

The divine right of Trump

President's embrace of religious imagery and rhetoric is provoking a backlash

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The popularity of Donald Trump among the US Christian right has long baffled those beyond America's shores. A former playboy real estate developer and casino owner, twice impeached as president, makes for an unlikely defender of Christian values. But the president's feud with the pope and posting of an image of himself — later deleted — as a Christ-like figure has provoked a backlash among Catholics and some evangelical Christians alike. It may come at a political cost.

Many nationalist populist parties have positioned themselves as bastions of Christian family values against so-called woke causes such as diversity and identity politics; Trump endeared himself to the religious right by appointing conservative judges to the Supreme Court who helped to overturn *Roe vs Wade*, which guaranteed the constitutional right to an abortion. Right-wing populists such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán portray themselves, too, as defenders of western civilisation against threats such as radical Islam. Standing beside Orbán last week, days before the Hungarian leader was toppled at the polls after 16 years in power, US vice-president JD Vance saluted a shared commitment to a "certain Christian civilisation".

But the backlash by some Christians against Trump is rooted in a bolder characterisation, by the president and by some supporters and members of his administration: that the presidency commands something akin to divine authority. Trump's spiritual adviser, Paula White, a televangelist, at an Easter lunch this month compared the president to Christ since he, too, had been "betrayed and arrested and falsely accused". The Trump-as-Jesus image the president posted this week was condemned by Christians from various denominations as blasphemous. (Trump later said he thought it depicted him as a doctor.)

Pete Hegseth, who portrays himself as a devout Christian while insisting he be called "secretary of war", has also often employed religious rhetoric that frames the US military — and the US-Israeli war against Iran — as a divinely sanctioned mission. He has compared the rescue of a US pilot shot down in Iran to the resurrection. He said God protects US troops in the Middle East and "deserves all the glory" for American military successes. And he used a Pentagon worship service to call for "overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy". He says a *Deus Vult* ("God wills it") tattoo on his bicep, a symbol that has been associated with white nationalists, is a battle cry from the Crusades.

To the chagrin of the White House, the US-born Pope Leo XIV has resisted its efforts to portray the Iran conflict as a "just war" by stating that "God does not bless any conflict". During a trip to Cameroon on Thursday, Leo went further, without naming names. "Woe to those who manipulate religion and the very name of God for their own military, economic and political gain," he said.

The impact of the White House's embrace of religious rhetoric is insidious. It shifts the basis of US foreign policy from international law and secularism to notions of religious war.

The administration may, though, have over-reached. More than 80 per cent of white evangelical Christians and just under 60 per cent of US Catholics supported Trump in the 2024 presidential election. The pushback from some Christians to Trump's recent language and imagery endangers portions of that support in the midterm elections. And, after cowing many US institutions, including the Congress, parts of the media and some courts, the president is finding that — despite their earlier enthusiasm — Christian leaders and churches may be harder to subvert.