

Populism, Religious Identity, and the Instrumentalization of “Religious Freedom” in the United States during the Era of Donald Trump

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Introduction: Christian identity rather than gospel Christianity

One of the most important populist movements in the history of the United States (U.S.) began in 2015 with Donald Trump’s successful campaign for the American presidency. This populist movement – often named “MAGA” (“Make America Great Again”) – deployed traditional populist rhetoric of “the people” against the “elites” and appealed to widespread resentments against entrenched politicians and established interests. Within the MAGA movement, one salient theme was that religious freedom was under attack in America and that it was necessary for religious people to mobilize and “to take back the country.” The White Evangelical community was a key demographic component of the MAGA movement that led to the electoral victory of Trump in November 2016.¹ Although the majority of White Evangelicals – both leaders and grassroots – were initially skeptical of Trump and his candidacy due to his dubious moral character, a full 77% of White Evangelicals ultimately voted for him for president (as opposed to 16% for Hillary Clinton). This chapter will refer to Trump’s White Evangelical supporters, combined with others who adopted his religio-political themes, as “MAGA Christians.”

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- 1 The term “evangelical” traditionally refers to people who share with others the good news of the New Testament and the gift of salvation offered to mankind through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As used in the United States – and differently from how the terms is generally used in Europe – “Evangelical” refers to a trinitarian subgroup of Protestant Christianity that traditionally emphasizes the infallibility of the Bible. There are numerous varieties of American Evangelicalism, and between 10% and 15% might be identified as “progressive” or “liberal.”

Why did White Evangelicals, who initially were skeptical of Trump, become arguably the strongest MAGA supporters? This chapter argues that the Trump candidacy and presidency successfully instrumentalized the themes of “religious freedom” and “religious identity” to mobilize these supporters, a demographic group that was critical for his electoral success. Trump and the MAGA Christians did not invoke the Gospel themes of caring for the sick and injured, giving to the poor, loving one’s enemies, turning the other cheek, helping widows and orphans, forgiveness, or praying in private.² Rather, they prioritized Christian identity themes, including “Christians versus Muslims,” attacking one’s enemies, encouraging state financial support for Christians, promoting public displays of Christian symbols, as well as the use of the rhetoric of “religious freedom.”

Instrumentalizing religious freedom to win an election

For more than a hundred years, Evangelicals (including Fundamentalists) had insisted that a worthy moral character is a necessary qualification for anyone seeking public office. Among the many vices that traditionally were seen as disqualifying for candidates were extra-marital sex, divorce, ignorance of religion, dishonesty, and gambling. Between the 1920s and 1940s, many conservative Christians refused even to vote or participate in politics because it was seen as inherently corrupt. By the 1970s, the willingness of Evangelicals to engage in political activity had grown considerably, and 1979 to 1980 marked a sea change with the creation of the Moral Majority and several other religious-political activist groups that promoted Republican Party candidates.

At the time of his June 2015 announcement, Donald Trump was already a public figure who was well known for his New York-style braggadocio, pursuit of self-aggrandizing publicity, promiscuous sexual behavior, showy displays of wealth, promotion of commercial ventures branded with the name “Trump,” hosting a popular reality-television show where he frequently insulted participants, ownership of casinos, as well as his bankruptcies and spectacular business failures (three Trump casinos in Atlantic City, Trump Airlines, Trump University, Trump Vodka, Trump Steaks, and Trump Magazine). A thrice-married man, he frequently and publicly boasted of his extra-marital sexual escapades and having impregnated girlfriends while married to other women.

2 Matthew 6:5–6. See discussion below.

In addition to his disreputable lifestyle, Trump had no recognizable knowledge or interest in the religious values that are at the heart of the Evangelical worldview.³ Trump was never comfortable responding to questions about religion, and typically answered them in such a way as to turn the focus away from God and onto himself. At the time when Trump announced his candidacy, not only was his knowledge of religion superficial, but he had earlier made statements on homosexuality and abortion that were unacceptable to Evangelicals.

There are several positions that are widely shared in the conservative Evangelical community regarding religio-political issues:

- Promotion of “religious freedom” (and freedom from persecution for Christians);
- Opposition to abortion;
- Opposition to gay marriage and other LGBTQ rights;
- Appointing Supreme Court justices who oppose abortion and favor religious freedom;
- Favoring religious exemptions from laws of general applicability;
- Promoting religion in public schools;
- Promoting public prayer in schools and in governmental bodies;
- The threat posed by Muslims;⁴
- Military and financial support for the State of Israel;
- Encouraging state financial support for religion (including opposition to the “Johnson Amendment” to the federal tax code).⁵

3 See Critchlow, Donald T.: *The Conservative Ascendancy. How the GOP Right Made Political History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2007, where Trump's name does not appear; Balmer, Randall: *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, Waco: Baylor University Press 2004; Sutton, Matthew A.: *American Apocalypse. A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2014; Wodak, Ruth: *The Politics of Fear. What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, London: Sage Publications Ltd 2015; Thompson, Michael J.: *Confronting the New Conservatism. The Rise of the Right in America*, New York: New York University Press 2007; Critchlow, Donald T.: *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism. A Woman's Crusade*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005.

4 “[W]hite evangelical Protestants tend to express more reservations about Muslims and Islam than do those in other religious groups.” Pew Research Center: *U.S. Muslims concerned about their place in society, but continue to believe in the American dream* (26 Jul. 2015), p. 127, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

5 For the Johnson Amendment, see below.

During the first six months of his campaign, Trump largely ignored or was ignorant of the importance of these themes to Evangelical voters. For example, he did not mention any of them in his declaration of candidacy on June 16, 2015. He did not even bother to attend the first major forum in 2015 for Evangelical voters. He was the only Republican candidate not to appear at the event, sponsored by the Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, on October 18, 2015. So foreign was Trump to Evangelicals at the time that his absence – as reported at the time – “practically went unmentioned.” The polls at the end of 2015 gave him less than 20% of the Evangelical vote.

In December 2015, as he came to understand that he was not gaining sufficient support from the key Evangelical community, Trump began to promote their favored religio-political themes. In that month, he hit squarely on one of the principal Evangelical anxieties when he issued a press release accusing Muslims of endangering the religious freedom of Americans and promising to ban them from entering the United States if he were to be elected president. Trump then sought a high-profile endorsement from the well-known Jerry Falwell Jr., President of Liberty University, and the namesake of one of the most famous and controversial Evangelical leaders of the 20th century. Trump was invited to speak at Liberty University in January 2016, in the same lecture series where candidate Ted Cruz had been enthusiastically welcomed a few weeks earlier.

In his Liberty University address in 2016, Trump vaguely called for the need to protect Christianity, albeit without explaining exactly why, where, or how. He did not yet link religious freedom to any of the trigger terms associated with it: abortion, gay marriage, or the Supreme Court. His stumbling message mentioned “we are going to protect Christianity [...] I do not have to be politically correct. [applause] We’re going to protect it, you know. We’re going to protect it. You know.”

A week after Trump delivered the speech that demonstrated little familiarity with the Evangelical religion or Evangelical positions, Jerry Falwell Jr. stunned the Evangelical world by endorsing the worldly and biblically illiterate Donald Trump for president. While benefiting Trump’s credibility within the Evangelical community, Falwell’s endorsement was sharply criticized by many

prominent Evangelical leaders who continued to insist that Trump did not have the moral character to be president.⁶

Over the next six months, Trump gradually began to articulate the religio-political themes favored by Evangelicals and MAGA Christians by emphasizing the danger of Muslims, the evil of abortion, the growing threat to religious freedom, appointing favorable Justices to the Supreme Court, and promoting state funding for religious activities. After many victories in Republican Party primaries, it became clear than Trump would win the Republican nomination for president. With the combined interest of the MAGA Christians in supporting the victorious candidate and Trump's interest in enlisting the enthusiastic support of Evangelical leadership, the candidate met with more than 1,000 influential Evangelical leaders and representatives on June 21, 2016, in the Marriott Marquis hotel on Times Square in New York City. Among the participants were former candidates Mike Huckabee and Ben Carson, whom Trump had soundly defeated, but also some of the most famous Evangelicals in the country, including Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr., James Dobson, Tony Perkins, James Robison, and Kelly Shackelford. At this June 21 meeting, the leaders described themselves as a gathering of spiritual people doing God's work.

Trump acceded to and promoted the core Evangelical religio-political positions at the Marriott Marquis meeting. He and the gathered leaders agreed that:

- Religious freedom is under attack in America and the Johnson amendment is an infringement on religious liberty.
- There is a need to appoint Supreme Court justices that would support MAGA Christian positions on abortion, religious freedom, and gay rights.
- Trump had been able to overcome many difficulties and obtain electoral victories due to God's intervention in the election.
- Trump possesses identifiable and necessary moral and spiritual qualities for holding public office.
- Political divisions in the United States should not be understood as legitimate differences among alternative approaches to complicated issues, but as a stark contrast between good and evil.
- There should be unquestioned support for the State of Israel.

6 Collins, Eliza: "Christian leaders balk at Falwell's Trump Endorsement" (26 Jan. 2016), <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/jerry-falwell-jr-endorses-trump-218238>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

- Trump is a strong and forceful leader who will protect Americans from enemies, foreign and domestic.⁷

Between the time that he announced his candidacy in June 2015 and his presidential victory with strong Evangelical support in November 2016, Trump had not changed his moral character nor revealed any increased knowledge about religion. While Trump's character did not change as he sought Evangelical support, he did change his campaign message by newly emphasizing the fears and concerns of the Evangelical community, most particularly the dangers posed by Muslims, that Christianity was under threat, and the need to appoint Supreme Court justices who would promote religious freedom and end abortion. Trump thus instrumentalized the rhetoric of religious freedom to enlist the support of the crucial Evangelical voting bloc, which enabled him to defeat Hillary Clinton in November 2016. As president, he would later instrumentalize religious freedom to mobilize support for his political objectives.

Instrumentalization of religious freedom by MAGA Christians and the Trump administration

The Supreme Court, abortion, and gay rights

Among the many social-political issues of concern to MAGA Christians, there are two clusters that recur most frequently: first, those related to family planning (including most importantly abortion but also contraception); and second, issues related to gender identity (including gay marriage, gay rights, and transgender rights). Although the Gospels speak eloquently and clearly about the importance of loving one's neighbor, giving to the poor, and ministering to the sick, it was not these Gospel-articulated issues that motivated MAGA Christians' political engagement, but opposition to abortion and gender rights, neither of which was ever raised in the Gospels.

There is compelling evidence that the issue of abortion held little initial interest to the Evangelical community in 1973 at the time of the Supreme Court

7 A transcript of the closed-door event can be found at Ward, Jon: "Transcript: Donald Trump's closed-door meeting with evangelical leaders" (22 Jun. 2016), <https://news.yahoo.com/transcript-donald-trumps-closed-door-meeting-with-evangelical-leaders-195810824.html?guccounter=1>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

case *Roe v. Wade* constitutionally legalized the right to abortion.⁸ However, in 1979, as part of a political strategy to consolidate conservative religious communities – including Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Christian Orthodox, conservative Roman Catholics, and conservative Jews – into a unified voting bloc to aid the Republican Party, several influential persons agreed to frame abortion as the defining moral issue of our time. This newly discovered moral issue helped Republicans elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. Prior to 1979, the legality of abortion had troubled Catholics but not Protestants. After 1979, it became both a galvanizing and polarizing topic in American politics.

In 2015 and 2016, as Trump came to understand the importance of the issue to the Evangelical community and to gain their support, he spoke out in opposition to abortion and promised to appoint Justices to the Supreme Court who would overrule *Roe v. Wade*. Trump was later able to appoint three justices (with Senate confirmation) who stated during their Senate confirmation hearings that *Roe* was “settled law” and that they did not foresee overruling it. However, the first time that the opportunity presented itself, to the delight of Trump and MAGA Christians, all three Trump judges reversed their stated positions on abortion being settled law and voted with other justices to overturn *Roe* in the 2022 decision *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. ____ (2022).

Instrumentalizing “religious freedom” as a two-edged sword: Seeking state benefits on the grounds of religious freedom

Under American and international human rights law, *the state* is prohibited from discrimination among religious groups, and should not demonstrate preferences or prejudice regarding the differences among Catholics, Hindus, Protestants, Muslims, or Buddhists. At the same time, both in the United States and internationally, *religious people and religious groups* are allowed to discriminate on the basis of religion. Religions are not obligated to allow non-members to participate in sacred religious rituals, hire people of other religions to preside at religious ceremonies, or to admit into membership those whose values or behavior are anathema to their religion. Thus, under

8 See Balmer, Randall: Redeemer. The Life of Jimmy Carter, New York: Basic Books 2014; Balmer, Randall: Bad Faith. Race and the Rise of the Religious Right, Chicago: William B. Eerdmans Press 2021; and Balmer, Randall: “The Religious Right and the Abortion Myth” (10 May 2022), <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/05/10/abortion-history-right-white-evangelical-1970s-00031480>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

basic principles of law, *state discrimination on the basis of religion is prohibited while religious individuals and entities are permitted to discriminate on the basis of their religious beliefs*. However, this critical difference between the impermissibility of state discrimination and the permissibility of private discrimination becomes problematic when individuals and groups are able to instrumentalize the authority of the state to discriminate while simultaneously invoking their “religious freedom” as a shield to allow them to discriminate. To a great extent, this is exactly what MAGA Christians and the Trump administration promoted: instrumentalizing the rhetoric of religious freedom to insist upon their equal right to obtain governmental resources (such as state financial support for religious hospitals and schools) while simultaneously insisting on their religious freedom right to use state resources to discriminate against others. We may characterize this two-part use of “religious freedom” as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, religious freedom is invoked (defensively) to demand equal treatment to obtain state benefits, but then is used (offensively) to insist on the right to use state benefits to discriminate against others.

Trump administration actions to provide state financial benefits

With the active encouragement of the MAGA Christian community, the Trump administration (2017–2021) issued more than a dozen orders and regulations to help religious individuals and groups obtain government benefits or exemptions from federal law, and then permit the beneficiaries of governmental support to claim their “religious freedom” right to discriminate against others whose values and interests differ from their own. The two most important examples were Executive Order (EO) 13798 “Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty” (May 4, 2017)⁹ and EO 13831 “Establishment of a White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative” (May 3, 2018)¹⁰. Pursuant to EO 13798, the U.S. Attorney General issued guidelines for all federal agencies entitled “Federal Law Protections for Religious Liberty” (Oct. 6, 2017)¹¹. Following the issuance of these two Executive Orders and Attorney General guidelines, the Department of Health

9 82 Fed. Reg. 21675 (9 May 2017), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-05-09/pdf/2017-09574.pdf>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

10 83 Fed. Reg. 20715 (8 May 2018), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2018-05-08/pdf/2018-09895.pdf>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

11 Attorney General [Jeff Sessions]: Federal Law Protections for Religious Liberty (6 Oct. 2017), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1001891/download>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

and Human Services (HHS) in turn issued a series of orders and regulations that applied to government agencies, non-profit organizations, and for-profit businesses owned or operated by people making religious freedom claims. The HHS rules were designed to facilitate religious freedom objections to laws of general applicability, particularly regarding family planning (contraception and pregnancy) and providing services to the LGBTQ community.

The HHS regulations undercut the rules of the Affordable Care Act (ACA, popularly known as Obamacare) that required qualifying employers to provide contraception coverage for their employees. Although churches and religious institutions were already exempt from this mandate in the ACA, the Trump administration – by executive fiat – extended this exemption to include not only religious organizations, but also for-profit businesses that claimed religious freedom exemptions.¹² Other regulations enhanced the authority of federally subsidized health care providers to limit access to medical care for the LGBTQ community. The Department of Housing and Urban Development proposed rules to allow federally subsidized homeless shelters to refuse access to transgender people.

Both the White House (under EO 13831) and the HHS also created offices to advise on policies to promote religious exemptions to laws. These offices openly invited and welcomed the participation of religious leaders in policy formulation. President Trump claimed substantial credit for these initiatives.

Reminding MAGA Christians of his promises as a candidate, President Trump also claimed to have abolished the Johnson amendment in EO 13798:

“As I campaigned across the country, faith leaders explained that they were prevented from speaking their minds because of a 1954 rule known as the Johnson Amendment. I spoke about it a lot. Under this rule, if a pastor, priest, or imam speaks about issues of public or political importance, they are threatened with the loss of their tax-exempt status, a crippling financial punishment. Very, very unfair. But no longer.”¹³

12 Pear, Robert/Ruiz, Rebecca R./Goodstein, Laurie: “Trump Administration Rolls Back Birth Control Mandate” (6 Oct. 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/us/politics/trump-contraception-birth-control.html>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

13 Trump, Donald J.: Remarks on Signing a Proclamation on the National Day of Prayer and an Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty (4 May 2017), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-proclamation-the-national-day-prayer-and-executive-order-promoting-free>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

Given that the Johnson amendment is statutory law, and has not been repealed, Trump's claim was exaggerated. It would be more accurate to say that Johnson amendment had rarely been enforced prior to Trump, and then only in extreme cases, and that the longstanding policy effectively did not change under Trump.

The Trump administration and MAGA Christian identity

Public prayer and religious displays

In the Gospels, Jesus criticized the “hypocrites” who ostentatiously pray in public so that others might see them (Matthew 6:5–6). Repudiating the form of prayer taught by Jesus in the Gospels, Trump and many MAGA Christians promote public prayer as a way of manifesting their religious identity. Perhaps the most obvious example of promoting public prayer takes place at the annual “National Prayer Breakfast,” which has been held in Washington, DC, since the 1950s. The annual event is attended by the news media and is broadcast on national television.

One of the many recurring themes at the prayer breakfasts is the vital need to allow children to pray in public school, as if they are prohibited from doing so. In reality, children have a right to individual prayer in public schools. This form of individual prayer – apparently approved of by Jesus – has, however, been insufficient for the religious right that has long sought to promote school-sponsored prayers led by teachers, athletic coaches, or other school officials. Advocates of school-sponsored prayers have essentially argued that public school officials have a religious freedom right to lead children in prayer.

Other MAGA Christian objectives that have long been part of the agenda of the religious right include promoting official prayers not only in the U.S. Congress but also statehouses and local government meetings throughout the country. Trump frequently staged photo opportunities in the White House showing religious leaders praying for him.

Displays of religious symbols

Individuals and religious communities have a long-recognized constitutional right to display religious symbols in public. Churches may display crosses, Ten Commandments monuments, and Bibles. Individuals also have the constitu-

tional right to wear religious symbols on their clothing. Many MAGA Christians seek, however, not simply to exercise their right to display symbols individually and as religious communities, but also seek state support and financing for the display of religious symbols on public property. Since the 1950s, and continuing under the Trump administration, there have been efforts to promote governmental displays of Ten Commandments monuments, Christian crosses and crucifixes, and biblical passages. Trump wanted to use his power as president to pressure businesses to declare publicly “Merry Christmas,” regardless of the sentiments either of the businesses or of persons who would be offended by it. Perhaps the most salient display of a religious symbolism during his administration was on June 1, 2020, when Trump ordered the U.S. military to forcefully clear Lafayette Park of peaceful protestors so that he could have his photograph taken while holding a copy of the Bible in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church.¹⁴ As was the case during his campaign, Trump was more interested in holding the Bible aloft for photographers than reading or understanding it.

Support for the State of Israel

Since the 1960s, the Evangelical community has been strongly supportive of the State of Israel, regardless of Israeli foreign and domestic policy. Whereas Evangelicals have been critical of other foreign states that prohibit Christian missionary activity, they have not offered such criticisms of Israel for its prohibition on proselytism. The unwavering MAGA Christian support of Israel has little to do with actual Israeli policy, but reflects the eschatological belief that the establishment of the State of Israel is part of a biblical prophecy and will lead to the Second Coming of Christ. Evangelical Christians have long supported Israeli policy and have been among the principal proponents of acceding to the Israeli position that Jerusalem is the undivided capital of Israel and that foreign states should move their embassies to Jerusalem, even when it means placing embassies on Palestinian land in East Jerusalem. Although several prior candidates for president had pledged to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, Trump was the first actually to do so. On December 6, 2017, he issued a “Proclamation Recognizing Jerusalem as the Capital of the State of Israel

14 Bennett, Dalton/Cahlan, Sarah/Davis, Aaron C./Lee, Joyce Sohyun: “The crackdown before Trump’s photo op” (8 Jun. 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2020/06/08/timeline-trump-church-photo-op/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

and Relocating the United States Embassy to Israel to Jerusalem.”¹⁵ Symbolizing the MAGA Christian support for this controversial political move, two of his well-known and controversial MAGA Christian supporters were invited to deliver public prayers inaugurating the newly opened embassy on May 14, 2018. According to The New York Times coverage of the event, a “Dallas evangelical pastor who once said that Jewish people are going to hell and a megachurch televangelist who claimed that Hitler was part of God’s plan to return Jews to Israel both played prominent roles on Monday in the opening ceremony of the new American Embassy in Jerusalem.”¹⁶

Attempt to ban Muslims from entering the United States

The MAGA movement is well known for its hostile rhetoric directed at Muslims, both those who are American citizens and those who live outside of the country. Equally sharp anti-Semitism was once pervasive among the Christian right, and now anti-Islam has become one of its new identifying characteristics. Whereas MAGA Christians support freedom of religion and non-discrimination for Christians, they have been much less supportive of religious freedom and non-discrimination regarding Muslims. Reflecting and promoting the bias against Muslims within the MAGA movement, candidate Trump repeatedly called for banning their entry into the United States. On January 27, 2017, within a week of his inauguration, President Trump issued Executive Order 13769, a provocative order designed to restrict Muslims from entering the United States. Entitled “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States,”¹⁷ it did not use the words “Muslim” or “Islam” explicitly, but it identified several Muslim-majority countries in its ban and its intent was clear. While MAGA Christians supported the ban, public demonstrations against the EO 13769 broke out across the United States and it was challenged immediately in federal courts, where it was blocked from implementation. In response to the serious legal challenges against the order, Trump

15 82 Fed. Reg. (6 Dec. 2017), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-12-11/pdf/2017-26832.pdf>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

16 Haag, Matthew: “Robert Jeffress, Pastor Who Said Jews Are Going to Hell, Led Prayer at Jerusalem Embassy,” in: The New York Times (14 May 2018).

17 82 Fed. Reg. 8977 (1 Feb. 2017), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/02/01/2017-02281/protecting-the-nation-from-foreign-terrorist-entry-into-the-united-states>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

revised it twice in order to make its original bias less stark. The doubly revised and modified order was partially upheld by the Supreme Court.

Trump and the MAGA Christians proposed *exemptions from state laws* (on the basis of religious freedom) while simultaneously seeking *state endorsement of their beliefs*. Thus, they are instrumentalizing the *language* of religious freedom to promote their own freedom while at the same time limiting the freedoms of others.

Conclusion

The MAGA populist movement – which coalesced in 2016 – combined elements of several pre-existing populist themes, including resentment against social elites, a fear that freedoms are being lost (particularly religious freedom and the right to bear arms), a fear of immigrants and Muslims, antipathy towards gay marriage and LGBTQ rights, and opposition to abortion. Many within the MAGA movement were motivated by racist and anti-Semitic sentiments. Initially suspicious of Trump's morality and character, White Evangelical Christians ultimately became MAGA Christians, without whose support Trump would not have won the election.

While the language of religious freedom, Christian nationalism, and the Christian God were prevalent within MAGA populism, the specific religious goals were not the Gospel values of feeding the hungry, caring for widows, visiting those in prison, or loving one's neighbor, but rather promoting hostility towards disfavored groups, supporting Christian-identity symbols, increasing state financial aid for religion, and encouraging religious freedom exemptions for businesses from laws of general applicability. With the notable exception of claims about the right of community worship during the COVID pandemic, the claims for religious freedom from MAGA populism were less about seeking the right to practice one's religion, and more about symbols of religious identity, state financial support for religion, exemptions to laws prohibiting discrimination against gays, and prohibiting women from making their own decisions about the viability of their own pregnancies.

