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Christian Far-Right Extremism: Theology & Typology

By Paul Hedges and Luca Farrow

SYNOPSIS

Increasing attention globally is being given to what are broadly termed far-right movements in terms of their potential extremist threat. Amongst these, religious groups occupy a wide range with Christian far-right extremists (CFRE) being one part. Covering a wide spectrum, the extent to which Christianity, in terms of beliefs and doctrines, is central is variable. The marker CFRE may, therefore, hide as much as it reveals in identifying the nature, motivations, and background of particular actors and groups.



White Supremacists and Christian Far-Right Extremists are changing the terrorism landscape in the US - pic by The Trace

COMMENTARY

SINCE 1979 and the Iranian Revolution, policy makers and scholars have realised that the long-dominant secularisation thesis — that religion was becoming increasingly irrelevant and marginal — did not hold. The events of 9/11 further foregrounded this in the public imagination, and very often the focus has been — with the benefit of hindsight — too narrowly focused on Islam in terms of both its imbrication with national and international politics and efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism (PCVE).

However, as Mark Juergensmeyer's work has shown over decades, extreme political and violent action in the name of religion does not only occur within Islam. Indeed, certainly within Western nations, far-right groups, including adherents of forms of CFRE, have been posing a greater threat to social cohesion and risk of terrorist attacks. Globally, groups typically framed as far-right include those advocating militant forms of [Hinduism](#) and [Buddhism](#), while [Christian](#) groups have also given cause for concern in the Asian context.

Types of Christian Far Right Extremism

In attempting a definition or typology of Christian Far Right Extremism, various types of belief and ideology may be markers. These would include, especially in what we may broadly term “the West”, forms of white ethno-religious nationalism, which may be tied to notions of certain nations or regions having a Christian, or “Judeo-Christian”, heritage.

Race may feature more or less prominently in different forms of Christian nationalism, and Christians have seen themselves related to a variety of national projects as part of their Christian identity. In the United States context, for example, Christian nationalism has come to signify the growing influence of Christian lobbies in politics and education.

A willingness to engage in physical violence to defend Christianity or a Christian culture may also be more or less prominent among various forms of Christian Far Right Extremism.

Militant nationalism is advocated by a range of figures, including those who may not consider themselves Christian or who have an ambivalent relationship with Christianity, such as [Anders Breivik](#), who has attempted to position himself as defending Christendom against Muslims, and those who locate themselves firmly within a Christian frame, including [Vladimir Putin](#) and some [Bosnian-Serb leaders](#).

Like followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which overlaps with aspects of Christian Far Right Extremism, adherents of some forms of CFRE may see themselves as opposing modern governments or the “deep state”. For many individuals embroiled within CFRE, the political system is seen to be rigged against ordinary people, with undesirable internationalist agendas understood to pose a threat to native Christian populations.

This is where we also see antisemitism and Islamophobia as typical features of Christian Far Right Extremism. This needs to be understood within a context where

both antisemitism and Islamophobia have been mainstream parts of certain forms of Christian and wider worldviews. Antisemitism and Islamophobia were deeply embedded in Medieval and early modern Europe, for example.

Theological Motifs

From the later 20th century, a particular theological doctrine has arisen within North American Evangelical circles and has expanded globally. Termed dominion theology (or dominionism), it encourages Christians to take control of the institutions or pillars of society so as to shape it according to a particular Christian vision. According to the “Seven Mountains Mandate”, these pillars are government, business, education, religion, family, entertainment, and media.

This, like other forms of Christian Far Right Extremism, may be related to anti-abortion laws, opposing what are seen as liberal views of sexuality, and ensuring a rigid adherence to Christian domination of social mores, legal norms, and so on.

Yet, many Christians will be inspired by their faith to seek a better and more equitable world, such that their Christian identity informs how they vote, their ethical stance, and so on. Dominionism and more moderate ways in which Christians may engage in the political sphere may therefore sometimes be hard to distinguish.

Finally, a belief in the imminent end times also marks Christian Far Right Extremism. While a belief in the Second Coming (Jesus’ return in justice and victory to earth) has been part of mainstream Christian belief, the idea that this is imminent has not been mainstream.

Jesus’ earliest followers soon moved from expecting this in the years after his death to a more long-term viewpoint, as the New Testament texts show. Belief that the Apocalypse is both imminent and can be predicted by some Christians therefore tends to mark extreme stances.

What is the Far-Right in Christian Extremism?

Not all of the above maps neatly on to what we may define as the far-right. While various forms of ethno-nationalism may be particularly associated with being right-wing, we see such diverse forms as the American Tea Party, Russian Orthodox ethno-nationalism, and historically Catholic support for fascism in Spain. Yet, nationalism, antisemitism, or belief in the end times are not inherently right-wing.

Though, in the contemporary context, it is perhaps most typically around broadly right-wing forms that these types of Christian extremism coalesce in many places. For instance, in support of authoritarian neo-liberal capitalist agendas, or in defence of the traditional social order and state church.

When we come to religion, there may be questions about what is meant by extremism, especially within the context of the right to freedom of religion and belief (FoRB). If we see an “extreme” belief as simply one which is not mainstream, then we risk denying the rights of minorities.

Again, whether a belief is regarded as extreme in this way depends upon the context. In Serbia, for instance, associations of the church, ethnicity, and nationalism are widespread and mainstream.

Here, our focus is on a PCVE perspective. In other words, do certain forms of belief, organisation, or practice disrupt social cohesion and potentially promote violent extremism? Ethno-religious nationalisms have, in many contexts, been seen to be extremely detrimental to the wellbeing of a diverse and healthy society.

Again, beliefs in the imminent end of times may leave some to seek to disregard or tear down existing social structures that ensure equity and communal wellbeing, though for others it may simply mean withdrawal from society and quietism.

In this context, it is very much the practices or behaviour that manifests from specific beliefs, or the specific contextual weight given to aspects of these beliefs that determines what may be considered extremism.

Policy Considerations and Actions

Policy makers and PCVE practitioners must strike a careful balance. Excessive action against what may be seen as legitimate or scriptural beliefs may incur the ire of many.

As noted, the distance between something such as dominionism which seeks to overturn a democratic and inclusive society to impose a theocratic state, and Christians seeking to be only one voice within a democratic sphere may be hard to spot on the surface.

Yet this does not mean that no action should be taken. Various forms of what may be placed within Christian Far Right Extremism may spill over into violence. Without the due diligence of the security services this could have occurred in [Singapore](#), when a 16-year-old boy planned to attack two [mosques](#) in an Islamophobic attack.

A clear understanding of the narratives of both Christian traditions, individual churches, and specific actors must be kept in view.

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