

The Religious Underpinnings of Russia's Invasion in Ukraine: The Orthodox Russian State, US
Evangelicals, and the Global Culture Wars

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Mainstream narratives of the devastating war in Ukraine have mainly focused on the fears of nuclear escalation, the shifting of world powers, globalization, and the duty of Western nations to respond, in addition to reports about the increasing humanitarian and refugee crisis the war has created. While these are important discussions, the influence of religion in this conflict has largely been relegated to scholarly blogs and commentaries by religious studies scholars and theologians. Including a discussion about the presence of religion in this conflict, not only with regards to the regional influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also in the way that Americans are responding to the conflict, will help individuals not only better understand the role that Christian nationalism plays in foreign and domestic relations and politics but it will also situate this war in the broader context of the global culture wars; of which religion is at the forefront. From a progressive perspective I am concerned with how the larger movement of Christian nationalism may be reflected or affecting the US and how it is infringing on the degree of separation between church and state in secular democracies. I am arguing that the war in Ukraine has a pervasive religious orientation in two clear ways: the first is the historical relationship of Orthodoxy between Ukraine and Russia which is being used as a religious justification for the invasion; the second is the US conservative evangelical response to the war and invasion, a narrative which casts Russia and Putin as the defenders of a traditional and conservative Christian nationalism. Furthermore, given that US foreign policy has historically been influenced by American evangelical leaders like Billy and Franklin Graham who wanted to further their moral evangelical crusades, it is important that the current Biden administration recognize the role that evangelicals play in the American political sphere and right now with regards to Russia and Ukraine. The main content of this briefing paper will proceed in the following way: I will begin with a brief historical overview of the Orthodox churches in Ukraine

and Russia and the rhetoric being used by Putin and Patriarch Kirill in defense of the invasion; secondly, I will give an explanation of the relationship between US evangelicals and Russia and the implications of the various evangelical responses, to the invasion; finally, I will go into the role that American evangelical leaders have played in influencing foreign policy, furthering Christian nationalism, and the larger, global culture wars.

In this paper I will be using Walter Mead's definition and understanding of the conservative 'evangelicals' I will reference throughout this briefing. There are three strands within the American Protestant tradition: liberal Christianity, fundamentalism, and a broader evangelical tradition. Over the course of the 19th century fundamentalists further split into the separatist camp (known for isolating and withdrawing from mainstream culture and politics) and, a group known simply as 'evangelicals', who sought involvement with the world. There are many similarities between the more moderate evangelical camp and fundamentalist and the two are often referenced interchangeably. Mead writes that there are three characteristics of fundamentalists: "a high view of biblical authority and inspiration; a strong determination to defend the historical Protestant faith against Roman Catholic and modernist, secular, and non-secular Christian influence; and the conviction that believers should separate themselves from the non-Christian world."¹ Furthermore fundamentalists are interested in fashioning a 'Christian worldview' in order to stop the spread of secular morality led by a reforming US and a world order instituted by international organizations. These characteristics are the basis of my understanding of 'conservative evangelicals/Christians', however, the movements and individuals referenced may also fall into the middle ground of evangelism more broadly (for example, many in the Religious/Christian Right). Throughout this paper the descriptors,

¹ Walter Russell Mead, "God's Country?," Foreign Affairs, January 29, 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2006-09-01/gods-country>.

evangelical or conservative Christians, are used interchangeably, but it is important to note that I am not suggesting that the views or beliefs I reference are the views or beliefs of those entire groups, rather, I am referencing the most orthodox, extreme variations of evangelism (which in itself is a difficult task as there are countless variations and interpretations).

Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy

There are two distinct Orthodox churches in Ukraine; each which claim to represent the Ukrainian people. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate is a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and overseen by the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. The second Orthodox church is the Orthodox Church of Ukraine which consciously broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate as a clear expression of Ukrainian divergence, independence, and freedom from Russia. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine now has canonical status and is overseen by the Kyiv Patriarchate which was officially recognized by the ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (which has a Western leaning orientation in its values) and granted autocephaly in 2018. This restructuring of Ukrainian Orthodoxy away from the ROC threatened the supremacy of the conservative stronghold of the Orthodox tradition and Church in the Eastern world. The ROC has yet to recognize the split and the Moscow Patriarchate has clearly denied the existence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, going as far as to break communion with the new iteration of the Ukrainian church. An article from the scholarly discussion board, the Conversation, reads: “It [the Orthodox Church of Ukraine] regards Russians and Ukrainians as two different peoples, each of whom deserves to have its own separate church.”² On the other hand, both Putin and Patriarch Kirill have spoken to the idea that the invasion is an effort to restore spiritual unity and

² Clay, Eugene J. “Why Church Conflict in Ukraine Reflects Historic Russian-Ukrainian Tensions.” The Conversation, March 7, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/why-church-conflict-in-ukraine-reflects-historic-russian-ukrainian-tensions-175818>.

Orthodox Civilization by taking back ‘Holy Rus’: the religious and philosophical territory which harkens back to the medieval East Slavic civilization comprised of modern-day Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. One monk recalls the prophecy of a saint: “Just as the One Lord God is the indivisible Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... so Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus together are Holy Rus’ and cannot be separated.”³ This is direct evidence of Russia’s Christian imperialist sentiment and presumed destiny to protect and reinstate Russia’s rightful place on earth as an exceptional civilization.⁴ Perhaps uncoincidentally this is also rhetoric that Stalin employed. Furthermore, and in direct opposition to the perspective of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill wrote to the World Council of Churches that “The peoples of Russia and Ukraine, who came from one Kievan baptismal font, are united by common faith, common saints and prayers, and share common historical fate,” and he sees the conflict as part of a Western and NATO led geopolitical strategy aimed at dividing the “brotherly nations of Ukraine and Russia”, weakening Russia, and inspiring Russophobia.⁵ Kirill also gave a moral justification for the invasion in his Forgiveness Sunday sermon on March 6th saying that Russian Orthodox Christians in the Donbass region of Ukraine are being persecuted for their fundamental rejection of liberal beliefs (i.e. the rejection of God and his truth and the demand for participation in gay parades).⁶ This followed Putin's February 21st public address in which he denied Ukraine’s sovereignty and asserted that “President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government was ‘infringing on

³ Geraldine Fagan, “How the Russian Orthodox Church Is Helping Putin's War,” Time (Time, April 15, 2022), <https://time.com/6167332/putin-russian-orthodox-church-war-ukraine/>.

⁴ Fagan, “How the Russian Orthodox Church Is Helping Putin's War”.

⁵ H.H. Kirill, Response by H.H. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca (English translation), 10 March 2022, oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-english-translation

⁶ “Patriarchal Sermon on Cheesefare Week After the Liturgy at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior / Patriarch / Patriarchy.ru.” Patriarchy.ru. Accessed April 25, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>.

believers' rights" and 'preparing the destruction' of Ukraine's Moscow-linked church."⁷ Both the leader of Russia and the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church see the invasion of Ukraine (and have used these arguments as reasons for invading Ukraine) as a spiritual crusade to re-civilize the world: by stopping the "sodomization of the world" and ensuring the defense of the traditional family.⁸

Overlapping Agendas: Russia and US Evangelicals

The religious rhetoric being used by Putin and Kirill closely resembles the voiced concerns of the conservative evangelical population in the US (Evangelical Christians make up the largest religious group in the US with estimates ranging from 20-35% of the total US population) who worry of a loss of traditional values and family structures in the face of expanding Western liberal influence.⁹ However, this relationship between evangelicals and Russia has not always been present. During the Cold War the USSR - and communism more generally - was believed by American Protestants to be the biggest threat to Christian existence and global expansion. With the fall of the USSR, evangelicals began a bustling transnational business of Bible smuggling into the morally corrupt Russia in order to missionize the former communists.¹⁰ In the years since the establishment of the Russian state, Putin and the last two Patriarchs of Moscow have emphasized and expanded the influence of the Russian Orthodox

⁷ Jonathan Luxmoore, "After Supporting Ukraine Invasion, Russia's Patriarch Kirill Criticized Worldwide," National Catholic Reporter, March 15, 2022, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/after-supporting-ukraine-invasion-russias-patriarch-kirill-criticized-worldwide-0>.

⁸ "Europe Expects from Russia the Consolidation of Healthy Forces and the Organization of Resistance to the Sodomization of the World," Russian People's Line, June 17, 2013, https://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2013/06/17/evropa_zhdyot_ot_rossii_konsolidacii_zdravyh_sil_i_org_anizacii_soprotivleniya_sodomizacii_mira/.

⁹ Robert McMahon, "Christian Evangelicals and U.S. Foreign Policy," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, August 22, 2006), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/christian-evangelicals-and-us-foreign-policy>.

¹⁰ Melani McAlister, "Why Putin Is an Ally for American Evangelicals," The Conversation, April 15, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/why-putin-is-an-ally-for-american-evangelicals-101504>.

Church in the newly secularized, ‘democratic’ country. Simultaneously, the last three decades of globalization have left hardline, conservative, and fundamental evangelicals feeling disenfranchised and left behind by the liberalizing and secular United States. There is a population of far-right evangelicals who have turned to the figure of Vladimir Putin and Russia as the answer and model for the moral shortcomings of the United States. In the wake of Trump, there are some conservative evangelicals who see Putin as a religiously devout strongman who has the follow-through, strength, and power needed in the current divisive global climate.¹¹ This perspective is ironic given that the Russian state does not support the evangelical groups within Russia and has a relatively poor rate of church attendance and strict religious adherence. A Pew Research article titled “Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church” uses data from the International Social Survey Programme which reports that between 1991 and 2008 “Russian adults identifying as Orthodox Christian rose from 31% to 72%” however, across all the data that was collected, only one-in-ten Russians actually report attending church services once a month.¹² So, while Russians may be identifying with Orthodoxy more strongly (an explicit goal of Putin) they are not necessarily more religiously observant. Additionally, even while Russia’s constitution guarantees religious freedom, persecution of various Christian denominations has ramped up in recent years including a ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2017 and evangelical Protestants have been targeted by the imposition of anti-missionary laws.¹³ Even in the face of a

¹¹ Davey Alba and Stuart A. Thompson, “‘I’ll Stand on the Side of Russia’: Pro-Putin Sentiment Spreads Online,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 25, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/technology/russia-supporters.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.

¹²“Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church,” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, February 10, 2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/02/10/russians-return-to-religion-but-not-to-church/>.

¹³Kate Shellnutt, “Christians Fleeing Persecution in Russia Can Stay in Germany,” *News & Reporting* (Christianity Today, July 23, 2019), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/july/german-court-asylum-russian-baptist-persecution.html>.

lack of religious adherence by Russians and clear examples of evangelical persecution in Russia, some conservative evangelicals in the US continue to see Putin and the Russian state through rose-colored glasses. This is even more surprising given that one of the main issues which mobilize the Religious Right to act in American foreign policy is the fight against the global persecution of Christians.¹⁴

Since the invasion of Ukraine, there has been an increase in public conservative evangelical support of Russia and Putin. This has included comments by televangelist Pat Robertson on the Christian Broadcasting Network, who argued that Putin was “compelled by God” to invade Ukraine, as part of a biblical prophecy in which the invasion was a precursor to an Armageddon battle: “God is getting ready to do something amazing...and that will be fulfilled”¹⁵; the far-right Orthodox Christian activist Lauren Witzke proclaimed that “Russia is a Christian nationalist nation... I actually support Putin’s right to protect his people and always put his people first, but also protect their Christian values.”¹⁶ Furthermore, the American evangelical legacy Franklin Graham was met with severe backlash after he called his followers to “pray for Putin” in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.¹⁷ That said, Graham has since denounced the war, in albeit general terms, saying, “This is a war. I don’t support war and I don’t know of any Christian that supports war. We pray for peace, not war. We pray for peace, not war. I don’t

¹⁴William Martin, “The Christian Right and American Foreign Policy” *Foreign Policy*, 114, Spring 1999: pp. 66-80.

¹⁵ Timothy Bella, “Pat Robertson Says Putin Was 'Compelled by God' to Invade Ukraine to Fulfill Armageddon Prophecy,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, March 1, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/01/pat-robertson-putin-god-russia-ukraine/>.

¹⁶ Graham Gremore, “Lauren Witzke Proves the Body Can Survive without a Brain by Praising Putin's Good ‘Christian Values,’” *Queerty* (Queerty, February 25, 2022), <https://www.queerty.com/lauren-witzke-proves-body-can-survive-without-brain-praising-putins-good-christian-values-20220225>.

¹⁷ Franklin Graham, Twitter post, February 2022, 3:10 p.m., https://twitter.com/Franklin_Graham/status/1494796401779351558?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1494861978992582657%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es2&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rawstory.com%2Ffranklin-graham-putin%2F.

support this at all,”¹⁸ after which he has sent aid groups to Ukraine through his humanitarian aid organization, Samaritan’s Purse. The list of far-right, conservative, evangelical rhetoric could continue, but the figures mentioned have a considerable platform and reach which is important to note because this rhetoric is not relegated to obscure far-right blogs. The Boston Review summarizes:

White evangelicals once saw Russia as an existential threat to traditional gender roles and sexual morality, but over the past three decades, they have forged a partnership in a global family values movement that not only embraces sexual and gender traditionalism but sees these practices as a solution to demographic changes around the globe... American evangelicals leveraged [Russian Christian Nationalism] to amplify the message: the people really suffering, in the United States and globally, were white Christians being crushed by the hands of godless government.¹⁹

This quote speaks to the embattlement narrative discussed in Kristin Kobes du Mez’s book, *Jesus and John Wayne*, which evangelicals thrive upon. The global culture wars are the new rallying cry which (often conservative) evangelicals feel they can support and their positive comments are evidence of the “grievance politics” that have spurred the right to action in the US in the past few years.²⁰ An American anthropologist of American politics and religion conducted an ethnographic case study in an Appalachian community and found that some American evangelicals are converting to Orthodoxy as a political act given their identity with Russian Orthodoxy as not only a spiritual home but an ideological haven in Putin’s god-inspired regime which is believed to have the power to “not only make Russia great again, but also make America, by extension, *holy* again.”²¹ These converts see America as in moral decline in the face

¹⁸Josiah Reedy, “How Christians Enabled Putin,” Juicy Ecumenism, March 10, 2022, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2022/03/10/evangelicals-and-putin/>.

¹⁹ Bethany Moreton, “The U.S. Christians Who Pray for Putin,” Boston Review, March 14, 2022, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/the-u-s-christians-who-pray-for-putin/>.

²⁰ Davey Alba and Stuart A. Thompson, “‘I’ll Stand on the Side of Russia’: Pro-Putin Sentiment Spreads Online.”

²¹ Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, “American Conversions to Russian Orthodoxy Amid the Global Culture Wars,” Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs (Georgetown University, December 18, 2019),

of liberal secularism and have found solace in the conservative morality of the “ideologies found in a foreign (and historically hostile) power.”²² This conversion is reminiscent of the 1987 mass conversion event to American Orthodoxy during the Reagan era and the growth of the religious right in American politics: “The mass defection—the culmination of more than a decade’s seeking by a loose network of self-proclaimed “Evangelical Orthodox” churches—helped raise awareness of Orthodoxy as an alternative for conservative Christians who were growing disillusioned by what they interpreted as liberalizing trends in their churches.”²³ The evangelical support of the Russian state and almost inseparable Orthodox Church is deeply rooted in the perceived alliance between cultural conservatives and far-right evangelicals in the US and Russia which are both rooted in white nationalism, traditional gender roles and sexual morality.²⁴ The Russian Orthodox Church, Putin, and the conservatism of Russian politics offers something to American conservatives who feel that liberalizing evangelism and US politics is missing.

One of the ways in which the US Religious Right and Russia have cemented their alliance for conserving traditional family values is through the World Congress of Families (WCF), an organization which was born out of discussions between US conservative Allan Carlson and Russian professors of sociology Anatoly Antonov and Viktor Medkov in 1997. The WCF is vehemently anti-choice, anti-LGBTQ, anti-abortion and spreads its “pro-family” rhetoric through proposed legislation which will criminalize and dismantle all non-traditional families so

<https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/american-conversions-to-russian-orthodoxy-amid-the-global-culture-wars>.

²² Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, “American Conversions to Russian Orthodoxy Amid the Global Culture Wars.”

²³ Bethany Moreton, “The U.S. Christians Who Pray for Putin.”

²⁴ Bethany Moreton, “The Bond That Explains Why Some on the Christian Right Support Putin’s War,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, March 4, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/05/bond-that-explains-why-some-christian-right-support-putins-war/>.

as to preserve the theologically justified “natural family” of a man, woman, and children.²⁵ The WCF spreads its mission through international Congresses, many of which have been held in Russia. In fact, WCF’s 2014 Congress was set to take place in Moscow, however it was officially ‘canceled’ over concerns about Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The meetings, however, actually continued but without the name of WCF, instead being called: “Large Families and the Future of Humanity International Forum,” disregarding the international concerns for Ukraine’s sovereignty.²⁶ Carlson founded the WCF on the basis of fears - which echo those of Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian-born Harvard sociologist - of a “future marked by “catastrophic population decline, economic contraction, and human tragedy” (all symptoms of the “evils” of feminism, socialism, and secularism).”²⁷ This began the equal and bilateral exchange of ideas and the common goal of global spiritual missionization between the pro-family Russian State, Russian Orthodox Church, and far-right evangelicals in the US. An article by Chrissy Stoop for *Political Research Associates* reads:

Along with post-Communist concerns about a “demographic winter”—the idea that the West is suffering a “birth dearth” of too few babies as a result of secular values and the embrace of progressive sexual mores—the Russian discourse of moral mission and the superiority of Christian values to those of the “decadent” West has played a key role in the resurgence of social conservatism in post-Soviet Russian society. It should be noted that this discourse is essentially imperial; Russian concerns about public morality have never been only about Russia, but have always been bound up with considerations of the role that Russia should play in the wider world.²⁸

²⁵ “Everything You Need to Know about the Anti-LGBTQ World Congress of Families (WCF),” Political Research Associates, October 21, 2015, <https://politicalresearch.org/2015/10/21/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-anti-lgbtq-world-congress-of-families-wcf>.

²⁶ “Everything You Need to Know about the Anti-LGBTQ World Congress of Families (WCF),” Political Research Associates.

²⁷ Chrissy Stoop, “A Right-Wing International?,” Political Research Associates, February 16, 2016, <https://politicalresearch.org/2016/02/16/russian-social-conservatism-the-u-s-based-wcf-the-global-culture-wars-in-historical-context>.

²⁸ Chrissy Stoop, “A Right-Wing International?”

Stroop speaks directly to the imperialist motivations behind the moral and spiritual missionization efforts which bind the Religious Right and the Russian State. Larry Jacobs, the managing director of WCF is among those evangelicals who have praised Russia's leadership in the global families movement, announcing that "The Russians might be the Christian saviors of the world" and that they could help to defeat the cultural marxism of the West.²⁹ The WCF is succeeding in attempting to legislate the natural family on an international scale seen in part as the Russian prophecy to "to revive the Christian roots of European, or more broadly Western, civilization" in the image of Russia, and seen by religious conservatives in the West as a defense of traditional Christianity as declared by Franklin Graham.³⁰ The culture wars are well under way, led by Russia but supported by groups embedded in the cultural fabric of the US as well, a point which should not be underestimated.

Evangelism in the White House and Beyond

There has been a long history of relations between political Russian conservatism and the Russian Orthodox Church, however, it was the American Evangelist Billy Graham who solidified the presence of Evangelicals in the White House.³¹ Graham was known as the Pastor of America, who reached across the aisle of secular/religious and partisan politics to create a relationship with every president from Truman to Obama. He was vehemently anti-communist, once saying that "Either Communism must die, or Christianity must die, because it is actually a battle between Christ and the anti-Christ."³² He wanted to instill evangelism across the world as a

²⁹ Chrissy Stroop, "A Right-Wing International?"

³⁰ Chrissy Stroop, "A Right-Wing International?"

³¹ It should also be noted that American evangelists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were crucial to the establishment of the Religious/Christian Right in US politics. However, the scope of this paper does not allow for me to cover their immeasurable contribution to the larger movement of the Religious Right today.

³² Melani McAlister, "Why Billy Graham Was Determined to Globalize Evangelicalism," The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, February 21, 2018),

replacement to the spread of sinful communism in the mid 20th century. His famous ‘Crusades’ across America were evidence of his action-oriented desire to spread the word of God. With the dawn of the 21st century, Graham’s son Franklin Graham became the new head of Billy’s expansive, evangelical empire. However, Franklin Graham has not continued the legacy laid out by his father. Franklin Graham’s events are closer to political rallies than the religious revivals of Billy and he is far more divisive, sitting comfortably in the politics of the far right.³³ While his father spoke of God’s love for all people (famously the black, white, yellow, rich and poor), Franklin has invoked a fear of the other in the political Left. With Trump in office, the two spoke of the danger for American Christians if Republicans were to lose the midterms and Graham likened the persecution of Christians in the USSR during the Cold War to explain his view of the Democratic Party: “The Democratic Party is moving very quickly toward socialism, and I know what socialism does to the church.”³⁴ He has further stated that one of his primary objectives is to put Christians in office in order to exert influence like the ‘gays’ do by putting ‘their politicians’ into office.³⁵ An *Atlantic* article writes: “Franklin Graham has declared, for example, that America “is in deep trouble and on the verge of total moral and spiritual collapse.”³⁶ Graham also has a relationship with Putin, having met with the Russian president in 2015. Graham previously declared in 2014 that Russia’s standard for morality was higher than that of America’s which has

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/billy-graham-globalized-evangelicalism/553886/>.

³³ Eliza Griswold, “Franklin Graham's Uneasy Alliance with Donald Trump,” *The New Yorker*, September 11, 2018,

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/franklin-grahams-uneasy-alliance-with-donald-trump>

³⁴ Eliza Griswold, “Franklin Graham's Uneasy Alliance with Donald Trump.”

³⁵ Eliza Griswold, “Franklin Graham's Uneasy Alliance with Donald Trump.”

³⁶ Anne Applebaum, “The False Romance of Russia,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, December 12, 2019),

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/false-romance-russia/603433/>.

fallen short on the issue of “protecting children from any homosexual agenda or propaganda.”³⁷ He has repeatedly expressed support and admiration for Putin’s anti-gay policies in Russia and heralded Putin’s foreign involvement in Syria by way of support for the violent Assad regime as an effort to protect persecuted Christians. Franklin Graham could be said to be the figurehead of this mystical connection between Putin’s authoritarian Russia, Orthodox Leadership of the global families movement, and aggrieved white evangelicals who seek to emulate Putin’s relationship with the Moscow Patriarchate in the US.

In large part due to the presence and activism of Billy Graham in the White House and his relationship with US presidents, evangelicals have had a recognizable and growing influence on US foreign policy and in many ways replaced the influence of liberal Protestantism in the mid 20th century. Walter Martin sheds light on the Religious Right’s values which is very reminiscent of the ideals spoken by founders of the WCF:

...on most international issues, the motivation is the same as that driving religious conservatives' domestic agenda: distrust of secular government; opposition to any perceived threat to ‘traditional family values;’ determination to preach and practice their beliefs without hindrance or restriction; and, less obvious to most secular observers, a conviction that increasing globalization is a fulfillment of dire Biblical prophecies foreshadowing the return of Christ and the onset of Armageddon. The very term by which most conservative Protestants identify themselves - “evangelical” -- announces their intention to carry their message, as Jesus instructed, “unto all the world.”³⁸

The Religious Right sees the United Nations as an institution which aims to destroy not only the American family but Christian civilization more broadly, which is indicative of the Religious Right’s support of national sovereignty, security and defense, and its disdain for government involvement. With this in mind, the main foreign policy interests for US evangelicals concern

³⁷ Molly Olmstead, “Can the Christian Right Quit Putin?,” Slate Magazine (Slate, March 8, 2022), <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/03/christian-conservatives-vladimir-putin-ukraine-invasion.html>.

³⁸William Martin, “The Christian Right and American Foreign Policy,” pp. 66-80.

human rights, family planning, and the support of the Israeli state. Concerns for human rights often arise when Christians are being threatened or harmed, for example evangelicals advocated for and heavily funded US involvement in Sudan's civil war (a decision which Sudan and South Sudan are still paying for to this day)³⁹ when reports came out about the Khartoum government imposing slavery and Islam on the Christians in the south of the country.⁴⁰ Evangelicals also helped to pass the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 which was inspired by the desire for religious freedom "to proselytize and to convert."⁴¹ Another area of influence combines the evangelical focus on humanitarianism and family planning especially pertaining to the AIDS crisis. The Bush administration introduced the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief to address the AIDS and HIV pandemic in Africa and is known as a bipartisan success and the largest foreign aid commitment to address a single disease.⁴² Many of the Americans distributing the aid in these countries were part of Christian missions which emphasized abstinence rather than comprehensive sexual education. Furthermore, PEPFAR was expanded under Trump to include more funding to the Mexico City Policy (commonly known as the 'global gag rule) which was created by the evangelical president Ronald Reagan to restrict funding to non-governmental organizations which provided "abortions, counsels or refers for abortion services, or advocates for access to safe abortion."⁴³ Global family planning and abstinence-only

³⁹Simon Wolfe, "Evangelical Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy Conflicts with Washington's Strategic Interests," International Policy Digest, September 30, 2020, <https://intpolicydigest.org/evangelical-influence-on-u-s-foreign-policy-conflicts-with-washington-s-strategic-interests/>.

⁴⁰ Robert McMahon, "Christian Evangelicals and U.S. Foreign Policy."

⁴¹Walter Russell Mead, "God's Country?"

⁴² Jennifer Sherwood and Matthea Roemer, "Opinion: The 'Global Gag Rule' Hits PEPFAR Implementers ...," Devez, April 16, 2019, <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-the-global-gag-rule-hits-pepfar-implementers-study-shows-94656>.

⁴³ Jennifer Sherwood and Matthea Roemer, "Opinion: The 'Global Gag Rule' Hits PEPFAR Implementers ...,"

sexual education became a form of spreading evangelism across the world. Perhaps one of the most important foreign policy issues to US evangelicals is the support of Israel which existed even prior to the establishment of Israel in 1948. Walter Mead writes for *Foreign Affairs* that: “Many believe that the promise of [the bible’s book of] Genesis still stands and that the God of Abraham will literally bless the United States if the United States blesses Israel.”⁴⁴ Much of the support for Israel and Jews is rooted in biblical prophecy; a sentiment which does not extend to other parts of the Middle East or to the religious majority in that region, Muslims. Franklin Graham infamously said post 9/11 that “Islam was a “very evil and a very wicked religion,” and a Pew Forum found that the 9/11 attacks solidified the evangelical view that Islam is a source of violence in the world and leads to religious persecution.⁴⁵ Walter Martin attributes the unprecedented influence of the Religious Right on US domestic and foreign policies to its ability “to mobilize the electorate rapidly, coupled with an effective lobbying apparatus.”⁴⁶ He quotes one member of Congress who said, “A lot of groups have a great Washington presence and some have great grassroots... but few combine them both.”⁴⁷ While these are not the interests or passions of all evangelicals, evangelicals do tend to vote Republican which has put conservatives at the helm of US foreign policy who aim to please their constituents.⁴⁸ There is pushback and concern that the Religious Right is not only attempting to legislate morality, but they are succeeding in doing so and thus fashioning a country and world in the image of their conservative Christian worldview. Religious adherents across the board appeal to their religious beliefs for guidance and to support their political views, however none have the influence in the White House of the Christian Right.

⁴⁴ Walter Russell Mead, “God's Country?”

⁴⁵ Robert McMahon, “Christian Evangelicals and U.S. Foreign Policy.”

⁴⁶ William Martin, “The Christian Right and American Foreign Policy,” pp. 66-80.

⁴⁷ William Martin, “The Christian Right and American Foreign Policy,” pp. 66-80.

⁴⁸ Walter Russell Mead, “God's Country?”

Policy Prescription

US foreign policy towards Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine has spearheaded the Western response to the war. The Biden administration's actions have included banning Russian oil and gas imports, an action which has had effects on his own country, imposing severe trade restrictions on Russia, and speaking out about the moral rejection and disgust at Putin's invasion. However, a no-fly zone has yet to be instituted over Ukraine and no US combat troops have been put on the ground in Ukraine. Some analysts have categorized the Biden response as softly realist, even progressive, given Biden's hesitancy to engage militarily. From a progressive perspective this war is an example of insidious Christian imperialism and nationalism playing out on a violent world stage and under the guise of a regional conflict. It is imperative that the current administration not only recognize the harmful role of religiously justified imperialism and nationalism but also denounce it publicly. This war is part of the larger culture wars which divide tradition and family versus globalization and liberalizing values, however, perhaps more important to recognize is its religiously founded orientation based on a struggle for religious power and authority in secular states both with Russia in Ukraine and conservative evangelicals in the US. Putin is capitalizing on the attention of the Religious Right in the US and there have already been instance of Russian infiltration into US politics through religious avenues (i.e. the convicted Russian agent Maria Butina used the 2017 National Prayer Breakfast as a site to establish "a backchannel of communication" between Americans - religious elites - and high-ranking Russian officials)⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ Jack Jenkins, "Why Mariia Butina Wasn't the Only Russian Attending the National Prayer Breakfast," National Catholic Reporter (Religion News Service, July 19, 2018), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/why-mariia-butina-wasn-t-only-russian-attending-national-prayer-breakfast>.

The US has a history of Christian imperialism and nationalism as well, rooted in secularized notions of Western morality. It would serve the US well to engage in critical self-reflection at the ways in which our political institutions uphold and give power to [largely white] Christian imperialism and nationalism as well. That said, it is clear that some on the Religious Right in the US feel validated by Putin - and the values of the Russian state more broadly - because this group feels like it has been cast aside and relegated to the shadows of US politics and culture. On both a national security and foreign policy level it would benefit the US to counter this relationship between the Religious Right and Russia by publicly supporting evangelical groups in Ukraine and in Russia. Perhaps an action of virtue signaling, but it may show the Religious Right that there are other evangelical groups - rather than the [non-evangelical] Russian state - with which they can establish relationships. Furthermore, such actions would highlight that the US supports religious freedom on an international level and has not forgotten the presence of evangelicals in the US. This action would also have the benefit of uniting mainline, conservative, and perhaps fundamentalist evangelicals which is important because while the majority of evangelicals in the US are not on the side of the Russian state, the more that groups feel disenfranchised or unrepresented by a system or their government, the more individuals turn to more extreme and fringe approaches which support and give public voice to their ideologies. While this action may not dissuade those conservative US evangelicals who have expressed support for Putin, it could be a step in the right direction as far as a preventive action against the national security issue of Russian affinity.

The scope of this briefing cannot fully address this topic in its entirety. Areas for further research include the responses to the invasion of Ukrainian Orthodox and Russian Orthodox adherents in the US and Ukraine; the responses of Ukrainian and Russian evangelicals

(especially given the suppression of evangelism in Russia by Putin); as well as more specific data on the demographics of people who support the discussed ideology of Russian salvation.



⁵⁰Alexander N., *Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill (L) congratulates Russian President Vladimir Putin during an Orthodox Easter ceremony in Moscow, early on April 8, 2018.*, 2018, photograph, 1500 x 1000 px, Foreign Policy, AFP via Getty Images, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/06/russia-putin-civilization/>.



⁵¹ Ron S., *Franklin Graham (R) talks with President Donald Trump during a ceremony as the late evangelist Billy Graham lies in repose at the U.S. Capitol, on February 28, 2018 in Washington, DC. Rev. Graham is being honored by Congress by lying in repose inside of the U.S. Capitol Rotunda for 24 hours. Graham was the nation's best known Christian evangelist, preaching to millions worldwide, as well as being an advisor to US presidents over his six decade career.*, 2018, photograph, 1600 x 1213 px, New Yorker, Getty Images, <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/political-scene/rev-franklin-graham-offers-an-evangelists-view-of-donald-trump>.

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