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Abstract

This thesis examines the intersection of Christian nationalism and nativism in contemporary United States political discourse. It draws on speeches held by three key political figures in the current administration, which began in January 2025, namely President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance, and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth.

The research question guiding this thesis asks: how are Christian nationalist narratives constructed in contemporary U.S. political discourse, and how do they contribute to the formation of nativist conceptions of national identity? To answer this, the thesis builds on two complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is nativism, understood as the ideological preference for a designated native ingroup over those constructed as outsiders, with particular attention to its historical roots in the United States and its manifestation in anti-immigration rhetoric and ethno-religious boundary-making. The second is ethno-symbolism, as developed by Anthony D. Smith, which foregrounds the role of myths, symbols, and historical narratives in the formation of nationalist identities. Together, these frameworks illuminate how appeals to a supposedly Christian founding, a sacred national territory, and a divinely ordained national destiny serve to naturalize exclusionary ideas of American belonging.

The methodology is rooted in critical discourse analysis, which allows for an examination not only of the language used by political elites but also of the underlying power structures their narratives reproduce. Six speeches in total, two per political actor, were coded deductively using a codebook developed from the theoretical framework. The speeches were selected to capture three distinct dimensions of Christian nationalist discourse: institutional, moral, and operational.

The historical overview provided prior to the analysis traces the development of Christian nationalist ideology from the Puritan settlements of colonial America through the Civil War, the Cold War, and into the present day, demonstrating the enduring influence of foundational myths on contemporary political rhetoric. The analysis itself reveals that all three actors employ overlapping but distinct rhetorical strategies.

President Trump frames himself as a divinely appointed restorer of a Christian America, instrumentalizing faith to reinforce ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Vice President Vance grounds his Christian nationalism in a moral framework, blurring the boundary between private religious conviction and public governance. Secretary of Defense Hegseth operationalizes Christian nationalist ideology within the context of national security and foreign policy, framing military action and border enforcement as divinely sanctioned duties.

The thesis concludes that Christian nationalism and nativism are structurally intertwined. Defining the United States as an inherently Christian nation necessarily produces an ingroup and an outgroup, legitimizing the exclusion of non-Christians, immigrants, and others deemed outside the bounds of authentic American identity. The normalization of this rhetoric by figures at the highest levels of government poses a significant threat to religious pluralism and democratic inclusion. As Christian nationalist narratives increasingly shape policy, they risk deepening societal polarization and institutionalizing exclusionary conceptions of national belonging in the United States and beyond.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Schnittstelle von christlichem Nationalismus und Nativismus in gegenwärtigen politischen Diskursen der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika. Sie stützt sich auf Reden dreier Schlüsselfiguren der aktuellen US-Regierung, nämlich Präsident Donald Trump, Vizepräsident JD Vance und Verteidigungsminister Pete Hegseth.

Die zentrale Forschungsfrage dieser Arbeit lautet: Wie werden christlich-nationalistische Narrative im gegenwärtigen politischen Diskurs der USA konstruiert und wie tragen sie zur Herausbildung nativistischer Vorstellungen von nationaler Identität bei? Zur Beantwortung dieser Frage stützt sich die Arbeit auf zwei sich ergänzende theoretische Rahmen. Der erste Rahmen betrachtet Nativismus als die ideologische Bevorzugung einer bestimmten einheimischen Gruppe gegenüber jenen, die als Außenseiter konstruiert werden.

Besonders hervorgehoben werden die historischen Wurzeln des Nativismus in den Vereinigten Staaten und die Manifestation der einwanderungsfeindlichen Rhetorik und der ethnisch-religiösen Grenzziehung. Der zweite Ansatz ist der Ethno-Symbolismus nach Anthony D. Smith, der die Rolle von Mythen, Symbolen und historischen Erzählungen bei der Herausbildung nationalistischer Identitäten in den Vordergrund rückt. Gemeinsam verdeutlichen diese Ansätze, wie Appelle an eine vermeintlich christliche Gründung, ein heiliges Staatsgebiet und eine göttlich vorherbestimmte nationale Identität dazu dienen, ausgrenzende Vorstellungen von amerikanischer Zugehörigkeit zu naturalisieren.

Die Methodik basiert auf der kritischen Diskursanalyse, die es ermöglicht, nicht nur die Sprache politischer Eliten, sondern auch die zugrunde liegenden Machtstrukturen zu untersuchen, die ihre Narrative reproduzieren. Insgesamt wurden sechs Reden, zwei pro politischem Akteur, deduktiv mithilfe eines auf dem theoretischen Rahmen basierenden Codebuchs kodiert. Die Reden wurden so ausgewählt, dass sie drei unterschiedliche Dimensionen des christlich-nationalistischen Diskurses erfassen: die institutionelle, die moralische und die operative.

Der der Analyse vorangehende historische Überblick zeichnet die Entwicklung der christlich-nationalistischen Ideologie von den puritanischen Siedlungen im kolonialen Amerika über den Bürgerkrieg und den Kalten Krieg bis in die Gegenwart nach und verdeutlicht den anhaltenden Einfluss von Gründungsmythen auf die zeitgenössische politische Rhetorik. Die Analyse selbst zeigt, dass alle drei Akteure zwar sich überschneidende, aber dennoch unterschiedliche rhetorische Strategien anwenden.

Präsident Trump inszeniert sich als von Gott berufener Wiederhersteller eines christlichen Amerikas und instrumentalisiert den Glauben, um ethnische und kulturelle Homogenität zu stärken. Vizepräsident Vance verankert seinen christlichen Nationalismus in einem moralischen Rahmen und verwischt so die Grenze zwischen privater religiöser Überzeugung und öffentlicher Regierungsführung. Verteidigungsminister Hegseth setzt die christlich-nationalistische Ideologie im Kontext der nationalen Sicherheit und Außenpolitik um und stilisiert Militäreinsätze und Grenzsicherung zu göttlich legitimierten Pflichten.

Die Arbeit kommt zu dem Schluss, dass christlicher Nationalismus und Nativismus strukturell miteinander verflochten sind. Die Definition der Vereinigten Staaten als einer inhärent christlichen Nation erzeugt zwangsläufig eine Eigengruppe und eine Fremdgruppe und legitimiert den Ausschluss von Nichtchristen, Einwanderern und anderen, die als außerhalb der authentischen amerikanischen Identität stehend betrachtet werden. Die Normalisierung dieser Rhetorik durch hochrangige Regierungsvertreter stellt eine erhebliche Bedrohung für religiösen Pluralismus und demokratische Teilhabe dar. Da christlich-nationalistische Narrative zunehmend die Politik prägen, besteht die Gefahr, dass sie die gesellschaftliche Polarisierung vertiefen und ausgrenzende Vorstellungen von nationaler Zugehörigkeit in den Vereinigten Staaten und darüber hinaus institutionalisieren.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the United States has seen an increased presence of Christian nationalist narratives in political discourse. They depict the nation as being inherently Christian and call for its society as well as its representative government to ensure the continuation of it being defined by its Christianity. When pairing the framing of the US as a Christian nation with contemporary policies, such as those concerning immigration, the ideology's danger in fueling exclusion and the othering of minority groups becomes apparent. Some scholars even point to an erosion of democratic principles as a result of rising Christian nationalism (CN) and specifically to the endangering of religious freedom (Li & Froese 2023: 777).

President Donald Trump, who began his second term in January 2025, was strongly supported both by Christian elites as well as regular voters identifying as Christian. Trump's political messaging, especially pertaining to divisive cultural issues as well as migration, resonated with people who expressed fears of a Christian decline in America (Whitehead et al. 2018: 147).

However, Christian nationalism is not a new phenomenon and has established itself in the United States long before the current administration came into power. One prominent element of Christian nationalist belief pertains to the makeup of American society. While the ideology's manifestations differ in their severity regarding this issue, the general view is that the US should consist of people following the Christian faith (Smidt 2024: 3).

Often this conviction is accompanied by an ethnic component, which is why numerous authors who have dedicated their work to this topic have focused on white Christian nationalism (Li & Froese 2023: 794). Such a creation of an ingroup that is positioned in contrast to a marginalized outgroup and is in turn prioritized by the state is collectively referred to as a nativist approach (Kokkonen & Linde 2023: 50).

Nativism in the context of white Christian nationalist narratives points to the mythologized notion that "true Americans" cannot be anything other than white Christians. Symbols and myths play an important role in constituting such beliefs, which is why this thesis utilizes the theory of ethno-symbolism to support its analysis of current political discourses employed by US elites (Smith 2009: 18).

This thesis aims to understand the link between Christian nationalism and nativism and to analyze how these ideologies are manifested in contemporary narratives in the United States. The research question to be answered in the course of the thesis is thus as follows:

“How are Christian nationalist narratives constructed in contemporary U.S. political discourse, and how do they contribute to the formation of nativist conceptions of national identity?”

Next to analyzing existing literature to define the relevant terms, I want to understand how the imagery of the US as a Christian nation is constructed by looking at the movement’s history as well as its current developments and how nativism is being utilized to inform the country’s national identity. Therefore, I am first outlining previous research regarding the conceptualization of Christian nationalism, its political and practical application as well as its relationship to nativism. I go on to present my theoretical framework, consisting of theories surrounding nativism and ethno-symbolism, which then leads me to my methodology. With the approach of conducting a critical discourse analysis, I analyzed six speeches in total by three important political actors in the current landscape, namely President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth.

By coding these speeches in a deductive manner, that is to say by building on the theoretical groundwork of my thesis, I was able to paint a more complete picture of Christian nationalist rhetoric being used in contemporary discourse. A historical overview of Christian nationalism in the United States leading up to my analysis demonstrates the longevity of the ideology’s influence in the nation and connects the past to the present.

The goal of the thesis was to recognize the influence of Christian nationalism in the American policy sphere and to highlight the dangers of the normalization of its presence in ongoing political discourses. By analyzing narratives in connection to Christian nationalism and nativism in current political discourse, it became clear that the two are inextricably linked. Presupposing a Christian national identity automatically leads to the exclusion of those positioned outside of the ingroup and has the potential of pitting communities against each other.

2. Literature Review

The existing literature concerning Christian nationalism in the United States has so far focused exceedingly on its definitions and historical embedment as well as societal and political realities resulting from this ideology. Since I have found strands of Christian nationalism to be specific to its context and the region it emerged and developed in, I do not see it as constructive to include literature that deals with the ideology outside of the United States. My methodology of analyzing speeches held by political representatives in the US is also constrained to its national setting. Shedding light on realities of Christian nationalism in other countries might therefore expand the scope of the ideology but would not be conducive to answering my research question. Consequently, the following literature builds solely on an American background so as to remain in the scope of this thesis and to create a logical strand throughout the entire work.

In the context of my research question as well as the set goals of my analysis, I divided the utilized literature into three main categories. The first aims to conceptualize Christian nationalism by examining variations of defining the belief system. The second subchapter touches on how Christian nationalism in the US manifests itself on a social, political and even legal level. This is to show the widespread presence of the ideology in different national spheres and the way it is legitimized through political actors and legal institutions. Lastly, the third subchapter deals with the aspect of whiteness that is often connected to Christian nationalist ideals. Racial and ethnic discourses are of great relevance not only in existing literature on the subject, but also in the trajectory of this thesis. Since nativism, which prioritizes one societal group over another, plays an integral role in my analysis, it is pertinent to zoom in on prejudices based on race and ethnicity that exist in the realm of Christian nationalism.

2.1. Conceptualizing Christian Nationalism

Defining Christian nationalism is not a straightforward task. Existing literature has conceptualized the phenomenon in various ways, ranging from a merely ideological interpretation to the understanding of Christian nationalism as a social movement (Lehman & Teimouri 2025: 15).

Some previous work has been contested by other authors, demonstrating that Christian nationalism is not a homogenous entity and there is not one clearcut conceptualization that can be attributed to it. Nevertheless, examining the different approaches that have been applied so far sheds a light on each lens through which Christian nationalism can be comprehended. One of these lenses sees CN as a cultural framework. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry support this interpretation and explain the belief to derive from an amalgamation of ideological elements, including myths and narratives (Whitehead & Perry 2020: 10). Christian nationalism can also be seen as a kind of social identity, which understands individual identity to be formed by a combination of American nationality with Christian belief (Smith & Adler 2022: 3).

To be able to quantify the presence of Christian nationalism in US-American society, Whitehead and Perry have set out to establish a spectrum of Christian nationalist belief. In their book “Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States” Whitehead and Perry utilize a survey conducted by Baylor University to divide participants into four categories. The authors settled on groups they named ambassadors, accommodators, resisters and rejecters (Whitehead & Perry 2020: 10). Ambassadors and accommodators are those whose worldview reflects Christian nationalist beliefs, although the first are more adamant in their ideology than the latter. In a similar vein, resisters and rejecters both disagree with the notion that the United States is and should continue to be governed as a Christian state, with rejecters taking a stronger stance than resisters (Whitehead & Perry 2020: 25).

While such an interpretation of the survey might be useful to give a broad overview of how many defenders of Christian nationalism there are versus those that position themselves against the ideology, it can be challenging to pinpoint people’s exact belief systems. Not everyone who is Christian in the United States also adheres to Christian nationalist ideals. But where can a line be drawn in terms of who falls into the category of Christian nationalists?

So-called civic republicans, who support democratic principles alongside highlighting the importance of morals, for example, might advocate for the practice of prayer in schools, but do not explicitly call for the privileging of Christians in all spheres of society (Smidt 2024: 5).

While this example of prayer in a school setting is not an indicator of Christian nationalism for some, for others it clearly falls into its ideological realm (Corbin 2020). Seeing how difficult it is to determine what can count as Christian nationalism, it could be helpful to rule out certain elements, civic republicanism being one of them. Jesse Smith and Gary Adler distinguish between CN and civic republicanism by explaining that the latter does advocate for a presence of religion in American society, but not without specifying its scope (Smith & Adler 2022: 6).

So far, what connects many of these approaches is a focus on the individual, by examining what specific beliefs might inform a Christian nationalist mindset. The danger of such an analysis, as hinted at, is the fact that social and political realities can be interpreted according to a spectrum. Some might throw them into the Christian nationalist pot, while others could dismiss such notions (Lehman & Teimouri 2025: 15).

Several authors have thus proposed an alternative method. By positioning Christian nationalism on a bigger scale, various difficulties of defining the concept can be circumvented. For example, Derek Lehman and Amirhossein Teimouri approach the issue by classifying CN as a social movement. More specifically, the authors examine the White Christian nationalist movement and categorize it into right-wing movements. By applying this lens, it becomes clearer how Christian nationalism can mobilize its proponents and create a link between them. As with other strands adopting a right-wing ideology, existing literature supports the claim that the movement formed and has been strengthened by reacting to a perceived threat. White Christian nationalists are afraid of being replaced as the dominant group in American society and therefore feel the need to organize a kind of resistance (Lehman & Teimouri 2025: 16).

Interestingly, religious belief does not always take center stage in Christian nationalism. The way it exists now among many Trump supporters can be viewed as a kind of secular Christian nationalism. Christianity is mainly utilized to further an us-vs.-them mentality and to anchor such narratives in a supposed historical background, while actual Christian teachings, such as those based on compassion and empathy, are entirely omitted (Gorski 2017: 348).

Furthermore, many Americans who call themselves Christian, do not adhere to any singular denomination. This underscores the apparent secularism that can be found inside the Christian nationalist movement and seems to rather connect it with a social and cultural identity than a religious motivation (Sherkat et al. 2024: 272). However, an exposure to religious communities and their respective beliefs can surely be formative to Christian nationalist ideals and can strengthen the supposed link between Christianity and an American identity. It thus exists on both a secular as well as faith-based level and can be characterized by many nuances through which it is formed (Sherkat et al. 2024: 275).

Having named and examined a number of conceptualizations of CN, its manifestations and implementation into practice will be elaborated on.

2.2. Christian Nationalism as Social, Political & Legal Practice

To understand Christian nationalism not only through a theoretical lens, but also a practical one, its social, political and legal manifestations should be examined. Through communal practices such as rituals and performances, Christian nationalism can exist as a social space. One example of this, as argued by Joel Day, is the importance of prayer. When analyzed in political settings, such as protests, prayer can function as a powerful symbolic act. By engaging in public prayer, it also becomes apparent who belongs to the group identifying as Christian and who doesn't. This can reinforce hierarchical notions, that are already prevalent in a Christian nationalist ideology (Day 2025: 3).

An event that is often connected to the resurgence of Christian nationalism in the United States is the infamous Storming of the Capital on January 6th, 2021. In his research, Day examines this "religious spectacle" in greater detail and underscores the importance of its framing. Leading up to the violence that ensued, prayers were held by evangelical leaders, such as Paula White-Cain, who in the meantime has been appointed as the leader of the White House Faith Office in 2025 ("President Trump Announces Appointments to the White House Faith Office", White House 2025). Invoking God to stand by the protesters and later rioters' side, the event was equaled to a sacred fight in response to Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 election (Day 2025: 5).

The overall abundance of religious symbols and outright religious references at the insurrection calls for a closer look at Christian nationalism as a political practice and in this case its link to political violence. While there is a layer of grassroots organization when it comes to the capital insurrection, for example, for Christian nationalists to mobilize and be moved to the extreme by enacting political violence, elite rhetoric can play an inciting role (Armaly et al. 2022: 944).

Among more specific factors that can explain Christian nationalists' motivation behind turning to violent means, authors such as Miles T. Armaly et al. situate a communal sense of being under threat or being discriminated against. Even if such an antagonization does not factually exist, invoking such feelings is a powerful tool to rally Christian nationalists together. Whiteness as a marker of identity also plays into this narrative of victimhood, but this attribute deserves to be explored in greater detail (Armaly et al. 2022: 945). Political mobilization can also exist in a more structured, but no less influential context, namely in the form of voting. Both administrations under President Donald Trump have been connected by a number of authors to Christian nationalist rhetoric and those who identify with CN were seen as more likely to support Trump in the presidential elections (Gorski 2017: 348).

Individual motivations of Christian nationalists differ in their respective focus, but several belief systems, including ethno-centrism and xenophobia, unite most of those who had voted for Trump. Adding the layer of a perceived threat to their identity, many Christian nationalists also saw Trump as a means to an end of preserving what they deem to be a Christian America. Although not outspokenly religious himself, Trump managed to play into Christian nationalist narratives, such as the seemingly necessary protection of the rights of American Christians and gain the support of numerous advocates of the ideology (Whitehead et al. 2018: 166).

Lastly, this chapter calls for examining the legal practice of CN. Can Christian nationalism penetrate the judicial level in the United States? When imagining a future of even greater Christian nationalist sentiment, this poses as a relevant question. As a matter of fact, there is a historic precedent when it comes to American laws being centered around Christianity (Green 2021: 443).

One prominent example stems from the context of courtroom procedure, namely the swearing of an oath in front of a judge. In 19th Century America, Christianity was deemed as intertwined with the nation's common law and thus one had to profess one's belief in God in order to testify in court. Justice was therefore interpreted as divinely ordained, strongly linking Christianity and the American nation (Green 2021: 458). More recent court decisions provide clarity on how Christian nationalism can infuse the American legal system. Many cases have revolved around the presence of prayer at public institutions, such as schools. A principle that is often questioned in such instances is the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the US constitution, which states that the government should neither proclaim an official religion nor express preference to one (Corbin 2020: 834).

While state courts have not always made decisions in favor of Christian representation, those that did should be questioned, especially in terms of the Establishment Clause, as law professor Caroline Corbin argues. A case that was heard in front of the Supreme Court, to provide an example, dealt with a New York town opening its board meetings with a prayer. The court ultimately decided that this conduct did not violate the First Amendment on the grounds that those not identifying as Christians were not purposefully excluded (Corbin 2020: 839). By making such decisions, the argument can be made that while courts might not act in the name of Christian nationalism, allowing the practice of Christian traditions in spaces such as schools or political institutions can support notions of Christian nationalism in the long run (Corbin 2020: 866).

This chapter presented some of the literature dealing with Christian nationalism as a social, political and legal practice. Its aim was to showcase how present CN is in numerous spheres of American ways of life and how it has been rising in both terms held by President Trump.

2.3. Nativism & Whiteness in Christian Nationalist Thought

A large portion of literature on Christian nationalism shines a light on racial and ethnic prejudices that exist inside the ideology. Many authors therefore narrow in on white Christian nationalism which goes one step further in its definition of an in-group vs. a perceived out-group. According to this view, the American nation is to consist of and be led by white Christians (Armaly et al. 2022, Corbin 2020, Gorski & Perry 2022, Lehman & Teimouri 2025).

Although many different cultures and ethnicities in the United States practice Christianity, a Christian nationalist has become connotated with whiteness, with Armaly et al. even calling it a “white phenomenon” (Armaly et al. 2022: 946). Another indicator that supports this connection, is that those who identify more strongly as Christian nationalists also believe that white people were facing increasing discrimination. It is this factor of whiteness that can serve to explain how Christian nationalism undermines democratic practices, that are based on equality and inclusion (Gorski & Perry 2022: 21).

In terms of the level of extremity of White Christian nationalism, two subsections of the ideology can be distinguished from one another, namely “Christian Statists” as well as “Religious Traditionalists”. As argued by Ruiqian Li and Paul Froese, Christian Statism is more closely related to nativist narratives and thus the exclusion of non-white, non-Christian members of the population (Li & Froese 2023: 771). In contrast, Religious Traditionalism refers in a greater capacity to the embedding of Christian values in societal structures but is more open to other nationalities and ethnicities. Those allocated to this group however do still agree with the belief that Christianity is the “foundation of American culture” and tend to be worried by rising secularist convictions as well as more progressive views on contentious issues such as abortion rights or LGBTQ+ inclusive policies. While not openly denouncing multiculturalism in American society, religious traditionalists, Li and Froese argue, often employ a “colorblind” stance, through which the role of race relations in the US is downplayed or ignored altogether (Li & Froese 2023: 774).

Since racial identities play an important role in White Christian nationalism, its connection to a nativist ideology becomes apparent. While nativism as a grounding concept of this thesis will be elaborated on in the following chapter, its link to Christian nationalism is a consistent part of existing literature on the subject. Nativism, as the belief that those outside of the designated ingroup should be disadvantaged, is closely connected to negative attitudes towards immigration in Christian nationalist circles (Stroope et al. 2021: 1).

By viewing US-Americans as inherently white and Christian and positioning them in contrast to non-white and non-Christian immigrants, opposing groups are constructed. When it comes to refugees, for example, there is a clear bias towards people exhibiting a white ethnicity, and often an adherence to Christianity, by the US government (Grace & Heins 2020: 572).

In 2025, the Trump administration made headlines when it declared it would allow the resettlement of white South Africans, while putting a stop to all other refugee admissions, showcasing how blatant this preferencing can be (Jones 2026).

In the context of immigrants being racialized, Breanne Leigh Grace and Katie Heins refer to what has been dubbed racist nativism. This facet of nativism links racist and xenophobic notions, through which immigrants are alienated on the basis of both their race or ethnicity and their culture, which often includes their religion. By framing US-Americans as white Christians while excluding those not belonging to this designated group, White Christian nationalism is legitimized (Grace & Heins 2020: 560).

In the context of Christian nationalism in the United States, nativist notions can and do have serious real-life consequences. Minority groups that are especially targeted, such as Muslims in America, have seen harmful measures pass including the travel ban imposed in President Trump's first term on countries that all had a Muslim majority (Dahab & Omori 2019: 1742). As the more detailed outline of nativism and its history will show, race and religion have been conflated in the United States for a long time. Historically, the lines were more explicitly blurred, however rhetoric that is being used today still lets people associate certain ethnic backgrounds with a specific religion and portrays many "others" as the opposite to a white and Christian America (Corbin 2020: 843).

Although there has been a fair amount of research done on these focal points of Christian nationalism, the implementation of this ideology into the context of political representation is comparatively underexplored. Adding the lens and theoretical foundation of nativism as well as ethno-symbolism, both of which will be elaborated on in the following chapter, will allow for a more detailed analysis of the influence of Christian nationalism on the rhetoric being used in the contemporary US political landscape.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Nativism

Nativism poses as a foundational concept in this examination of Christian nationalist rhetoric in the current US-American political landscape. At its core, nativism refers to the preference of what is seen as a nation's people over those deemed as "outsiders" (Betz 2019: 111).

Nativism has often been treated as being closely connected to nationalism, but it can also exist as its own ideology. Racist and populist ways of thinking are frequently seen as embedded in nativism, but scholars such as Rafal Riedel, identify several differences between nationalist, populist and nativist ideals (Riedel 2020: 18).

Interestingly and fittingly for this thesis, Riedel finds nativism to have originated in the United States of America. He argues that nativist approaches were an answer to the migration flows from Europe to the US throughout the 19th and early 20th century. While its name is reminiscent of the indigenous population in America, nativism includes the peoples making up the British colonies that had settled on the continent a century prior. Ironically, those known as Native Americans would not be seen as part of the ingroup which nativists regard as the principal inhabitants of the United States (Riedel 2020: 19).

The history of nativism is further elaborated on by Hans-Georg Betz, who identifies two specific periods in US-American history as influential in the shaping of the ideology. Firstly, the formation of the American party, which was more commonly known as the Know Nothing Party, in the 1850s demonstrated a rise in nativist ideals. This was in reaction to the arrival of German and Irish immigrants, who were Roman Catholic as opposed to the existing majority of Protestants in the country. The Know Nothings propagated a strongly nativist ideology, by voicing concerns over the influx of immigrants and calling for more control of American politics by their own ethno-religious group (Betz 2017: 339). The end of the 19th century marked another rise in nativist sentiments brought especially to the forefront by agrarian groups. What these historical developments show is that many current narratives echo those of the past. Beliefs that immigrants steal away jobs or that they could not assimilate to a certain culture have stood the test of time and keep on being mobilized by actors in positions of power (Betz 2017: 348).

Ethnicity does not have to be the only factor to unite a group that is seen as the native inhabitants, though ethnocentrism plays an important role in nativist discourses. Other characteristics could be the language they use, a shared history or religious affiliation (Riedel 2020: 20). What was deemed “white” during the first surges of nativism in the US has also fluctuated. Irish Catholics, for example, that would have been considered unwelcome and not belonging to the white Christian majority, have since been integrated into the idea of a native group. With new flows of immigration, who belongs to the ingroup vs. the outgroup continues to be redefined (Young 2017: 230).

Furthermore, nativism can be related to socio-economic realities. Two such definitions, economic nativism and welfare chauvinism, continue to be relevant in contemporary political discourse. The principal focus of economic nativism is the belief that migration negatively impacts the job market in terms of availabilities and wages for nationals. Welfare chauvinism reflects the widely made claim that immigrants should not be able to receive social benefits from the state they came to inhabit (Betz 2019: 111). In today’s globalized world attaining a society that is made up of a singular culture, as the most extreme amongst nativists might wish for, is rather unrealistic. Instead, nativists aim for stringent policies regarding immigration as well as economic advantages for the group they belong to, implemented by government representatives who themselves are members of the “native” population (Kokkonen & Linde 2023: 52).

In differentiating between populism and nativism, the clearest distinction can be made in the groups that both ideologies aim to alienate. While nativists divide their fellow inhabitants of their nation into in- and outgroups, the common enemy in populist discourses are those making up the elite of their society. Nativism and nationalism might seem more closely related and while they do tend to overlap and influence one another, they represent distinct ideologies along with their respective manifestations. Nativism, Rafal Riedel argues, appears to have a more positive reception than nationalism. Perhaps this is due to the prevalence of the latter term in public discourses and media outlets, a presence which nativism lacks. Nativism can be potentially framed to be defending community values or local groups, but like nationalism, it carries racist and xenophobic undertones, which should not be ignored. Additionally, while nationalism predominantly focuses on the state where it functions, nativism exists on a narrower level, as it can relate to a shared language, historical developments or religious beliefs (Riedel 2020: 22-27).

Having established that nationalism and nativism have nuanced differences, links between them should also be examined more closely since the goal of this thesis is to reveal how Christian nationalist rhetoric informs nativist interpretations of national identity. To therefore clarify the relationship between a nativist ideology and Christian nationalism, it can be useful to understand nativism as a blend of nationalism and xenophobia. The aspect of nativeness, as pointed out by Cas Mudde, while subjective, generally relates to creating boundaries according to cultural attributes (Mudde 2009: 19). Xenophobia and racism can thus be seen as connected to nativism, although the nation acts as a conceptual divider between the two latter ideologies. Racism exists outside of the realm of the nation, drawing lines between what is seen as “civilized” or “uncivilized”, whereas nativism always views such in- and outgroups in a national context (Higham 1955: 333).

Nativism therefore informs a national identity, albeit one that ostracizes those who do not belong to the native community (Newth 2023: 164). It is formulated and aided by historical context, symbols and myths. The most relevant form of nativism to the analysis of this thesis is therefore one specified as symbolic nativism. It centers around a shared identity, based on a group’s cultural ties, including traditions and stories drawn from history (Betz 2019: 123). A similar theoretical strand that also incorporates the element of ethnicity and thus serves to connect nativism to Christian nationalism is a concept called ethno-symbolism, which constitutes the second underlying theoretical strand of this thesis.

The concept of nativism is utilized in this thesis to understand how natives are differentiated from non-natives and which groups belong in which category. As discussed, nativism has a long history in the United States and many misconceptions about certain minorities, such as their supposed endangering of the job market or posing a threat to national security, have unfortunately been upheld over time. Such mechanisms of othering are often justified with elements of ethno-symbolism. Since nativism posits that a nation should consist of a specific group that is seen as innate, the mere existence of a nation is presupposed (Higham 1955: 4). Nativism in the context of Christian nationalism can therefore flourish with the help of mythologized narratives about the foundation of a nation and a supposedly coherent national identity. The theory of ethno-symbolism, which will be laid out in the following section, is utilized to tie together Christian nationalism, nativism and myths of origin and identity.

3.2. Ethno-symbolism

Ethno-symbolism, as most famously laid out by sociologist Anthony D. Smith, underscores the importance of myths and symbols in the formation of nationalist thinking relating especially to a supposed ethnic heritage. In his approach Smith employs a historical understanding of nations, and like in the context of symbolic nativism, emphasizes the role of a community's past experiences and recurring traditions in the shaping of their identity. He argues that most nations have been built on ethnic foundations, but that the evolution of these ethnic ties implements itself culturally and is not necessarily reflected in the nation's demographic composition (Smith 2009: 14). Ethno-symbolism emerged as an alternative approach in understanding and explaining the longevity and weight of nationalist strands. Smith argues that it can be understood as a critical approach towards modernist beliefs that state that nationalism is a relatively new concept. Ethno-symbolism, in contrast, sees nationalism to be rooted in mythologized interpretations of the past (Smith 2009: 9). Current Christian nationalist ideologies echo such a definition, as they apply historical narratives to the present to justify principles regarding the makeup of American society and its supposed inherent values (Gorski & Perry 2022: 4).

There are three main components of ethno-symbolism, as described by Smith. As hinted at, the first, which Smith calls "*la longue durée*", emphasizes the need for a long-term examination of nationalist strands. Describing nations as inherently historical, Smith highlights how a collective memory and tradition can shape national conduct and people's sense of belonging. It is this foundation that constitutes the emotional connection that nationalists feel regarding their ancestry and the culture they prescribe to it (Smith 2000: 9).

In the context of Christian nationalism, such a building of identity based on historically underscored characteristics is referred to by Gorski and Perry as a "deep story". This deep story of Christian nationalism supports the notion of America's founding as a Christian nation and envisions its continuing path as adhering to Christian values. The history of the United States is thus bent to fit a narrative that Christian nationalists can feed off to justify their vision of how the nation was and should be. The supposed "chosenness" of the US also plays a role in CN's deep story. This belief that God had selected the country as a vessel to do his bidding continues to influence narratives not only by religious leaders, but also political representatives, as will become apparent in the analysis of this thesis (Gorski & Perry 2022: 4).

The second theme Smith describes in his outlining of ethno-symbolism is the interrelation of the past, present and future of nations as well as nationalism, establishing three further categories in this context, namely recurrence, continuity and reappropriation. Nations are understood as recurring, meaning cultural and political communities can and have formed all throughout history. They are continuous in the sense that those belonging to a nation feel connected to their ancestors through symbolic ties, which are rediscovered and incorporated into current narratives, hence the element of reappropriation. Smith thus refers to nationalists as “political archeologists”, whose goal is to formulate the nation according to components of their ethnic community that have been passed from generation to generation. These ethnic ties constitute the third defining factor (Smith 2000: 12). Ethnic communities are seen by Smith as the core of national identities. They are defined as being tied together by myths pertaining to a shared background, cultural similarities and other related elements contributing to their identity, such as the territory they are situated in (Smith 2009: 27).

Myths, symbols and stories hold the power to influence the actions of groups that connect with such narratives. Some examples that Smith names and that can support this thesis in its later analysis of contemporary political discourse in the United States include myths related to the founding of a nation or its purpose (Smith 2009: 93). By adopting certain characteristics and narratives as the defining features of a nation, groups can also separate themselves from others. National elements can therefore be utilized to draw social borders between different nationals and create a dynamic of insiders vs. outsiders (Smith 2009: 25). This is especially relevant in the context of nativist notions and demonstrates how myths and symbols can be drivers in perpetrating such a divide.

Connecting the interrelation of the past, present and future proposed by Smith to Christian nationalism, several specific narratives can be utilized as a theoretical foundation. Firstly, regarding the aspect of the past, in outlining symbolic approaches in terms of his theory, Smith refers to the idea of a nation’s “golden age”. It is a historical period which acts as an anchor for national pride and belonging (Smith 2009: 95). For Christian nationalists the golden age that is often used as a source of pride and inspiration dates to the days of the Southern Confederacy and the Civil War period. Especially the South identified itself as God’s chosen people, as stated in their Constitution, laying out the blueprint for Christian nationalist rhetoric that continues to shape American national identity (Fea 2011: 17).

This period has been mythologized as an era of fighting for one's beliefs and securing America's status as a Christian nation. Both the North and the South drew on Christian narratives, albeit to different ends. While one stood up against slavery, the other defended it, but Christian scripture was used as the basis for both lines of argumentation (Fea 2011: 18). The idea of exceptionalism and divine purpose of the nation that emerged during this time stayed with those pertaining to Christian nationalism and references to such an image of the United States remain prevalent. These past myths of the glory days of the United States lead to the current narrative of American decline and the supposed loss of Christian values. In linking national identity with Christianity, current political representatives perpetrate a distinction between the Christian ingroup and the secular or other-denominational outgroup. Outside influences that are seen as antithetical to so-called Judeo-Christian values are depicted as a threat and as something to fight against (Haynes 2017: 70).

The future therefore calls for a restoration of American, or in other words Christian values and for their defense in response to their endangerment by external or internal forces. Donald Trump's by now infamous "Make America Great Again" political slogan is reminiscent of such a quest of the rebuilding of the American nation. While it does not singularly refer to the reinstitution of a Christian approach to US politics, when analyzed in accordance with statements made by Trump himself as well as other representatives supporting Trump's vision for the nation, making America great definitely seems to involve a cultural and faith-oriented reset. The policy manifesto "Project 2025", authored by the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation, is one example of how the Christian nationalist ideology is aimed to be institutionalized to achieve a return to America's so-called golden age, closing the ideological circle of Christian nationalism (Hollis-Brusky 2024: 31).

In summary, the past, present and future of Christian nationalism as viewed through the lens of ethno-symbolism builds on a foundational mythological narrative of American history that informs its identity. This identity shaped around Judeo-Christian values is in turn framed as being under threat and in need of saving in current political narratives and finally, the future of the nation is foreseen as bringing in a restoration of the original American identity, based on a definition of religious and ethnic homogeneity (Gorski & Perry 2022: 4).

Ethnicity, the third pillar of ethno-symbolism according to Smith, plays a central role in Christian nationalist viewpoints, linking the ethno-symbolic approach back to nativism. The perception of cultural, religious and other commonalities as creating an American identity influences Christian nationalist opinions on social groups that fall outside this community, such as immigrants and Americans adhering to a different faith (Baker & Whitehead 2024: 440). As previously explained, whiteness or a white identity is closely interrelated with Christian nationalism. In an American context, Christianity is often equated with whiteness, so when Christian nationalists talk of a Christian America in decline, what they insinuate is also a decline of whiteness in the nation (Emerson & Bracey 2024: 45). This notion of ethnic homogeneity is not always overtly claimed and sometimes even denied in the name of Christianity. By framing their quest for a more Christian nation in moral terms, their aspirations of excluding an ethnic other stay hidden (Perry & Grubbs 2025: 16).

This chapter served to explain how the theoretical concept of ethno-symbolism acts as a foundation for my methodology of coding texts that reflect current Christian nationalist narratives in the United States. In answering how such narratives shape American national identity, ethno-symbolism can be useful in drawing on myths, traditions and histories that are prevalent in a Christian nationalist ideology. Additionally, linking the ethno-symbolic theory with nativist convictions sheds a light on how a Christian national identity contributes to boundary making. Language that can potentially lead to social exclusion is a central focus of this thesis. Therefore, connecting nativism and ethno-symbolism explains the background as well as the gravitas of defining the US as a Christian nation and can underscore the repercussions of such a mindset.

Regarding the history of Christian nationalism and the integral role of related mythology, especially concerning the narrative of the founding of the United States as a Christian nation, utilizing the lenses of nativism and ethno-symbolism offers insights into how these myths have prevailed over time and how they have strengthened the shaping of Christian nationalist identity as well as exclusionary viewpoints. In turn, this theoretical approach anchors the methodological methods through which the incorporation of Christian nationalist rhetoric into the political sphere is analyzed.

4. Methodology

4.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

The exploration of this thesis centers around the way narratives are being portrayed in political discourse. Therefore, an initial instinct would be to conduct a qualitative discourse analysis, which appears as useful due to its interdisciplinarity as well as its questioning of how reality is constructed using language. However, as the thesis specifically aims to analyze nativist approaches in the context of Christian nationalism, ideological influences on political decision-making are an important focus. A critical discourse analysis thus offers a more fitting framework. While it still allows for an examination of the language being used, it also adds the layer of underlying power structures which influence the existing discourse. As Norman Fairclough puts it, a critical discourse analysis creates a connection between events on a smaller scale and the structural background underpinning them (Fairclough 1995: 28).

Critical discourse analysis therefore links language and its production to societal realities. It focuses on the contribution of dominant actors and institutions to the creation and upkeep of unequal hierarchies (van Dijk 1993: 250). What further distinguishes a qualitative discourse analysis from a critical one, is that the latter is defined by its normativity. Its goal, as Teun van Dijk explains, is to expose unjust structures that act as the foundation of the discourse that is being utilized to legitimize such hierarchies (van Dijk 1993: 253).

Power in a social sense is a crucial element of critical discourse analysis. In this context, it can be defined as influential in shaping the beliefs and values of others, demonstrating its role in perpetrating ideologies (van Dijk 1993: 257). In the case of nativism in Christian nationalism, the elements of power that are significant in this discussion, include division of society into an ingroup and outgroup, namely into (mostly white) Christians and non-Christians. Language and narratives can determine reality and its role in being transformed into policy should not be understated.

The objective of this thesis is therefore to analyze the framing of nativist approaches in the context of Christian nationalism in the United States and to situate them into existing power structures and political decision making, which ultimately affects the American population as well as its national identity.

4.2. Actors and Material to be Analyzed

Numerous actors provide crucial insights into how the current administration incorporates the religious right into their governing framework and in turn legitimizes Christian nationalist views. One example is the White House Faith Office, established by an executive order issued by President Trump in 2025. Such an organ has existed since the administration of George W. Bush, but what makes its contemporary manifestation relevant for the exploration of Christian nationalism in the US, is its current composition (“Establishment of the White House Faith Office”, White House 2025).

For instance, President Trump appointed Paula White-Cain as the Senior Advisor to the White House Faith Office, who is a televangelist and the founder of the National Faith Advisory Board, an association of American churches and ministries. On its official website, there are four pillars presented as the principal priorities of the Board, including the promotion of a “strong America”. It references the United States’ “godly foundation”, echoing Christian nationalist stances on the seemingly inherent Christian nature of the state (National Faith Advisory Board). The Heritage Foundation has undoubtedly been another actor that has been influential in shaping American policies according to conservative, Christian beliefs. Since its inception in the 1970s it has had a say in several administrations and has strongly supported current President Donald Trump in his undertakings (Popli 2025).

Although these actors are significant in terms of their support of the current administration, none are as influential and medially present as Donald Trump himself as well as members of his cabinet. For this thesis, I have chosen to examine statements made by President Donald Trump, Vice-President JD Vance as well as Minister of Defense Pete Hegseth. The reason for decoding speeches held by President Donald Trump in the context of uncovering Christian nationalist narratives is self-evidently that as President, Trump is the main representative of the United States of America. He is a very prominent figure, which renders his speeches well-documented and accessible. Trump is also an interesting figure to examine, because of the crucial role Christian nationalists have played in securing his win for both terms he was elected as president. He has emphasized the importance of the Christian community in the United States by establishing a taskforce to counter supposed anti-Christian bias as well as the White House Faith Office, led by Paula White-Cain (“President Trump’s Top 100 Victories for People of Faith”, White House 2025).

I chose to examine statements made by JD Vance as well, because as vice president he is another highly prominent figure in US politics. If Donald Trump should not be able to fulfill his term, JD Vance would take his place. There is also the possibility of him running as president in the 2028 election, therefore the importance of his personal and political convictions should not be underestimated. Vance has made his Christian faith known publicly on various occasions and has even announced his upcoming second book (following an autobiography) to be about his conversion to Catholicism (Loffhagen 2026). He is therefore a relevant actor to consider when examining Christian nationalist narratives in the US.

The third political figure I have decided to include in my analysis is Secretary of Defense also known as Secretary of War Pete Hegseth. Due to his position in the US government, Hegseth is a prominent figure both domestically and internationally and has also garnered media attention for his statements related to his religious belief. His book “American Crusade”, in which he calls for a kind of holy war to reinstate conservative values in American society, has caused some controversy and makes Hegseth a person of interest when approaching the issue of Christian nationalism in the US (Ryan 2025). Hegseth is also a member of a church belonging to a network led by pastor Doug Wilson. Wilson has voiced many controversial opinions, most notably downplaying the severity of slavery in the United States and is open about his Christian nationalist ideals. The Secretary of Defense has not been subtle in his support for Wilson, having invited the pastor to lead a prayer inside the Pentagon (Iyer & Britzky 2026).

Ideologically, all three actors adhere to conservative beliefs, but with differing degrees of engagement. There is therefore no distinction in my analysis between political stances, but since I am trying to understand how nativist and Christian nationalist rhetoric in general is being used in contemporary political discourse, Trump, Vance and Hegseth as high-level officials appear to be fitting representatives. The narratives in their speeches will help me ascertain the presence of Christian nationalist and nativist beliefs in current political discourse in the United States. Additionally, since all three figures belong to the political elite, power structures that frame their narratives can be highlighted in line with a critical discourse analysis.

The time frame that I am sourcing material from is set to the current Trump administration, namely starting from January 2025, when Trump was inaugurated, and ending at the time of the writing of this thesis in April 2026. I am examining two speeches per actor, as this corresponds to the foreseen length of my thesis and allows me to code and analyze each text fully. This sample size also permits me to assess common themes mentioned by the actors that point to a propagation of nativism in relation to Christian nationalist rhetoric.

When selecting speeches, a challenge was to determine which criteria the choice should be based on. Logistically, the availability of transcripts of speeches played an important role. While prominent speeches held by President Trump, such as his inaugural address, were easy to find online and were even posted on the official White House website, Vice President JD Vance has a considerably smaller repertoire. Interestingly, most public statements made at official events by Pete Hegseth are published on the government website of the renamed Department of War. There is therefore a much bigger selection of sources by Hegseth than JD Vance, which facilitated the decision process concerning statements made by the Secretary.

The respective sets of speeches held by the three actors can be divided into thematic points of focus. Regarding President Trump, I have chosen to analyze the speech he held at the inauguration of his second term in January 2025 as well as his State of the Union address, which took place a little over a year later, namely in February 2026. In selecting these speeches, I am aiming to examine Christian nationalist narratives on an institutional level. Trump's inaugural address sets the tone for his second presidential term. It not only demonstrates focal points of his political aspirations but also touches on his interpretations of American national identity. The State of the Union address is an annual assessment of the nation's progress as well as potential areas of improvement. Since it is held a year after President Trump's inauguration, it can be examined if Christian nationalist rhetoric is being maintained. Both the inaugural as well as the State of the Union address are widely broadcast, meaning they have the potential of exerting influence on millions of Americans. Due to their reach and level of importance, these speeches constitute a medium with the power to shape people's ideas of national identity.

As mentioned, selecting speeches held by JD Vance was not as straightforward. The most prominent ones when consulting search engines seem to pertain more to the relationship of the United States with Europe, as demonstrated by his recent visit to Hungary to endorse Viktor Orban in the April 2026 parliamentary elections or his speech at the Munich Security Conference, which garnered a lot of media attention for its apparent antagonization of European allies (Kirby 2026; Wintour 2025). To narrow down the selection, I focused on speeches by Vance related to moral framings of national identity. Since he has been vocal about the influence of faith on his political stances, many of his public statements are infused with narratives of morality (Barker 2026).

One example I found that also garnered some attention due to its circumstances, is Vance's appearance and speech at a Turning Point USA conference in December 2025. The non-profit organization Turning Point USA was founded by self-proclaimed Christian nationalist Charlie Kirk, who was killed in a shooting in September of that year. Kirk's murder sparked a strong national and even international reaction. He was a prominent figure in right-wing circles and an avid Trump supporter (Evans 2025). Vance's participation in the event shortly after the murder of Charlie Kirk, whom the VP refers to as his friend, provides an interesting context in the exploration of Christian nationalism in current political discourse in the United States. Another speech which relates to a moral framing of an American national identity was held by Vance at the annual March for Life Rally in January 2026 in Washington DC. It is also organized by a non-profit association and focuses on anti-abortion mobilization (March for Life 2026). Its religious connotation allows for an analysis of the intersection of elements of Christian belief, political realities and the formation of national identity.

What both speeches have in common as well are its intended audiences. Since more conservative Americans attend events such as these, their political views are more likely to align with Vance's ideals and rhetoric. It is therefore interesting to see how the vice president depicts himself as being part of the respective movements to formulate an identity based on the Christian faith. His role as vice president of the United States gives his words social and political weight, with the power to shape the public's idea of what being American can and should mean.

The third political figure I am including in my analysis is Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth. He has most recently come under fire for his choice of words at a Pentagon prayer service, a practice which he himself introduced, calling for an elimination of America's supposed enemies in the context of the ongoing war with Iran. His framing of violent conflict being warranted by God displays a legitimization of Christian nationalist narratives in a high-stakes security setting (Wong 2026). The practice of prayer at the Pentagon itself has drawn criticism and has even been hit with a lawsuit by a non-profit organization called Americans United for Separation of Church and State. It argues that the exposure of federal workers to the personal religious beliefs of Secretary Hegseth among others violates their rights related to religious freedom (Americans United 2026).

While the statements Hegseth made at the Pentagon prayer would surely provide some interesting insights in terms of the goals of this thesis, they do not constitute an actual speech held in an official and more importantly public capacity. Therefore, I have chosen to analyze two of the most recent speeches that can be found on the Ministry of Defense website, namely one held at the Reagan National Defense Forum in 2025 and one at the Americas Counter Cartel Conference Speech in 2026.

At a first glance these selected statements might seem arbitrary, however when taking a closer look, both events offer fitting contexts when examining the operationalization of Christian nationalist and nativist thought. Firstly, the Reagan National Defense Forum is an annual event which sees bipartisan leaders come together to discuss issues related to America's safety and defense strategies (Reagan National Defense Forum 2025). By analyzing Hegseth's keynote speech at the forum, national identity can be situated within a security framework and notions of external threats, which again have symbolic power, can be examined. Secondly, the Americas Counter Cartel Conference held in March 2026 was a multinational gathering, bringing together conservative leaders from North, Central and South America. The topics that were discussed included the combatting of organized crime and border security (Olay 2026). Regarding nativist notions of an in- vs. an outgroup, such a setting can provide crucial insights into the formulation of national identity according to Christian nationalist narratives, especially regarding the perception of internal and external threat.

As Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth holds a position of great importance in the US government. The speeches mentioned demonstrate how Christian nationalism can be operationalized through discourse. By adopting a religious lens on security issues, Hegseth's rhetoric is reminiscent of the symbolic construction of threat and the juxtaposition of an inside group with those deemed to be on the outside. In the cases of both JD Vance and Pete Hegseth, the selection of speeches was informed by their availability. Those chosen provide online transcripts that can be utilized when creating categories of code. Thematically, as described, the mentioned speeches were selected to examine Christian nationalist framing contributing to nativist notions on an institutional, moral as well as operational level. These layers of analysis help me paint a more complete picture of the extent of saturation of current political discourse by Christian nationalist rhetoric.

I aim to treat these mediums as examples of the institutionalization of Christian nationalist thought, in which nativist narratives are embedded. The language of such actors will be viewed through the lens of discursive analyses with the goal of determining its presence in policy-oriented narratives and its ultimate influence on political realities in the United States of America.

4.3. Method: Coding of Speeches

To be able to categorize terms used in the speeches I am examining more thoroughly, I am utilizing a coding method, which entails categorizing terms thematically and analyzing them through a critical lens. The coding results are summarized in a codebook that can be found in the appendix to this thesis. The coding process was facilitated by consulting existing literature on coding qualitative data (Cope 2010, Lester et al. 2020). Codes based on qualitative methods can be generated in an inductive or deductive manner. Some researchers also analyze data according to a mixed method. Working inductively is understood as developing a theory from the data that is being analyzed, whereas a deductive approach is utilized to support an existing theory (Cope 2010: 282).

Since nativist and ethno-symbolic theories form the basis for my analysis, the codes I applied to the examined speeches were generated deductively rather than inductively.

While some codes appear to be more descriptive in nature, specifically echoing phrases used in the statements, such as the expression “golden age”, others are more analytic and fall into the realm of an ethno-symbolic approach. One example is the framing of an ingroup vs. outgroup dynamic. However, the term “golden age” can have both a descriptive as well as analytical function. Mentioned as a kind of myth by Anthony D. Smith, the golden age narrative can act as a powerful symbol to a nation, through which action can also be mobilized (Smith 2009: 95). This is to say that not all codes fall clearly into one category. What also occurred during the process of coding was that some sections of the texts called for multiple codewords, making it less transparent, but in turn more analytically rich. The codes were polished throughout readings of the speeches and adjusted to reflect specific discursive patterns.

Some significant codes that were prescribed to the speeches I analyzed that are most indicative of the rhetoric this thesis aims to uncover, namely regarding Christian nationalist narratives and their shaping of a nativist national identity are listed in the following table.

Code	Description	Text Examples	Theoretical Link
Destiny	America’s future is framed as predetermined and divinely sanctioned	<i>“For our destiny is written by the hand of Providence”</i> <i>“Our nation’s glorious destiny”</i>	Smith describes historical developments to be linked with a nation’s ordained path, creating the idea of a nation’s destiny; the naturalization of nativism in discourse leads to nativism being deemed necessary or inevitable
Foundation	America’s founding is seen as God’s will; its constitution, history and values are viewed in a Christian context	<i>“America is one nation under God”</i> <i>“We will always be a Christian nation”</i>	Ethno-symbolism describes myths of foundation as constituting national identity, implicitly forming an ingroup and an outgroup
In- vs. Outgroup	Positioning of the ingroup against the outgroup, through which a binary is constructed between authentic Americans and the “other”	<i>“border invasion”</i> <i>“The first duty of the American government is to protect American citizens, not illegal aliens”</i>	Positioning of the native ingroup against the outgroup, in line with nativism
Identity	Narratives depicting what it means to be American,	<i>“Americans are hungry for identity”</i>	National identity is constructed according to

	constructing an identity based on cultural, ethnic and religious realities	<i>“We grew up in a Christian culture and were formed by religious values”</i>	myths and symbolic rhetoric, as per Smith
Myth	Stories through which nationalism is strengthened, narrative around the nation’s foundation, destiny or divine role	<i>“Martyred for his beliefs” “We appeal to Almighty God, just as our forefathers did”</i>	What national identity is based on; highly influential narratives in forming an ethnic community according to Smith

The codes I chose to include here build on an ethno-symbolic or nativist approach. Some can fall into both theoretical frameworks, such as the “destiny” code. In Smith’s interpretation, the concept of a national destiny is built upon historical narratives and deemed as a divinely ordained path of the nation (Smith 2009: 34). In a nativist context, the code can refer to a naturalization of nativist ideals, which moves them from a fringe political position to the mainstream and depicts such views as inevitable (Newth 2023: 172). A national destiny is closely related to its foundation. If a historical precedent is given regarding a nation’s origins, its influence on national identity can be far-reaching. Smith regards this foundation as something that is utilized to argue for a restoration of certain values or realities (Smith 2009: 98). One of the most central terms in ethno-symbolic theory is “myth”. Myths that are formed around the concepts of destiny and foundation hold a substantial power in declaring a definitive national identity (Smith 2009: 27). The codes listed here are therefore all interconnected and finally lead to the “in- vs. outgroup” code, which deals with narratives of nativism. If a national identity is fixed, those falling outside of it are not deemed as part of the community and as part of the nation (Smith 2009: 25).

This short overview of some of the most crucial codes pertaining to the speeches that were examined, demonstrates the method through which they were drawn from the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter. The full codebook, that can be found in the appendix, shows the discursive elements appearing in the three leaders’ speeches that formulate an American national identity. In line with Smith’s proposition of a “longue durée” of nationalism, the following historical overview will provide a timeline of some of the most integral developments of a Christian nationalist ideology in American history. Building on the background presented in previous chapters as well as historical realities, the analysis will provide a closer look at how the codes materialized in the six speeches held by three of the most influential actors in the contemporary US political landscape.

5. Historical Overview

An outline of historical developments regarding Christian nationalism in the United States is crucial to understand the power myths and narratives of the past hold to this day. In line with the speeches that are being analyzed in this thesis as well as its ethno-symbolic approach, it felt fitting to divide this chapter into three sections. While some of the historical developments mentioned here overlap thematically, covering them in the context of subchapters can be useful in building up towards the analysis of the three actors' speeches.

Firstly, I will try to explain how the US came to be known as a Christian nation by those adhering to the ideology. The second subchapter specifies how Christian nationalist values and morals have been formulated throughout US-American history. Thirdly, this historical overview aims to describe how Christian nationalism has framed its threat perception over time and thus deals with the supposedly imperative defense of the United States as a Christian nation. Throughout the historical foundation, nativist notions will be underlined as well.

5.1. Foundational Myths of a Christian Nation

In accordance with Smith's concept of a nation's myths of origin, it is essential to provide an outline of historical narratives pertaining to the United States' founding as a nation that are prevalent in Christian nationalist discourses. This origin is often marked by the arrival of the Pilgrims and Puritans who formed the first English colonies in the US. Having been persecuted for their religious beliefs in their native countries, the communities saw the American land as a haven and a chosen territory protected by God, creating a similar narrative to that found in Christian scripture, even framing it as God's "new Israel" (Fea 2011: 60). To remain in control over this territory and to keep it sacred, the famous "City upon a hill" sermon held by Puritan leader John Winthrop talks of a duty of the newly formed societies to uphold Christian values, a sentiment that has been echoed many times throughout American history. If the population faced hardships, it was due to its straying from Christianity (Paul 2014: 153). The colonists' conflicts with the native American population were viewed as another form of punishment, mirroring biblical chronicles, and were described as holy wars, sanctioned by God with the goal of establishing solely Puritan lands (Gorski & Perry 2022: 51). Some even deemed these wars to be of an apocalyptic nature and viewed them as a fight against the anti-Christ (Kid 2025: 51).

The antagonization of natives was soon accompanied by what Gorski and Perry call a “racist theology”, emerging in response to the slave trade in America. Among the explanations for why enslaved Africans were deemed as deserving of their fate, biblical stories were utilized which talked of a curse they were exposed to while others argued it to be necessary to convert them to Christianity. Interestingly, the social status of other groups, such as Irish Catholics, was similar to that of black people and native Americans at first. But due to the economic benefit of enslaving Africans, racial hierarchies started being cemented in American society (Gorski & Perry 2022: 54).

Skipping ahead in time, a crucial historical event in Christian nationalist discourse but also in the formation of American identity as a whole was the American Revolution in 1776. The fight for independence from the British cemented a sense of national belonging, which replaced the colonies’ former alignment with the English. The revolution having led to the United States’ independence was utilized as a legitimization of the nation’s divine role (Fea 2011: 4). America’s “founding fathers” who had signed the Declaration of Independence have also been framed as adhering to faith in Christian nationalist circles, although historians have largely contested their supposed spirituality (Fea 2011: 68). Another narrative that fed into the idea of America’s exceptionalism was that of “Manifest Destiny”. It describes the duty of America to expand its territory and instill its values on surrounding peoples. Regarded as an important part of God’s plan, these beginnings of US imperialism laid the foundation for ongoing beliefs of American dominance and self-prescribed supremacy (Gorski & Perry 2022: 64).

The period of the Civil War in 1860s America provides more religious imagery through which a Christian nationalist interpretation of history is informed. In the conflict, both sides felt that they had God on their side and that what they were defending was a Christian way of life (Fea 2011: 12). Since the outcome of the civil war, where the North won against the South, another myth known as the “Lost Cause” was circulated in the historical consciousness of the US. It stated that the real motivation for the Southern states in the war had been the defense of their rights, rather than the differing stances on slavery that existed throughout the nation. Both the Manifest Destiny narrative as well as the Lost Cause became embedded in Christian nationalist thought and were enmeshed with biblical allegories, such as the notion of an inevitable rise of the South, likened to the rebirth of Jesus Christ (Gorski & Perry 2022: 63).

These myths regarding a Christian foundation of the United States, specifically portraying it as a sacred territory meant for a chosen people, lay the groundwork for much of Christian nationalist rhetoric that is being employed today. By viewing the US as inherently Christian and mythologizing the colonies that first settled in the region, an ingroup is created from the get-go. Exclusion of those not belonging to the group of divinely ordained Americans therefore goes hand in hand with these narratives, setting a precondition for nativism rooted in the nation's origins.

5.2. Sacred Values & Moral Community

The way faith was integrated into American's lives changed with the First Amendment to the American constitution in 1791, altering modes of belonging. It provided people with a choice of whether to exercise a religion or not, calling on Congress to neither establish an official religion nor to forbid the practice of faith in general. This development caused a religious revival in American society known as the Second Great Awakening. The aspect of the freedom of choice contributed to the emergence of a kind of democratic theology, forming an American concept of a moral community. Faith transformed from a passive to an active part of one's life, where the extent of religious beliefs became a matter to be taken into one's own hands (Fea 2011: 5). However, according to Christian nationalists, it did not necessarily promote an idea of religious pluralism but rather envisioned several branches of Christianity as making up the American nation (Fea 2011: 71).

If foundational myths establish who the Christian nation is and what it was ordained to do, the moral community and the sacred values connected to it establish the criteria by which membership in that nation is granted or denied. Following Smith's framework, the boundaries of the ethno-symbolic community are maintained through shared principles that function as implicit trials of belonging. This is how both religious and ethnic ways of exclusion are generated and how Christian nationalism and nativism become structurally connected. Those who are not accepted as part of the moral community are not viewed as belonging to the nation.

The relevance of nativism in the shaping of identity based on Christian morals became apparent at various points of American history. For example, the alienation of Roman Catholic immigrants was integral in positioning an ingroup against the designated outgroup. The same applies to African slaves or native Americans. All of these “others” are put in relation to Christianity. These groups had to either be integrated into the Christian faith or be shunned from American society altogether (Betz 2019: 124).

Although wars were being fought with the natives in colonial America, their culture added towards the identity formation of Christian nationalists. Gorski and Perry name freedom, order and violence as the “holy trinity” characterizing white Christian nationalism. While white people were seen as free and black people as enslaved, native Americans were positioned somewhere in between. Their “savagery” was assumed as a trait that was distinctly American and this aspect contributed to an image of the white male explorer, who was bound to resort to violence to defend his Christian values (Gorski & Perry 2022: 59). This idea of a divine fight to uphold a seemingly Christian nation has prevailed and continues to permeate current discourses. Some of these narratives that shaped the history of defending the idea of a Christian nation will be uncovered in the following chapter.

5.3. Defending the Christian Nation

More recent developments in American history have seen defenders of Christian nationalism fight for their beliefs, although not by exhibiting the same kind of violence that was prevalent during colonial times. Rather, their battles were more ideological in nature. In the 1920s, Christian fundamentalism was on a rise in the United States. Those adhering to such beliefs advocated strongly for issues such as the prohibition of alcohol, but also those pertaining to education. A famous example is that of the Scopes trial in 1925, when teacher John Scopes came under fire for teaching about evolution in a science class, something which Christian fundamentalists vehemently contested (Nikkel 2025: 3). Symbolically, the Scopes trial showcases how Christian values and beliefs were framed as being under threat and demonstrates the need to quite literally defend them, even in a court of law.

Another historical period indicative of the notion of an outside threat was the Cold War period. Communist forms of governance were seen as entirely opposite to the American way of life, and all aspects related to them were demonized. This included belief systems as well. While the USSR promoted an atheist way of life thus seeking to minimize the influence of religion in society, the United States cemented their status as a Christian nation (Perry et al. 2021: 24). This was also the time when the term “Judeo-Christian values” flourished in American political discourse. It has been utilized by many US leaders throughout history to signify its inherent divine identity (Haynes 2017: 70). This identification was practically applied in 1954, when the American Pledge of Allegiance was modified to include the phrase “one nation under God” as well as in 1956, when the official state motto was established as “In God We Trust”, a move that was promoted by President Eisenhower (Fea 2011: 51).

The Civil Rights movement in the 1950s also played a role in shaping Christian nationalist beliefs. The supreme court case *Brown v. Board of Education* that dealt with the integration of black Americans into white schools was especially influential in forming nativist ideals of belonging in religious circles (Gorski & Perry 2022: 69). In the 1970s another supreme court case shook the Christian community, namely *Roe v. Wade*, causing a surge in Christian conservatism. Proponents of the Christian Right rallied around the issue of abortion, which remains central in debates among American Christians to this day (Fea 2011: 54). The motivation behind preserving the Christian nationalist ideal, namely the homogeneity of an ethnically Christian society, was exacerbated through cases such as these.

In the 50 years since then, many more events have shaped the Christian nationalism that exists in the United States today. One prominent example is the surge of anti-Muslim sentiment, especially following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, establishing another societal group that is positioned on the outside of a Christian American identity (Haynes 2017: 67). The defense of the Christian nation from the “other” deemed as a threat in the context of these historical developments demonstrates how nativism permeates Christian nationalist discourse and how it can be regarded as a structural feature of the ideology. Numerous issues and antagonisms listed in this brief historical overview have been incorporated into the ideology that has been perpetrated in both Trump administrations. Whether it be the alienation of immigrants or debates surrounding abortion policy, the idea of an America being an inherently Christian nation is reflected in many facets of contemporary political discourse, as the following analysis will show.

6. Analysis

As outlined in previous chapters, my analysis of the six statements made by President Trump, VP Vance and Secretary of Defense Hegseth, is built on codes that I have deduced from the texts with the help of the theoretical framing of nativism and ethno-symbolism. By engaging in a critical discourse analysis, I aim to shed a light on underlying power structures of Christian nationalist rhetoric and its influence on a nativist interpretation of American identity.

6.1. Institutional Christian Nationalism: President Donald Trump

The first text that I will analyze is Donald Trump's inaugural address of his second term in office. Being the starting point of Trump's second presidential appointment, the speech utilizes exceptionalist rhetoric and presents a promise of restoration of American values under Trump's leadership (Trump 2025). What such values look like exactly, will be examined in this chapter.

President Trump begins the speech by calling for a "golden age", framing previous leadership of the United States as having led the nation down a wrong path. He assures his listeners that under his guidance, important factors, such as their faith, would be restored (ibid.).

Positioning himself as a savior and defender of the nation, Trump's inaugural speech paints a picture of an unbalanced America in need of being repaired and echoes the ethno-symbolic idea of a bygone era of the nation that set the precedent for its supposed greatness (Smith 2009: 97). One of the speech's quotes that especially stands out when utilizing the lens of Christian nationalist rhetoric is a reference that Trump makes to the highly publicized assassination attempt on his life in 2024. Trump posits that his life was saved by divine intervention in order for him to transform America into a greater nation. This religious framing of destiny also echoes ethno-symbolic notions. "Divine election", as researchers working within the ethno-symbolic theory call it, creates a narrative of a leader having been specifically selected to fulfil a godly sanctioned purpose (Cauthen 2004: 20).

Such a narrative of having been ordained by God to lead the nation and restore its "promise" echoes Christian nationalist myths of America being a chosen people. In a following statement, President Trump also identifies a return of "national unity", which he complements

by stating "...we will not forget our God". Through this association, Trump connects an American identity with Christian belief and simultaneously differentiates between an in- and an outgroup, with the latter being those who do not adhere to a Christian faith. An even clearer depiction of this othering of those not seen as belonging immediately followed his reaffirmation of religious belief since Trump referred to the closing of the national border as his main objective to keep "criminal aliens", as he puts it, outside of the country (Trump 2025).

This conflation between the narrative of a Christian nation and the apparent struggle against outsiders paints a picture of Christianity under threat and an America in need of saving and restoring to its former glory. In van Dijk's terms, this constitutes a form of elite discourse through which power is exercised. By controlling the narrative of what America is and who belongs to it, Trump reproduces ideological structures that legitimize the marginalization of those outside the Christian ingroup (van Dijk 1993: 257)

Trump's inaugural address is rife with images of an exceptional America, one that has a purpose, which Trump himself was tasked to fulfil. By referring to a "spirit of unity" which the United States is to bring to a global stage under his leadership, the narrative utilized by Trump transcends national borders and frames the United States as an international bringer of peace while at the same time calling for an expansion of American territory (Trump 2025). This narrative is reminiscent of the mythologized stories prevalent in Christian nationalist ideology. The struggle for (religious) freedom and the simultaneous quest for more land to call home echoes the tale of the original settlers of a manifest destiny, which saw their mission as being divinely ordered (Gorski & Perry 2022: 64). President Trump even uses this term explicitly, showcasing that he does not shy away from upholding myths from the past to underscore his political ambitions.

Phrases used by Trump such as the United States being "one glorious nation under God" promote the idea that an American identity is linked to a Christian faith and aim to create a sense of unity and belonging for those being part of the ingroup. When Trump says, "we are one people, one family", his framing of religious and/or ethnic outsiders in other parts of the speech makes it clear that not all Americans are being addressed (Trump 2025). Racialized others are not part of the family and do not fall into the vision held by the settlers several centuries ago of a Christian and implicitly white America (Gorski & Perry 2022: 47).

Such a building of boundaries becomes even more evident in the second speech by Donald Trump that I have examined and coded. The State of the Union Address, which Trump held in February 2026, marks an annual event, in which the president addresses the United States Congress. Since the address is televised, it reaches a large audience and can display a sitting president's narrative and vision on a global stage (United States Senate). Some of the codes attributed to this speech are "golden age", "exceptionalism", "threat", "savior", "American restoration", "faith" and "foundation".

The president begins his speech by once again pointing out the exceptionality of the United States and refers to his term as America's golden age. In the course of the address, Trump talks about the dangers of immigration and repeatedly uses the term "illegal aliens", creating a clear line in terms of a national identity. One issue that he narrows in on is the apparent participation of non-citizens in what he calls "sacred American elections" (Trump 2026). This phrasing is interesting as it frames partaking in the democratic system as divinely sanctioned. Once again, the myth of a holy purpose of the United States is alluded to by the president while simultaneously excluding communities by spreading a false claim about voter participation, which had already been disproved during his first term (Chen & Knapp 2021: 725).

In the address, President Trump also highlights how faith has seen a resurgence in American society and explicitly names a rise in Christianity during his term as a point of pride. He mentions the shooting of Charlie Kirk, who openly endorsed Christian nationalism, as being one motivator for this shift and refers to the incident as Kirk having been "martyred for his beliefs". This framing supports the notion of Christianity in America being under threat and having to be defended and saved. The "savior" code seems applicable in this sense, since Trump implies that his leadership was instrumental in "bringing [religion] back", as he states (Trump 2026). Religion and faith in the United States have always had a tremendous influence on political developments and the American life as a whole, but by painting a picture of religious belief, specifically Christian belief, being attacked from secularists or people of different faiths, Trump positions himself as the leader tasked with returning the nation to its apparent Christian origins.

Apart from the discourse President Trump engages in, he has recently come under fire for posting an AI-generated image of himself resembling common depictions of Jesus as a healer or savior (Debusmann 2026). While this goes beyond the discursive analysis that is central to this thesis, it may add some more context to Trump's self-portrayals as a divinely ordained figure that is tasked to fulfil a certain purpose, which in this case appears to be the return of an inherently Christian America.

Trump's praise of a heightened orientation around faith in American society is followed directly by calling for an increased safety of American communities to counter policies enacted by "pro-crime Democrat politicians" (Trump 2026). He implicitly creates a juxtaposition between those adhering to religious belief and those that, in his eyes, contribute to America's disarray. This is a strategy that is also referred to by van Dijk in his outline of a critical discourse analysis. By describing one's own faction, or the one that is to be promoted, in positive and the "other" in negative terms, unequal treatment of social groups is justified (van Dijk 1993: 263). This in turn creates a power dynamic, in which one community is positioned above another. In nativist terms, by framing believers in contrast to a dangerous "other", Trump reinforces social boundaries and utilizes ideas of a Christian foundation of the nation to create a homogenous identity. This is what Fairclough identifies as the discursive construction of social identities. Language does not merely reflect existing divisions but actively produces and reinforces them (Fairclough 1995: 35).

The State of the Union Address is concluded by President Trump by stating "...when God needs a nation to work his miracles, he knows exactly who to ask", marking another explicit depiction of the exceptionalism of the United States and its role as executioner of a divine plan (Trump 2026). This notion directly echoes Smith's concept of myths of election and more specifically what he calls missionary election myths (Smith 2009: 93). It describes people adhering to the belief that their path has been predestined through a mission from God, a notion that is underscored by Trump by saying that the American destiny "is written by the hand of Providence". This ties in the foundational myths that are prominent in Christian nationalist interpretations of the country's history. Trump then goes on to invoke the image of the "golden age" of America, framing it to take place under his leadership. Leading up to this, he mentions several US states such as Texas, Michigan and Florida, seemingly appointing them contributors to this renewed era of prosperity (Trump 2016).

At first glance the choice of states seems rather inconspicuous, but through a critical discourse analysis lens it is noteworthy that more cosmopolitan areas of the United States were omitted and that these exact states, which not coincidentally were all states that voted for Trump in the 2024 election, were mentioned by the president (Election 2024: Presidential Results, CNN 2024).

Who is included in his narrative and who is excluded plays a role. This also plays into the idea of a “homeland”, as per Smith or a “sacred territory”. Through such a framing, Trump touches on the sense of belonging Americans might feel in connection to their home state or the nation as a whole. Who benefits of Trump’s vision of a “glorious” America? This question lingers after his concluding remarks. Utilizing myths of a divine foundation, the homeland and the golden age in both of the analyzed speeches, Trump instrumentalizes ethno-symbolic ideals to shape a national identity and to define who belongs to the ingroup of devout Americans following a God-given path and who stands outside of it, threatening his vision of a culturally and religiously homogenous society.

6.2. Moral Christian Nationalism: Vice-President JD Vance

Having analyzed President Donald Trump’s rhetoric in an institutional context, the Vice-President of the United States JD Vance has spoken at more explicitly religiously tied rallies and events. At the 2025 convention “America Fest” held by Turning Point USA, the non-profit organization founded by Charlie Kirk, Vance held a speech in front of a crowd broadly aligning with his political views (Siddiqui 2025). There are many different topics and issues that Vance touches on in this speech, but one central theme is the building of an American and explicitly Christian identity. The VP describes how Americans have been hindered in their search for a common identity as a result of pluralism and globalism. He states that the principal uniting factor in the United States is the fact that the nation has always been and will continue to be Christian. While he denounces the idea that it is necessary for citizens to be Christians in order to be deemed American, he underlines the significant role of Christianity, by calling it “America’s creed”. He also touches on the importance of faith in the building of the American nation, referencing historical events, such as the Revolution and the Civil War and their shaping through a “moral language”. Christianity, according to Vance, can be seen as the driver behind foundational principles in the United States, including rights like that of religious freedom (Vance 2025).

In terms of ethno-symbolism, these claims can be attributed to myths of origin, creating a deeper sense of belonging based on a common heritage and history (Smith 2009: 113). Even if he first separates the two from one another, by highlighting the inherent Christian nature of the United States, JD Vance prescribes a Christian identity to Americans and creates a boundary between those belonging to that ingroup and those who do not.

Like President Trump, the Vice President utilizes the idea of Christianity having been under threat, even calling it a “war that has been waged on Christians” by people on the left, who promote a more secular way of life. He supports Trump’s notion that this conflict has been resolved by the President and his vision for America and emphasizes the necessity of Christianity in American life. Without the Christian faith and its moral framework, America runs the risk of allowing its citizens to go down the wrong path, which for JD Vance means abandoning traditional family values, for example (Vance 2025).

Since this marked the first iteration of the event after Charlie Kirk’s assassination, the Vice President’s remarks often revolved around the controversial figure. Vance goes on to position the man who murdered Kirk, Tyler Robinson, against the former and paints their personas as a juxtaposition between Christian and non-Christian. Robinson is described as having been corrupted by progressive politics, whereas Kirk, according to Vance, adhered to “true Christianity”. By utilizing this choice of words, JD Vance equates Kirk’s ideology, which was openly Christian nationalist, to a genuine practice of the Christian faith. Vance therefore promotes a Christian foundation of the nation and even goes on to say that the Trump administration’s goal is to realize “true Christian politics”, calling it the “moral truth” at the heart of the cabinet’s policies. Christianity is to be reflected in their “full understanding of government”. By enacting this rhetoric, Vice President Vance consciously builds an American identity that is Christian by nature. Although he negates it, Vance sets up an ingroup vs. outgroup dynamic by painting those who are on the left of the political spectrum and have abandoned “conservatism and [...] spirituality” as being detrimental to America’s success (ibid.). From a CDA perspective, this binary construction is significant not simply as rhetoric but as an exercise of symbolic power. By defining “true Christianity” in political terms, Vance positions the Trump administration as the arbiter of authentic American identity, naturalizing a hierarchy in which secular or progressive Americans are implicitly delegitimized (van Dijk 1993: 263).

In the closing passage of his speech JD Vance calls on his audience to “take the country back” from those responsible for Charlie Kirk’s death, which in terms of his framing is clear to be referring to his constructed outgroup. In return for this action, Vance proclaims to ensure “closed borders and safe communities” adding a more explicit reference to safeguarding ethnic boundaries and a nativist interpretation of American national identity. This claim is rounded out by echoing the myth of origin according to ethno-symbolism and playing on the idea of the United States’ destiny, as Vance states that the “promise of the greatest nation” would be fulfilled by standing up to those he deems as enemies and upkeeping a collective faith in God (Vance 2025).

In his speech held at the Turning Point USA event, JD Vance builds an image of a homogenous national identity with the help of several layers. One predominant factor is a sense of threat that Vance perpetrates through the framing of an existing war on Christianity and which aims to mobilize those adhering to the Christian faith to fight back. This is legitimized by portraying those not belonging to the ingroup as a danger to what America stands for, which can primarily be characterized by Christian values, as described by Vance through the example of the corrupted character of Tyler Robinson versus the purity of Charlie Kirk’s morality. The most frequent codes ascribed to this speech, namely “identity”, “foundation” and “unity”, show how Vance connects the American national identity to a Christian foundation of the United States, which seeps through into its governmental structures and is reflected in its God-fearing population.

The second speech by JD Vance that I am analyzing took place at the March for Life Rally in January 2026. The rally has been held yearly since the Supreme Court ruled in favor of legalizing abortion in terms of the Roe v. Wade case in 1973, which under the Trump administration was infamously overturned. Donald Trump was also the first sitting president to attend a March for Life Rally in 2020 (March for Life 2026). For Vice President Vance this speech marked his second appearance at the annual event, which he remarks with pride in the opening passages of his speech. A code that was ascribed numerous times to his statement is that of “unity”. In speaking to an audience of people having the same anti-abortion stance as Vance promotes, the VP immediately depicts himself as being part of this ingroup by announcing his wife’s pregnancy with their fourth child (Vance 2026). This merges the personal with the political, a common tactic in Christian nationalist rhetoric, and paints Vance as an even stronger supporter of the cause, both at home and in his function as Vice President.

A recurring theme in both of Vance's speeches is the depiction of an existing struggle that Christian Americans have faced. However, Vance declares much of it to have been resolved by the Trump administration and states that under its leadership the "censorship of Christians, Jews and other Americans of faith" came to an end. This framing is worth taking a closer look at, since other belief systems than solely Christianity are mentioned. However, when examining this apparent inclusion in the context of the rest of Vance's speech, Christianity remains at the center of the VP's identity building. One quote that is indicative of this framing is Vance stating: "we grew up in a Christian culture and were formed by religious values" (Vance 2026).

The use of "we" in this claim denotes a sense of unity as well as a Christian foundation to an American way of life. For JD Vance the principal question in the debate of abortion policy is not a political one. Rather he asks if his constructed ingroup "will remain a civilization under God". Not only does this framing call for the United States to be a nation defined by Christianity, but it also taps into the foundational myth of it having always been a Christian nation. Being Christian in such a context, for Vance, therefore means upholding traditional family values, including an anti-abortion stance, which he calls "God's design for men and women" (ibid.). This is marked by the code "Christianity as policy", since political decisions which have the power to affect all Americans, Christian and non-Christian alike, are being framed through a moral and religious lens. Vance's phrasing exemplifies what Fairclough calls the "technologization of discourse", meaning the deliberate use of language strategies by political actors to normalize specific ideological positions as common sense rather than contested political choices (Fairclough 1995: 91).

Another aspect of interest of Vance's speech is the mention of foreign policy in the context of a pro-life rhetoric. The VP describes President Trump's predecessor Joe Biden as having "export[ed] abortion and radical gender ideology all around the world" and especially touches on the influence of such policies on developing countries. According to Vance, this ideology was ascribed to non-Western countries against their will, painting a picture of imperialism enacted by the Biden administration. In contrast, the nativist shaping of American identity based on inherent Christian values is constructed as the more effective and respectful approach to foreign policy. An ingroup vs. outgroup dynamic is thus propagated, since those adhering to a "radical ideology", as per Vance, and defending abortion rights for women are

equaled to the “other”, the antithesis to Christian moral purity, advocating for life and the conservative image of the American family (Vance 2026).

The way Vance goes about creating the narrative of a struggle to be overcome and the ultimately victory over an assumed enemy is significant in and of itself. By utilizing biblical references in his speech, such as John 14:1 (“Let not your heart be troubled”), Vance echoes stories of suffering and perseverance that are prominent in Christian belief. The code “struggle” therefore demonstrates how such a narrative can be useful in legitimizing the solidification of Christian virtues in American society as well as the nation’s governance. The historical timeline of the March for Life movement, spanning 50 years, and its ultimate successes during the Trump administrations is attributed to a sense of resilience, echoing Christian nationalist myths of persistence through hardship caused by those on the outside. To close his speech, the vice president reaffirms his support of the movement, stating: “I hope you know that the vice president of the United States will march with you” (ibid.).

Both speeches by JD Vance analyzed in this chapter showcase a moral framing of a Christian approach to American policy and governance, albeit employing two different tones. The first, held at the Turning Point USA event, is more confrontational in nature, prioritizing the construction of an enemy, namely those identifying as secular and more progressive, and in turn a mobilization of Christians to revolt against this perceived threat. Charlie Kirk’s murder several months prior provides context for this rhetoric of retribution. The remarks by Vance at the March for Life Rally, on the other hand, adopt a more hopeful attitude by promoting unity through a sense of perseverance building on a historical foundation.

Utilizing a critical discourse analysis lens as outlined by Fairclough, the intrinsic linking of the United States with Christianity through phrasing such as “civilization under God” can be seen as a so-called ideological naturalization. This process can be understood as a normalization of certain beliefs, transforming them from pieces of ideologies to widely accepted notions (Fairclough 1995: 42). Moral framing of political issues such as an abortion policy therefore depicts their solutions as warranted by Christian virtues. JD Vance claiming that starting a family is “part of God’s design” is one example for such a rhetoric (Vance 2026). Beliefs are no longer constrained to the objectives of a political party but rather constructed as faith-based truths. Nativist exclusion of those outside of the Christian ingroup is thus legitimized as guarding the American way of life and honoring its history.

6.3. Operational Christian Nationalism: Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth

The third actor to be analyzed in terms of Christian nationalist rhetoric in contemporary political discourse in the United States is Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth. The first speech I coded for this analysis was held by Hegseth at the Reagan National Defense Forum in December 2025. Focused more on issues related to security and foreign affairs, this speech nonetheless contains elements of othering, as described by the ingroup vs. outgroup code, as well as a construction of the nation as chosen to fulfil a divine purpose.

Before diving into the intricacies of Hegseth's employed narrative, taking a look at the event itself can provide some relevant context. As mentioned, the annual forum brings bipartisan leaders together to discuss issues related to defense in the realm of current global affairs (Reagan National Defense Forum 2025). In his speech, Hegseth refers to President Trump as the "true heir" of Ronald Reagan, referring to their alignment regarding their policy approaches. However, another link can be established between the two (Hegseth 2025). The think tank Heritage Foundation, which published the policy proposal Project 2025 laying the foundation for many of Trump's governmental decisions, was also a staunch supporter of Reagan. In a direct parallel, the former president drew much of his policymaking from the first edition of the Mandate for Leadership (Blasko 2004).

The main message of the speech held by Hegseth at the Reagan National Defense Forum is a promotion of the current administration's defense approach characterized by "peace through strength", as the secretary of defense phrases it. This is framed as opposed to former President Biden's strategy, "wokeness, weakness [and] war", falling into the ingroup vs. outgroup code, as one method is depicted as superseding another. Another significant phrasing which Hegseth utilizes several times is the term "homeland" (Hegseth 2025). In an ethno-symbolic context, this terminology is loaded with meaning, as it denotes belonging and attachment to a certain territory, adhering to the myth of a people being inherently connected to a specific land (Smith 2009: 63).

Defending the homeland is, according to Hegseth, a principal objective of the United States and calling for this action can have a mobilizing function. By connecting the American identity to its territory and creating a narrative in which it is essential to defend it, can heighten people's sense of belonging and fuse nationalists together. This is what Smith calls "destiny through sacrifice", a notion that is directly echoed by Hegseth, stating that the nation would honor military recruits' service and sacrifice (Smith 2009: 97; Hegseth 2025).

Critically, this language does not simply describe a security strategy, but rather performs an ideological function. In Fairclough's terms, it works to naturalize a particular vision of the nation as sacred and besieged, rendering militarism and exclusionary nationalism as logical and even morally necessary responses (Fairclough 1995: 42). The discursive framing of military sacrifice as divinely ordained is a mechanism through which unequal power relations, such as those between citizens and non-citizens or between the faithful and the secular, are reproduced and legitimized.

The narratives of a realist approach to security and defense and an accompanied call for devotion and sacrifice is rounded out by Hegseth pointing to an underlying divine command, stating this approach to be an "appeal to Almighty God" (Hegseth 2025). The secretary of defense also constructs a supposed historical connection, by invoking an image of George Washington praying in between battles of the American Revolution, based on a painting from 1975. The historical accuracy of this event is very much contested, since there aren't any concrete sources showcasing Washington's religiosity (Ulaby 2026). The mythologization of this image is a fitting puzzle piece in Pete Hegseth's narrative. According to him, American leaders have always been acting in the name of a Christian God. Like Washington and Reagan before him, President Trump therefore walks a similar divine path. Military decisions are framed as being guided by Jesus Christ, sacralizing the nation and its quest for security and tapping directly into Christian nationalist narratives. Hegseth ends his speech by calling for God's blessing of the nation's "warriors" (Hegseth 2025).

This term is also of interest, similar to the Trump administration's decision of reverting the department of defense back to the name it was known for during the Revolutionary War, namely Department of War ("Restoring the United States Department of War", The White House 2025).

Both mark an escalation of severity and aggression. When connected to myths such as that of a divine mission or of American forefathers leaning on their religious beliefs for strength, a powerful narrative is constructed, through which Americans feel their identity, formed through faith and exceptionalism, be reinforced.

Hegseth's second speech to be analyzed in this chapter was held at the Americas Counter Cartel Conference in March 2026. Many sentiments that were touched on in Hegseth's speech at the Reagan National Defense Forum are echoed in his remarks at the conference, especially regarding America's exceptionalism and its need to defend itself against outside threats. The event also marked the formation of a military coalition between the United States and largely politically aligned countries from Latin America called "Shield of the Americas", aiming to collaborate in the fight against narco-terrorism and other security risks (Schuster 2026).

In this context, Hegseth adopts a significant narrative. He points to an apparent shared cultural and historical heritage between the US and the South American states participating in the conference, specifically calling the nations "offsprings of Western civilization" and then "Christian nations under God" (Hegseth 2026). Offering several interpretations, the principal conclusion to be drawn from this framing is that the unifying factor of the nations present, many of which have a history of having been colonized by European forces, is their adherence to principles of a Christian faith. Hegseth goes on to construct another layer of this apparent homogenous identity by attributing "law, order and common sense" to those acting in the name of Christianity, whereas those that do not are said to be "ruled [...] by violence and chaos" (ibid.).

This is another instance of ideological naturalization, as per Fairclough, but in contrast to Vice President JD Vance, Hegseth is more explicit in his phrasing. By equating Christianity to "common sense" he aims to normalize the notion of a Christian nation and even expands this idea to numerous South American countries. This orientation around the Christian faith is therefore said to be found in the majority of the Americas, excluding those not counted as part of this community. In the context of the Shield of the Americas coalition, this could refer to countries such as Brazil or Columbia, whose governments are currently more oriented towards the left of the political spectrum (Schuster 2026).

This kind of governance is positioned as antithetical to the conservative, Christian way of life said to be existing in the United States and its South American allies. Other threats to this national and even international sense of self, according to Hegseth, are migration or globalism. These would cause the safety and identity of “deserving citizens”, as described by the secretary, to be endangered (Hegseth 2026).

This kind of wording falls into nativist definitions of belonging in several ways. Firstly, a Christian oriented society, defined by order and a “civilized” nature, is juxtaposed with a secular reality of chaos and disarray. Secondly, Hegseth’s positioning of migrants on the outside of those deemed worthy of receiving support by the nation adds an ethnic element to his boundary construction. The secretary of defense also criticizes a diversity-oriented approach in a military setting, instead naming unity the greatest strength in such a context (ibid.). Unity for Hegseth therefore appears to mean a homogenous entity which encapsulates the Christian values acting as the nation’s foundation.

Globalism and thus a more multicultural makeup of society are depicted by Hegseth as a threat to the America’s “distinct national identities”. Diversity, tolerance and compassion are all terms utilized by the secretary as false promises by politically progressive leaders which end up endangering the American nation’s identity (ibid.). In terms of ethno-symbolism, Smith would call this a perceived risk to the “ethnie”, the cultural community at the center of the nation (Smith 2009: 35). Therefore, Hegseth calls for a prioritization of the nation’s “shared purpose” and a restoration of national identities (Hegseth 2026).

In both speeches, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth aims to mobilize his audience to defend American and thus Christian values from an apparent threat stemming from multiculturalism, globalization and progressive policies. While this is conducted on a national level in his speech at the Reagan National Defense Forum, he transcends a US context in his address at the American Counter Cartel Conference. A national Christian heritage informs not only domestic politics, but also influences foreign policy, especially in the context of ensuring safety and peace (ibid.).

When keeping in mind Hegseth's personal background of supporting an influential figure in the Christian nationalist movement and openly calling for a Christian crusade against non-conforming Americans, the exclusionary rhetoric falling into a nativist worldview is underscored. As secretary of defense, Pete Hegseth holds control over one of the most powerful militaries in the world. The Christian nationalism already present in the United States therefore crosses over into an international context, as practically demonstrated by Hegseth's framing of ongoing conflicts, such as the War in Iran, as divinely sanctioned undertakings (Wong 2026).

7. Conclusion

This thesis has shown that Christian nationalist rhetoric and identity formation not only has a historic precedent in the United States of America but also continues to be present in political and societal discourse. In answering the first part of the initial research question regarding how Christian nationalist narratives are constructed in contemporary US political discourse, the analysis of six speeches, two per actor, showed varying degrees of a Christian nationalist ideology. President Trump's Inaugural Address in 2025 as well as his State of the Union speech held a year later in 2026 paint a picture of a restoration of a Christian America under his leadership. By depicting himself as a savior figure, he plays into ethno-symbolic narratives of a divinely ordained leader, tasked with reinstating the nation's former glory (Smith 2009: 77). In several instances of his speeches, President Trump adopts the narrative of a decline of a Christian America. By claiming to have brought religion back to the forefront of the American nation, the idea of a national Christian foundation is reinforced. Framing his fellow Americans as belonging to a faith-oriented collective, the president inadvertently creates a specific national identity, one which assumes Christianity to be at its core.

The speeches held by Vice President JD Vance see similar constructs of Christian nationalism, however his rhetoric holds a greater focus on morality. He is also more explicit in his framing of the nation by frequently referring to its apparent Christian heritage. This approach echoes ethno-symbolic notions of shared values that are integral to the formation of a national identity (Smith 2009: 49).

Although Vance attempts at times to include those in the US population who are not as religiously motivated, by calling for the integration of Christian teachings into American forms of governance, the vice president reinforces the image of the US as a Christian nation. Those not belonging to the ingroup are made to adapt to a system that is built around the Christian faith.

By referencing his personal decisions to adhere to religious teachings, such as his declaration of a family-oriented lifestyle, Vance depicts himself as being part of the Christian community that makes up the foundation of American society. In doing so, he blurs the lines between one's private life and political realities, equating Christian morals to American morals. The nation's orientation around faith is therefore cemented through the use of such rhetoric. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth operationalizes Christian nationalism in the two analyzed speeches by connecting America's supposed Christian foundation with its approach to security and international relations. Defending one's nation is framed as divinely ordained, carrying the power to mobilize Americans to fight for their sacred territory, an image mirroring Smith's ethno-symbolic approach (Smith 2009: 94). By utilizing terms such as "homeland", Hegseth fuses mythological imagery of the nation with an apparent duty to protect it.

The secretary of defense also draws on several historical or rather pseudo-historical notions to strengthen his argument. The idea of a manifest destiny, a myth of a divinely ordered spreading of American values as well as an expansion of territory, is reflected in his rhetoric of considering the United States' allies in the Americas to be fellow Christian nations, abiding by law and order. This is contrasted by depicting those not adhering to a nationally claimed faith as unruly and in need of saving. His reference of George Washington praying before a battle, the accuracy of which is disputed among historians, is another example of his usage of mythologized narratives (Hegseth 2025).

Grouped together, the three actors analyzed in this thesis represent not merely individual political figures but three intertwined mechanisms through which Christian nationalism enters and shapes governance. Trump's institutional rhetoric establishes the ideological parameters of a Christian national identity at the highest level of political authority. Vance's moral framing normalizes these parameters by embedding them in the language of virtue and family, making them feel personal rather than political.

Hegseth's operational rhetoric then translates this ideological foundation into concrete domains of security and foreign policy, extending its reach beyond domestic discourse into international contexts. In Fairclough's terms, this constitutes a layered discursive process through which Christian nationalist ideology moves from the level of text or speech to the level of social practice, shaping not only how Americans talk about their nation but how its institutions act (Fairclough 1995: 97).

These methods of construction of Christian nationalism in contemporary political discourse in the US lead me to the second part of my research question pertaining to a nativist conception of national identity, which deems one societal group to be preferred to another. In the context of President Trump's rhetoric, his framing of America as a Christian nation as opposed to antagonized groups not sharing such values, creates an ingroup vs. outgroup mentality. Straying from actual teachings of Christianity in his public appearances and many of his enacted policies, Trump instrumentalizes faith to further his agenda of ethnic and cultural homogeneity in the United States (Haynes 2017: 70).

His role as principal representative of the United States gives Trump's statements a lot of weight. His rhetoric has the power to influence ordinary Americans and to shape their notions of national identity. By referring to immigrants as "criminal aliens" and focusing on the securing of the national border after underlining America's devotion to faith, the image of a sacred territory that is in need of protection is perpetrated. Nativism is therefore reinforced through a connection of a Christian national identity with the othering of those not seen as belonging to the ingroup.

JD Vance's moral framing of the nation also plays into nativist ideals. The exclusion of non-Christians and other groups not being seen as part of the ingroup is legitimized by depicting the upholding of a Christian nation as a moral duty of Americans. This logic is also applied to other contentious issues, such as that of policymaking around abortion. Equating Christian nationalism to "true Christianity", Vance makes it known that he views those not supporting this vision of America as reprehensible and enacts a similar rhetoric to Donald Trump and Pete Hegseth by arguing the Christian to be under attack and as having to be defended.

In the remarks made by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth the idea of an ingroup vs. an outgroup is also realized and underscored by Christian nationalist rhetoric. By naming migration and globalization as two of the greatest threats that the American nation is facing, Hegseth depicts outsiders as endangering America's Christian identity. He also juxtaposes secular nations with the faith-oriented United States, alluding to the uncivilized nature of the former. This framing also leads to a method of justification of utilizing rhetoric regarding the US as a Christian nation, as this religious definition is equated to order and civility.

All in all, what stood out from each speech analyzed as well as from examining previous literature and American historical developments pertaining to Christian nationalism, is that depicting the United States as an inherently Christian nation automatically separates its population into an in- and an outgroup (Straughn & Feld 2010: 281). Nativism is therefore a fundamental feature of Christian nationalism. While explicit boundaries might not always be drawn in contemporary political discourse regarding people's culture, ethnicity or religious affiliation, the framing of the United States being founded upon Christian values and having the religion be present in numerous facets of society as well as its government, has the power to shape national identity.

Since prominent political figures of the current administration echo such sentiments, nativist beliefs of religious and/or ethnic superiority over other communities are likely to be normalized and even institutionalized. With the help of mythological narratives, a discourse is built upon an existing fear held by Christian nationalists of societal marginalization and a reversal of the centering of Christian values in the United States.

Feeding into unsubstantiated claims of erasure and replacement of Christian dominance in America, political figures, such as President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth mobilize the American population adhering to such beliefs to support their political agenda of maintaining a Christian nation and more importantly, of staying in power. Echoing van Dijk, this elite discourse reproduces ideological structures that legitimize inequality by making them appear natural, inevitable, and morally necessary (van Dijk 1993: 250).

In conclusion, Christian nationalism and nativism are inextricably intertwined. What the analysis of these six speeches makes clear is that this relationship is not incidental to contemporary U.S. political discourse but exists structurally within it. Current political discourse in the United States reflects both ideological elements and by doing so propagates the exclusion of non-Christians, secular Americans and others who do not feel represented by such a faith-based national identity. Reflecting Fairclough's analytical approach, this constitutes a discursive process, through which ideology moves from the level of text to that of social practice, shaping not only how Americans talk about their nation but how its institutions act (Fairclough 1995: 55).

As one of the most influential countries in the world, this fractured and exclusionary sense of national self poses a danger not only to its own population but to other actors on the global stage, particularly as figures like Hegseth extend Christian nationalist logic into foreign policy and military action. The normalization of nativist conceptions of belonging at the highest levels of government represents a direct challenge to the pluralist foundations of democratic life, one that, given the institutional reach of the current administration, shows little sign of abating.

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9. Appendix: Codebook

Code	Description	Text Examples	Theoretical Link
Destiny	America's future is framed as predetermined and divinely sanctioned	<i>"For our destiny is written by the hand of Providence"</i> <i>"Our nation's glorious destiny"</i>	Smith describes historical developments to be linked with a nation's ordained path, creating the idea of a nation's destiny; the naturalization of nativism in discourse leads to nativism being deemed necessary or inevitable
Foundation	America's founding is seen as God's will; its constitution, history and values are viewed in a Christian context	<i>"America is one nation under God"</i> <i>"We will always be a Christian nation"</i>	Ethno-symbolism describes myths of foundation as constituting national identity, implicitly forming an ingroup and an outgroup
Threat	An element of danger, usually coming from the outside, jeopardizing the Christian nation	<i>"Importing these cultures through unrestricted immigration and open borders brings us problems right here to the USA"</i>	In terms of nativism, those positioned outside of the native ingroup are seen as a source of danger
Sacred Territory	The idea of the national territory being divinely ordained; a mythologization of national territory	<i>"Keeping our homeland safe"</i>	Smith describes a felt link between a nation and its territory, which has a symbolic meaning
Judeo-Christian Values	Set of morals that are based on belief around Judeo-Christian heritage; often accompanied with its juxtaposition to an "other"	<i>"There has been a tremendous renewal in religion, faith, Christianity and belief in God"</i>	Shared values and ethnic characteristics such as a community's religion form a national identity, according to Smith
Savior	A positioning of political actors and/or policies as restoring and/or saving American values and the ingroup that defend them	<i>"I was saved by God to make America great again"</i>	Pertaining to Smith's myths of ethnic election, the chosen leader is positioned as a liberator of the nation
American Restoration	A return to a "golden age" or an era of greatness carrying an implication of previous administrations/policymakers having corrupted the nation	<i>"America will be respected again and admired again, including by people of religion, faith, and goodwill"</i>	A relation of Smith's "golden age" concept to nativist notions of belonging; the nation's original values need restoring

Exceptionalism	The belief that the United States is superior to other nations and/or has been chosen by God to fulfil a higher purpose	<i>“There is no nation like our nation” “When God needs a nation to work his miracles, he knows exactly who to ask”</i>	The myth of ethnic election is transformed to a national level; in nativism exceptionalism is used to justify the privileging of the native group
Ingroup	The group seen as dominant in American society that shared an ethnic, cultural and religious background	<i>“We are one people, one family, and one glorious nation under God”</i>	The ethnic community according to Smith sharing a cultural, religious and ethnic background
Outgroup	Groups of people positioned as the antagonists to the ingroup; they are seen as incompatible or threatening to the ingroup	<i>“criminal aliens” “illegal aliens”</i>	The designated “other” in contrast to the ingroup; depicted to appear as the antagonist to the native
In- vs. Outgroup	Positioning of the ingroup against the outgroup, through which a binary is constructed between authentic Americans and the “other”	<i>“border invasion” “The first duty of the American government is to protect American citizens, not illegal aliens”</i>	Positioning of the native ingroup against the outgroup, in line with nativism
Unity	Discourse that aims to create a sense of unity and solidarity by implicitly or explicitly excluding the outgroup	<i>“We’re all creatures of God”</i>	Constructing the ethnic community/the native ingroup through shared attributes
Struggle	A narrative of the nation being involved in a battle to secure or reinstate its true nature; a fight that led to America’s exceptionalism	<i>„Our country was forged and built by the generations of patriots who gave everything they had for our rights and for our freedom”</i>	Overcoming of threat posed by the “other” in a nativist context and aiming to strengthen unity through shared memories of conflict
Golden Age	Describes a period of perceived national greatness, acting as a source of pride for nationalists	<i>“Our golden age has just begun” “This is the golden age of America”</i>	Ethno-symbolic idea of significance in creating a national identity based on historical eras of greatness
Mobilization	Narratives calling for collective action to secure a Christian American identity	<i>“We must all come together to reaffirm that America is one nation under God”</i>	Mythological narratives are utilized to achieve political agency, creating a trajectory from ideology to action
Identity	Narratives depicting what it means to be American, constructing an identity based on cultural, ethnic and religious realities	<i>“Americans are hungry for identity” “We grew up in a Christian culture and were formed by religious values”</i>	National identity is constructed according to myths and symbolic rhetoric, as per Smith

Myth	Stories through which nationalism is strengthened, narrative around the nation's foundation, destiny or divine role	<i>"Martyred for his beliefs" "We appeal to Almighty God, just as our forefathers did"</i>	What national identity is based on; highly influential narratives in forming an ethnic community according to Smith
Christianity as policy	Integration of Christianity into American policy or ways of governing; the boundary between faith and government is blurred or erased altogether	<i>"A true Christian politics [...] must be at the heart of our full understanding of government"</i>	A nativist view of the American society as inherently Christian is deepened through its application in political structured
Christianity in practice	References to expressions of faith and Christian rituals	<i>"We are all praying for you"</i>	Religion in practice can serve as a practical example of nativist notions of the American nation
Faith	References to Christianity; discourse that invokes God or Jesus Christ	<i>"Scripture tells us, each life is fearfully and wonderfully made by our Creator"</i>	Smith highlights the importance of shared values in nationalisms; faith can function both inclusively and exclusively
Civilization	Framing of America in the context of broader civilizational values; the nation is positioned as a defender of Judeo-Christian values	<i>"We will remain a civilization under God"</i>	Nativist and ethno-symbolic notions of the ingroup's exceptionalism are underscored; nation is synonymous with a broader cultural or religious order