

Immigration, Christianity, Race, and the “American Dream” of Religious Freedom

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ABSTRACT

The idea of the United States as a haven for religious freedom serves as one foundational narrative for Americans' conception of themselves and of the United States. Scholars have shown, however, that the concept of religious freedom is inseparable from ideologies of both race and nationalism. In the U.S. specifically, ideologies of whiteness, Christianity, and nationalism intertwine and influence multiple areas of policy, especially immigration. This paper examines the inseparability of ideologies of race, religion, and nationalism in immigration policy by arguing that racist stereotypes influence the notion of who “counts” as a “proper” Christian immigrant in the minds of many communities and officials in the U.S. There is a long history behind this enmeshment of race, religion, and nationalism, but in the current moment, these connections have been thrown into stark relief as the Trump administration touts its ostensible commitment to promoting religious freedom of Christians, while taking actions on immigration that seriously harm the religious freedom of Christian immigrants. For religious groups and scholars who wish to understand and engage with U.S. immigration policy, analysis of this case study helps elucidate the ways that race, religion, and nationalism remain conflated in U.S. public imagination.

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I. THE “AMERICAN DREAM” OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The idea of the “American dream” is deeply rooted in the self-perception of many Americans in the United States, and in many Americans’¹ perception of the United States itself. One aspect of the “American dream,” as it is commonly understood, is the notion that the United States serves as a haven for religious freedom and escape from religious persecution. To be sure, the most widespread version of the “American dream” narrative is about economics: a person or family moves to the United States and builds a “good life” in the sense of obtaining sufficient material wealth and comfort. Nevertheless, when Americans in the United States talk about the “American dream,” they also frequently refer to immigrants’ and refugees’ quests for freedom in the U.S., specifically religious freedom. The narratives of a stalwart group of Separatist Pilgrims landing on the eastern shore at Plymouth Rock, Puritans founding the Massachusetts Bay Colony after harassment and oppression by the Church of England, and dissenters like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson extending freedom of worship beyond the Puritans’ own restrictions, are familiar to many a schoolchild in the U.S., and to adults as well.²

Steven Green has argued that the story of the United States as “a haven for religious freedom” functions in popular and civic narratives as a kind of “myth,”³ in the sense of an “identity-creating narrative.”⁴ In media publications, speeches of politicians, and grassroots dialogue, the idea of the

¹ In this essay I will use the term “Americans” to mean people who live in the United States, recognizing that the term can more widely, and more accurately, refer to all people living in the Americas.

² Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11-15. Steven K. Green, *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20-23.

³ Green, *Inventing a Christian America*, 34.

⁴ Green, *Inventing a Christian America*, 29.

United States as a place of religious freedom is widespread.⁵

Green does not use the term “myth” in the colloquial sense; he is not arguing that religious freedom is not a true concept or that it does not in fact shape thought and practice in the United States. Yet it *is* the case, as scholars of law and religion have pointed out, that “religious freedom” is a vague and overloaded term, haunted by centuries of colonialist thought and practices and integrated into hierarchical social structures. These structures of unequal power allow European Christians to define both “religion” and “freedom” in ways that promote dominance of their own commitments and values and render impossible the religious/lifeways⁶ claims and practices of colonized and marginalized groups, especially those marginalized based on perceived racial categories.

This essay takes up conversations about the complexity of the ideas of “religion” and “religious freedom” in public life in the United States, examining how the myth of the United States as a haven of religious freedom intersects with ideologies of race and racial belonging to shape immigration policy. It specifically addresses the second Trump administration’s purported focus on religious freedom for Christians. Trump and his administration have professed commitments both to promoting religious freedom and to rooting out “anti-Christian bias,” in domestic policy as well as the execution and enforcement of immigration laws. Yet the administration’s executive actions on immigration and refugee policy have in fact harmed Christians by

⁵ Cullen, *The American Dream*, especially pp. 3-6.

⁶ I use a double term here to acknowledge that there is no term for “religion” in some Indigenous languages and worldviews, especially among Native American communities. Many Native American scholars and practitioners use the term “lifeways” to honor how spiritual worldviews and practices are woven into the whole of life. See Joseph Epes Brown, *Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)s, especially p. 5: “The presence of the sacred can permeate all lifeways to such a degree....Religion here is so pervasive in life that there is probably no Native American language in which there is a term that could be translated as ‘religion’ in the way we understand it.”

disrupting religious practices of Christian immigrants in the U.S. and refusing refuge to Christians suffering violence or oppression in other countries.

These discrepancies show how ideologies of race and religion intertwine to shape both civic dialogue and social policy in the United States. The assertion that the U.S. supports religious freedom for Christians – or anyone – cannot be assessed simply by considering “religion” as a stand-alone identity category that the government protects. “Religious freedom” is a concept encumbered by biases and ideologies of race that enmesh with social imaginaries about religion. This paper examines the inseparability of ideologies of race and religion in the specific area of immigration policy by arguing that racist stereotypes influence the notion of who “counts” as a “proper” Christian immigrant in the minds of many communities and officials in the U.S. Those stereotypes consequently shape policy.

Ideologies that conflate race and religion have been around for a long time, and members of the Trump administration are far from the first to hold or act on them. But the rhetoric and actions of the Trump administration provide a particularly blunt case study, highlighting how race and religion cannot be fully separated in American public dialogue, nor in scholarship on American perceptions of immigration and religion.

One caveat to begin: I have chosen to focus on how racist stereotypes impact Christian immigrants specifically, in order to better understand the discrepancies between the Trump administration’s professed concern for the religious freedom of Christians and the actual experiences of Christians under the administration’s policies. I will not here address how U.S. leaders and courts interpret principles of religious freedom in ways that privilege Christians,⁷ or how antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other religious prejudices continue to impact

⁷ Khyati Y. Jhoshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 33-41. Zemba, Stephanie and Meeta Mehrotra, “I just don’t belong’: White Christian privilege and older immigrants’ experiences with religion,” *Social Compass* 72, no. 1 (March 2025): 159-176.

immigration policy.⁸ These paths of study are, of course, equally as important.

II. CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL BAGGAGE OF “RELIGIOUS FREEDOM”

The notion of the United States as a haven for religious freedom is widespread in the social imagination. For a few examples of the pervasiveness of this narrative across very different settings, the Library of Congress website includes a page entitled “America as a Religious Refuge,” which argues that most early American colonists sought religious freedom and provides graphic descriptions of religious persecution in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries.⁹ In academic research, EBSCO, an American publishing company specializing in scholarly journals, offers a “Research Starters” explainer on its online platform intended to introduce students and others to research on religion among immigrants to the U.S. The explainer states that many immigrants were escaping religious persecution and argues that the diversity of religious traditions in the U.S. has contributed to America’s democratic culture and respect for minority rights.¹⁰ In the policy and think tank world, the 2025 report of the Congressionally-authorized United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) connects immigration and religious freedom by supporting policies that provide legal status in the U.S. to people fleeing

⁸ An anonymous reviewer of this paper noted that this analysis could intersect with examination of the Trump administration’s professed commitments to combatting antisemitism, even as some of its members and allies engage in antisemitic rhetoric. I agree this is an important area of study, though I do not have space to analyze it here, except for considering antisemitic elements in the so-called “Great Replacement Theory” (see below).

⁹ Library of Congress, “Religion and the Founding of the American Republic: America as a Religious Refuge, The Seventeenth Century, Part I,” n.d., <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html>.

¹⁰ Emily Alward, “Religions of immigrants,” EBSCO Knowledge Advantage, 2024, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/religions-immigrants>.

religious persecution.¹¹ Finally, in the religious nonprofit arena, World Relief, a prominent international aid organization connected to evangelical Christian groups, argues that religious freedom is a “foundational value of our country” and must play a role in immigration policy.¹²

President Donald Trump and members of both his first and second administrations have loudly and often declared their commitment to religious freedom – or “religious liberty,” which seems now to be the more-favored phrase for American religious conservatives.¹³ In his second term, Trump established a “Religious Liberty Commission.” The executive order creating this commission states that it will “celebrate America’s peaceful religious pluralism” and mentions that all Americans should enjoy the right to free exercise of religion,¹⁴ though the White House’s fact sheet summarizing the order mentions only Christians and purported “anti-Christian” actions when giving specific

¹¹ USCIRF, *2025 Annual Report*, Washington, DC, <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

¹² Liliana Reza, “When Religious Freedom Stops at the U.S. Border,” July 17, 2025, <https://worldrelief.org/blog-when-religious-freedom-stops-at-the-u-s-border/>.

¹³ Stephanie Russell-Kraft discussed why this might be in 2016, when the phrase was becoming more common. Russell-Kraft, “‘Freedom’ vs. ‘Liberty’: Why Religious Conservatives Have Begun to Favor One over the Other,” *Religion Dispatches*, October 12, 2016, <https://religiondispatches.org/2016/10/12/freedom-vs-liberty-why-religious-conservatives-have-begun-favor-one-over-other>. I will continue to use the term “religious freedom,” which is more common in the work of scholars who explore this issue, unless directly quoting a source.

¹⁴ Exec. Order No. 14291, *Code of Federal Regulations*, “Establishment of the Religious Liberty Commission,” May 1, 2025, 2025-08134, 90 FR 19417.

examples of the commission's tasks.¹⁵ The White House has also highlighted Trump's initiative "America Prays," arguing that Trump is "reaffirm[ing] his commitment to protecting our religious freedoms."¹⁶

Well before Trump came into office, however, scholars of religion and public life have noted that "religious freedom" is a loaded concept, in law as well as public and scholarly dialogue.¹⁷ Indeed, some scholars either argue or imply that the concept of religious freedom is not useful for promoting human well-being or equality, because the idea is *so* loaded and the concept of "religion" is so effectively impossible to define.¹⁸ The idea that the United States government promotes religious freedom at home or abroad brings with it a host of interconnected assumptions about what religion is and who practices it properly. This is no surprise to those who take a "complex religion" approach, articulated by Melissa

¹⁵ The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Establishes the Religious Liberty Commission," May 1, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-establishes-the-religious-liberty-commission/>. As I was editing this piece, the Trump administration was sued by several interfaith and religious organizations on the grounds that the commission lacks religious and viewpoint diversity and thus violates the Federal Advisory Committee Act. BrieAnna J. Frank, "Trump's Religious Liberty Commission sued over lack of diversity," *USA Today*, February 9, 2026, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2026/02/09/religious-liberty-commission-sued-trump/88526368007/>.

¹⁶ The White House, "President Trump Champions Religious Freedom, Unveils America Prays," September 8, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/09/president-trump-champions-religious-freedom-unveils-america-prays/>.

¹⁷ See especially Winifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ For my own part, I continue to view religious freedom as an important principle on which to base certain arguments for equality and full political participation of all, but since this article takes a critical view of the concept in the specific case of U.S. immigration policy, I will not fully examine that normative argument here.

Wilde and Ruth Braunstein among others, which demonstrates how the social concept of “religion” is so deeply intertwined with notions of race, class, and other social factors that it really cannot be examined on its own.¹⁹ Scholarship on religion and law must examine the interplay of ideologies of religion and race – as well as class and other factors not fully addressed here – in rhetoric and policy of immigration, both to articulate what is going on and to consider what could be possible in the future. This essay seeks to engage that conversation by examining how ideologies of Christianity, whiteness, and American nationalism intersect in recent developments in immigration policy in the United States.

III. WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AND THE ROLE OF RACIAL IDEOLOGIES IN PERCEPTIONS OF “PROPER” CHRISTIANITY

U.S. government rhetoric, policy, and action on immigration provide an especially fertile ground to investigate how religion, and concern for religious freedom, becomes conflated both with assumptions about racial identity and with ideologies of nationalism. “Race” and “nationalism,” of course, are themselves complex concepts. As I use the terms here, *race* is a socially constructed category in which people are identified, or assumed, to be part of a group sharing certain phenotypical characteristics. *Nationalism* is a feeling of loyalty to a specific country or group, whose members are understood to have traits shared in common, which can include ideals and constitutional structures and/or ethnic makeup, cultural traditions, language, and religion.²⁰

¹⁹ Melissa J. Wilde, “Complex Religion,” *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 3 (Autumn 2018): 287-298. Ruth Braunstein, “The ‘Right’ History: Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America,” *Religions* 12, no. 2: 95-115, p. 96.

²⁰ In discussing race, I draw on a definition from Rashawn Ray and Nicole DeLoatch that I reference in a textbook chapter on race, religion, and human rights; my definition of nationalism also draws from that chapter. See Laura E. Alexander, “Racial Discrimination, Religious Nationalism, and Human Rights,” in *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2024), 104-125.

Immigration policy in the United States has always been shaped in part by ideologies of white Christian nationalism. The influence of these ideologies fluctuates over time, but their persistence demonstrates how concepts of race, religion, and the American “nation” – understood not simply as a country with a government, institutions, and laws, but as a community of people with certain shared traits – intertwine and overlap in social imagination. Ideologies of white Christian nationalism embrace the idea that the U.S. is a “Christian nation” that is built on Christian principles and should favor those principles in governance and social life. At the same time, in this view, *white* Christians are the only Christians who are viewed as “fully” Christian. Conceptions of whiteness, Christianity, and nationalism therefore cannot be fully separated out and analyzed independently in U.S. political thought but must be examined in relationship to each other.

Polling evidence on religion, race, and nationalism provides one point of evidence for how ideologies of whiteness, Christianity, and nationalism intertwine, demonstrating that for white Americans in particular, there seems to be very little daylight between “simple” Christian nationalism – believing that the U.S. is a Christian nation and should favor Christian principles – and *white* Christian nationalism. It’s worth noting that even discussing demographics of polling data is complicated for an analysis like this one, since “whiteness” and other racial categories are socially constructed.²¹ But looking at polling data helps us understand the implications of perceived white identity among Americans, and how that perceived identity influences political ideologies about what kind of nation the United States is, and who belongs in it.

The Public Religion Research Institute has undertaken a series of polls to gauge Americans’ attitudes about Christian nationalism. In February

²¹ For more on the socially constructed (and co-constructed) nature of “whiteness” and “blackness,” see Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

2023, PRRI found that respondents who held Christian nationalist views were much more likely to say that white supremacy is not a problem and to disagree that Black Americans have more difficult economic challenges because of the legacy of slavery.²² And *white* Americans who held Christian nationalist views were more likely to hold these attitudes about white supremacy and the legacy of slavery than members of other racial groups with similar Christian nationalist views. Michael R. Fisher, Jr. has analyzed divergences in attitudes about immigration as well: in 2023, 71% of white Americans with Christian nationalist views agreed with the statement “immigrants are invading our country and replacing our cultural and ethnic background,” while 61% of Black Americans with Christian nationalist views *disagreed* with that statement.²³

Other research demonstrates that many white Americans’ conception of what it means to be white significantly overlaps with what it means to be Christian. Rosemary L. Al-Kire and others have shown that white Christians who read about anti-Christian bias perceived more anti-white bias as well.²⁴ Samuel L. Perry and Joshua B. Grubbs note that when white Americans agree with “seemingly ‘race-neutral’ statements about the centrality of Christian identity or values to the United States,” they are more likely to believe that white Americans face discrimination, to oppose immigration from Mexico, and to support

²² PRRI, “A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture,” February 8, 2023, <https://prri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>.

²³ Michael R. Fisher, Jr. “Understanding Differences between Black and White Christian Nationalism Adherents and Sympathizers,” PRRI, July 3, 2024, <https://prri.org/spotlight/understanding-differences-between-black-and-white-of-christian-nationalism-adherents-and-sympathizers/>.

²⁴ Rosemary L. Al-Kire, Chad A. Miller, Michael H. Pasek, Samuel L. Perry, and Clara L. Wilkins, “White by Another Name? Can Anti-Christian Bias Claims Serve as a Racial Dog-Whistle?” *Association for Psychological Science* 35, no. 4 (April 2024): 415-434.

candidates who “appeal to White grievances.”²⁵ Perry and Grubbs further argue that white Americans “*uniquely* conflate their racial, religious, and national identities.”²⁶ They find that adherence to Christian nationalist ideologies strengthened solidarity with one’s own racial group among white Americans but did not change racial solidarity for Hispanic Americans and possibly diminished it for Black Americans.²⁷

If we flip things around and examine the influence of perceptions of white identity on Christian nationalism, Perry and Grubbs’s model provides some data as well. The model was designed to test whether people with stronger Christian nationalist beliefs also exhibited beliefs associated with white racial solidarity (the belief that white people must work together to advance their interests), but Perry and Grubbs’s further analysis of survey data indicates that white people who feel more racial solidarity also have a stronger connection to Christian nationalism.²⁸ Braunstein’s historical analysis shows how American white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan began deploying “Christian nation” or “Judeo-Christian nation” language once white supremacist language became frowned upon in mainstream American society. That is to say, for many groups the white supremacy came first and the Christian nationalism followed from it.²⁹ In short, while individual Americans may have nuanced relationships to white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and white Christian nationalism, on the

²⁵ Samuel L. Perry and Joshua B. Grubbs, “The Religion of White Identity Politics: Christian Nationalism and White Racial Solidarity,” *Social Forces* 104 (2025): 453-475, p. 454.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 454 (emphasis added).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 462.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 465 and 467.

²⁹ Braunstein, 102-104.

whole these ideologies influence each other and are intertwined in American society and government.³⁰

This growing body of research shows how we really cannot tease apart perceptions of Christianity, whiteness, and what it means to be American, especially (though perhaps not only) among white Americans. Perceptions of religion and race overlap, and they impact who is imagined to be part of the American nation – and thus, who is eligible to join that “nation” as an immigrant. As we will see below, the conflation of these categories shows up when members of the Trump administration vow to protect the religious freedom of Christians, yet advance immigration policies that harm Christians who do not fit the imagined mold of a white, Christian, “true” American.

IV. HISTORICAL ROOTS OF PERCEPTIONS OF CHRISTIANITY AND WHITENESS

Where does this all come from? Conflation of whiteness, Christianity, and the “proper” character and demographic makeup of the U.S. as an imagined nation has deep historical roots. Colonial ideologies have connected race and religion ever since the first European monarch sent troops to occupy territory and deprive Indigenous inhabitants of their land, resources, and labor.

When European powers began colonizing peoples across the globe in the 15th century, they were buoyed by religious ideology in the form of Roman Catholic papal bulls. The bulls *Dum Diversas*, *Romanus Pontifex*, and *Inter Caetera* gave a religious imprimatur to the capture of land and suppression or

³⁰ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who noted the overlap between notions of Christian nationalism, white nationalism, and white supremacy in an earlier draft of this paper and pushed me to more clearly distinguish these terms. I am not certain I have met the reviewer’s expectations, but their critique has led me to emphasize more strongly the ways these ideologies intertwine and become difficult to distinguish from each other, in keeping with this paper’s argument about the enmeshment of concepts of religion and race.

enslavement of non-European peoples.³¹ The popes who wrote these documents justify conquest by referencing the subjugation of “pagans,” “Saracens,” and others who are not Christian.

With the blessing of the church, European leaders, soldiers, and missionaries embarked on conquest to (in part) “spread Christianity.” The colonizers associated Christianity with white European men, and judged people’s “fitness” for Christianity by racial classifications. Willie James Jennings describes powerful examples of how early colonial chroniclers and priests made these judgments. Jesuit priest Alessandro Valignano, for instance, had this to say about his travels in Asia:

There is this difference between the Indian and Japanese Christians, which in itself proves that there is really no room for comparison between them, for each one of the former was converted from some individual ulterior motive, and since they are blacks, and of small sense, they are subsequently very difficult to improve and turn into good Christians; whereas the Japanese usually become converted, not on some whimsical individual ulterior move (since it is their suzerains who expect to benefit thereby and not they themselves) but only in obedience to their lord’s command; and since they are white and of good understanding and behavior, and greatly given to outward show, they readily frequent the churches and

³¹ Nicholas V, *Dum Diversas*, 1452. Full text at The Complete Doctrine of Discovery Website, <https://www.doctrineofdiscovery.net/1452-dum-diversas-issued-by-pope-nicolas-v-to-alfonso-v-of-portugal.html>. See also Adam DJ Brett and Betty Hill, “Documenting Domination: From the Doctrine of Christian Discovery to Dominion Theology,” *Religions* 14, no. 12 (2024): Article 1493. Nicholas V, *Romanus Pontifex*, 1455. Full text at The Complete Doctrine of Discovery Website, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/the-bull-romanus-pontifex-nicholas-v/>. Alexander VI, *Inter Caetera*, 1493. Full text at <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/inter-caetera/>.

sermons, and when they are instructed they become very good Christians.³²

Jessica Wong adds that the ideology of “spreading Christianity” from Europe to other lands supports an ideology of the European male as the truest and fittest follower of Christ: “the identity of the Christian disciple is collapsed into that of the civilized European subject. The white European becomes the primary representative of Christ and a model of the Christian life for an otherwise lost people.”³³ I have elsewhere discussed these and other scholars’ insights into colonial ideologies of race and Christianity.³⁴

Wong further elucidates connections between these historical ideologies and 20th-century political ideologies about which immigrants to the U.S. “count” – both those who “count” as Christian and those who can ostensibly “assimilate” to U.S. culture. Wong draws on early twentieth century texts to show that scientific racism – the notion that people can be evaluated through a “scientific” lens based on their race – influenced thought in the U.S. around the time of the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, giving cover to authorities who wished to admit only northern and western European immigrants. Potential immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were not considered “assimilable” in the same way, and eugenicist Charles Davenport described Jewish immigrants (who, Wong notes, were considered “black” when groups of Jewish migrants first arrived in the U.S.) as “prone to individualism and materialism” and of low character “discerned through their more darkly pigmented bodies.”³⁵

³² Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 32.

³³ Jessica Wai-Fong Wong, “The Christian Criteria for Assimilation: Racially Reading Christianity, Civility, and Social Belonging in the Modern Western World,” p. 107, in *The Meaning of My Neighbor’s Faith: Interreligious Reflections on Immigration*, ed. Alexander Y. Hwang and Laura E. Alexander, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 105-118.

³⁴ Laura E. Alexander, “Proposition 187 and the Travel Ban: Addressing Economy, Security, and White Christian Nationalism in U.S. Christian Communities,” *Religions* 13, no. 337 (2022), 4; *Ibid.*, *Religion and Human Rights*, 105.

³⁵ Wong, 110.

V. CONTEMPORARY IDEOLOGIES OF WHITENESS AND CHRISTIANITY

As this brief historical narrative indicates, the conflation of the category of “religion” with perceptions of race and nation and its subsequent impact on immigration policy is by no means limited to the current moment, nor to the Trump administration. Politicians, pundits, and at least some ordinary Americans continue to associate “proper” Christianity with whiteness and to favor white immigrants. With colleagues, I have written about the striking contrast when the administration of President Joe Biden admitted white, Christian Ukrainian asylum seekers at the U.S. southern border in 2022 while enforcing strict border policies against all other asylum seekers, nearly all of whom were not white (though most were Christians).³⁶ A study by Breanna Grace and Katie Heins examines public testimony over South Carolina’s Bill S-997, introduced in 2016, when members of the public argued both for and against eliminating the state’s refugee resettlement program. Grace and Heins found fifty-two instances in which white members of the public “physically us[ed] their body to signal whiteness in testimony,” such as gesturing to their white skin or caressing their arms when they talked about the supposed gulf between themselves, as (white) Americans, and refugees, who were assumed to be non-white.³⁷ Grace and Heins write,

While bill supporters seldom explicitly described race in testimony, they frequently would juxtapose “undesirable refugees”, admitted refugees from non-white majority countries, and “ideal refugees”, who are from Christian-

³⁶ Laura E. Alexander, Jane Hong, Karen Hooge Michalka, and Luis A. Romero, “How race and religion have always played a role in who gets refuge in the U.S.” *The Conversation*, April 28, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/how-race-and-religion-have-always-played-a-role-in-who-gets-refuge-in-the-us-181700>.

³⁷ Breanna Leigh Grace and Katie Heins, “Redefining Refugee: White Christian Nationalism in State Politics and Beyond,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 4 (2021): 555-575, pp. 563-564.

majority European countries – England, Ireland, and Germany were all cited as acceptable refugee countries numerous times. European refugees were distinguished from current refugees who were all assumed to be non-white and Muslim.³⁸

Even pro-refugee advocates used phrases that distinguished “good” from “bad” refugees and upheld Eastern European Christian refugees as a “good” group who should not be punished by being refused resettlement.³⁹

Still, the contrast between Donald Trump’s and his administration’s professed interest in protecting the religious freedom of Christians, and the harm done to Christian (actual or would-be) immigrants and refugees, provides a prominent case study of the ways religion and race become imaginatively intertwined. Examining the impact of white Christian nationalist ideologies within this particular administration demonstrates starkly how concepts of religion and religious freedom easily overlap with racial ideologies. Christianity is privileged in the Trump administration’s pronouncements and activities, yet whiteness is conflated with “true” or “proper” Christianity in ways that harm actual Christians.

Donald Trump and highly-placed members of his administration have demonstrated commitments to white Christian nationalism, which, as we have discussed, incorporates entangled ideologies of white supremacy, Christian supremacy, and Christian nationalism. During Trump’s first term, leaked emails showed that Stephen Miller, who was then a White House advisor and is now an advisor for the Department of Homeland Security and White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy, had recommended articles from white supremacist websites to a Breitbart reporter.⁴⁰ Darren Beattie, now Under Secretary for

³⁸ Ibid., 562-563.

³⁹ Ibid., 569.

⁴⁰ Joel Rose, “Leaked Emails Fuel Calls for Stephen Miller to Leave White House,” NPR, November 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/26/783047584/leaked-emails-fuel-calls-for-stephen-miller-to-leave-white-house>.

Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, was formerly fired as a speechwriter for Trump after it was revealed he spoke at the 2016 H.L. Mencken Club Conference where several white nationalists were in attendance. In October 2024 he tweeted, “Competent white men must be in charge if you want things to work.”⁴¹

Considering Trump himself, Joshua Davis and Samuel Perry characterize Trump’s “lukewarm condemnation of racists” after the 2017 Charlottesville “Unite the Right” violence as “a privileging of the civil liberties of racist hate-groups” in comparison with, for example, Muslims, or “critical journalists.”⁴² Trump’s reaction, they say, is consistent with the argument that Americans who hold white Christian nationalist ideas do not always express support of racist ideas explicitly, but tolerate racist individuals and groups, like the Charlottesville rioters, more than they tolerate historically stigmatized groups.⁴³ Trump himself also has a history of racist statements as well as business practices,⁴⁴ and as president he seemed to indicate a preference for building up the U.S. population with white immigrants when he made his infamous 2018 remarks that immigrants from Haiti and Africa were coming from “shithole countries” and asked why the U.S. couldn’t take more Norwegian immigrants.⁴⁵

With this discussion of white Christian nationalist ideologies in mind, we can turn to consider

⁴¹ Andrew Kaczynski, Jennifer Hansler, and Em Steck, “Trump appoints speechwriter fired for attending conference with White nationalists to top State Department role,” CNN, February 3, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/03/politics/kfile-darren-beattie-state-department-controversial-tweets-white-nationalist-conference/index.html>.

⁴² Joshua T. Davis and Samuel L. Perry, “White Christian Nationalism and Relative Political Tolerance for Racists,” *Social Problems* 21, no. 68 (2021): 513-534.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 514-515.

⁴⁴ German Lopez, “Donald Trump’s long history of racism, from the 1970s to 2020,” *Vox*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/25/12270880/donald-trump-racist-racism-history>.

⁴⁵ Ali Vitali, Kasie Hunt, and Frank Thorp, “Trump referred to Haiti and African nations as ‘shithole’ countries,” *NBC News*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946>.

the relationship between the administration’s stated concerns for religious freedom of Christians and its actual immigration policies.

VI. “ANTI-CHRISTIAN BIAS”

The Trump administration has been exceedingly receptive to complaints that U.S. government institutions and other large organizations have, do, or might demonstrate bias against Christians. In his first term, Trump would periodically complain that American Christians were under duress or being treated unfairly.⁴⁶ He seemed to fully accept conservative Christians’ concerns about their freedom of religious expression being limited by anti-discrimination or public health laws, and crafted policy accordingly.⁴⁷ The administration likewise provided preferential treatment for Christians in the areas of immigration and foreign policy. When Trump signed the first version of the “travel ban,” which barred citizens of certain countries from entering the United States, he told an interviewer from the Christian Broadcasting Network that priority would be given to persecuted Christian refugees over others. Trump seemed to use the justification that Christians were being treated worse than others in places like Syria, indicating that a perception of poor treatment of Christians overseas played a role in his administration’s intent to discriminate in refugee admissions. He further complained about supposed

⁴⁶ For one example, see White House, “Remarks by President Trump and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing,” April 18, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-2/>.

⁴⁷ For example, in May 2017 Trump put out an executive order instructing government agencies to amend regulations so that more organizations could claim exemption from the Affordable Care Act’s mandate for employer-funded insurance to cover contraceptives for employees, and could claim that exemption more easily. See Exec. Order 13798, 82 Fed. Reg. 21675 (May 4, 2017), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/05/09/2017-09574/promoting-free-speech-and-religious-liberty> (“Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty”).

bias against Christians in the U.S. refugee resettlement program, saying, “Do you know if you were a Christian in Syria it was impossible, at least very tough to get into the United States? If you were a Muslim you could come in, but if you were a Christian, it was almost impossible.”⁴⁸ Trump might be referring to the fact that in 2016, fewer than 1% of Syrian refugees who resettled in the U.S. were Christian, even though Christians made up at least 5% of Syria’s population prior to the 2011-2024 civil war.⁴⁹ That discrepancy can be almost entirely explained by the fact that only 1.2% of those who registered as refugees from the war were Christian,⁵⁰ and Trump did not provide any evidence of anti-Christian bias in the U.S. Department of State treatment of Syrian refugees. His statement, though, demonstrates a perception, whether real or feigned, of poor treatment of Christians, as well as the intent to reverse this perceived bias by showing favoritism toward Christian refugees.

In his second term, Trump and his appointees have doubled down on complaints about prejudice against Christians, arguing in both official acts and media statements that “anti-Christian bias” is a major problem in the United States and promising to focus on protecting religious freedom for Christians. In February 2024, Trump made a speech at the annual gathering of National Religious Broadcasters claiming that evangelical Christians had been persecuted under

⁴⁸ David Brody, “Brody File Exclusive: President Trump Says Persecuted Christians Will Be Given Priority as Refugees,” CBN News, January 27, 2017, <https://www1.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2017/01/27/brody-file-exclusive-president-trump-says-persecuted-christians-will-be-given-priority-as-refugees>.

⁴⁹ Phillip Connor, “U.S. admits record number of Muslim refugees in 2016,” Pew Research Center, October 5, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/10/05/u-s-admits-record-number-of-muslim-refugees-in-2016/>.

⁵⁰ Marwan Kreidie, “Why Do so Few Christian Syrian Refugees Register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees?” *Rozenberg Quarterly*, n.d. <https://rozenbergquarterly.com/why-do-so-few-christian-syrian-refugees-register-with-the-united-nations-high-commissioner-for-refugees/>.

the Biden administration and that he would “root out anti-Christian bias if elected.”⁵¹ True to that promise, on February 6, 2025, Trump issued an executive order “Establishing a Task Force to Eradicate Anti-Christian Bias.”⁵² The order claims that the Biden administration had “sought to squelch faith in the public square by bringing Federal criminal charges and obtaining in numerous cases multi-year prison sentences against nearly two dozen peaceful pro-life Christians for praying and demonstrating outside abortion facilities.” To be clear, this assertion is false: abortion-clinic protestors who have faced charges were *not* simply praying peacefully but were blocking entrances and, in some cases, assaulting and threatening staff members of clinics.⁵³ Nevertheless, the claim fits with a pattern of complaints about poor treatment of (conservative) Christians by the government.

The executive order also states that Catholic churches have increasingly been subject to vandalism and arson, which *is* true. The FBI has warned religious communities that attacks on buildings or events could

⁵¹ Bob Smietana, “Trump promises a revival of Christian power in speech to National Religious Broadcasters,” *Religion News Service*, February 23, 2024, <https://religionnews.com/2024/02/23/trump-promises-a-revival-of-christian-power-in-speech-to-national-religious-broadcasters/>. In the same speech, Trump claimed that if he was elected, Christians would get to “us[e] that power at a level that you’ve never used before.”

⁵² Exec. Order No. 14202, 90 Fed. Reg. 9365 (Feb. 6, 2025), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/12/2025-02611/eradicating-anti-christian-bias> (“Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias”).

⁵³ Angelo Fichera, “Biden’s Christian ‘Persecution’? We Assess Trump’s Recent Claims,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/29/us/politics/trump-biden-christianity.html>. Hannah Hudnall, “Tennessee man arrested for blocking access to abortion clinic, not praying,” *USA Today*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2024/04/01/abortion-protesters-arrest-unrelated-to-prayer/73166262007/>; and “Woman arrested for blocking access to abortion clinic, not praying,” *USA Today*, October 23, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2024/10/23/tennessee-woman-convicted-blocking-abortion-clinic-fact-check/75781759007/>.

increase,⁵⁴ and FBI statistics show 360 anti-Catholic hate crimes in 2023,⁵⁵ an increase from 62 in 2019.⁵⁶ It is not clear, however, that the Justice Department “largely ignored” these cases as the Executive Order claims. The fact that the FBI has tracked many of these instances as hate crimes indicates awareness of possible anti-Catholic bias, and perpetrators have been charged with either state or federal hate crimes in multiple instances.⁵⁷

In any case, Trump and his advisors argue that anti-Christian bias is rampant both in government (at least when a Democrat is president) and in social life. The upshot is the task force Trump ordered in February, which was officially launched by Attorney General Pam Bondi on April 22, 2025.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Luke Barr, Mike Levine, and Aaron Katersky, “DHS, FBI warn faith-based communities they ‘will likely continue to be targets of violence,” *ABC News*, January 18, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/dhs-fbi-warn-faith-based-communities-continue-targets/story?id=82323688>.

⁵⁵ United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Hate Crime in the United States Incident Analysis,” 2023, <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/hate-crime>.

⁵⁶ FBI, “2019 Hate Crime Statistics,” <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2019/tables/table-1.xls>.

⁵⁷ Austin L. Miller, “Dunellon man charged with hate crime in Ocala church fire,” *Ocala Star-Banner*, March 18, 2021, updated March 19, 2021, <https://www.ocala.com/story/news/2021/03/18/hate-crime-alleged-fire-ocalas-queen-peace-catholic-church/4757527001/>; “Madeline Cramer Charged with Hate Crime Over Vandalism at Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception,” *CBS Colorado*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/madeline-cramer-arrest-cathedral-basilica-immaculate-conception-denver-vandalized-graffiti-spray-paint/>; Jonathan Ayestas, “Fire at Sacramento church being investigated as hate crime, officials say,” *KCRA*, August 14, 2024, <https://www.kcra.com/article/sacramento-church-fire-hate-crime-investigation/61879235>.

⁵⁸ Sydney Jezik, “The Trump administration launched an anti-Christian bias task force. Here’s what it will do,” *Deseret News*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.deseret.com/politics/2025/04/22/trump-administration-is-launching-an-anti-christian-bias-task-force/>.

VII. HARASSMENT OF CHRISTIANS GLOBALLY

The Trump White House’s claims that Christians in the United States face bias are suspect at best. Christians are targeted in 3% of hate crimes in the U.S. despite making up about 63% of the population, whereas Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs make up 3% of the population total but are targeted in 14% of hate crimes.⁵⁹ Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated that implicit bias often *favours* Christians in policies and legal decisions⁶⁰ and in social perceptions in the U.S.⁶¹

However, it is certainly true that in some countries, Christians *are* subject to negative social prejudice, judicial penalties, government persecution, and acts of violence. Given the complexity of the category of religion,⁶² it would require parsing individual cases to understand whether people have been targeted specifically because of their religious identities, rather than because of differences of language or ethnicity, economic competition, or some combination of many factors. Still, for the purposes of examining the Trump administration’s purported concern about bias against Christians, it’s helpful to understand the oppression or harassment faced by Christians outside the U.S.

⁵⁹ Jezik, “The Trump administration launched an anti-Christian bias task force. Here’s what it will do,” *Deseret News*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.deseret.com/politics/2025/04/22/trump-administration-is-launching-an-anti-christian-bias-task-force/>.

⁶⁰ Carol Barner-Barry, *Contemporary Paganism: Minority Religions in a Majoritarian America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 72-73; Justin D. Levinson, Mark W. Bennett, and Koichi Hioki, “Judging Implicit Bias: A National Empirical Study of Judicial Stereotypes,” *Florida Law Review* 69, no. 1 (January 2017): 63-114.

⁶¹ Carly M. Jacobs and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, “Belonging in a ‘Christian Nation’: The Explicit and Implicit Associations between Religion and National Group Membership,” *Politics and Religion* 6, no. 2 (June 2013): 373-401; Linda Thunström, Chian Jones Ritten, Christopher Bastian, Elizabeth Minton, and Dayana Zhappassova, “Trust and Trustworthiness of Christians, Muslims, and Atheists/Agnostics in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 60, no. 1 (March 2021): 147-179.

⁶² See again Hurd’s *Beyond Religious Freedom*, as well as *Heaven Has a Wall: Religion, Borders, and the Global United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2025).

Both social and government harassment of people based at least in part on religious belonging have been increasing globally for several years. The Pew Research Center, which has tracked both governmental restrictions on religious expression and social hostility to religion since 2007, has reported that government restrictions on religion were higher in both 2021 and 2022 than in any previous years measured.⁶³ Pew has created an index to evaluate government restriction of religion based on 20 factors, and out of a 10-point index, the level of restriction has risen from 1.8 in 2007 to 3.0 in 2022. The percentage of countries of the world with “high” or “very high” levels of government restriction on religion, according to Pew’s criteria, has also risen from 20% in 2007 to 30% in 2022.

It is perhaps not surprising that an overall increase in religious restrictions worldwide is associated with an increase in restrictions on members of particular religious traditions, in this case, Christians. The Pew report notes that in 2022, “Christians were harassed by governments or social actors in 166 countries, up from 160 the previous year.”⁶⁴ (The report also notes that Muslims, the second-largest religious group in the world, were harassed in 148 countries in 2022, an increase from 141 in 2021. Since there are approximately 2.4 billion Christians in the world compared to approximately 1.9 billion Muslims, it’s possible to argue that Muslims are harassed in proportionately *more* places than Christians by the numbers. So again, while this paper focuses on persecution of Christians, there is much to discuss about religious persecution of non-Christian groups.)

The Pew report provides examples of both government restrictions and social hostility to Christian individuals or communities. Cuba and China, for example, both have high levels of

⁶³ Samirah Majumdar, “Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022,” *Pew Research Center*, December 18, 2024,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/12/18/government-restrictions-on-religion-stayed-at-peak-levels-globally-in-2022/>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

government restriction on freedom of religious expression. In Cuba, the government has targeted Christian leaders who oppose its ruling Cuban Communist Party.⁶⁵ A man was arrested in Mauritania in 2022 after his son brought Christian literature into the country and he claimed it as his own to deflect blame from his son.⁶⁶ And in Iraq, a Christian community in the Ninewa Province was targeted by militias who tried to seize and occupy properties owned by Christians to drive them out.⁶⁷

VIII. THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S FOREIGN POLICY RESPONSES

In foreign policy, the Trump administration has taken a few steps toward assisting or pressuring other governments to better protect religious groups including Christians, though the administration has not been as active as might be expected. In the early days of the administration, Vice President J.D. Vance told attendees at the International Religious Freedom Summit that the U.S. would engage more strongly in advocacy for religious freedom in its foreign policy.⁶⁸

One case in which this has arguably happened is Nigeria, which Trump designated a “Country of Particular Concern” in November 2025. The reason given for this designation was ongoing violence against Christians by militant groups.⁶⁹ The U.S. government used airstrikes that it said were targeting Islamic State militants in December 2025, and as of February 2026 a small group of military officers have been sent

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12, 32.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁸ Tad Walch, “Here’s what Vice President J.D. Vance just told believers about Trump’s religious freedom plans,” *Deseret News*, February 5, 2025, <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2025/02/05/vice-president-vance-trump-religious-freedom-irf-summit/>.

⁶⁹ Mariam Khan, “U.S. Designates Nigeria ‘Country of Particular Concern’ after Trump threat of alleged attacks on Christians,” ABC News, November 3, 2025, <https://abcnews.com/Politics/us-designates-nigeria-country-concern-after-trump-threat/story?id=127148133>.

to train Nigerian troops.⁷⁰ While Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has accepted these military actions, he argues that the crisis is one of violence in general and not specific to Christians.⁷¹ Nigerians who have been subject to attacks, as well as experts from organizations that collect data on violence, likewise say that both Christians and Muslims have been targeted and that the violence is usually related to kidnapping and extortion for money.⁷² Still, this represents a case in which the government has taken actions that it claims will help Christians, even if the evidence for the type of persecution the U.S. is ostensibly combatting is flimsy.

It is not easy to find concrete steps the administration has taken to pressure other countries where Christians or other religious groups are oppressed. While recognizing that diplomatic negotiations are not always fully revealed to the public, I have not been able to find evidence that the Trump administration has demanded protection for freedom of religious expression from other “Countries of Particular Concern.” Human rights advocates have been especially critical of Trump’s embrace of Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose country is on the list. Trump does not seem to have engaged with Saudi Arabian leaders on any human rights issues, including religious freedom.⁷³ In another case from early 2025, conservative Christian leaders urged the administration to include religious freedom as an element of a trade deal with India. India is not on the list of Countries of Particular Concern, but Christians in India do face instances of religious

⁷⁰ Ope Adetayo, “US announces military team sent to Nigeria after recent attacks,” AP News, February 3, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/nigeria-us-troops-b415141ca6ed27978ba52f081ca05405>.

⁷¹ Khan, “U.S. Designates.”

⁷² Chinedu Asadu, “Trump says Christians are being persecuted in Nigeria. The reality is more complicated.” AP News, November 18, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/nigeria-christian-muslim-killings-kidnapping-trump-af57834a1ce47488397bf07931b5cf51>.

⁷³ Ellen Knickmeyer, “Trump’s Mideast trip splashes out on deals and diplomacy but is quiet on human rights,” AP News, May 16, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-saudi-arabia-human-rights-f005cb14a8a0d51b1963a05215305d04>.

conflict and oppression.⁷⁴ There is no indication, however, that steps toward religious freedom were seriously discussed during those trade talks.⁷⁵

IX. IMPACTS OF U.S. IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE POLICY ON CHRISTIANS

More central to the discussion in this paper is the question of whether concern for Christians facing violence or suppression of religious practices has impacted the administration’s immigration and asylum policies. If the U.S. government wishes to protect Christians’ religious freedom, it could do so by offering asylum in the U.S. to a greater number of persecuted Christians from other countries, both through the U.S. refugee resettlement program and by carefully and generously considering cases in which Christians (and others) seek asylum based on claims of religious persecution. The USCIRF report mentioned above recommends that the “U.S. government maintain a robust refugee resettlement program and prioritize the resettlement of victims of the most severe forms of religious persecution,”⁷⁶ and establish a plan “to fully comply with asylum laws.”⁷⁷ The report notes that there are longstanding “major problems” with expedited removal of asylum seekers. People seeking asylum in the U.S. to escape violence or suppression of their religious practices almost certainly have not had appropriate opportunities to access protection, and there is great risk that some are being detained and deported to countries where they face violence that

⁷⁴ S.A. McCarthy, “Experts Urge U.S. to Link Trade Deal with India to Religious Liberty Provisions,” *The Washington Stand*, April 23, 2025, <https://washingtonstand.com/news/religious-liberty-experts-urge-us-to-link-trade-deal-with-india-to-religious-liberty-provisions>.

⁷⁵ Anugrah Kumar, “Modi returns from Trump meeting as Christian groups raise religious freedom concerns in India,” *Christian Post*, February 17, 2025, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/modi-returns-from-trump-meeting-amid-rising-attacks-on-christians.html>.

⁷⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2025 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: USCIRF), 71-72.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

relates to their religious identity, among other factors.⁷⁸

A. Organizations Sound the Alarm About Cutting off Assistance to Persecuted Christians

However, the administration's refugee and asylum policy has *not* met the hopes of people and organizations who advocate for Christians and others facing violence or suppression of religious practices. Immediately upon inauguration, Trump ordered a "pause" to the U.S. refugee resettlement program. This "pause" has not been lifted as of this writing, though a district court did order the administration to allow people who had already been provisionally accepted through the program to resettle.⁷⁹ If the administration continues to bar nearly all refugees from entering the United States, then Christians who are seeking refuge will be unable to enter as well.

When this refugee "pause" happened, organizations that track and try to promote religious liberty across the globe quickly responded. They issued warnings that religious liberty is harmed when people who are targeted for oppression or violence because of their religious identity cannot seek safety in other countries. The chair of the USCIRF noted the cancellation of aid programs that specifically support religious freedom.⁸⁰ Matthew Soerens, vice president at evangelical Christian aid organization World Relief, called the suspension of the refugee resettlement program "devastating," while Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, stated that it denies relief to "people who are fleeing

⁷⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁹ Lindsay Whitehurst and Gene Johnson, "Appeals court allows Trump administration to suspend approval of new refugees amid lawsuit," *AP News*, March 25, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/refugee-program-trump-administration-appeals-court-a6188722de3e3e1d2f344862b853d0c7>.

⁸⁰ Catherine Putz, "International Religious Freedom in the Spotlight Amid US Political Recalibration," *The Diplomat*, March 26, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/international-religious-freedom-in-the-spotlight-amid-us-political-recalibration/>.

religious persecution and seeking religious freedom.”⁸¹ World Relief also issued a statement urging Trump to reinstate the resettlement program and referencing persecution of Christians and other religious persecution. The statement was signed by several prominent evangelical Christian leaders, including the president of the National Association of Evangelicals and the president of Open Doors, an evangelical aid agency that tracks persecution of Christians and assists those who are persecuted.⁸²

Specific cases of poor treatment of asylum seekers fleeing religious persecution have also made news in the months since the pause. A group of Iranian Christians were shackled and flown to Panama in February 2025 without receiving “credible fear” interviews, which are standard procedure in determining someone’s initial eligibility to seek asylum in the U.S.⁸³ In April 2025, Christian leaders, from church pastors to Franklin Graham of Samaritan’s Purse, highlighted the plight of Christians from Afghanistan who were told they must leave the U.S. within a week.⁸⁴ Yet the administration does not seem especially concerned that Christians might be returned to countries where they could be tortured and killed, either for their religious identity alone or because they have protested against that country’s government.

⁸¹ Samuel Benson, “Faith leaders weigh in as Trump puts pause on refugee resettlement,” *Deseret News*, January 21, 2025, <https://www.deseret.com/politics/2025/01/21/faith-leaders-weigh-in-as-trump-puts-pause-on-refugee-resettlement/>.

⁸² Dale Chamberlain, “Trump’s Executive Order Harms Persecuted Christians, Argues World Relief,” *Church Leaders*, January 23, 2025, <https://churchleaders.com/news/504300-world-relief-urges-president-trump-to-reconsider-executive-order-suspending-refugee-resettlement.html>.

⁸³ Rick Jervis, “Iranian Christians feared death in Iran. Then the US deported them to Panama,” *USA Today*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/02/20/iranian-christians-asylum-seekers-deported-panama/79217451007/>.

⁸⁴ Josh Schumacher, “Religious groups ask Trump administration not to deport Afghan Christians,” *World*, April 22, 2025, <https://wng.org/roundups/religious-groups-ask-trump-administration-not-to-deport-afghan-christians-1745359782>.

B. Threats to Religious Freedom of Christians Entering the U.S. and in U.S. Detention Facilities

Many Christian immigrants and refugees face a further threat to freedom of religious expression when they encounter the U.S. immigration system: denial of religious objects and practices while in Border Patrol custody or immigration detention.⁸⁵ It has been documented for years that U.S. Border Patrol routinely confiscates religious items when taking a person into custody, including rosaries, Bibles, turbans, prayer rugs, religious figurines, prayer cards, and more.⁸⁶ Border Patrol officials have said this is a routine part of confiscating personal property when people are detained, especially items that could be used to do harm. However, the items are often not returned when people are released or deported.⁸⁷

In immigration detention, violations of religious freedom for Christians, among others, are common and can stretch on for weeks or months. As reported by both religiously-affiliated and secular organizations, migrants, including asylum seekers, have been provided food that is forbidden in their religious tradition with no alternatives; denied access to clergy, religious items, and texts; and denied the opportunity

⁸⁵ This is especially concerning in light of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act passed by Congress and signed into law in 2000. This law provides for strict scrutiny of any burden on the religious expression of a person in detention. 42 U.S. Code §2000cc-1.

⁸⁶ American Civil Liberties Union and ACLUs of Arizona, New Mexico, San Diego & Imperial Counties, and Texas; Kino Border Initiative; ProtectAZ Health; The Sikh Coalition, *From Hope to Heartbreak: The Disturbing Reality of Border Patrol's Confiscation of Migrants' Belongings* (2024), 17-19; Marisha Goldhamer, "This photo of rosaries confiscated at the US-Mexico border was taken in 2015," *AFP*, July 12, 2019, <https://factcheck.afp.com/photo-rosaries-confiscated-us-mexico-border-was-taken-2015>.

⁸⁷ Goldhamer, "This photo of rosaries confiscated at the US-Mexico border was taken in 2015," *AFP*, July 12, 2019, <https://factcheck.afp.com/photo-rosaries-confiscated-us-mexico-border-was-taken-2015>.

to worship.⁸⁸ In 2019, during the first Trump administration, the American Civil Liberties Union reported that one detainee was chastised for singing hymns to himself in his own cell.⁸⁹ In 2025, the organization World Relief responded with concern to news reports that detainees at the so-called “Alligator Alcatraz” facility in Florida have been subject to inhumane conditions, including having Bibles taken away and denied religious practices.⁹⁰

It appears that, under the harsh immigration policies of the Trump administration, Christians are not only stranded in conditions of persecution in other countries or returned to those conditions, but they also suffer denial of their rights to pray and worship even on U.S. territory. These violations certainly have not only happened under the Trump administration; denial of religious freedom in immigration detention has been a problem for years. But the increase in the number of migrants detained under Trump has brought the issue into stark light,⁹¹ and it seems surprising that an administration so publicly concerned with promoting religious freedom (at least for Christians) would, at best, turn a blind eye to

⁸⁸ “World Relief Responds to Allegations of Inhumane Conditions and Religious Freedom Violations in ‘Alligator Alcatraz,’” *World Relief*, July 8, 2025, <https://worldrelief.org/world-relief-responds-to-allegations-of-inhumane-conditions-and-religious-freedom-violations-in-alligator-alcatraz/>; Steven P. Millies, “Republicans champion religious freedom – but not for detained migrants,” *America Magazine*, August 11, 2025, <https://www.americamagazine.org/short-take/2025/08/11/republicans-champion-religious-freedom-but-not-for-detained-migrants/>.

⁸⁹ Aleksandr Sverdlik, “Border Patrol and ICE Routinely Violate Immigrants’ Religious Rights,” *ACLU*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/border-patrol-and-ice-routinely-violate>.

⁹⁰ “World Relief Responds to Allegations of Inhumane Conditions and Religious Freedom Violations in ‘Alligator Alcatraz,’” *World Relief*, July 8, 2025, <https://worldrelief.org/world-relief-responds-to-allegations-of-inhumane-conditions-and-religious-freedom-violations-in-alligator-alcatraz/>.

⁹¹ Gisela Salomon, “Migrants face dire conditions and prolonged waits in U.S. detention centers,” PBS News, February 9, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/migrants-face-dire-conditions-and-prolonged-waits-in-u-s-detention-centers>.

abuses of religious freedom (including for Christians) in migrant detention facilities on U.S. soil.

X. WHICH CHRISTIANS RECEIVE PROTECTION?

These violations of religious expression and refusal to allow certain Christians to access the asylum system can be understood as an extension of white Christian nationalist ideologies and the conflation of religion and race (specifically, Christianity and whiteness), in the thought as well as policy decisions of administration officials. To add a few immigration-specific examples to the previous discussion of white Christian nationalism in the administration, both Vice President J.D. Vance⁹² and Trump's director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services⁹³ have embraced the language of "great replacement theory," which argues that elites or Democrats⁹⁴ are importing nonwhite immigrants into the U.S. to replace white Americans. Joseph Baker and Andrew Whitehead have shown that white Christian nationalist beliefs are significantly associated with worries about "replacement" of white people with people of other races in the U.S., as well as fear of Muslims and immigrants.⁹⁵ Trump's own words about the supposed criminality of non-white immigrants, most of whom are Christian, have been widely reported: Mexicans as

⁹² Aaron Kessler, David Klepper, and Trenton Daniel, "JD Vance once said conspiracy theories were idiotic. As Trump's VP pick he is embracing them," PBS News, September 20, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/jd-vance-once-said-conspiracy-theories-were-idiotic-as-trumps-vp-pick-he-is-embracing-them>.

⁹³ Ja'han Jones, "Trump's citizenship chief espouses 'great replacement' theory racism to Breitbart," MSNOW, August 14, 2025, <https://www.ms.now/top-stories/latest/joseph-edlow-uscis-great-replacement-theory-immigration-rcna225089>.

⁹⁴ Great replacement theory is also frequently an antisemitic conspiracy theory which argues that Jews, specifically, are importing nonwhite immigrants. See Brian Duignan, "Replacement Theory," *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/replacement-theory>.

⁹⁵ Joseph O. Baker and Andrew L. Whitehead, "Faith over fear? Christian nationalism and cultural fears in the United States," *Nations and Nationalism* (2024): 1-20.

rapists, Latino immigrants as “bad hombres,” the “shithole countries” remark.

Going beyond rhetoric, the administration’s policy decisions in the first year of Trump’s second term have strongly indicated favoritism toward white immigrants and the influence of racial prejudice on immigration enforcement. Despite shutting down the U.S. refugee resettlement program almost entirely, the administration chose in May 2025 to offer refugee status to white Afrikaner South Africans, making false claims that Afrikaners were subject to genocide.⁹⁶ Then in July 2025, the administration argued in court that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers should be permitted to use people’s perceived racial identity, among other factors like speaking Spanish or working in certain occupations, as a “reasonable suspicion” for stopping and detaining them. The U.S. Supreme Court granted a stay on a previous order that restricted such stops, which means that ICE is currently allowed to racially profile people as part of their enforcement work,⁹⁷ and has allegedly been doing so in late 2025 and early 2026, according to a lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Michelle Gumede, “More white South Africans arrive in the US under a new refugee program,” *AP News*, June 2, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-south-africa-refugees-afrikaner-white-f5ed3aa615e0448157f8c4752d2a0cc7>. Mogomotsi Magome, “Trump alleges ‘genocide’ in South Africa. White Afrikaner farmers reject that,” *AP News*, May 20, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-afrikaners-trump-refugees-ramaphosa-c87264523d555a64c0588d8734bba83a>.

⁹⁷ Amy Howe, “Supreme Court allows federal officers to more freely make immigration stops in LA,” *SCOTUSblog*, September 8, 2025, <https://www.scotusblog.com/2025/09/supreme-court-allows-federal-officers-to-more-freely-make-immigration-stops-in-los-angeles/>; Erika Ryan, Scott Detrow, Jasmine Garsd, Avery Keatley, “The Supreme Court clears the way for ICS agents to treat race as grounds for immigration stops,” *NPR*, September 13, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/09/13/nx-s1-5507125/the-supreme-court-clears-the-way-for-ice-agents-to-treat-race-as-grounds-for-immigration-stops>.

⁹⁸ American Civil Liberties Union, “ACLU Sues Federal Government to End ICE, CBP’s Practice of Suspicionless Stops, Warrantless Arrests, and Racial Profiling of Minnesotans.” January 15, 2026, <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/aclu-sues-federal-government-to-end-ice-cbps-practice-of-suspicionless-stops-warrantless-arrests-and-racial-profiling-of-minnesotans>.

In short, the Trump administration's policies toward Christian (actual or would-be) immigrants and refugees provides a case study that demonstrates how concepts of religion and race intertwine, specifically in ideologies of white Christian nationalism. Despite the administration's professed commitment to religious freedom for Christians, it seems clear that the concerns of *white* Christians are the primary concerns that drive the administration's immigration policies. In this mindset, bias against white Christians is the "true" form of anti-Christian bias that needs to be faced and fought. Violence or suppression of religious practices perpetrated against Christians who are not white might be unfortunate, but that sort of persecution does not "count" in the same way that the perceived sufferings of white Christians do.

XI. CONCLUSION: THE COMPLEXITIES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, AND POSSIBILITIES FOR MOVING FORWARD

The persistence of white Christian nationalist ideologies in American society, including the highest ranks of government, demonstrates the difficulty of teasing apart conceptions of religion and race in American thought. The complexity of "religious freedom" as one aspect of the "American dream" myth makes it possible for a presidential administration to tout its deep commitment to religious freedom, especially religious freedom for Christians, while taking actions that in fact suppress the religious practices of Christians domestically and deny protection to Christians who experience violence abroad. Immigration is an especially salient policy area in which it becomes obvious that Christianity is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) associated with whiteness for many Americans. We can see this in the history of U.S. immigration policy, described briefly

above and narrated much more fully elsewhere.⁹⁹ It is also the case that the executive branch of the U.S. federal government wields enormous power over immigration policy, so the impact of white Christian nationalist ideologies within a presidential administration becomes especially clear as it uses its power over immigration.

So where can we go from here? Researchers studying white Christian nationalism continue to refine scholarly knowledge of its impact on different groups in the United States and on social policy. When white Christian nationalist ideologies are held by any significant percentage of Americans, especially those in power, then equality and justice – for immigrants or anyone – are basically impossible. Therefore, for those who value equality and just treatment of both immigrants and citizens, more robust research is needed on overcoming white Christian nationalist ideologies. Countering Christian nationalist ideologies is taken up in the work of Pamela Cooper-White and others,¹⁰⁰ and some Christian groups¹⁰¹ have drawn on Christian ethical ideas to push back on white Christian nationalist ideologies. (We might note that some scholars and religious groups name *white*

⁹⁹ This is a robust area of study. See Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), and *Hidden Histories of Unauthorized Migration from Europe to the United States*, ed. Danielle Battisti and Deborah S. Kang (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2025).

¹⁰⁰ Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn in and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022); Esther Prins, “Unlearning and Deradicalizing from White Christian Nationalism: Implications for Adult Learning and Education,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 186 (Summer 2025): 67-74; Steven Frye, “Religious Education and White Christian Nationalism,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 186 (Summer 2025): 43-50.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations of the Presbyterian Church (USA), “Confronting White Christian Nationalism,” n.d., <https://calltoworshipjournal.org/confronting-white-christian-nationalism/>; Jason DeRose, “Progressive Christians counter Christian Nationalism message,” NPR, October 22, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/10/22/nx-s1-5553659/progressive-christians-counter-christian-nationalism-message>.

Christian nationalism specifically, and others simply name Christian nationalism, once again demonstrating complexities in conversations about race and religion in public life!) Further study of how to break the implicit connections between religion and race held by many Americans, consciously or not, might suggest a path forward for conversations about what it means to respect the religious practices of all people, and how government actions might more closely approximate equal treatment for all immigrants. The myth of the “American dream” and its simplified promise of religious freedom certainly has its own complexities, but more precise knowledge of how to overcome white Christian nationalist ideologies might move us a tiny bit closer toward the ideals that myth expresses.