

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

LIZ THEOHARIS

06.03.2025

## *A Battle of Theologies in the Age of Trump*

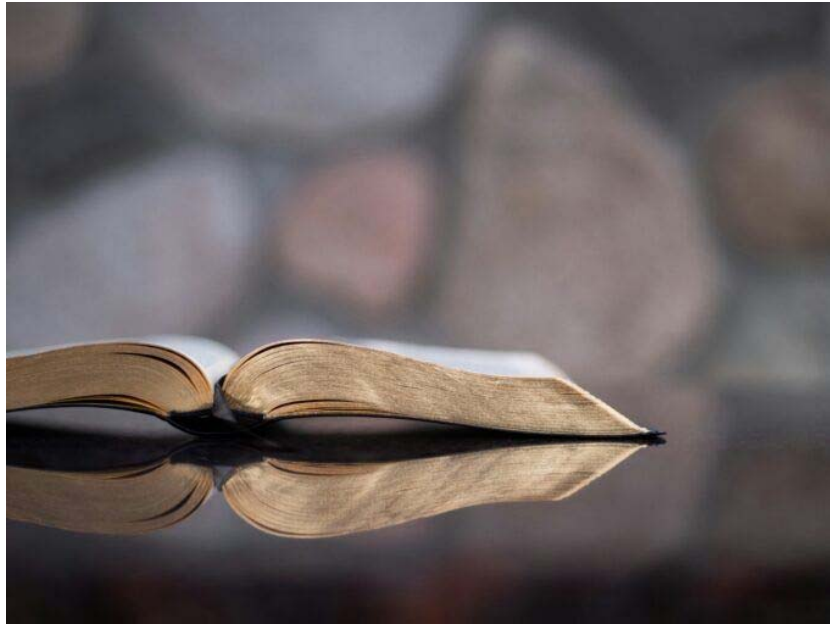


Image by Aaron Burden.

“There has almost always been an outright hostility that is shown towards people of the Christian faith,” House Speaker Mike Johnson said on a podcast recently. He was talking with Tony Perkins, a former Louisiana lawmaker and president of the Family Research Council, about freedom of religion and the actions of the second Trump administration.

I have to admit that such a statement from this country’s third most powerful politician and an avowed Christian nationalist almost takes my breath away. Of *all* the people facing hostility, discrimination, and violence now and throughout history, Christians like Mike Johnson rank low on the list. Still, his comment is consistent with a disturbing religious trend in the country right now.

As an early act of his second administration, Donald Trump has created an anti-Christian bias task force to be chaired by Attorney General Pam Bondi. At the same time, he's slashing federal jobs and programs, threatening Medicaid, Head Start, the Department of Education, affordable housing programs, accommodations for the disabled, environmental protections, public health and safety, Social Security, and Medicare, while scapegoating immigrants and trans kids. It's particularly ironic that Trump, Johnson, and the people with them in the top echelons of power are targeting those that the Bible is most concerned about — children, the poor, immigrants, the sick and disabled, women, the vulnerable, and the earth itself. Meanwhile, Elon Musk, the richest man ever to exist, who has built his wealth off exploiting the poor, goes so far as to call the impoverished “parasites.” After all, there are more than 2,000 Biblical passages that speak about protecting the vulnerable, offering good news to the poor, stewarding God's creation, and bringing judgment down upon those with wealth and power who make people suffer.

Pope Francis himself has weighed in on the regressive policies and posture of the current administration. To America's bishops he wrote, “The true common good is promoted when society and government, with creativity and strict respect for the rights of all — as I have affirmed on numerous occasions — welcomes, protects, promotes and integrates the most fragile, unprotected and vulnerable.” Indeed, if any Christians are under attack right now, it's those included in what liberation theologians have called “God's preferential option for the poor” (the very creation for whom God has special love and care) and those standing up with and for them.

The Pope hasn't been the only one to challenge the use of religion in the Trump administration. Since the inauguration, the actions of Johnson, Trump, Vice President JD Vance, and others have been opposed and decried by people of faith of many persuasions. Remember Episcopal Bishop Marian Budde imploring President Trump to show mercy, especially to immigrants and LGBTQ+ people, at the Inaugural Prayer Service at the Washington National Cathedral? Since her gentle reminder that the Bible teaches love, truth, and mercy, she has received regular and credible death threats on a daily basis, even as people have also flocked to the Cathedral and other houses of worship in search of moral leaders willing to stand up to the bullying tactics of Donald Trump, the richest man on earth Elon Musk, and their cronies.

In response to Trump's threats of mass detention and deportation, especially removing “sensitive sites” status from houses of worship, schools, and hospitals, while threatening “sanctuary cities” with a loss of federal funding, 27 religious groups have sued the Trump

administration for infringement of *their* religious liberty to honor and worship God by loving their immigrant neighbors. Kelsi Corkran, a lawyer with the Georgetown University Law Center's Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection and lead counsel in that lawsuit, said that plaintiffs joined the suit “because their scripture, teaching, and traditions offer irrefutable unanimity on their religious obligation to embrace and serve the refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants in their midst without regard to documentation or legal status.”

Faith leaders are coming together to support and protect transgender and nonbinary people now under attack by the Trump administration as well. My colleagues Aaron Scott and Moses Hernandez-McGavin recently penned an article for Religion News Service where they affirmed the dignity of LGBTQ+ people, even as Christian nationalists continue to build their influence and power by damning LGBTQ+ communities, all while claiming to protect children and traditional family values. “Gender diversity,” they wrote, “is a fact of human existence older than Scripture and is thoroughly attested to in the Bible. Jesus’s teaching about eunuchs in the Gospel of Matthew makes clear there are human beings who exist outside of the gender binary from birth, as well as those who live outside the gender binary ‘for the sake of the kingdom.’ In the story of the Ethiopian eunuch’s baptism, the Book of Acts lifts up the spiritual leadership of gender non-conforming people of African descent. In the Hebrew Bible’s Book of Isaiah, God affirms not only the sanctity but the spiritual importance of people outside the gender binary, promising us ‘a name better than sons and daughters.’ ...The Talmud reflects this affirmation of gender diversity, recognizing no fewer than seven genders.”

### **A Battle for the Bible in History**

The battle of theologies taking place right now is anything but a new phenomenon, even if it’s at an inflection point, with life-and-death consequences for our democracy, Christianity itself, and those who are God’s greatest concern. The Christian nationalism, exceptionalism, and white supremacy ascendant in Trump 2.0 has evolved from a long genealogy that has enabled an elite strata of mostly white Christian men to rule society and amass enormous wealth and power throughout American history.

Such Christians have always anointed themselves with the lie of divine righteousness, while insisting that they are God’s chosen representatives on Earth. To maintain this charade, they have brandished the Bible like a cudgel, bludgeoning poor people, people of color, the Indigenous, women, LGBTQ+ people, and others with tales of their supposed sinfulness meant to distract, demean, divide, and dispossess. Therefore, if we are truly serious about

confronting and countering the influence of such an authoritarian version of Christianity under Trump, Vance, Johnson, and their associates and followers, we must learn from how it's been wielded (and challenged) in other times in history.

The roots of such idolatry reach back centuries, even before the founding of this nation, to the conquest of Indigenous lands by European invaders. In 1493, after Spain first sent its ships to islands in the Caribbean, Pope Alexander VI issued the Doctrine of Discovery, a series of papal bulls granting all newly “discovered” lands to their Christian conquerors. Those church documents asserted the supposed “godlessness” of Indigenous peoples, smoothing over the ruthless colonial campaign of extermination being waged with a veneer of moral virtue. Centuries later, the idea of “manifest destiny” drew on the same religious underpinnings as the Doctrine of Discovery, popularizing the belief that white Christians were destined by God to control and therefore redeem the lands of the West. Manifest destiny not only valorized the violence of westward expansion but sanctified and made exceptional the emerging project of American imperialism. God, the argument went, had chosen this nation to be a beacon of hope, a city upon a hill for the whole world.

Alongside the dispossession and attempted extermination of Indigenous peoples, invocations of God and the Bible were used to justify the enslavement of African peoples and their descendants. Slaveholders cherry-picked passages from the book of Ephesians — “slaves obey your earthly masters” — and lines from other epistles of the Apostle Paul to claim that slavery was ordained by God. They ripped out of the pages on the Exodus from Egypt, huge sections of the prophets, and even Jesus’s inaugural sermon praising the poor and dispossessed from the Bibles they gave to their enslaved workers. Those “Slave Bibles” would serve as evidence of just how dangerous the unadulterated gospel was to the legitimacy of the slaveholding planter class.

They also twisted theology to serve their political needs by obscuring the common interests of enslaved Black workers and poor Southern whites. Readings of the Bible that claimed God had singled out Black people for slave labor helped the Southern ruling class turn many of the region’s majority of poor whites into zealous defenders of a system that relegated them to marginal lands and poverty wages.

After the fall of the Confederacy, the Bible remained core to the new racialized divide-and-conquer system in the South. Pro-segregationist preachers, no longer able to use the Bible to defend slavery per se, turned to stories like the Tower of Babel to claim that God desired racial segregation and abhorred intermarriage across racial lines. In 1954, Baptist preacher Carey Daniel wrote a pamphlet entitled *God the Original Segregationist* in which he

explained: “When first He separated the black race from the white and lighter skinned races He did not simply put them in different parts of town. He did not even put them in different towns or states. Nay, He did not even put them in adjoining countries.” The pamphlet was distributed widely by White Citizens’ Councils and sold more than a million copies.

Parallel to the theological justifications for the system of segregation that came to be known as Jim Crow, a national theology of industrial capitalism emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s. During the Gilded Age, a prosperity gospel and its theology of muscular Christianity flourished among the white upper class. Amid the excesses of the Second Industrial Revolution, they celebrated their own hard work and moral rectitude and bemoaned the personal failings of the poor. When the economic bubble finally burst in 1929 with the Great Depression and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal ushered in an unprecedented era of financial regulation and labor protection, the nation’s corporate class turned once again to the church to fight back and put a stamp of approval on its free-market aspirations.

As historian Kevin Kruse writes in *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, in the 1930s and 1940s, “corporate titans enlisted conservative clergymen in an effort to promote new political arguments embodied in the phrase ‘freedom under God.’ As the private correspondence and public claims of the men leading this charge make clear, this new ideology was designed to defeat the state power its architects feared most — not the Soviet regime in Moscow, but Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal administration in Washington. With ample funding from major corporations, prominent industrialists, and business lobbies such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in the 1930s and 1940s, these new evangelists for free enterprise promoted a vision best characterized as ‘Christian libertarianism.’”

The phrase “freedom under God” captures the tension at the heart of the long battle over the Bible in this country in which there have always been two diametrically opposed visions of freedom: on one side, the freedom of the vast majority of the people to enjoy the fruits of their labor and live with dignity and self-determination; on the other side, the freedom of the wealthy to control society, sow division, and hoard the planet’s (and in Elon Musk’s case, the galaxy’s) abundance for themselves. Poor people, disproportionately poor people of color, have always been on the front lines of this battle, as both canaries in the coal mine and prophetic leaders. Think of it this way in the age of Trump: As their lives go, so goes the nation.

*Ordo Amoris* and Other Theologies of the Day

This age-old debate is playing out in JD Vance's recent statement about "*ordo amoris*" (or "rightly-ordered love"). Weighing in on cutting both domestic and global aid as well as scapegoating immigrants, the vice president wrote on social media, "You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country. And then after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world."

Pope Francis offered a fitting rebuttal to Vance's statement and the actions of the second Trump administration by summing up its deeply heretical nature and echoing a historic prophetic tradition of increasing importance again today. In his letter to the American bishops, urging them to reject Vance's theology of isolationism and egotism, Pope Francis wrote, "Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups. In other words: the human person is not a mere individual, relatively expansive, with some philanthropic feelings! The human person is a subject with dignity who, through the constitutive relationship with all, especially with the poorest, can gradually mature in his identity and vocation. The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' (cf. *Lk* 10:25-37), that is, by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception."

As this statement from the Pope reminds us, history is replete with examples of people from many religions who have grounded their struggles for justice in the holy word and the spirit of God, not just extremists trying to claim and justify their lust for power and avarice for wealth. Abolitionists, suffragists, labor organizers, student protestors, civil rights leaders, and various representatives of poor and oppressed people have insisted that divinity cannot be reduced to private matters of the soul and salvation. They have affirmed that truth, love, and justice, starting with the most vulnerable and marginalized, are what matter the most to God. They have insisted that the worship of God must be concerned with the building of a society in which all life is cared for and treated with dignity. In every previous era, there were courageous people for whom protest and public action were a form of prayer, even as the religious leaders and institutions of their day hid behind sanctuary walls — walls currently being torn down again to release forces devastating to the most vulnerable among us and to the planet itself.

Today, while the Trump administration continues to unveil new attacks daily on what the Bible calls, "the least of these," it's important to remember the prophetic tradition of faith leaders of the past as well as the heroic, if often unnoticed, moral organizing happening now.

I return to my colleagues Aaron Scott and Moses Hernandez-McGavin who sum up the sentiment of many people of faith in our society today: “God’s love and truth are alive whether elected officials seek to legislate them out of existence or not. God’s Word continues to call for justice and mercy for all people regardless of the distortions of the Word by religious and political leaders obsessed with the worship of their own power. They are not God. And God will not, and cannot, be stopped.”

As they conclude, offering a message of hope and encouragement in these dark and dangerous days: “God’s liberating action will break through in this world through the steadfast work and witness of people of goodwill who are beholden to a higher law, who refuse to comply with unjust executive orders, who continue to defend the vulnerable against abuses of the powerful in courtrooms and school buildings and hospitals and in the streets across the country.”

The question then is: In the second age of Donald Trump, which side will you choose?

MARCH 5, 2025

*This piece first appeared on [TomDispatch](#).*

*Liz Theoharis, a TomDispatch [regular](#), is a theologian, ordained minister, and anti-poverty activist. Co-chair of the [Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival](#) and director of the [Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice](#) at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, she is the author of *Always With Us? What Jesus Really Said About the Poor* and *We Cry Justice: Reading the Bible with the Poor People’s Campaign*. Follow her on Twitter at [@liztheo](#).*