

Exporting Christian Nationalism: Transnational Power, Religious Polarisation, and the Instrumentalisation of the Church

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Abstract

American Christian nationalism is frequently treated as a domestic U.S. culture-war pathology or a merely theological deviation within conservative Christianity. This article argues instead that it functions as an exportable political technology whose discursive templates, funding pathways, media ecosystems, and legal-activist infrastructures travel transnationally, reshaping church identity and public witness far beyond the United States, including in Australia. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in sociology of religion, political theology, and transnational activism, the analysis traces (i) how Christian nationalist imaginaries re-code discipleship into a national moral project within U.S. congregational life, (ii) how these frames are received and normalized in allied democracies through religious-freedom discourse and digitally mediated culture-war formation, and (iii) how such dynamics can serve transnational power formations by intensifying polarization, redirecting ecclesial energy toward governance-by-grievance, and weakening the church's capacity to offer principled resistance to technocratic consolidation. While the article does not posit a monolithic covert cabal, it offers a convergence-based account of elite networking in which corporate, political, and religious actors repeatedly find Christian nationalist mobilization instrumentally useful. A biblical evaluation then demonstrates that core tenets of Christian nationalism conflict with New Testament ecclesiology and the kingdom ethic of Christ, particularly where national identity displaces the church's pilgrim identity, coercive power eclipses cruciform witness, and market ideology is sacralized. The article concludes by proposing a pastoral-theological strategy of intentional counter-formation, including transnational ecclesial solidarity, media discipleship, and renewed economic moral witness, aimed at restoring gospel fidelity amid globalizing political religion.

Keywords: American Christian nationalism; transnational religious nationalism; Australia Christian Right; global governance; World Economic Forum Great Reset; digital surveillance; political theology and ecclesiology.

Introduction

American Christian nationalism is not merely a theological error within the church. It also functions as a political technology that can be strategically leveraged in moments of cultural anxiety, institutional decline, and geopolitical instability. While the evidence does not substantiate a single centrally managed cabal coordinating all outcomes, it does document recurring convergence among corporate, political, and religious elites who find Christian nationalist language useful for consolidating authority, disciplining dissent, and stabilising economic arrangements that advantage the powerful. This article therefore holds two commitments together: rigorous engagement with the best available historical and social-scientific scholarship on Christian nationalism, and a biblical-theological critique that takes spiritual deception and the “principalities and powers” seriously.

Although branded “American,” Christian nationalism is increasingly transnational in its circulation and effects. Its discursive templates, funding logics, media ecosystems, and legal-activist strategies travel across borders, shaping churches in allied democracies and contributing to a wider global realignment in which Christian identity is recruited into polarising political projects. In Australia, peer-reviewed research has documented both the development of Christian Right infrastructures with U.S.-origin movement forms and the discursive mimicry by which “religious freedom” rhetoric adopts American Christian-right framing (McLeay et al., 2023; Maddox, 2005). Building on this transnational frame, the article addresses three linked questions: how Christian nationalism reshapes church identity and discipleship within the United States; how these frames are received and normalised within churches in contexts such as Australia; and how these dynamics can function, whether by design or by convergence of interests, to serve transnational governance and influence structures by intensifying

polarisation, redirecting ecclesial energy toward culture-war governance, and weakening the church’s public witness (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2023; Sangwa, 2025).

Analytical focus. Building on the claim that this is “*a transnational, not merely American, project*,” this article addresses three linked questions: (1) how Christian nationalism is reshaping church identity and discipleship within the United States; (2) how those frames are received, adapted, and normalized within churches in countries such as Australia; and (3) how these dynamics can function (whether by design or by convergence of interests) to serve transnational power formations by intensifying polarization, redirecting ecclesial energy toward culture-war governance, and weakening the church’s public witness (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2023; Sangwa, 2025).

1. What is American Christian nationalism?

Social scientists now define Christian nationalism quite precisely. Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry describe it as a “cultural framework” that “seeks to merge Christian and American identities” and insists that the United States “has been and should always be” a distinctly Christian nation, with Christians holding a privileged place in public life (Saiya, 2025). Nilay Saiya calls it a political theology that wants “*a privileged place for a particular form of Christianity in American public life*” (Saiya, 2025).

Large empirical studies show that stronger Christian nationalist beliefs are consistently linked with racism, misogyny, hostility to immigrants, homophobia, support for political violence, and authoritarian views of state power (Saiya, 2025). Whitehead and Perry’s survey work, now extended by Gorski and others, also shows that “Christian” and “evangelical” often function as ethnic and political markers rather than indicators of genuine discipleship (Saiya, 2025).

In other words, American Christian nationalism is not just Christians having political opinions. It is an ideology that fuses:

- A mythic story about a lost Christian golden age in America
- White, native-born identity as the “real” America
- A strong preference for order, hierarchy, and “law and order” politics
- A belief that God’s will is implemented primarily through the American state and military

Already you can feel how far this is from the New Testament picture of the church as a multi-ethnic people whose “*citizenship is in heaven*” (Philippians 3:20), and whose Lord clearly tells Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world*” (John 18:36).

2. Corporate and “globalist” fingerprints from the beginning

The strongest historical work shows that modern talk of “Christian America” was not primarily a spontaneous grassroots revival. It was heavily midwifed by big business.

Historian Kevin Kruse demonstrates that in the 1930s and 1940s, corporate leaders facing Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal welfare policies enlisted conservative clergy in a campaign for “freedom under God.” Corporations like General Motors, Kraft Foods, J.C. Penney, and Hilton funded pastors who denounced the New Deal as “pagan statism” and preached that true Christianity meant small government, low taxes, and free enterprise (Kruse, 2015). Kruse’s central claim is blunt: corporate America effectively “*invented*” much of what people now call “*Christian America*.”

Mathew Guest’s work on “neoliberal religion” picks up this thread. He shows how, in the second half of the twentieth century, neoliberal economics (small state, deregulation, privatisation, global free markets) became the “world’s dominant ideology,”

and how Christian movements in the United States were reorganised around the banner of “*faith, freedom, and free enterprise*” (Guest, 2022). He highlights Kruse’s evidence that business-funded coalitions deliberately presented Christianity and free-market capitalism as natural allies and portrayed federal taxation as almost a violation of the commandment against stealing (Guest, 2022).

Sociologists Samuel Perry, Andrew Whitehead, and Joshua Grubbs show that Christian nationalism inherited this DNA. Their study in *Sociology of Religion* finds “*distinctly libertarian and neoliberal impulses within Christian nationalism*” that drive adherents to oppose government regulation and to treat economic prosperity and individual liberty as “*sacred values*” (Perry et al., 2021). They argue that historical work by Kruse and others demonstrates how the “*Christian nation*” idea in the post-war era became tied to loyalty to free markets and suspicion of state intervention, especially in the Cold War struggle against communism (Perry et al., 2021).

Put simply: long before today’s culture wars, transnational corporate and financial actors discovered that baptising free-market ideology with Bible language was politically useful. That is exactly what many people now mean (in a loose way) when they talk about “globalists.”

3. Dark money, think tanks, and Christian nationalist mobilisation

Fast forward to the present, and the networks have become far more sophisticated.

Katherine Stewart’s investigative book “*The Power Worshipers*” shows that what is often sold to the public as a spontaneous “values movement” is in reality “*a dense network of think tanks, advocacy groups, and pastoral organizations*” embedded in “international alliances with likeminded, anti-democratic religious nationalists around the world,” funded by “*super-wealthy, ultraconservative donors and family foundations*.” (Stewart, 2020) She argues that this Christian nationalist movement seeks

control over “all aspects of government and society,” posing a serious threat to democratic norms.

Anne Nelson’s (2019) *Shadow Network* and subsequent interviews trace the Council for National Policy (CNP), a secretive hub where fossil-fuel magnates, billionaire families like the DeVoses, strategists such as Ralph Reed, legal organisations, and Christian media outlets coordinate political strategy (Nelson, 2019). Nelson describes how, since the early 1980s, political strategists and major economic interests, many from the oil and gas sector, have used the CNP to mobilise previously disengaged evangelicals around “hot-button” social issues (abortion, sexuality, gender) in order to secure reliable votes for a broader pro-corporate agenda (Nelson, 2019; Chakrabarti, 2023).

A detailed profile of the CNP by Monitoring Influence notes that it functions through closed-door meetings that bring together big donors, media operators, and activists, and that it played a role in efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 U.S. election (Monitoring Influence, n.d.) Again, the pattern is the same: wealthy donors and corporate interests using religious language and cultural grievances to pursue power.

Journalist Nicholas Powers summarises this dynamic very clearly in a Truthout analysis. He documents how a “one percent” of megadonors and corporations, including the Koch network, the Mercer family, Sheldon Adelson, and multinationals like Amazon, AT&T, and Coca-Cola, pour millions into Christian nationalist groups and anti-abortion organisations. Their goal is to secure deregulation, low taxes, and an unrestrained form of capitalism, even when some of these donors are personally socially liberal (Powers, 2022). Powers concludes that the wealthy are “more than willing to throw people’s rights under the bus in order to protect their profits,” and that they have “fed Christian nationalism” until it has become a powerful political force (Powers, 2022).

When you put Kruse, Guest, Stewart, Nelson, and Powers together, you do not get a tidy, movie-style conspiracy, but you do get a very clear picture: transnational corporate and financial elites have repeatedly found it useful to fund and shape American Christian nationalism as a tool to defend an economic order that benefits them.

4. A transnational, not merely American, project

Christian nationalism is often wrapped in patriotic anti-globalist rhetoric, but scholars of World Christianity point out that the phenomenon itself is transnational.

Raimundo Barreto and João Chaves have shown how Christian nationalism in Brazil and the United States are “interconnected” and part of a broader “transnational phenomenon.” (Open Plaza, 2022) They trace how right-wing evangelical networks, often influenced by U.S. missions and media, helped fuel support for Jair Bolsonaro and a “messianic” style of politics in Brazil.

Mathew Guest notes that across the world, populist movements in countries such as the United States, Brazil, Turkey, and parts of Europe make strategic use of religious identity to advance nativist and authoritarian agendas (Guest, 2022). In this picture, Christian nationalism is one local expression of a wider pattern in which religion is mobilised as a symbolic resource in service of a new politics of fear, resentment, and strong-man leadership.

Stewart’s description of Christian nationalism’s international alliances with similar movements, including actors in Russia, confirms that we are dealing with a cross-border ecosystem of think tanks, media, and donors that share strategies and resources (Stewart, 2022). That is precisely the terrain in which global elites operate.

Beyond individual country cases, recent scholarship maps how transnational “pro-family/anti-gender” networks build alliances that join religious leaders, political elites, and movement entrepreneurs across

regions, producing coordinated norm-contestation that travels through conferences, policy playbooks, litigation strategies, and digital campaigning (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2023; Kahlina, 2024). These networks are empirically observable as transnational organizing structures, not merely local reactions, and they provide a ready-made infrastructure through which Christian-nationalist imaginaries can be adapted and reproduced globally.

So even while Christian nationalists shout against globalism, the movement is deeply entangled with global flows of capital, information, and strategy. It becomes one more instrument inside a larger, oligarchic world system.

5. From American Christian nationalism to Australia: transmission mechanisms and ecclesial effects

Although Australia's political system and church landscape differ from the United States, peer-reviewed research shows that the Christian Right in Australia has developed "firm roots" while originating in U.S. movement forms, and that Australian religious-freedom discourse often involves discursive mimicry of U.S. Christian-right framing (McLeay et al., 2023). Maddox's landmark study of the rise of the Christian Right in Australia similarly documents the importation of U.S.-style political theology into Australian public life, particularly through culture-war mobilization around national identity, family, and moral order (Maddox, 2005).

The transmission is not merely rhetorical. It travels through (a) transnational advocacy networks that share strategy and resources, (b) media ecosystems that circulate American culture-war narratives into Australian congregations in real time, and (c) conference and coalition infrastructures that normalize "Christian nation" claims as faithful discipleship rather than partisan formation. For example, scholarship on transnational "pro-family/anti-gender" networking shows how

actors, organizations, and high-level political figures coordinate across regions, using "natural family" narratives as a unifying political technology in multiple national settings, including Australia (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2023).

Ecclesiologically, the effect is a gradual re-coding of Christian identity: membership in the church is subtly reframed as participation in a national moral project, with pastoral authority pressured to function as political authorization. This aligns with your paper's wider concern that Christian nationalism replaces the church's cruciform witness with a quest for cultural dominance and boundary policing.

In the Australian context, this often appears less as explicit "America-style" Christian nationalism and more as a religious-freedom culture-war identity, in which congregations are taught to view pluralist democracy primarily as a threat to "Christian heritage," and political action becomes a test of faithfulness (McLeay et al., 2023; Smith & Marden, 2012).

6. How this serves a "globalist" agenda in practice

If we define "globalists" soberly as transnational networks of corporate, financial, and technocratic power, their interest in Christian nationalism makes sense.

First, Christian nationalism sacralises free-market capitalism. As Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs observe, Christian nationalism carries an "*impulse to preserve economic prosperity and individual freedoms, even during national emergencies,*" because it treats free markets and minimal government as moral goods (Perry et al., 2022). That dovetails with neoliberal capitalism's need for low regulation, weak labour protections, and a minimal welfare state.

Second, it redirects popular anger. When working and middle-class communities suffer under debt,

wage stagnation, and deindustrialisation, elites have every reason to prefer culture-war battles over abortion, migrants, and “woke” teachers. Powers shows concretely how megadonors fund Christian nationalist groups that restrict abortion, attack LGBTQ rights, and harden borders, while simultaneously lobbying for tax cuts and deregulation that increase inequality (Powers, 2022). Christian nationalism becomes a lightning rod that redirects anger away from unjust economic structures and toward marginalised neighbours.

Third, it blesses the security state and war. Gorski and Perry argue in *The Flag and the Cross* that white Christian nationalism has long imagined the United States as a righteous nation locked in a cosmic battle against “outsiders,” whether Native Americans, Catholics, communists, or now immigrants and “globalists” (Saiya, 2025). That imagination provides theological cover for militarism, surveillance, and permanent war, all of which serve the interests of defence contractors and the broader imperial apparatus.

Finally, it weakens the church as a prophetic voice. Andrew Whitehead, in *American Idolatry*, argues that Christian nationalism “betrays the gospel and threatens the church” because it replaces allegiance to Christ with loyalty to nation and party (Whitehead, 2023). A church that equates the kingdom of God with the American flag will struggle to critique unjust trade, exploitative finance, or imperial wars, since those are now “patriotic” acts.

In biblical terms, you could say that “the rulers, the authorities, the world powers of this darkness” (Ephesians 6:12) have discovered that Christian nationalism is a very effective costume.

7. Core tenets of Christian nationalism versus Scripture

If we test American Christian nationalism by Scripture, its contradictions with the gospel are stark.

a). Kingdom and nation: Christian nationalism treats a specific modern nation-state as uniquely “chosen” and central to God’s purposes. Yet Jesus explicitly refuses to align his kingdom with any earthly state: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). The apostles describe believers as “strangers and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11), whose true “citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20).

The New Testament church spans every nation and language (Revelation 7:9) and is sent “to all nations” with the gospel (Matthew 28:19). Any project that elevates one national story to sacred status has already drifted into idolatry.

b). Ethno-national partiality: White Christian nationalism in particular links “real America” with whiteness and native-born status. Empirical research connects Christian nationalist scores with anti-immigrant sentiment and racism (Saiya, 2025). Scripture, however, insists that in Christ “there is no Jew or Greek” (Galatians 3:28), and that Christ “has made both groups one and torn down the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14). Partiality toward the rich or the powerful is forbidden (James 2:1–4).

A movement that treats migrants, racial minorities, or political opponents as enemies of God’s nation is out of step with the crucified Lord who dies “for the world” (John 3:16) and commands love of enemies (Matthew 5:43–45).

c). Coercive “Christianising” by state power: Christian nationalism seeks to use law, courts, and police power to “restore” Christian dominance. Yet the New Testament church spreads by preaching, persuasion, and sacrificial love, not by state coercion. The Great Commission is to “make disciples” through teaching and baptism, not to seize control of Caesar’s sword (Matthew 28:18–20). Peter calls believers to give a reason for their hope “with gentleness and reverence,” even under persecution (1 Peter 3:15–16).

When the church fuses itself with the state, history shows that the result is persecution of dissenters, not protection of the weak.

d). Sanctifying greed and exploitation: Because Christian nationalism is so deeply entangled with neoliberal capitalism, it often treats unregulated markets and wealth accumulation as signs of God's favour. Yet Jesus warns that "you cannot serve both God and money" (Luke 16:13). The early church held possessions in common so that "no one among them was in need" (Acts 4:34). Paul warns that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10).

When billionaire funders use Christian language to bless policies that harm the poor while enriching themselves, we are not witnessing the kingdom of God. We are seeing what Revelation calls "Babylon" (Revelation 18), a spiritual-political system that mixes religious imagery with economic exploitation and violence.

8. Discernment without paranoia

There really is a pattern of powerful economic and political actors using Christian nationalism to advance an unjust global order. That pattern is documented by mainstream historians, sociologists, and investigative journalists, not just fringe blogs or anonymous accounts. It is reasonable, from a Christian perspective, to describe this as part of a "sinister agenda," in the sense that it normalises greed, hierarchy, and violence while cloaking them in religious language.

At the same time, not every event is centrally coordinated. There is no scholarly evidence for a single, unified cabal that micromanages every crisis. What we do see is something more biblical and more sobering: overlapping networks of elites whose interests converge, and who are quite willing to instrumentalise faith. Scripture calls this "the schemes of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11), working through principalities and powers that operate in and through human institutions.

For clarity, "globalist" is used here descriptively to refer to transnational governance and influence structures that operate through public-private coordination, elite networking, policy standard-setting, and the global circulation of narratives that legitimate those arrangements. On this definition, initiatives such as the World Economic Forum's "Great Reset" explicitly frame a post-crisis opportunity for intensified public-private cooperation and re-design of economic and social systems at global scale (World Economic Forum, 2020a; Georgieva, 2020). The argument of this paper is not that such initiatives require Christian nationalism as a formal partner, but that Christian nationalism can function as a useful destabilizer and distractor: it deepens polarization, collapses ecclesial identity into national identity, and thereby weakens the church's capacity to offer principled resistance to technocratic consolidation (Powers, 2022; Sangwa, 2025).

For the church, the task is not to baptise either globalism or nationalism, but to recover its identity as an embassy of a different kingdom, one that refuses idolatry of nation, market, or party, and that judges every political project by the cross.

9. Pastoral and theological counter-formation: how the church responds in the U.S., Australia, and globally

In practical terms, this response must be intentionally transnational, because the problem is now transnational. Australian churches, for example, should treat U.S.-origin culture-war discipleship as a form of imported formation requiring explicit pastoral counter-formation: sermons and teaching should disentangle Christian identity from national grievance narratives, and leadership training should include disciplined engagement with media ecosystems that algorithmically reward outrage and boundary policing (McLeay et al., 2023).

At the level of spiritual diagnosis, the church must also name the deeper pattern by which power recruits religious language for governance. Sangwa

(2025) frames modern technocratic projects as a “*serpentine strategy*” that advances through financial consolidation and surveillance expansion, demanding prophetic discernment rather than partisan capture. Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025a) develop this further as a spiritual “operating system” of global governance that normalizes control through moral inversion and counterfeit salvation narratives. These analyses can be used here as a theological lens: Christian nationalism becomes especially dangerous when it offers believers a political “messiah” and a coercive “kingdom” strategy that competes with the cruciform kingdom of Christ (Sangwa, 2025; Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025a).

Finally, because Christian nationalism often frames rights discourse and family policy as existential battlegrounds, Sangwa and Mutabazi’s (2025b) analysis of rights-based reforms and family dissolution trends can be used to argue for a more careful Christian public theology: one that addresses real social breakdown without collapsing into punitive culture-war identity, and without surrendering biblical ecclesiology to corporate-political templates (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025b).

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