian George Marsden once teased in the 1950s and 1960s that an evangelical Christian was “anyone who likes Billy Graham.” But when Billy Graham was asked to define the term in the late 1980s, he replied, “Actually, that’s a question I’d like to ask somebody else.” As it turned out, even America’s most prominent evangelical preachers could not describe what exactly the term meant. To the pollster, evangelical is a sociological term; to the pastor, it is a denominational or doctrinal academic term; and to the politician, it is a synonym for a white Christian Republican (Merritt 2015). In reality, some believed that all conservative Protestants are evangelicals. Some held that evangelicals are not all fundamentalists because of the focus on academic research, the emphasis on cooperation among denominations, and the concern about social care and social responsibility. Others argued that Catholics cannot be described as evangelicals on the ground that evangelical is a Protestant term arising out of disagreement with Catholicism. The other reason why Catholics are not evangelical is that, while they accept the authority of the Bible, they also confer authority to the church and the Pope. Today, evangelicals and Catholics begin making alliances in some forms over shared concerns, primarily traditional marriage, opposition to abortion and protection of religious freedom. The term “evangelical Catholics” has emerged in practice accordingly.

American society is deeply divided over the question, “who is an evangelical?” An important reason is the variety of criteria used to define evangelical. From the broadest one of “confessing to being a born-again Christian” to the four stricter ones of “acknowledging the absolute authority of Scripture, highlighting the sacrifice of Jesus and His salvation for humanity, believing in the universal conversion to Christianity, and insisting on the influence of faith on public life”, these criteria reflect a spectrum of views within America’s religious conservatives.

As evangelical Christians have risen into an extremely important political and social force, the definition of evangelical has become a major issue affecting American elections, public opinions and public policy choices. According to scholarly estimates, evangelicals comprise 7% of the US population in the strictest terms or as much as 47% in the broadest terms. In general, about a quarter of the total US population is identified as evangelicals.

It is not the intention of this paper to define evangelical due to space limitations. It is important to note, however, that evangelicalism is not a clearly defined

denomination. Evangelicals exist in almost every Protestant denomination, including the Reformed, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Charismatic in particular. Historically, evangelicalism was a synonym for Christian revivalism, and in reality, it is used to describe the conservative masses or the religious right, or in some cases, all Christians. Therefore, it is evident that evangelicalism has a strong historical and practical influence.

In short, evangelical Christianity is a very complex religious, social and political phenomenon. It is, first and foremost, an important product of the Reformation. Over the centuries, evangelicalism has made important contributions to resisting the institutionalization of Catholicism and the Catholic oppression or restriction on personal freedom. However, with the progression of time, especially in the face of the powerful impact of secularism, evangelicalism has become closer and closer to Catholicism and even tended to merge with it in terms of the degree of organization, defense of traditional marriage and family, opposition to abortion, suppression of the rights of lesbian and gay people, and especially, defense of so-called “religious freedom”. This tendency shows that there is always, on the one hand, a solid self-sustaining endogenous force in “Christian America” and, on the other hand, a struggle between Christian nationalism and civic or liberal nationalism in the United States. The relative stability of the domestic political and social ecosystem of the United States depends largely on the balance of these two forces. With other variables being constant, Christian nationalism becomes actively involved, in either direct or indirect way, in political and social life whenever civic or liberal nationalism is overstretched.

Obviously, domestic politics in the United States has been overly “liberalized” since the beginning of the twenty-first century. During the successive years when Democratic Party rules, the freedom of abortion for women, legalization of homosexual marriage, and relatively liberal immigration policies have incited strong discontent among religious conservatives, especially evangelical Christians. This discontent, coupled with the decline in the economic and social status of the white population brought about by economic globalization, the influx of refugees caused by intervention or invasion of major powers, as well as terrorism, has eventually led evangelicals with significant social and political influence to the front stage of history. Furthermore, evangelicals merged with the Republican Party, a traditionally conservative party eager to find a new turnaround, forming the far-reaching Christian evangelical nationalism.

### **The early religious, political, and social activities of evangelicals**

The influence of evangelicals in the United States can be observed throughout American history, and the development from evangelicals and evangelicalism to evangelical nationalism has also gone through a long historical period. The early religious, political, and social activities of evangelicals were reflected in the religious revival movement known as the Great Awakening. Huntington quoted Gary Wells, saying that “religion has been at the center of our major political crises”. That was what happened. According to American historians, Protestantism has experienced four

so-called Great Awakenings, each of which has profoundly influenced and reshaped the course of American politics and society. It was evangelical Christians who led the way.

The First Great Awakening occurred in the 1830s and 1840s, as part of Pietism in continental Europe and evangelism in England and as a continuation of the European Reformation. Faced with the threat of rationalism of the Enlightenment and the rigorous formalism of the institutional church, conservative (evangelical) leaders such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield actively toured the colonies, passionately preaching and arguing on many theological assertions that influenced American politics and culture. They emphasized the “original sin” of humankind, believing that only by confessing their sins to God, seeking forgiveness and receiving God’s grace, could they be salvaged. They stressed that all people could build a connection directly with God and that religion should not be institutionalized, but rather individualized and casual. The movement of the revival of Christianity called for by Edwards and others rendered far-reaching political and social implications: the emphasis on personal direct communication with God legitimized a large number of sects that might have been considered “heretical”, objectively expanding religious freedom and increasing religious tolerance (the colonies thus attracted a large number of religiously persecuted people from Europe). Also, it promoted a sense of equality among the colonists. The democratization of church life contributed to the democratization of North America. In addition, the Great Awakening strengthened the connection and communication among the 13 North American colonies ideologically and politically. Although the resulting controversies led to the split of the colonies into New Lights and Old Lights, the Great Awakening, as the first major event shared by all the colonies, objectively injected a considerable impetus to the unification of the 13 colonies and the subsequent establishment of an independent nation. When discussing the impact of the Great Awakening on the American Revolution, Huntington quoted Harvard scholar Alan Hemmert: “The evangelical impulse was the avatar and instrument of a fervent American nationalism. In the evangelical churches of pre-Revolutionary America was forged that union of tribunes and people that was to characterize the early American Democracy. (1966)” At that time, the masses of Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Baptists, who represented nearly half the population of the United States of America, embraced “millenarianism”, and “these millenarians were the strongest supporters of the American Revolution.” (Huntington 2005).

It is worth noting that the original motivation for the Great Awakening was not to promote unity or union among colonists, let alone to establish a strong modern nation-state. Rather, it was, on the one hand, a response to the impact on religion by the spirit of science, reason, and logic brought by the European Enlightenment across the Atlantic, and on the other hand, to address problems such as low church attendance caused by the over-institutionalization of religion. However, in terms of results, the Great Awakening awakened more than just the religious devotion of the colonized people and strengthened more than just their religious beliefs. In the process of participating in religious revival, autonomy, equality and confidence in participation in public affairs and public moral reconstruction were significantly

boosted, and so was the American consciousness.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Great Awakening also fostered a habit of active, proactive participation in social and political affairs among the colonists. Since then, evangelicals have been an important and even decisive force in every major social, cultural and political event, or every major political and social transition.

After the First Great Awakening, American society experienced three more Great Awakenings in the 1820s and 1830s, 1890s, and the 1950s and 1960s respectively. Among them, the Great Awakening in the 1820s and 1830s prioritized the abolitionist movement on the agenda. The “evangelical and activist movement”, referred to as the Second American Revolution, eventually mobilized millions of people to join the cause of emancipating the enslaved Black people. The Great Awakening of the 1890s was “directly linked to the Populist and Progressive Party movements for social and political reform” and advocated “anti-trust measures, women’s suffrage, citizen initiative, citizen review, recall, alcoholic prohibition, railroad regulation and direct primary elections”. The Great Awakening of the 1950s and 1960s was closely linked to two political reform movements in the United States: the end of legal and institutional discrimination against and segregation of blacks, and the conservative reform movement of the 1980s–1990s (Huntington 2005).

Through a review of the political and religious (social) issues spurred by the four evangelical Great Awakenings, we find that as a significant political and social force, evangelicalism has two sides on political and social issues in almost every stage of history. The First Great Awakening pursued religious piety but inadvertently forged a secular “American consciousness”. In the dimension of religious piety, it emphasized the original sin of man and salvation only as a gift of God, and at the same time, the direct communication between individuals and God and the equality of human beings. The Second Great Awakening, on the one hand, “followed God” to abolish slavery, but on the other hand, defended slavery in the name of God.<sup>9</sup> The Third Great Awakening upheld the egalitarian notions of Populism and Progressivism, coupled with a widespread belief in the “superiority of American-born whites and the superiority of Protestants and especially Puritan morality”. The Fourth Great Awakening, while denouncing political and institutional racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans, sought new ways and approaches to maintain existing privileges. The dual character of the evangelical-led Great Awakenings profoundly shaped traditional American political and social culture. Left-wing or progressive forces carried on the defence for democracy, freedom and equality and gave rise to liberal nationalism, while the Republican, traditional and conservative beliefs, and Christian identity in particular, were inherited by right-wing or

<sup>8</sup> Huntington argued that the Great Awakening enabled “the first unifying experience for Americans, generating a sense of national, distinct from provincial, consciousness.” He quoted John Adams in 1818, saying that “the Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations.” Samuel Huntington. 2005. *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* December 5: 77. Simon & Schuster.

<sup>9</sup> Soldiers in the war, both North and South, sang “Glorified God”, believing they were fighting for “God’s” cause.



conservative forces and eventually developed into a religious nationalism marked by evangelicalism—evangelical nationalism.

### **The moral majority and its political practices: a preliminary exercise in evangelical nationalism**

As a result of the Fourth Great Awakening, racial segregation that had prevailed for nearly a century was outlawed. Thereafter, evangelicals and other conservative Christians pursued traditional white supremacy in the form of religious conservatism. As exemplified by the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court put an end to black-white segregation in (public) schools in the United States and declared the “separate but equal” doctrine unconstitutional. Following the ruling, Southern whites who did not want to attend the same schools as blacks fled public schools and established their own “segregated schools”—private schools for whites—typically under the name of tax-exempt religious schools. When evangelical Bob Jones University, with an explicit ban on interracial dating, was raided by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to lose its tax-exempt status, a Republican activist named Paul Weyrich, sponsored by segregationist beer baron Joseph Coors, formed a coalition with Southern religious leader Jerry Falwell and others, successfully lobbied for soft enforcement. Thus, the Moral Majority, known for its hard-line, conservative religious and moral views, was formed.

The Moral Majority was an interdenominational political organization with an evangelical backbone. It emerged amid the crisis of traditional Christian values caused by the post-1960s movements for civil rights, women’s rights and gay rights. The Moral Majority was directly motivated by judicial and legislative actions that were believed to “undermine” Christian family values, including a series of Supreme Court decisions such as allowing abortion for women and banning prayer in public schools, and the Senate’s March 1972 passing of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)<sup>10</sup> to promote gender equality. In the opinion of Falwell, a major leader of the Moral Majority, the Supreme Court’s ruling to legalize abortion was more destructive of their nation than any previous rulings. He also dismissed the nine justices who banned prayer in public schools as “idiots”, claiming that “it was the execution of power to wage war on Christians and against God almighty”. The ERA, which sought complete equality between men and women, would have wholly overturned Christian family values (Oginitz 1980).

Among various (judicial) challenges to Christian values, the most intolerable to religious conservatives, especially evangelicals, was the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. For them, the legalization of abortion, making it the law of the nation, was not only “offensive, barbaric, and rude”, but also a blasphemy against the precious works of God, who, in their view, created man in His own image. In short, the *Roe v. Wade* decision made it impossible for many conservative

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<sup>10</sup> After being passed by the Senate, the bill needed to be ratified by state legislatures within 7 years. The deadline for ratification was later extended to June 1982, but the bill did not receive the necessary majority ratification from 38 states until 2020.

Christians, especially evangelicals, to remain silent. Many of them realized that the only way to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* decision was to unite in the political arena (Banwart 2013).

However, obstacles to the political arena were tremendous for evangelicals and other religious conservatives. First, for a long time, the religious conservatives represented by evangelicals “have always labeled politics as dirty and thought people should stay away from it”. Second, for much of the twentieth century, evangelicals and other religious conservative cultures were outside the mainstream of society, so it was somewhat impractical to mobilize the faithful to participate in political activities. Third, the tradition of separation between church and state in American society constituted a “natural firewall” that prevented evangelicals and other religious conservatives from engaging in public political activities. Nevertheless, in the face of “growing social and moral decline and decadence and undisguised apostasy from God in America”, religious conservative leaders such as Falwell were determined to change the tradition of non-participation and even aversion to political participation, and to unite and lead the faithful to reclaim “America under God or Christian America” through practical action. The religious conservative leaders thus embarked on a new journey of open and direct politicization of evangelicalism.

To maximize all the forces that could be mobilized, the Moral Majority set aside sectarian controversies and differences. It took the initiative to admit conservatives from the Protestant Christian, Mormon, Catholic, and even Jewish communities (whose leadership included the Catholic Paul Weyrich and the Jewish Howard Phillips,<sup>11</sup> in addition to the evangelical Falwell) and rally them under the banner of opposition to the legalization of abortion, feminism, homosexuality, and the ERA. The Moral Majority carefully crafted topics and discourses to garner support from non-religious voters, social conservatives, and the general public. In some cases, they cunningly replaced anti-abortion, anti-gay, and anti-ERA expressions with “pro-family” or “save family” rhetoric, calling on people to “protect the family”. According to Falwell, the “desire for positive family values” in the governmental agenda should not be seen as “theocracy”, or as a religious agenda alone, but as a legitimate social and moral imperative.

In other cases, the Moral Majority framed its conservative religious and social agenda as political patriotism. Falwell staged massive “I Love America” rallies of the faithful during the Bicentennial of the United States in 1976. At one of the rallies, Falwell said that the potential flaws in America in the past had now been corrected. He assured the government that there were still many patriots who loved the country and supported the work of the government and military. Falwell also warned voters, including evangelicals and other religious conservatives, that “America’s success depends largely on trust and faith in God,” claiming that America had a divine mission to bring freedom and salvation to the rest of the world. However, that

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<sup>11</sup> For much of the time before that, not only were Protestants and Catholics in conflict over politics and many religious and social issues, but also evangelicals themselves were divided into hostile fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and new evangelicals, among others. Wilcox. 2003. Laying up treasures in Washington and heaven: the Christian right in evangelical politics in the twentieth century and beyond. *OAH Magazine of History* 17January: 23.

task would never be accomplished if the nation forgot its covenant with the Lord. “If God lifts His hand from America, it’s all over, and if America loses her freedom, the free world is gone,” Falwell said. God’s ultimate purpose for the nation, he said, was that “America should bless the world” (Williams 2010).

Apart from these “unification” tactics, the Moral Majority tried to foster a “united front” with the conservatives on traditional (political) conservative issues. To this end, they directed attention to the welfare programs of the federal government, arguing that welfare checks reward lazy people who refuse to work. Those formulating welfare policies were “secular humanists refusing to live and work according to Biblical principles,” and sought to tax hard-working Protestants, some of whom started their own business, in order to feed those who disregarded Protestant morals and ethics, Falwell believed. In addition, the Moral Majority favored tax cuts and increased defense spending, advocated continued support for Israel, and strongly resisted communism in terms of foreign policy. These claims and appeals have strong political conservative overtones, despite Falwell’s insistence that the Moral Majority is concerned about morality rather than politics.

Through such efforts, the Moral Majority quickly brought together millions of members into their camp, including evangelicals and other religious conservatives, as well as political and social conservatives. Led by Falwell, etc., religious conservatives represented by evangelicals entered the political arena with their heads held high. In their first political contest, i.e., the 1980 presidential election, the Moral Majority acted quickly to raise money, lobby the faithful and encourage them to register to vote. Thanks to a combination of forces, including the Moral Majority, Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in a landslide.<sup>12</sup> After Reagan’s election, members of the Moral Majority were extremely excited, insisting that it was the strong network of support mobilized by religious conservatives such as evangelicals that gave Reagan a landslide victory over Carter who was trying to win a second term.<sup>13</sup> The Moral Majority thus had reason to believe that the Reagan administration would reward them by banning abortion, restoring prayer in public schools, eliminating special rights for homosexuals, re-establishing traditional gender roles for men and women, and preventing the ERA from taking effect. Some members even compared Reagan to Moses, saying that he could lead them “out of the wilderness of iniquity” (Buursma 1980).

After Reagan took the helm at the White House, the Moral Majority chose to fight on two fronts. On the one hand, they acted directly to lobby Congress members for the constitutional amendment Human Life Bill<sup>14</sup> that would overturn the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. At the same time, they actively took actions in San

<sup>12</sup> In fact, it was not until a few months before the election that evangelicals and others finally chose Reagan as their proxy. In their view, though not perfect, Reagan would certainly be better than Carter, who during his reign, had taken few effective legislative or executive orders to soothe evangelicals.

<sup>13</sup> While it is difficult to determine the extent to which Falwell’s Moral Majority played a role in Reagan’s success, it is certain that the moral issues of importance to Falwell and his constituents became an integral part of the Reagan Revolution. Michael Sean Winters. 2012. *God’s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the Religious Right* 4. New York: Harper Collins.

<sup>14</sup> The values espoused by the Moral Majority are “life begins at conception and fetus should be regarded as human being.”

Francisco, trying to criminalize homosexuality. On the other hand, they pressured President Reagan through various channels to restore traditional values somehow. Due to various reasons, however, Reagan did not want to make a difference in the area of social reform. Soon after taking office, he signaled to the Moral Majority that his immediate priorities were tax and economic reform, rather than reshaping values. Of course, in response to promises made during the election, the Departments of Justice and Treasury under the Reagan administration reversed, in January 1982, the IRS decision to revoke the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University. However, the action was soon met with fierce criticism. Critics argued that it was using taxpayers' money to support Bob Jones University, which had openly promoted racial discrimination. In further response to the fierce political opposition, President Reagan then sought legislation from Congress to ban tax exemptions for schools that practice racial discrimination, a move that was regarded as a resounding slap across the face of religious conservative forces, including the Moral Majority (Haberman 2005). Moreover, during Reagan's presidency, two Senate constitutional amendments against abortion were never voted on. A constitutional amendment to restore prayer in public schools was defeated for lack of sufficient votes, an outcome that was clearly linked to Reagan's passive attitude or his distance from the issue. Perhaps most unacceptable to the Moral Majority was Reagan's nomination of Sandra D. O'Connor to the Supreme Court in the spring of 1981. O'Connor had been criticized and rebuked by many Christian right-wing leaders for supporting the passing of the ERA and voting in favor of abortion rights. She was the first female justice of the Supreme Court.

In fact, until Reagan left office, the Moral Majority's hopes for "social reform" or "values reshaping" had not substantially progressed. From seeing Reagan as Moses to being absolutely disillusioned with him, the Moral Majority was acutely aware of the distance between religious fervor and political reality. They deeply felt that the rules of the political game were far more complex than religion based on piety and passion alone. In 1989, the Moral Majority disbanded and Reagan's presidency ended.

Although the Moral Majority existed for only a decade as a representative of religious conservative forces such as American evangelicals, its impact on American politics and society has been enormous and profound. First, the Moral Majority and its movement overtly politicized the religious conservative forces represented by evangelicals. Previously, evangelicals and other religious conservatives tended to view politics as a "dirty game" and avoided getting involved with it. For the first time, the Moral Majority openly mobilized Christian voters in a general election and made politics a priority on the church's agenda. Throughout the 1970s, the Moral Majority became politically active, participating in elections, supporting conservative-leaning candidates, and creating lists of "the ungodly" to prevent them from being elected. Second, the Moral Majority brought religion back into the public sphere: not only did Christianity rise into an important public issue, but also religious piety became important for measuring the legitimacy of public decisions. Third, the Moral Majority's positions on abortion, feminism, gay rights, and other issues related to Christian family values sparked a backlash from the American

left, liberals, and other progressives. These groups then became more aggressive in defending their views, which thereafter led to the intensifying of the “culture war”. Fourth, the Moral Majority has established a political paradigm of pursuing religious nationalism (evangelical nationalism) with the “religious right”, adding a new factor of uncertainty to the development of church-state relations and party politics in the United States.

Finally and most importantly, the Moral Majority and its movement also intensified the conflict between traditional American conservatism and liberalism around the issue of religion. In this process, religious conservatives represented by evangelicals chose the Republican Party as the spokesman for their own interests, and since then, evangelical voters have become the largest vote bank and the strongest supporters of the Republican Party. Meanwhile, the Republican Party also nurtured and utilized evangelical voters or conservative Christians as an essential basis for its political activities. All had a significant impact on subsequent political developments and church-state relations in the United States.

In short, the emergence of the Moral Majority was a major event in the history of American political, religious, social and cultural development, as well as race relations. On the surface, its formation embodied the response to the impact of political, social, and cultural transformations that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. In the opinions of those religious conservatives including evangelicals, the pervasive lack of sexual morality in the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, homosexual and young people, the Supreme Court’s ruling to ban group prayer and Bible reading in public schools, the legalization of abortion, and the permission for teaching evolutionism in schools, among others, seriously undermined the traditional moral values espoused by Christianity. At deeper levels, its emergence was a momentous omen of the rise of white nationalism in the United States. After the Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in 1954, white parents who did not want their children to share schools with blacks chose to set up religious private schools as a harbor for continued racial segregation and white supremacy. After the enactment of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and other acts that prohibited discrimination, some well-known Christian educational institutions, such as Bob Jones University, stubbornly clung to racial discrimination. Bob Jones University declared that racial distinction is a biblical imperative as the Bible clearly distinguishes between the sexes and gender roles. When the IRS under the Carter administration threatened to revoke the tax-exempt status of overtly racially discriminatory religious educational institutions, it drew fierce opposition from these institutions in justification for “religious freedom”. Obviously, whether it is the establishment of religious schools that are segregated from colored ethnic groups such as blacks, or the continuation of the policy of racial segregation in existing religious schools, the underlying purpose was to restore or preserve the white racism that was based on the regime that persisted for over 200 years. They acted under the guise of religion or “religious freedom” because the doctrine of racial superiority was unsustainable under the new historical conditions.

There is every indication that the Moral Majority flourishing in the 1970s and 1980s is an important exercise in or attempt at evangelical nationalism. However, the evangelical nationalism upheld by religious conservatives such as evangelicals

did not produce the desired results, due to the enormous influence of the post-1960s left-wing and progressive movements, combined with the thorny economic problems faced by the United States, especially with the fact that the rich-poor divide, identity politics, and refugee crisis brought about by globalization and alter-globalization were not prominent. From the perspective of the evolvement of party politics in the United States, the Republican and Democratic parties were far less divided than they are today—as evidenced by the fact that some Democratic legislators supported the “pro-life” constitutional amendment proposed by the Moral Majority, and moreover, by the fact that Reagan received 95% of the vote in the 1984 presidential election. Under the historical circumstance when party politics functioned normally, both Democrats and Republicans have largely adhered to their traditional values—even though they have adjusted or changed, neither has deviated significantly from their consistent values—this is why the Moral Majority’s attempt to frame the Republican Party and President Reagan as agents of their values failed. When the mainstream of political conservatism, the Republican Party, refused to become a proxy for religious conservatives such as evangelicals, so-called evangelical nationalism could only remain at the civic level, a dream of some politicians and religious believers. This by no means implies that the Republican Party and its President Reagan during the Moral Majority period were strictly neutral on the claims of religious conservatives such as evangelicals. In fact, pressured by economic issues, the diverse electorate, Democratic control of the Senate, and the progressive left, President Reagan appointed a large number of conservative federal judges while intentionally ignoring the Moral Majority’s claims to rebuild the nation’s morality. These judges, along with Reagan’s consistent support for Christian family values, played an important role in the subsequent rise of religious conservatism and even the eventual formation of evangelical nationalism. This is an important reason why religious conservatives represented by evangelicals have consistently contributed two-thirds of their votes to the Republican Party since the Reagan era. To some extent, the Moral Majority laid the historical foundation for the marriage between the Republican Party and evangelicals. In the following decades, the Republican Party and conservative evangelical Christians worked together in politics and values. The Republican Party “defended” and even promoted evangelical values through the political arena, while evangelicals gave the Republican Party firm vote support, until the two fully merged into evangelical nationalism. In this sense, the Moral Majority movement is considered as an important exercise in evangelical nationalism.

### **Trump’s election: formation of evangelical nationalism**

The twenty-first century has seen dramatic changes in the world as well as in the United States. Such changes have, on various levels, made possible the ideal of evangelical nationalism sought by the Moral Majority back then. From a global perspective, as global revivalism becomes intense, religious nationalism in various forms flourishes around the world, providing critical external conditions and demonstrations for evangelical nationalism. From a domestic perspective, under the combined influence of neo-liberalism, secularization, globalization, capitalism,

materialism, technocracy, and “historical neo-nihilism”,<sup>15</sup> the political and social life in the United States has been plunged into chaos, including rich-poor divide, racial conflict, elite polarization, rising populism, evaporation of government prestige, loss of importance to family and marriage, decline in the social influence and the shaping power of the traditional moral and religious communities. Among them, the most serious is the clash over values or so-called “culture war” and the polarization between the rich and the poor.

In terms of the clash over values or “culture war”, equality has been considerably realized for minorities in the economic and social spheres with the advancement of the civil rights revolution since the 1960s. The focus of left-wing and progressive camps in the United States has gradually shifted from the improvement of the economic and social conditions of minorities and the white lower-middle classes to the cultural sphere, in particular to the “cultural equality” for minorities, women and the homosexual community. Guided by this ideology, over the decades, not only have minority cultures, including those of blacks, gained traction in reality, but also with the help of the new American Revolution historians, blacks and other minorities have won a major victory in the reckoning of America’s founding history and the redistribution of “historical property” (Nash 2005). Under the framework of the new American Revolution historiography, blacks, Indians, and other minorities in the United States have, unprecedentedly received “retroactive recognition” in founding the nation as whites. At the same time, there has been remarkable progress in the right of women to abortion and equality for the gay community, with the latter gaining equal marriage rights. In addition, immigration policies have been more relaxed during this period. All these changes have seriously undermined traditional Christian values and American national identity in the opinion of religious conservatives such as evangelicals.

In terms of the rich-poor divide, the triumphant economic globalization since the 1970s has led to a massive exodus of manufacturing from the United States. This move seriously threatens the survival and livelihood of the lower and middle classes of less educated whites with relatively homogeneous labor skills. In the 2010s, social recession spread to the white working class.

“The opioid epidemic has hollowed out rural white working-class communities across the United States. There were more than 60,000 deaths from drug overdose in 2016, twice the number of annual deaths from traffic accidents in the region. Life expectancy for white men in the United States declined between 2013 and 2014, which is rarely seen in developed countries. The percentage of white working-class children growing up in single-parent households also rose from 22% in 2000 to 36% in 2017.”(Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru 2017)

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<sup>15</sup> This is most typical of the extreme left wing of the Black Lives Matter movement. They invoked the ideas of “freedom” and “equality” beyond time and space. They vilified the founding fathers, destroyed statues, inscriptions and other historical symbols, and took an ahistorical view and evaluation of American historical figures and traditional cultural symbols, which has seriously shaken the foundation of the United States. The author referred to these attitudes and practices as “historical neo-nihilism”.

At the same time, farmers have been left in the lurch by high estate taxes and environmental protection legislation.

Once again, under the pressure of various contradictions and conflicts mentioned above, there has been a marked nationalist turn in American conservatism since 2015, which is indispensable to the eventual formation of evangelical nationalism.

American conservatism is a complex of various ideologies and ideas, of which libertarianism and traditionalism are two structural components, referred to as “liberals” and “virtuals” respectively. For most of the post-World War II history, mainstream conservatives in the United States remained largely intact in the face of nationalists.<sup>16</sup> However, as the situation at home and abroad further evolves, the conservative establishment has, at least since 2015, begun to be severely challenged by neo-nationalism or so-called patriotism. Neo-nationalists, identified by Trumpism, have aimed their struggle against both classical liberalism and the conservative establishment. They criticized the conservative establishment for internally allowing the Democratic administration’s “unlimited” multiculturalism to impact the status of the English language, traditional American history and schooling, loosening the standard of uniformity on the issue of immigrant integration, which has led to difficulties in integrating a large number of immigrant communities, such as Latinos and Asians; and completely abandoning Christian values on issues of homosexuality and abortion, which undermined families as the foundation of American society. There has been an influx of refugees from failed states due to frequent wars and exportation of values, causing serious damage to the national interests and national security of the United States. In addition, neo-nationalists criticized the conservative establishment for long-standing stubborn adherence to outdated “politically correct” values.

It is noteworthy that, while neo-nationalists were critical of the conservative establishment, there were also voices echoing “positive nationalism” within the conservative camp. The *National Review*, a magazine founded by the conservative establishment, advocated “a realistic and robust nationalism”. Among them, Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru said, “nationalism can be a healthy and constructive force. Since nationalistic sentiments enjoy immense support and last long, it would be wiser to cultivate that kind of nationalism than to attempt to move beyond it”(Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru 2017). Of course, conservatives also emphasized that this nationalism is not an exclusionary nationalism based on “racial origin”, let alone one obsessed with “blood and land”, but a “patriotic nationalism” based on constitutional values. Lowry and Ponnuru concluded:

“we should instead favor a broad-minded nationalism that takes account of the nation’s idealism and rationally calculates its economic and foreign-policy interests. Nationalism should be tempered by a modesty about the power of government, lest an aggrandizing state wedded to a swollen nationalism run out of control; by religion, which keeps the nation from becoming the first

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<sup>16</sup> After the end of the Cold War, some traditionalists in the conservative camp pioneered “America First”, questioning America’s interventionist and “global democracy” goals and fearing that immigrants from the Third World would change America’s Christian historical and cultural traditions. Nevertheless, obviously, this nationalist overtone has failed to influence the conservative mainstream.



allegiance; and by a respect for other nations that undergirds a cooperative international order. Nationalism is a lot like self-interest. A political philosophy that denies its claims is utopian at best and tyrannical at worst, but it has to be enlightened. The first step to conservatives' advancing such an enlightened nationalism is to acknowledge how important it is to our worldview to begin with."(Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru 2017)

The views of the two editors and columnists of the *National Review* essentially represent the attitude of the conservative camp to the challenge from neo-nationalism. In this way, after the conservative reformulation, neo-nationalism has emerged as a member of the conservative coalition.

Faced with dramatic social reforms and changes, especially the historical opportunity to nationalize conservatism, religious conservatives represented by evangelicals lost no time in leaping onto the American political and social stage, as in every period of political and social transition in history. Continuing the "politicized" line of the Moral Majority, evangelicals explicitly proposed to fight a "fierce and protracted cultural war" in the United States. Politically, they sought to "bring evangelical Protestants into American social and political life", "lead them to the Republican Party", and "elect conservatives to government". It is noteworthy that in this contest, religious conservatives represented by evangelicals focused not only on revitalizing Christianity, but also on comprehensively transforming American character in politics, economy, culture, and foreign affairs, so as to ultimately return America to Christianity or "God". Therefore, the evangelical camp was not satisfied with the conservative establishment's claim of "positive nationalism", but aimed to "take America back for God" or "restore Christian America" through "a fierce culture war".

It is worth noting that, as a remarkably complex, highly politicized, religious and social conservative group, evangelicals vary greatly in their specific goals. The vast majority aim to restore the dominance or predominance of Christian culture in America, appearing as the special status of Christianity declared in federal law, erection of Christian symbols in public places, and state funding for church schools and other related institutions, of whom about 20% seek a political theology that blends American identity with ultra-conservative Christianity. In addition, adherents of Huntington's conception of Anglo-Protestant culture pursue a Protestant America in the sense of culture and values. What these three groups have in common is that they do not openly claim a white Christian nation, but often expose the narrative logic of white Christian nationalism (WCN) when describing the ideal of Christian or Protestant America in their minds.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Huntington is hardly an exception

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<sup>17</sup> A more popular version is that the United States is a Christian nation founded by (white) Christians (settlers), with laws and institutions based on Bible (i.e., Protestant) Christianity. The United States is a providentially ordained nation whose great wealth and power derive from God. It is simultaneously given a mission: propagating religion, freedom, and civilization—by force if necessary. But as non-whites, non-Christians and non-Americans increasingly appear on the American soil, this mission is threatened. Thus, white Christians have to "take their country back". Philip Gorski. 2021. White Christian nationalism: the deep story behind the Capitol insurrection, *Berkley Forum* 22 January. <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/white-christian-nationalism-the-deep-story-behind-the-capitol-insurrection>, 12 October 2021 retrieved.

in this regard.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the alt-right is much more explicit about the pursuit of American national identity or character. They defined America directly as a “white nation”,<sup>19</sup> arguing that restoring or rebuilding American national identity is about “reclaiming white America”.

In the 2016 presidential election, which was seen as a “contest over the direction of the country or the definition of its identity and character”, evangelicals, supported by nationalized Republicans, succeeded in putting self-proclaimed “nationalist” Trump in the presidency, in conjunction with various religious and cultural conservatives in American society, white supremacists, as well as blue-collar workers and farmers whose interests were harmed by globalization and domestic policies. Trump racked up a shocking 81% of evangelical voters in the election. In return for the enthusiastic support of religious conservatives, especially evangelicals, and nationalized Republican supporters, Trump fully pursued evangelical Christian nationalism after taking the helm at the White House. He included a number of evangelical Christians in key cabinet positions; issued an executive order on “defending religious freedom” to allow churches and other religious groups to participate in political activities; brought Bible study to the White House<sup>20</sup>; consulted closely with evangelical leaders when making important decisions; appointed three conservative Supreme Court justices to guard Christian values; hosted 100 evangelical leaders and their families at the White House to show that the White House and evangelicals are like a “family” and so on. Trump vowed to be the greatest “Christian president” in American history.

Following the release of the executive order on “defending religious freedom”, Trump used “religious freedom” as a grip to introduce a series of laws and executive orders that clamped down on women’s rights, abortion rights and gay rights. These laws and executive orders have cheered religious conservatives including evangelicals up. “All of my policy recommendations and political ideas based on Bible study have come to fruition with Trump,” declared Pastor Ralph Drollinger, who led the Bible study at the White House. At the same time, the Trump administration tightened the control over immigration with explicit legislation banning immigrants from specific countries and building a wall along the US-Mexico border. Trump’s immigration policies have been enthusiastically praised by nativist forces with an undercurrent of white supremacy.

Externally, the Trump administration openly pursued an “America First” strategy, and went to great lengths to justify it with conflicting policies and ideas such as isolationism, interventionism, and nativism. As a president carried into the White House by conservative groups such as evangelicals, Trump lived up to expectations. Through a series of domestic and foreign policies and concepts and the political pronouncements of conservative Christian concepts with national mobilization at a certain scale, American evangelism and other conservatism have evolved from a

<sup>18</sup> Huntington’s narrative of the “settlers” is similar to that of WCN.

<sup>19</sup> When necessary, they also resort to mobilizing terms such as “culture” or “Christianity”.

<sup>20</sup> “Faith is deeply embedded into the history of our country, the spirit of our founding and the soul of our nation,” Trump said at the presidential inauguration ceremony, “we will not allow people of faith to be targeted, bullied or silenced anymore.”

religious conservative force to a full-fledged nationalism. Evangelical nationalism is a new expression of American national (ethnic) nationalism in the twenty-first century.

### Trends in evangelical nationalism

The rise of evangelical nationalism is of great significance in the American history of nation-state development and national governance. It marks a major change in the traditional political landscape of the United States in which liberalism and conservatism have been contradictory but intertwined and mutually supportive since World War II. Then, is evangelical nationalism an episodic, transitional phenomenon? Or is it a directional phenomenon that has since reshaped the American political landscape? To answer this question, we need to return to several vital conditions or the historical contexts for its genesis.

Firstly, evangelical nationalism is a product of responding to dramatic changes in the internal and external environments of the United States. Due to the resonance of many factors, the United States has been confronted with multiple internal and external challenges since the early twenty-first century. Domestically, as the rich-poor divide intensifies, the livelihood of the middle and lower classes has been continually degraded (making the United States the “most unequal developed country”). Meanwhile, domestic political polarization becomes severe due to racial or ethnic conflicts coupled with the culture war. Internationally, the United States’ national reputation and international influence or international status have declined as a result of the longstanding and ineffective promotion of Western values and the rapid rise of economies such as China and India. Under the historical conditions that the traditional policies and ideologies of both parties were unable to make an effective response, evangelical nationalism, which mixed elements of conservatism and evangelicalism, has come to the forefront of history.

Secondly, evangelical nationalism, which is intensely strategic and responsive to reality, is a derivative of traditional American conservatism under new historical conditions. In the long-term history, the mainstream conservative ideology in the United States has constantly adjusted to the historical and social context. Irving Kristol, known as the godfather of neo-conservatism, said that “nationalism is one of the three core pillars of conservatism.”<sup>21</sup> The changing circumstances in the 2020s have prompted some conservatives to believe that it is necessary to introduce nationalism moderately to correct and equilibrate the imbalanced political and social ecosystem. Following Trump’s election, pro-Israeli conservative David Brog and Israeli Bible scholar Yoram Hazony unanimously hailed the “rebirth of conservatism”, arguing that a new conservative movement is coming into view, both in terms of intellectual system and political tradition. They also emphasized that “nationalism is not a betrayal of conservative ideology, but a return to it” (Hazony 2016).

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<sup>21</sup> The other two pillars suggested by Kristol are religion (Christianity) and economic growth. Yoram Hazony and David Brog, 2016. The nationalist spirit of 2016: a conservative spring. *National Review* 7 December.

At the same time, the conservative establishment has been actively reinterpreting nationalism to fit the new realities facing conservatism. In some sense, evangelical nationalism is an essential return for religious conservatives, while for the conservative establishment, it is a strategic conservatism.

Thirdly, against a more distant historical background, evangelical nationalism represents the emergence of traditional white racism in the guise of Christianity in a new era. It is well known that the United States has a deep history of racial oppression, segregation and discrimination. Until 1954, when the Supreme Court declared racial segregation unconstitutional, the United States was a nation of white dominance guaranteed by institutions and systems.<sup>22</sup> After racial segregation was outlawed, those whites who continued to wallow in racial superiority began to look for new regime or institutional support. Christianity and the constitutionally guaranteed “religious freedom” became a highly desirable alternative.<sup>23</sup> Hence, while evangelical Christianity is a universal religion that definitely transcends racial or ethnic boundaries in a purely religious sense, evangelicalism or evangelical nationalism has been a critical habitat or vehicle for white racists or white supremacists, both historically and in the present time when Trumpism is very influential. This is why the day after Trump was elected president, many on the right, including evangelicals, hailed “Trump’s nationalism” as “a victory for white America” (Zhou 2018).

Fourthly, from the perspective of the bifurcation of civic and ethnic nationalism, both civic and ethnic nationalist values exist to varying degrees in any country that has so far “deserved the name of modern nation”. Civic nationalism tends to be relatively strong when a country is progressing or ascending, and conversely, there is relatively strong ethnic nationalism. This is also the case in the United States. As a nation of immigrants, the United States lacks the traditional, continuous ethnic base of Western European nation-states. In the time when the country is rising, civic nationalism is more prominent (at least at the level of legal texts). In the time of relative downturn, ethnic nationalism begins to rise—due to historical, religious (cultural), and political, especially ideological factors, the “burden” of formulating American ethnic nationalism has historically fallen on religious conservatives, represented by evangelicals. This is one of the major reasons why Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, authors of *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, referred to white Christian nationalism as “ethnic Christianity”.

Finally, from the perspective of modernity, the emergence of evangelical nationalism is a preview of the American crisis of modernity. Historically, godliness-based individualism, liberalism and rationalism, as proclaimed in the First Great Awakening by Puritanism and Evangelicalism, broke down the rigid, institutionalized Christian barriers, and laid a solid foundation for the creation of the United States of America and its tremendous growth over the next 200 years. In this process,

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<sup>22</sup> Before the Civil War, whites were in absolute dominance both in regime and institutionally. After the Civil War, as colored people, such as blacks, gained formal citizenship, whites turned to Jim Crow laws to perpetuate their racial privilege. In this process, Southern evangelical leaders went out of their way to use God or Bible creeds to provide arguments of legitimacy for this systematic racial segregation.

<sup>23</sup> In the 2016 campaign and the subsequent Trump administration, “religious freedom” became a highly desirable and powerful tool of discourse for white racists in the guise of evangelicals.

however, the liberated and individualized Protestants did not always think, act, or perceive Christianity in accordance with their God-given “reason”, but increasingly embraced secularism, skepticism, agnosticism, and even atheism.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, materialism, consumerism, absolute freedom, and egalitarianism have been spreading in American social life—equal rights for gays and lesbians until full legalization of homosexual marriage, feminism and even full freedom of abortion, and changes in traditional family ethics and values, along with the rise of decadence marked by the loss of the sense of direction, worth and purpose in life, etc. have aroused strong resentment among evangelicals and other conservative Christians, Catholics, Jews and even conservative Islamists, who make up almost half the population. All these, combined with the cultural clashes and cultural identity problems brought about by globalization, have made the ongoing crisis of traditional lifestyles and values very clearly felt by the secular public.

It was under the above-said historical conditions that the religious conservative community, represented by evangelicals, came to the forefront of the history. Evangelicalism in this period was no longer the secularist religion that historically led the mainstream political and social culture and always corrected the country’s direction. Nevertheless, it still represented the traditional attributes of “Christian America” and the “inner spirit”<sup>25</sup> of American and Western culture as a whole. The revival of evangelical nationalism “reflects an existential crisis of American and Western culture” and “most profoundly expects a salvation of the soul that will save the West from the spiritual desert of materialism and technocracy, the banal life of capitalism”, and the “last man” at the end of history (Kong 2020). In this sense, the rise of evangelical nationalism is of significance to “American spiritual salvation”.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the conditions or historical background of the rise of evangelical nationalism in five dimensions: “response to dramatic changes in the internal and external environments”, “adjustment of traditional conservative strategies”, “revival of white racism”, “interplay between civic and ethnic nationalism”, and “crisis of American modernity”. Suppose the first two dimensions can be roughly categorized

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<sup>24</sup> According to surveys, about one-third of the people surveyed across the United States said they had “no religious affiliation”.

<sup>25</sup> The term is extracted from two articles. “To gain the cultural consciousness, a mystic spiritual power should be received on the real American soil and in the links between American families and society, and the transformation and conversion of their identity can thus be achieved by the revelation of such a spirit.” Kong Yuan. 2020. The nationalism turn of contemporary conservatism in the United States, *Chinese Journal of Foreign Theoretical Developments* (1):128, which is originated from “our American soil has been the burning ground upon which events inspired that forever bind us to one another, only those who know our history can develop this requisite memory, only those rooted on our soil can fuel these chords reverberating down to the present day. Our identity has never been defined by blood or clan, we are instead bound together by electric cords and inspired by mystic cords. Anyone can become an American, but to do so they must undergo a transformation through which they acquire an American spirit and send down roots into the soil from which this spirit first emerged.” David Brog. Roots of American Nationalism. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xNfChzwH3w>.

as “conditions and strategies”, and the last three as “identity and ultimate belief”—the development trend of evangelical nationalism can be estimated as follows: on the one hand, with the relative alleviation of internal and external conflicts, the corresponding adjustment of conservative strategies, and the growth of the civic nationalist camp in particular, the momentum of evangelical nationalism will further diminish (signified by the defeat of Trump among others). On the other hand, from the perspective of “identity and ultimate belief”, as a “Christian nation” underpinned by Christian culture and faith, the United States will see evangelical nationalism resilient, despite the relative alleviation of the identity problem, characterized by the culture war, in easing internal and external conditions. For the foreseeable future, as the pivot of American Christian society and an active defender of traditional values, evangelicals will keep on with the backbone force and flag bearer of evangelical nationalism, despite a number of problems, including member shrinkage (partly due to the withdrawal of young people) and internal severe conflicts. Evangelical nationalism will also continue to play an important role in the domestic and foreign affairs of the United States.

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## Comments

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