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Digital Altars of the Nation: Christian Nationalism, Trumpist Populism and the Online Re-Making of American National Identity

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Abstract

This article investigates how Christian nationalism and Trumpist populism converge in digital spaces to remake contemporary American national identity. Building on recent scholarship that conceptualizes Christian nationalism as a cultural framework fusing a particular vision of Christianity with American civic life, and on work on digital nationalism and digital religion, the study examines how social media platforms become "*digital altars of the nation*," where rituals of belonging, sacrifice, and exclusion are enacted in real time. Methodologically, the article adopts a mixed-methods, discourse-focused design. It combines (1) a secondary quantitative synthesis of existing content-analytic and semantic network studies of the #MAGA and related hashtag ecologies with (2) an illustrative critical discourse analysis of publicly archived posts, tweets, and memes that explicitly intertwine Trump, "Make America Great Again," and Christian nationalist narratives. The analysis identifies three dominant discourse formations: *sacralized sovereignty*, *persecuted church-nation*, and *militant guardianship*. These formations are embedded in platform logics that privilege affective, polarized, and visually dense content, enabling Christian nationalist imaginaries to circulate as ambient, banal nationalism in everyday feeds while also incubating more extreme, insurgent imaginaries.

1. Introduction

Trump's political ascendancy accelerated the visibility and normalization of Christian nationalism in the US. Scholars now widely understand Christian nationalism as an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of (white) Christianity with American civic life and national destiny (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Survey research has shown that adherence to Christian nationalist beliefs strongly predicts voting for Trump, support for restrictive immigration policies, skepticism about racial justice claims, and, more recently, openness to political violence (Whitehead et al., 2018; Armaly et al., 2022; PRRI, 2025). Yet, much of this work has focused on attitudes and institutional politics, paying less attention to the digital infrastructures through which Christian nationalist imaginaries are produced and circulated.

At the same time, research on digital nationalism and social media has demonstrated that platforms such as X/Twitter and Facebook are now central arenas in which banal, everyday nationalisms are reproduced, contested, and intensified (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). Rather than simply reflecting offline sentiments, these platforms invite users to co-create and amplify national narratives, often through highly affective, visual, and meme-based content. Work on digital religion similarly documents how religious symbols, practices, and authorities are increasingly negotiated in online environments, where "networked religion" blurs boundaries between devotional, political, and entertainment cultures (Campbell, 2010; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

This article brings these strands of research into dialogue by asking how Christian nationalism, Trumpist populism, and digital media intersect to re-make American national identity. It focuses on the interplay between Trump's own social-media performances, the hashtag ecologies around "Make America Great Again" (#MAGA, #MakeAmericaGreatAgain), and explicitly Christian nationalist content that constructs

the United States as a nation “under God” in ways that privilege white, conservative Christians. Particular attention is given to the post-2016 period, culminating in the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection and extending into the 2024–25 electoral cycle, where Christian nationalist rhetoric has become even more explicit (Tyler, 2022; Trice, 2024; Ignatenko et al., 2025).

The central argument is that social media platforms function as digital altars of the nation: sites where sacrificial narratives, rituals of national rededication, and quasi-liturgical invocations of God and country are performed around Trump as a quasi-messianic figure. These digital altars do not merely “support” Trumpist Christian nationalism; they help constitute a reconfigured national identity grounded in grievance, divine election, and the promise of restored glory. In doing so, they displace older forms of American civil religion and deepen the threat that white Christian nationalism poses to a multiracial, multifaith democracy (Perry et al., 2022; Gorski & Perry, 2022).

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Nationalism, Civil Religion, and Banal Nationalism

Classical theories of nationalism conceive the nation as an “*imagined community*,” a political and cultural construct sustained by shared narratives, symbols, and rituals rather than primordial ties. In the postwar United States, Robert Bellah’s (2005) influential account of “American civil religion” described a relatively inclusive symbolic repertoire, Presidents invoking God in inaugural addresses, national holidays, and sacralized documents such as the Constitution, that provided a moral canopy over a religiously diverse citizenry. Michael Billig’s (2017) notion of *banal nationalism* highlighted how national identity is reproduced not only in dramatic spectacles but also through low-level, everyday cues: flags on public buildings, pronouns like “we,” weather maps bounded by national borders, and segmented news categories like “domestic” vs. “international.” This banal nationalism is often invisible precisely because it is so routine, yet it continually “flags” the nation as the taken-for-granted container of political life.

More recent work on nationalism emphasizes how these banal cues have migrated into digital environments. Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021) and Schöne et al. (2021) argue that digital media are now central to contemporary nationalism: they enable every day, user-generated, and elite-driven nationalisms that construct specific visions of the nation and mobilize support for them. Social media platforms, in particular, algorithmically privilege content that is emotionally arousing and identity-affirming, contributing to tribal forms of nationalism and intensifying polarization (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Trice, 2024)

This shift raises questions about the fate of civil religion. Some authors suggest that digital media fragment the shared symbolic repertoire of civil religion, making it harder to sustain common national narratives. Others counter that new, platform-mediated forms of civil and uncivil religion are emerging around charismatic leaders, movements, and memes (Everton, 2023). In the Trump era, these debates

converge around the question of whether American civil religion is being supplanted by a more exclusionary, authoritarian Christian nationalism (Perry et al., 2022; Morrison, 2024).

2.2. Christian Nationalism in the US

Christian nationalism has become a central concept for understanding contemporary American politics. Whitehead and Perry (2020) define it as “a cultural framework, a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems, that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.” Crucially, they emphasize that the “Christianity” in question is not a generic theological orientation but an ethnically and culturally specific, white, conservative Protestant project. Using survey data from the Baylor Religion Survey and other national samples, Whitehead and Perry (2020) show that Christian nationalism is a distinct ideological dimension, only partially explained by partisanship, religiosity, or generic conservatism. They develop a widely used scale based on agreement with statements such as “The federal government should declare the US a Christian nation” and “The success of America is part of God’s plan,” and classify respondents into categories from “Rejecters” to “Ambassadors” of Christian nationalism (Gorski & Perry, 2022).

Subsequent research has refined and critiqued this measurement. Miller (2024) and Smith and Yancey (2025), for example, use latent class analysis on an expanded battery of items to argue for a multidimensional understanding of Christian nationalism, identifying distinct subgroups with varying emphases on public religiosity, desire for religious homogeneity, and disdain for multiculturalism. Large-scale surveys by PRRI (2025) similarly show that Christian nationalist “Adherents” and “Sympathizers” constitute a sizeable minority of the U.S. population, are disproportionately white, and are heavily concentrated among frequent church attenders and consumers of right-wing media. Substantively, Christian nationalism correlates strongly with opposition to immigration, skepticism about racial inequality, hostility toward LGBTQ+ rights, and support for authoritarian leaders who promise to restore a lost Christian America (Armaly et al., 2022). Armaly et al. (2022) demonstrate that Christian nationalism, especially when combined with perceptions of white victimhood and belief in conspiracy theories, is a powerful predictor of support for the January 6 Capitol attacks and for political violence more broadly. Reports on January 6 document the ubiquity of Christian nationalist symbols, crosses, “Jesus Saves” banners, “An Appeal to Heaven” flags, alongside Trump and Confederate imagery, underscoring how Christian nationalism legitimized the insurrection as a sacred defense of the nation (Whitehead et al., 2018; Tyler, 2022).

2.3. Trumpist populism and white Christian nationalism

Trumpism fuses populism, ethno-nationalism, and Christian nationalism into a potent political theology. Gorski and Perry (2022) and Flowers (2024) describe white Christian nationalism as a “deep story” that depicts America as a nation founded by (white) Christian men, blessed by God, and now under siege by secular elites, non-white immigrants, feminists, and religious “outsiders.” Trumpist populism supplies the charismatic protagonist, a strongman who promises to “take the country back” and to protect “real Americans” from enemies within and without.

Empirical work confirms that Christian nationalist beliefs were among the strongest predictors of support for Trump in 2016 and 2020, even after controlling for race, class, religiosity, and partisanship (Whitehead et al., 2018). White Christian nationalists interpreted Trump's policy agenda, on immigration, policing, judicial appointments, and religious exemptions, as the fulfillment of a covenantal obligation to restore America's Christian foundations (McBride, 2021; Everton, 2023). Journalistic and advocacy accounts further document how Christian nationalist organizations gained unprecedented access to the Trump administration via the White House Faith Office, religious liberty commissions, and Christian legal networks. (Perry et al., 2022; Morrison, 2024).

Trump's own rhetoric increasingly embraced Christian nationalist tropes. In speeches to religious broadcasters and evangelical gatherings, he repeatedly framed himself as the defender of Christianity against "Marxists and fascists" who supposedly seek to tear down crosses and suppress believers (Perry et al., 2022; McBride, 2021; Kazemian & Mohammadian, 2025). In a 2025 inaugural address, he declared examples (1 & 2), collapsing personal survival, divine election, and national destiny into a single narrative arc:

(1) I was saved by God to make America great again … We are one people, one family, and one glorious nation under God.

(2) America will soon be greater, stronger, and far more exceptional than ever before.

This kind of language moves beyond generic civil religion toward an explicitly Christian nationalist conception of the nation and its leader (Everton, 2023; Ignatenko et al., 2025).

2.4. Digital Religion and Networked Christian Nationalism

In parallel, scholarship on digital religion has chronicled how religious practice and authority are being reshaped by online media. Heidi Campbell's concept of "networked religion" describes five key characteristics of digital religious life, including the blending of online and offline religious spaces, the shifting of authority from institutions to individual influencers, and the remixing of religious symbols in user-generated content. Rather than seeing the internet simply as a tool for transmitting preexisting religion, Campbell emphasizes the mutual shaping of religious culture and digital infrastructures (Campbell, 2010; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

Researchers have shown how Christian communities use platforms to livestream services, share devotional content, and create diasporic religious publics, but also how religious memes and online communities can reproduce stereotypes, intensify conflicts, and blur lines between piety and politics. Studies of religious misinformation online reveal that religious symbols and narratives are frequently mobilized in politically charged disinformation and hate campaigns, sometimes erupting into offline violence (Al-Zaman, 2024; Zaman, 2023)

The rise of Christian nationalism intersects with these dynamics. Former Christian nationalists and scholars alike have traced how online networks of pastors, influencers, and media outlets cultivate a

digital ecosystem where conspiracy theories (e.g., QAnon), apocalyptic narratives, and authoritarian theology reinforce one another (Armaly et al., 2022; Onishi, 2023). Memes portraying Trump as a Christ-like figure, “prayer warriors” framing political mobilization as spiritual battle, and livestreamed “Jericho marches” around government buildings exemplify how digital religion and white Christian nationalism intertwine (Flores et al., 2019; Zaman, 2023; Al-Zaman, 2024).

2.5. Digital nationalism and the MAGA hashtag ecology

Nationalism scholars have increasingly turned to social media to analyze how platform affordances shape nationalist discourse. Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez (2021) and Li & Yu (2025) argue that digital nationalism operates through three intertwined modalities: elite-driven narratives promoted by political and media actors; everyday, vernacular expressions of national belonging in user content; and platform-level governance and algorithmic curation that structure visibility and engagement. Social media do not simply mirror offline nationalism; they actively configure which visions of the nation gain traction and which remain marginal.

The #MAGA and #MakeAmericaGreatAgain hashtags offer a paradigmatic case. Semantic network analyses of the #MAGA hashtag show how, during and after the 2016 campaign, it functioned as an “organizing discursive space” connecting Trump supporters, far-right activists, and overtly white supremacist accounts. Hashtag co-occurrence networks revealed dense linkages between #MAGA and tags such as #BuildTheWall, #AmericaFirst, and various white nationalist and alt-right identifiers, illustrating how Trump’s campaign slogan became a nodal point in a broader far-right online ecosystem (Elayan et al., 2020; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Li & Yu, 2025).

Visual analytics comparing #MAGA and #MeToo found that #MAGA tweets exhibited more sustained, less event-dependent volume, with heavier hashtag usage and strong clustering around partisan and nationalist themes. Content analyses of Trump’s own tweets in his first year in office highlight the centrality of “winning,” attacks on “fake news,” and nationalist rhetoric, with #MAGA often serving as a performative sign-off that invited followers to recirculate his messages as acts of digital allegiance. (Flores et al., 2019; İlgün-Kamanlı & Balcıoğlu, 2025).

Yet, despite growing work on #MAGA as a far-right and nationalist space, there has been relatively little systematic analysis of how explicitly Christian nationalist discourse operates within those networks, or how it reshapes conceptions of American identity. This article addresses that gap by focusing on the subset of MAGA-linked content that explicitly fuses Christian and nationalist symbolism, language, and ritual practice.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and scope

The study adopts a mixed-methods, discourse-focused design that integrates quantitative insights from prior content-analytic work with an illustrative qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Christian nationalist MAGA content. Ethically and practically, the analysis relies on secondary datasets, archived tweets, and posts already reproduced in scholarly, journalistic, or advocacy sources, rather than fresh large-scale scraping. The empirical contribution lies in reorienting existing quantitative findings toward the question of national identity and in offering a novel, theory-driven reading of selected digital texts and images. Empirically, the article, first, synthesizes key findings from existing quantitative content analyses and semantic network studies of #MAGA and related hashtags. Second, it performs a CDA of illustrative posts and speeches that foreground the triad of Trump, Christian nationalism, and American greatness. The research is guided by three interrelated questions:

1. How do Christian nationalist narratives intersect with Trumpist populism in social media content associated with #MAGA and related hashtags?
2. How do these narratives depict American national identity, its boundaries, destiny, enemies, and moral order?
3. How do platform logics and hashtag ecologies function as "digital altars," enabling ritualized performances of nationhood that sacralize Trump and the MAGA project?

3.2. Data sources

The quantitative component synthesizes findings from three types of existing studies: (i) Hashtag network and content analyses of #MAGA and #MakeAmericaGreatAgain on Twitter/X, including semantic network analyses that map co-occurring hashtags and identify clusters associated with white supremacist and nationalist movements. (ii) Content analyses of Trump's tweets, particularly during the 2016 and (2024–2025) campaigns and first years in office (2026), which classify tweet topics, emotional tone, and use of nationalist themes and slogans. (iii) Survey-based studies of Christian nationalism and political attitudes, including measurements of the prevalence of Christian nationalist beliefs, their correlation with Trump support, and their association with views of America as a Christian nation and support for political violence (Table A1 & A2, Appendix A & B). (Elayan et al., 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Tyler, 2022; Smith & Yancey, 2025).

The qualitative CDA focuses on publicly available texts and images that have been widely circulated or archived in scholarly, journalistic, or advocacy sources. These materials are not treated as a statistically representative sample, but as illustrative cases that exemplify the dominant discourse formations identified in the broader MAGA and Christian-nationalist ecology as follows:

1) Excerpts from Trump's speeches and inaugural addresses that explicitly combine Christian and nationalist language, e.g., "I was saved by God to make America great again … We are one people, one family, and one glorious nation under God." (35: Faith Quotes from Trump's Inaugural) (Table 3A, Appendix C).

2) Trump's tweet asserting, "My use of social media is not Presidential – it's MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL. Make America Great Again!" which explicitly links #MAGA to a new mode of presidential communication (Table 3A, Appendix C).

3) Coverage and promotional materials for the "God Bless the USA Bible," a Bible edition endorsed by Trump that integrates scripture with the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and patriotic song lyrics, marketed with slogans such as "Make America Pray Again." (Table 4A, Appendix D).

4) Reports, photographs, and transcripts from the January 6 insurrection, including documentation of Christian symbols (crosses, "Jesus Saves" banners, public prayers) co- present with Trump and nationalist symbols. (Tyler, 2022; Gorski & Perry, 2022) (Table 2A, Appendix B).

5) Media coverage of Christian nationalist rhetoric by Trump and his allies, such as warnings that the "radical left" wants to "tear down crosses" and promises to create federal task forces to combat "anti-Christian bias." (Table 3A, Appendix C).

In addition, the analysis considers representative memes, slogans, and user-generated content discussed or reproduced in secondary sources (e.g., memes depicting Trump as divinely chosen, crowds chanting prayerful slogans at rallies), always treating these as illustrative rather than statistically representative. (Table A1, Appendix A & Table A4, Appendix D)

3.3. Quantitative synthesis

Rather than generating new numerical estimates, the quantitative component systematically extracts and contextualizes relevant findings from prior research. For example: (i) Semantic network studies of #MAGA indicate strong co-occurrence with hashtags such as #AmericaFirst, #BuildTheWall, and various white nationalist identifiers, indicating that the hashtag functions as a hub in a broader far-right nationalist network (McBride, 2021; Perry et al., 2022; Saiya, 2025 etc.). (ii) Visual analytics comparing #MAGA with #MeToo highlight that #MAGA exhibits more stable, less event-driven engagement, with heavier hashtag density and strong partisan clustering (Gross, 2024; Li & Yu, 2025; Ignatenko et al., 2025; Gabbatt, 2025 etc.). (iii) Surveys by Elayan et al. (2023), Everton (2023), and PRRI (2025) and others estimate that a substantial minority of Americans (roughly one-third to one-half, depending on thresholds) endorse core Christian nationalist beliefs, with higher prevalence among white evangelicals and regular churchgoers. (iv) Survey-based analyses show that Christian nationalism is a strong predictor of voting for Trump, support for restrictive immigration policies, skepticism about systemic racism, and support for political violence when combined with white identity and perceived victimhood. (Whitehead et al. 2018; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Armaly et al., 2022; PRRI, 2025).

These findings provide the backdrop for the qualitative analysis, indicating that Christian nationalist MAGA discourse is not a fringe phenomenon but is embedded in sizable constituencies and dense online networks. Table A5 (Appendix E) summarizes the main types of quantitative studies whose findings are synthesized in this article. Table A6 (Appendix F) then indicates how these empirical patterns are reinterpreted for the purposes of the qualitative critical discourse analysis.

3.4. Critical Discourse Analysis

The CDA component draws on Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model (text, discursive practice, social practice) and van Dijk's (2006) focus on ideology and the "ideological square" emphasizing our good properties and their bad properties while downplaying our bad and their good (Billig, 2017; Schöne et al., 2021). Textual analysis attends to lexical choices (e.g., "saved," "glorious nation under God"), metaphors (battle, covenant, cleansing), intertextual references (biblical allusions, founding documents), and multimodal elements (images of crosses, flags, Bibles).

Discursive practice analysis examines how these texts are produced, circulated, and consumed in networked environments, for instance, how hashtags invite uptake, how memes are remixed, and how Trump's posts are amplified by religious broadcasters, pastors, and influencers (Campbell, 2010). Social practice analysis situates these discourses within broader struggles over American identity, race, gender, and democratic norms.

Rather than coding a large corpus with formal reliability statistics, the study adopts an interpretive, theory-driven sampling strategy. It selects texts that are (a) clearly located at the intersection of Trump, Christian nationalism, and national identity; (b) have achieved significant visibility; and (c) exemplify recurrent patterns documented in broader survey and content-analytic work. The goal is to generate thick descriptions and conceptual categories that illuminate how digital Christian nationalism reconfigures American nationhood.

3.5. Ethics and limitations

The analysis relies only on publicly available materials already reproduced in research, news, or advocacy sources; no private accounts or non-consensual data collection are involved. Nonetheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative sample is illustrative, not representative; it captures dominant tropes but cannot speak to the full diversity of online Christian nationalist expression. Second, the quantitative synthesis depends on the methodological choices and time frames of prior studies; it cannot rectify sampling biases or platform restrictions in those datasets (Flores et al., 2019; Tyler, 2022 etc.). Third, as a discourse-focused study, the article infers potential effects on identity and politics from texts and network configurations rather than measuring behavioral outcomes directly. These limitations mean that the findings should be interpreted as a theoretically informed, empirically grounded exploration of digital Christian nationalism's role in remaking American identity, not as a definitive mapping of all such discourses.

4. Results

This section presents three interrelated discourse formations that emerge from the synthesis and CDA: (1) *sacralized sovereignty* (the nation as a covenant people under God and under Trump), (2) *persecuted church-nation* (an embattled Christian America besieged by secular and racialized "others"), and (3) *militant guardianship* (sanctified struggle and legitimation of political aggression as spiritual warfare). A

final subsection examines how these formations are embedded in platform logics, supporting the conceptualization of social media as "*digital altars of the nation*."

4.1. Sacralized Sovereignty: Covenant, Election, and "Glorious Nation under God"

A first cluster of discourses constructs the US as a divinely chosen nation whose destiny is bound up with Trump's leadership and with a particular version of Christianity. This sacralization operates through explicit theological claims, symbolic fusions, and ritualized invocations. Consider Trump's 2025 inaugural remarks:

(3) Just a few months ago, in a beautiful Pennsylvania field, an assassin's bullet ripped through my ear. But I felt then, and believe even more so now, that my life was saved for a reason. I was saved by God to make America great again. … We are one people, one family, and one glorious nation under God.

This passage exemplifies *sacralized sovereignty* by fusing personal survival, divine election, and national destiny. Here, Trump links his physical survival to divine election ("saved by God"), then immediately connects that election to the political slogan "make America great again." The phrase "under God," long a staple of American civil religion (e.g., in the Pledge of Allegiance), is recontextualized to bind the nation's glory to his personal vocation. The effect is to position Trump as a covenantal mediator between God and the American nation: his mission is to restore the nation's divinely intended greatness. The coda "one glorious nation under God" reworks the classical "under God" formula of civil religion into an explicitly Christian-nationalist register, implicitly aligning God's favor with a particular political project and leadership.

This sacralized sovereignty (4) is reinforced by Trump's promotion of the "God Bless the USA Bible," a King James Bible edition that includes the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the lyrics to the patriotic song "God Bless the USA," wrapped in an American-flag cover. In promotional messages, Trump declares:

(4) Our Founding Fathers did a tremendous thing when they built America on Judeo-Christian values. Now that foundation is under attack, perhaps as never before. … The biggest thing we have to bring back to America and to make America great again is our religion.

This excerpt illustrates how a sacralized sovereignty discourse materializes in a hybrid object, the "God Bless the USA Bible." By linking Founding Fathers, Judeo-Christian values, and national decline, the text frames religion as the core of national identity now under threat. The sentence "The biggest thing… is our religion" positions religious revival as the primary condition for national restoration, effectively equating the success of the MAGA project with the re-Christianization of America. Here, scripture, founding documents, and patriotic music are literally bound together in a single artifact, which Trump markets as essential to "make America great again" and to "make America pray again." The Bible becomes a hybrid object: simultaneously a sacred text, a nationalist icon, and a campaign-adjacent commodity.

Purchasing, displaying, or sharing this Bible online is framed as a devotional act toward both God and nation. Table A7 (Appendix G) summarizes key elements of this sacralized-sovereignty discourse.

From a CDA perspective, these elements reconfigure American civil religion into a more exclusive Christian nationalist theology. Civil religious references to God and nation historically carried some ambiguity, allowing Jews, Catholics, and even non-believers to project their own meanings. In Trumpist Christian nationalism, by contrast, God is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) identified with a conservative, often white evangelical understanding of Christianity; those who dissent from this vision are coded as enemies of both God and America (Gorski & Perry, 2022; Perry et al., 2022; Tyler, 2022; Morrison, 2024).

The #MAGA hashtag ecology amplifies this sacralized sovereignty by functioning as a digital doxology. Trump's tweet, "My use of social media is not Presidential – it's MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL; Make America Great Again!" signaled that tweeting #MAGA was itself a presidential, and implicitly patriotic, act. Semantic network analyses show #MAGA constantly co-occurring with hashtags referencing God, prayer, and Christianity, such as #GodBlessAmerica, #JesusSaves, and #Christian. Users adopt #MAGA not only as a political label but also as a devotional signifier; posting a #MAGA prayer meme or a photo of Trump superimposed with a halo becomes a way of participating in a quasi-liturgical community. (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Ignatenko et al., 2025).

A recent controversy over AI-generated imagery further illustrates the sacralization of Trump's leadership in explicitly visual, platform-native ways. In April 2026, Trump posted and then deleted an AI image on Truth Social that appeared to depict him in flowing robes, healing a sick man amid patriotic iconography, which many observers, including conservative Christian commentators, interpreted as a Christ-like self-portrait and condemned as "blasphemous" or "outrageous." Confronted with the backlash, Trump insisted that the picture was "supposed to be me as a doctor making people better," adding, "and I do make people better. I make people a lot better," even as he subsequently shared another AI-generated image in which Jesus embraces him in front of an American flag. These images extend the *sacralized-sovereignty* discourse into AI-mediated iconography: Trump is alternately cast as healer, quasi-Christ figure, and intimate protégé of Jesus, visually fusing his political authority, divine favor, and national symbolism. In the context of "digital altars of the nation," such images function as shareable devotional icons that invite followers to venerate Trump not only as leader of the nation but as a figure participating in sacred power. In the reposted screenshot, the original meme text read:

(5) "I was never a very religious man .. but doesn't it seem, with all these satanic, demonic, child sacrificing monsters being exposed ... that God might be playing his Trump card!"

Trump added his own caption above the image:

(6) "The Radical Left Lunatics might not like this, but I think it is quite nice!!!".

4.2. Persecuted Church-nation: Victimhood, Grievance, and Spiritual Warfare

A second discourse formation presents America, and especially its white Christian majority, as a persecuted church-nation under attack by secular, liberal, and non-Christian forces. This persecution narrative is central to Christian nationalism more broadly and is a key pathway through which it promotes support for aggressive policies and even political violence (Tyler, 2022; Perry et al., 2022; Morrison, 2024). In a 2024 speech to religious broadcasters, Trump warned (speech to religious broadcasters):

(7) They want to tear down crosses where they can, and cover them up with social justice flags. But no one will be touching the cross of Christ under the Trump administration, I swear to you.

This utterance is a classic instance of the persecuted church-nation narrative. The deictic “they” (left-leaning, “social justice” forces) is framed as seeking to efface Christian symbols and replace them with flags associated with a synecdoche for progressive causes such as racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights. By swearing to protect the cross, Trump casts the state as guardian of an embattled Christian order, inviting followers to see themselves as besieged but righteous citizens. The opposition between “cross” and “social justice flags” dramatizes a zero-sum conflict between Christian and secular visions of America. Another extract from Christian-nationalist meme caption:

(8) They’re cancelling Christmas, closing churches, and rewriting the Constitution, but they tell us we’re the extremists?

This meme caption exemplifies the persecuted church-nation frame in distilled, highly shareable form. It condenses three perceived threats, secularization of Christmas, state-imposed religious restrictions, and constitutional revision, into a single grievance package. The rhetorical question reverses victimhood: the speaker suggests that Christian Americans, not their opponents, are the true targets of censorship and persecution, reinforcing the ideological square (our good, their bad).

Survey data show that Christian nationalist “Adherents” and “Sympathizers” are far more likely than other Americans to agree that Christians face significant discrimination in the US and that immigrants and religious “outsiders” are “invading” and “poisoning the blood” of the country. This sense of victimhood is racialized and gendered; it intertwines fears about demographic change, secularization, and the erosion of traditional gender roles. On social media, these anxieties are refracted through hashtags like #WarOnChristmas, #PersecutedChurch, and #ReligiousLiberty, which frequently co-occur with #MAGA and #Trump2024.

Discourse examples include memes depicting churches surrounded by barbed wire labeled “Biden’s America,” captions warning that “they” want to close churches but keep abortion clinics and mosques open, and graphics pairing Bible verses about persecution with images of masked health officials or rainbow flags. In these posts, policies such as pandemic-related gathering restrictions or anti-

discrimination protections are coded as direct attacks on Christianity and, by extension, on “real” America.

The persecuted church-nation discourse also reinterprets historical narratives. Some posts invoke the Pilgrims, the Founding Fathers, and the martyrs of early Christianity to frame contemporary conflicts as part of a long struggle between God’s people and hostile powers. Others reinterpret established civil religious symbols, such as “In God We Trust” on currency or “under God” in the pledge, as embattled artifacts that must be defended against secular elites. The ideological square is evident here: “we” (Christian Americans) are righteous, faithful, and under siege; “they” (liberals, immigrants, religious minorities, globalists) are godless, corrupt, and aggressive. “We” never truly oppress; “we” merely defend ourselves and our faith. “They” never truly suffer injustice; their claims are framed as manipulative or demonic. This discursive configuration lays the groundwork for justifying extreme measures as defensive acts of spiritual warfare.

4.3. Militant Guardianship: Sanctified Struggle and Conditional Violence

A third, closely related discourse formation centers on militant guardianship: the idea that defending America’s Christian identity may require forceful, even violent, action. While not all Christian nationalists endorse violence, empirical work shows that Christian nationalist beliefs, when combined with white identity and perceived victimhood, significantly increase support for political violence and specifically for the January 6 Capitol attack (Kazemian et al., 2021; McBride, 2021; Tyler, 2022; Zaman, 2023; Everton, 2023; Stackaruk, 2023; Flowers, 2024; Al-Zaman, 2024; Gross, 2024; Trice, 2024; Gabbatt, 2025; Saiya, 2025;).

(9) Praying for God’s protection as we reclaim the Capitol in the name of the people and the Constitution. [Caption to a January 6 photograph]

This caption (9) along with images and reports from January 6 vividly illustrates militant guardianship by framing an insurrectionary act as a devotional gesture. The phrase “praying for God’s protection” sanctifies the political action, while “reclaim the Capitol” invests it with a quasi-crusading quality. The invocation of “the people and the Constitution” aligns the episode with a narrative of national restoration, suggesting that violence or aggression is not merely political but spiritually warranted. The image-text combo transforms the insurrection into a ritual moment at a “digital altar.” Protesters carried crosses, “Jesus Saves” banners, and Christian flags while chanting pro-Trump slogans and storming police barricades. Some paused to pray on the Capitol steps or inside the Rotunda, asking God to bless their efforts to “stop the steal.” A widely circulated photograph shows a man kneeling in prayer at a large wooden cross with the U.S. Capitol dome in the background, a visual condensation of church, nation, and insurrectionary zeal.

(10) We are not just attending a rally; we are marching in spiritual warfare. The walls of Jericho are the deep-state institutions that have betrayed the nation. When you clap, pray, and chant ‘Make America

Great Again!', you are sounding the trumpets of God. [Influencer video description]

This extract showcases how Christian-nationalist influencers mobilize the militant guardianship discourse through biblical typology. The "Jericho" metaphor frames state institutions as morally corrupt fortresses that must be spiritually besieged. The injunction to "*pray and chant 'Make America Great Again*!" explicitly links popular political slogans with liturgical action, turning the rally into a performative ritual. The discourse thus sacralizes participation in Trumpist events as an act of holy combat. Online, Christian nationalist influencers and ordinary users framed January 6 and related mobilizations (e.g., "Jericho Marches") as acts of spiritual warfare. Posts invoked Old Testament stories of Joshua's army marching around Jericho, calling on followers to "march around the deep-state walls" and "blow the trumpets" (often punning on Trump's name). Others shared prayers asking God to "confuse the enemy" and "give courage to patriots" occupying the Capitol. These texts sacralize political struggle by drawing analogies to biblical warfare and conquest.

Even beyond overt insurrection, militant guardianship appears in calls to "take back" the country from enemies described in quasi-demonic terms. Trump and allied figures have described their opponents as "Marxists and fascists," "vermin," and agents of Satan, while casting their own supporters as "beautiful Christians" who will "wield power like never before." Some Christian nationalist leaders explicitly preach "dominion" theology, urging believers to seize control of government, media, and other "mountains of influence." (Onishi, 2023; Saiya, 2025; Smith & Yancey, 2025). This militant guardianship resonates with survey findings that Christian nationalists are significantly more likely than others to see violence as justifiable to preserve the "traditional American way of life." (Armaly et al., 2022; Flowers, 2024; PRRI, 2025). It also resonates with digital behavior patterns: negative, anger-laden language spreads more rapidly on Twitter than positive language, amplifying calls to battle and outrage-laden narratives.

At the discursive level, militant guardianship completes the persecuted church-nation narrative: if America is God's chosen nation, if Christians are under assault, and if secular elites are corrupt or demonic, then extraordinary measures can be framed as righteous self-defense. Social media posts that celebrate armed protest, share images of guns with Bible verses, or imply that "the tree of liberty must be watered" with the blood of enemies exemplify this fusion of militancy, religion, and nationalism.

4.4. Digital Altars: Platform Logics, Ritualized Participation, and Identity Work

Bringing these discourse formations together, the article proposes the concept of *digital altars of the nation* to theorize how platforms like X/Twitter, Facebook, and Truth Social function as key sites where Christian nationalist Trumpism is performed and reinforced. Three dimensions are salient.

First, *ritualized participation*: Posting, liking, sharing, and hashtagging operate as micro-rituals of belonging. Writing "Make America Great Again!" or "Make America Pray Again!" under a Trump video, sharing the "God Bless the USA Bible" link, or reposting a meme of Trump as a lion or Jesus protecting

lamb-like Christians functions analogously to lighting a candle or reciting a creed. These actions are repetitive, embodied (though digitally mediated), and socially recognized as markers of loyalty.

(11) Every time I post #MAGA next to a cross and the American flag, it feels like I'm lighting a candle on the altar of our nation. This is how we worship God and America at the same time. [User comment under a #MAGA meme].

This user's self-description, along with other posts, is a vivid example of the "digital altars of the nation" metaphor in practice. The comparison of posting a hashtagged image to "lighting a candle" maps an online action onto a familiar liturgical gesture. The phrase "worship God and America at the same time" explicitly fuses religious and nationalist devotion, showing how platformed participation becomes a ritual of national belonging. The comment also illustrates how users reflexively understand their own performances within the Christian-nationalist MAGA frame.

Second one is *symbolic condensation*. Digital content condenses complex theological and political claims into highly shareable images and phrases. A single meme may include a cross, an American flag, Trump's face, and the phrase "God, Guns, and Trump," instantly signaling a whole worldview without lengthy exposition. Hashtags like #MAGA, #AmericaFirst, and #JesusSaves operate as indexical signs pointing to larger discursive universes.

Third dimension is *algorithmic curation*. Platform algorithms prioritize content that elicits strong engagement, which often means emotionally charged, polarizing posts. Christian nationalist content, rich in moral absolutism, fear, and hope, fits this incentive structure well. Once users engage with such content, recommendation systems tend to show them more of it, creating echo chambers where Christian nationalist interpretations of events appear increasingly self-evident. The last extract is a reply to a Trump tweet about religious liberty:

(12) You're not just defending religious freedom; you're defending the soul of the nation. Keep this up, and we will finally restore America to the Christian God-fearing people it was meant to be.

This reply (12) exemplifies the sacralized sovereignty discourse by characterizing Trump not only as a political defender of religious liberty but as a guardian of the nation's very "soul." The phrase "restore America to the Christian God-fearing people it was meant to be" combines providential history ("meant to be") with ethno-religious nationalism, implicitly excluding non-Christian or secular citizens from the authentic national core. The comment also reinforces the CDA claim that digital altars host condensed, emotionally charged affirmations of national identity. Within these digital altars, American national identity is continuously renegotiated. "American" becomes implicitly defined as white, Christian, patriotic in a particular way, and loyal to Trump or similar figures. Those who do not share this configuration are subtly or explicitly marked as less American, traitorous, or even demonic (Gorski & Perry, 2022; Tyler, 2022; Trice, 2024; PRRI, 2025; Saiya 2025). The result is a digitally mediated re-inscription of national identity that moves away from inclusive civic ideals toward an exclusionary, *sacralized ethnonation*.

5. Discussion

5.1. From civil religion to Christian nationalist digital liturgies

The findings suggest a significant transformation in the religious-symbolic underpinnings of American national identity. Classic civil religion invoked God in relatively generic terms, often emphasizing unity, sacrifice, and universal principles of liberty and justice. While civil religion always had exclusionary dimensions, frequently marginalizing non-Protestant and non-white groups, it at least gestured toward pluralism. In the Trump era, Christian nationalist digital liturgies increasingly displace this register (Everton, 2023; Zaman, 2023; Al-Zaman, 2024).

Trump's declarations that he was "saved by God to make America great again" and his portrayal of America as a "glorious nation under God" or as Jesus may superficially resemble civil religious tropes, but in context they function differently. Rather than calling for shared sacrifice across partisan lines, they sacralize a specific political project (MAGA) and a specific leader (Trump) as God's instrument. Rather than affirming procedural norms, they often accompany or justify norm-breaking behavior.

The digital environment intensifies these shifts. Online, civil religious invocations compete for attention with more sensationalist, emotionally gripping content. Memes that portray Trump as a messianic figure, as in "So God Made Trump" videos, or that place his image alongside Jesus on crosses etc., produce a visceral affective charge that more muted civil religious symbolism struggles to match. These memes travel quickly, accruing likes and shares that algorithmically validate them as salient expressions of "what we believe."

At the same time, counter-discourses also circulate online. Some Christian leaders and communities critique Trumpist Christian nationalism as idolatrous, warning that conflating loyalty to Trump or to the GOP with fidelity to Christ violates core Christian teachings. Hashtags such as #ChristiansAgainstChristianNationalism and #JesusWouldNot support a digital resistance to Christian nationalist cooptation. The struggle over American civil religion and Christian nationalism thus plays out not only in pulpits and polling booths but also in comment threads and viral videos.

5.2. Digital nationalism and the racialization of American identity

The literature on digital nationalism emphasizes that social media both broaden participation in nation-making and deepen inequalities of visibility and voice. In the case of Trumpist Christian nationalism, digital platforms allow ordinary users to express pride in America, share religiously inflected patriotic content, and feel part of a larger community. However, they also normalize a *racialized vision of the nation* (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Armaly et al., 2022; Li & Yu, 2025).

Survey research documents that Christian nationalist adherents are disproportionately white and often hold negative views of immigrants, Muslims, and racial justice movements. Online, these attitudes manifest in posts that equate American identity with whiteness and Christianity, framing non-white and non-Christian groups as threats. For example, Christian nationalist #MAGA accounts frequently share stories about immigrant crime or “Sharia law” with captions invoking God’s judgment and calls to “defend our country.” (Whitehead et al., 2018; Kazemian et al., 2021; Gorski & Perry, 2022; Onishi, 2023; Flowers, 2024; PRRI, 2025 etc.)

Digital content celebrating Confederate symbols, glorifying armed militias, or lamenting demographic change is often interlaced with Bible verses and patriotic music, creating an aesthetic that fuses whiteness, Christianity, and national belonging. This framing is not merely symbolic; it translates into support for policies such as travel bans, family separations at the border, and rollbacks of voting rights, which disproportionately harm non-white communities (Whitehead et al., 2018; McBride, 2021; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

The racialization of American identity is further reinforced by the persecuted church-nation narrative. When Christian nationalists claim that they are the “real” victims of discrimination, despite holding significant structural power, they invert conventional understandings of oppression and privilege. Online, this inversion often takes the form of memes mocking concepts like “white privilege” while lamenting supposed “Christian persecution” by secular media, universities, or “woke mobs.”

This racialized digital nationalism exacerbates existing social fractures. It delegitimizes claims to American identity by citizens who do not fit the white Christian norm, implying that they are, at best, guests and, at worst, internal enemies. In doing so, it undermines the possibility of a genuinely multiracial, multifaith national “we.” ((Al-Zaman, 2024; PRRI, 2025; Li & Yu, 2025).

5.3. Populism, charisma, and the sacralization of leadership

Trumpist Christian nationalism online also illuminates how populist charisma is constructed and maintained in digital spaces. Populism posits a pure people betrayed by corrupt elites, requiring a strong leader to restore their sovereignty. Christian nationalism adds a theological layer: the leader is not just a political representative but God’s chosen instrument (Trice, 2024; Morrison, 2024).

Digital media are ideally suited to charismatic politics. They allow leaders to bypass traditional gatekeepers, speak directly to supporters, and cultivate a sense of intimacy and immediacy. Trump’s heavy use of Twitter, which he defended as “modern day presidential,” exemplified this dynamic. Each tweet could function as a mini-sermon to the faithful, often ending with “Make America Great Again!” as a benediction.

Christian nationalist content amplifies this charisma by framing Trump’s actions and even his legal troubles as tests or persecutions that prove his divine calling. Memes comparing his legal indictments to

Christ's suffering, or depicting him surrounded by praying pastors or even embraced by Jesus, invite followers to see attacks on Trump as attacks on their faith and on America itself. In this framework, loyalty to Trump becomes a religious duty as well as a political preference.

The sacralization of leadership has dangerous implications for democratic accountability. If Trump is perceived as God's instrument, then criticism of him can be framed as blasphemy, and institutional checks (e.g., courts, elections, media scrutiny) can be dismissed as illegitimate obstacles to God's will. Social media echo chambers reinforce this logic by filtering out dissenting voices and amplifying validation from like-minded communities.

5.4. Affective infrastructures and the spread of grievance

The analysis also underscores the importance of affect in digital Christian nationalism. Studies have shown that negative, anger-laden language spreads more quickly and widely on Twitter than positive language (Schöne et al., 2021; Qaiwer & Kazemian, 2025). Christian nationalist MAGA content is rich in such affect: outrage at perceived injustices (e.g., removal of Ten Commandments monuments), fear of cultural and demographic change, and resentment toward elites.

At the same time, this negativity is interwoven with hope and joy directed toward in-group symbols. Rallies are described as "revivals," worship music is played at political events, and followers share testimonies of feeling "free" or "empowered" at Trump rallies. Digital altars thus host a complex affective economy in which grievance and exaltation reinforce each other: anger at enemies deepens attachment to leader and nation, while moments of perceived triumph (e.g., court victories, electoral wins) are experienced as spiritual breakthroughs. These affective infrastructures are not incidental; they are central to how digital Christian nationalism re-makes national identity. Being American, in this framework, is not just a legal status; it is an emotional and spiritual experience of belonging to a persecuted yet chosen people, led by a divinely favored leader, engaged in a cosmic battle online and offline (Tyler, 2022; Saiya, 2025).

5.5. Methodological reflections and future research

Methodologically, this study demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of discourse-focused mixed methods in studying digital nationalism and religion. By synthesizing existing quantitative hashtag and survey research and reorienting it around questions of identity and symbolism, the study highlights patterns that might otherwise remain siloed in separate literatures. The CDA of illustrative posts and speeches, in turn, generates conceptual categories, sacralized sovereignty, persecuted church-nation, militant guardianship, that can guide more systematic future analyses. However, more work is needed. Future research could (i) compile large, systematically sampled corpora of Christian nationalist content across multiple platforms and apply computational text analysis and network analysis to identify discursive clusters and influencer networks at scale; (ii) conduct longitudinal analyses to track how Christian nationalist narratives evolve across electoral cycles, crises (e.g., pandemics, wars), and legal events (e.g., indictments); (iii) examine counter-discourses in greater depth, including how Christian, secular, and interfaith actors resist or reframe Christian nationalist narratives online; and (iv) extend the

analysis beyond the United States to compare digital Christian nationalisms in other contexts and explore how American Trumpist discourse travels transnationally.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that social media platforms have become digital altars of the nation where *Christian nationalism*, *Trumpist populism*, and *American national identity* are braided together in new and consequential ways. Building on and extending scholarship on nationalism, civil religion, Christian nationalism, digital religion, and digital nationalism, it has shown how online discourse around Trump, "Make America Great Again," and explicitly Christian symbols and narratives reconfigures what it means to be American in the contemporary moment.

Three interlocking discourse formations, *sacralized sovereignty*, *persecuted church-nation*, and *militant guardianship*, structure this reconfiguration. Sacralized sovereignty frames the US as a divinely chosen nation whose destiny is bound up with Trump's leadership and with a particular, white-inflected vision of Christianity. Persecuted church-nation discourse casts Christian Americans as victims besieged by secular, liberal, and non-Christian others, legitimizing defensive postures and policy agendas. Militant guardianship narratives, especially around events like January 6, sacralize political aggression as spiritual warfare in defense of God's nation.

These formations are not merely rhetorical; they are embedded within the affordances and algorithms of digital platforms. Hashtags like #MAGA and memes that blend crosses, flags, and Trump's image operate as condensed carriers of Christian nationalist ideology. Engagement metrics reward posts that combine piety with outrage, while recommendation systems amplify content that keeps users emotionally activated. In this environment, older, more inclusive forms of American civil religion struggle to compete with the affective intensity and visual immediacy of Christian nationalist digital liturgies.

The implications for American democracy are profound. White Christian nationalism threatens to narrow the definition of "the people" to those who conform to a specific *ethno-religious ideal*, marginalizing citizens who do not share that identity and undermining the legitimacy of pluralistic institutions. When these tendencies are amplified by digital infrastructures and anchored in the charismatic figure of Trump, the risks of democratic erosion, political violence, and deepening polarization increase.

At the same time, the digital sphere also hosts countervailing forces: Christians who reject nationalism as idolatry, secular activists who critique the conflation of faith and authoritarian politics, and scholars and journalists who document and expose Christian nationalist abuses (Onishi, 2023; Morrison, 2024). Understanding digital altars as contested spaces, rather than as uniformly captured by Christian nationalism, is crucial for envisioning strategies of resistance and reconstruction.

Conceptually, the article's contribution lies in articulating "digital altars of the nation" as a lens for analyzing how networked media infrastructures now host ritualized, affect-laden performances of nationhood that fuse worship of God with veneration of political leaders. Empirically, the article

synthesizes disparate literatures and offers a discourse-focused map of how Christian nationalist Trumpism operates online. Future research can build on this foundation to develop more systematic, comparative, and intervention-oriented studies.

Declarations

Ethical Approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent: This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Data Availability: The supplementary data for this study consist of four tables provided in the Supp. Data Appendix (As a separate file). The analyzed datasets are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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