

# From Politics to Governance

## How Christian Nationalism is Changing the Religious Right in the United States

☰ Der vorliegende Beitrag betrachtet den Umschwung der politischen Strategie der ‚Religiösen Rechten‘ in den USA. Während sie sich einst auf das Generieren von Stimmen für bestimmte Kandidaten konzentrierte, bringt sie sich nun in Stellung, die Regierungsstrukturen überhaupt neu zu gestalten. Akteure wie Leonard Leo und Sohrab Ahmari treten für die Nutzung der Staatsgewalt zur Förderung konservativ-christlicher Werte ein und fordern damit verfassungsrechtliche Normen der Vereinigten Staaten heraus. Diese neue Welle geht über einen kulturellen Konservatismus hinaus und in Richtung einer radikalen politischen Ideologie, die die Konfrontation und Verwendung politischer Autorität zu einer christlichen Neugestaltung der US-amerikanischen Gesellschaft betont.

👤 Leonard Leo, Sohrab Ahmari, David French, Christian Nationalism, post-fusionist

👤 **Dr. Jeffrey W. Robbins** ist Professor of Religion and Philosophy am Lebanon Valley College, Annville, Pennsylvania (USA).

“The central struggle in the world right now is between liberalism and authoritarianism.”  
– David Brooks

For decades, securing the Evangelical Christian vote was the key to winning U.S. elections. The “faith factor” – the correlation between religious observance and conservative, Republican voting – was a central truth of American politics.<sup>1</sup> While Donald Trump upended many political norms, the consolidation of the Evangelical vote has only grown stronger. However, between Trump’s first campaign and his time in office, a significant shift occurred. What was once a mere electoral strategy has transformed into a more ambitious governing philosophy. Christian Nationalism, now at the heart of the New Right, moves beyond politics to promise a reshaped vision for America.

1 N. GIBBS, The Faith Factor, *Time* (June 21, 2004): <https://time.com/archive/6738770/the-faith-factor/>. Last accessed on March 4, 2025.



Today's Christian nationalists signal a fundamental shift within the religious Right. Consider the contrast between the "ReAwaken America Tour" and the work of Leonard Leo. The former, a traveling circus of MAGA figures like Mike Flynn, Mike Lindell, Alex Jones, and Eric Trump, blends Christian nationalism, election denial, and patriotic zeal in front of sold-out crowds. Their performances are loud, populist, and brash, a spectacle of grievance and religious fervor.

In contrast, Leonard Leo, the behind-the-scenes power broker of the conservative movement, operates quietly but effectively from the shadows. As the architect of the Republican Party's Supreme Court nominations, Leo now manages a \$1.6 billion fund designed to extend conservative influence into all areas of American life. His efforts aim to bring conservative Christian values to education, media, and business, mirroring the success achieved in the courts. Leo's vision goes beyond electoral victories; he wants to reshape society by targeting liberalism, secularism and progressivism. In Leo's words, "I spent close to 30 years [...] helping to build the conservative legal movement. At some point or another, I just said to myself, 'Well, if this can work for law, why can't it work for lots of other areas of American culture and American life where things are really messed up right now?'"<sup>2</sup>

The stark difference between the attention-grabbing "ReAwaken America Tour" and Leo's quiet, well-funded machine highlights how the religious Right has evolved. Unlike the Reagan-era Republican strategy that extended through George W. Bush and into Trump's first term of office, where evangelicals were a necessary but separate component, today's Christian nationalists seek to use state power to fundamentally remake American society – even if it means upending constitutional norms. The distinction is clear: what was once an electoral strategy has now become an ambitious, all-encompassing effort to reshape the nation through law, culture, and politics.

This shift from the terrain of culture to that of politics is the main argument of Katherine Stewart's *The Power Worshipers*. She argues that what is new in this rising tide of Christian nationalists is their sense of the battle lines within American life. They see the struggle not as a cultural war but a political one. In this way, Christian nationalism is not a religious creed but a political ideology; is not conservative, but radical. The established (and by now establishment) Reagan Republican playbook's appeal to the religious Right was essentially *an electoral strategy*. This was the gambit of Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" or Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed's "Christian Coalition". Organizing and mobilizing the religious right around hot-button moral issues to provide the winning margin in elections in exchange for a seat at the table was a winning strategy that reached

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2 Quoted in A. KROLL/A.BERNSTEIN/I. MARRITZ, We Don't Talk About Leonard: The Man Behind the Right's Supreme Court Supermajority, *ProPublica*: <https://www.propublica.org/article/we-dont-talk-about-leonard-leo-supreme-court-supermajority>. Last accessed on March 4, 2025.



the pinnacle of its success with the election of George W. Bush. By contrast, today's Christian nationalists are offering up *a governing strategy*.

The debate between David French and Sohrab Ahmari, which began in conservative circles and culminated in a 2019 conversation at The Catholic University of America, highlights this pivotal split in American conservatism.<sup>3</sup> While French, a Southern evangelical and legal advocate for religious freedom, largely won the public debate, it is Ahmari – who unapologetically embraces Christian nationalism – who represents the future of the movement. French, a well-known “never-Trumper,” has long been a representative of the Republican establishment's hope for a conservative alternative to Trumpism. His brand of conservatism adheres to the traditional “fusionist” approach, blending social traditionalism with free-market economics. But Ahmari, a first-generation Iranian immigrant and Catholic convert, leads a new generation of conservatives who reject the Reagan-era fusion of social traditionalism and free-market economics. Ahmari and others like Tucker Carlson and Senator Josh Hawley are part of a “post-fusionist” movement, which seeks to reshape conservatism around cultural and religious identity rather than economic principles.

Ahmari's explicit Catholicism – and his embrace of what some, like Bret Stephens, have called his “would-be theocracy” – sets him apart as a leader of a more aggressive, faith-driven conservative vision.<sup>4</sup> As figures like Leonard Leo consolidate power within the movement, Ahmari's unapologetic Christian nationalism may well define the trajectory of American conservatism in the years to come.

According to *The Catholic World Report*, “Both French and Ahmari exemplify the fratricidal flaws of their respective factions”:

Both [...] demand that the Right purify itself. French is appalled at working through a libertine like Trump, while Ahmari is horrified at the thought of working with a libertarian. French calls for atonement for the sins of Trumpism, while Ahmari seeks to lead a revolution on the Right that will cleanse it of ideological impurity.

On May 29, 2019, Sohrab Ahmari published an editorial in *First Things* titled “Against David French-ism,” critiquing the conservative philosophy represented by French.<sup>5</sup> Ahmari's critique builds on a manifesto published by *First Things* two months earlier, in which young Catholic conservatives argued that the pre-Trump conservative consensus was dead and could never be resurrected.<sup>6</sup> In

3 This debate was held at the Institute for Human Ecology at the Catholic University of American in Washington, DC on September 5, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAG28K0nGAU>. Last accessed on March 4, 2025.

4 B. STEPHENS, The High Church of the Low Blow: Sohrab Ahmari Embraces Trump's Sucker Punch Politics, *The New York Times* (June 1, 2019): Section A, Page 23.

5 S. AHMARI, Against David French-ism, *First Things*, May 29, 2019: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/05/against-david-french-ism>. Last accessed on March 4, 2025.

6 VARIOUS, Against the Dead Consensus, *First Things*, March 21, 2019: <https://www.firstthings.com>.



place of this “dead consensus,” Ahmari calls for a politics of confrontation, rejecting the notion of a religiously neutral public square that French champions. While Ahmari acknowledges French’s admirable defense of religious liberty and his advocacy for Christians squeezed out of the public sphere, he rejects French’s vision of conservatism as too rooted in a liberal framework. For Ahmari, Frenchism is a form of conservative liberalism that mirrors libertarianism, where individual autonomy is protected from state interference, and the state remains morally neutral on issues ranging from the public display of the Ten Commandments to Drag Queen Story Hour at the local public library.

Ahmari critiques this approach as overly deferential to a supposedly neutral “culture,” which he argues is itself political. He takes issue with French’s belief that cultural change – unmoored from political power – can resolve moral and societal issues. Ahmari insists that conservatives must actively engage in wielding state power to advance Christian truth and confront secular challenges head-on, rather than relying on a passive cultural strategy. In essence, Ahmari argues that French’s conservatism is too timid, unwilling to directly confront the political and cultural forces that undermine the common good. Ahmari has had enough of what he calls this “depoliticized politics,” and sees the rise of Trump as the “great no” from the American public on that tendency. He seeks a “re-politicized” politics which will reject the liberal agnosticism that limits its power to that of leveling the playing field. He champions a more activist state, run by partisan government officials, willing to tip the scale of balance to its own particular conception of the good, to use the institution of government, and the levers of power to remake or to restore the United States as a Christian nation.

It is in this way that Ahmari’s rejection of French and the establishment playbook, and by extension, his embrace of Trump and the authoritarian threat he poses can be boiled down to a fundamental – but no less false – choice: either Constantine or the Colosseum; either offense or defense; either harnessing state power or forestalling the further victimization of the Christian witness. Ahmari chooses a return to the former: a kind of Constantinian Christianity wherein the Church’s monopoly on truth is buttressed by the state’s exercise of power. This beats the rear-guard defensive posture of the alternative, wherein the norms and values of a hostile secular culture, the consolidation of power by the moneyed and political establishment, will belittle, marginalize, exploit, or silence conservative Christians to the point where (supposedly) morally neutral public space becomes something of a lion’s den. The Christian will be victim or martyr no more. Even if it is not Ahmari himself, his ilk of Christian nationalist is on the march.

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[com/web-exclusives/2019/03/against-the-dead-consensus](https://www.washingtonpost.com/web-exclusives/2019/03/against-the-dead-consensus). Last accessed on March 4, 2025. Italics in the original.