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Exceptional secularism: The religion-politics nexus in American domestic and foreign policy orientations

Abstract. The growing political polarization in the United States of America in the 21st Century was accompanied by shifting ideological landscapes that reflect how cultural and religious divides continuously shape public discourse and policy orientations. Accordingly, this article highlights the role of religious paradigms in influencing political practice in the American context. It aims to inform current scholarship by assessing the relationship between religion and politics from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The article examines the fundamental relationship between American Exceptionalism, political practice, and religiosity. It argues that the American model of secularism is exceptional in nature and post-secular in practice. This study demonstrated that religion plays a significant role in shaping American political culture and policymaking processes despite the U.S. Constitution's emphasis on the separation of Church and state. This confirmed that key historical and contemporary instances where religious rhetoric intertwined with political discourse reflect a considerable reliance on religious paradigms to formulate and legitimise domestic and foreign policy orientations. Furthermore, the paper assessed the implications of the religion-politics entanglement on U.S. democracy by evaluating whether American political practice truly aligns with the secular ideals that are enshrined in its founding documents from the Federalist Papers to the U.S. Constitution. This paper argues that the American model of secularism is an exceptional and post-secularist one seeing that it encompasses religious diversity and theoretically promotes state neutrality while simultaneously depending on religious motifs in setting the norms for public debate, domestic policy, and foreign entanglement. The results of the study can be used to take into account religious aspects in the development of political campaign strategies, analysis of public opinion and forecasting of political changes

Keywords: political practice; religious discourse; policymaking; American exceptionalism; post-secularism

Introduction

The critical analysis and assessment of the intersection between religion and political culture in the United States (U.S.) reflects an integral paradigm in understanding socio-political tendencies especially as the American society continues to grapple with ideological and political polarization. The continuous evolution and mutation of political practice in the U.S. combined with constant cultural realignments present an opportunity for scholarly endeavour that seeks to further understand how religious paradigms influence political decision-making and to provide insights into the mechanisms shaping public policy and socio-religious norms from both historical and contemporary lenses. This topic is particularly significant due to the integral role that religion plays in shaping voter behaviour and in light of the resurgence of religious rhetoric

in political discourse especially after President Trump's assassination attempt. The intersection between religion and politics does not only challenge traditional notions of secular governance but further influences public opinion and international relations. By exploring the themes of religiosity and secularism, this paper seeks to address important questions about the compatibility of religious paradigms with democratic ideals especially during a period of time characterized by the evolving role of ideology in domestic and global challenges alike.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton, an English writer, philosopher, and theologian, described the United States as "a nation with the soul of a church" (Heclo & McClay, 2003). This religious motif that characterizes the American nation dates back to its foundation. In 1630, J. Winthrop (1838)

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described his vision of a new nation as “A Modell of Christian Charity”. The Puritan leader’s sermon took place a long time before John Adams also thanked an “overruling Providence” (Judis, 2005) for protecting the American nation. Invoking religious themes and divine spirituality emphasized religion as an essential element in the social and political psyche of the American nation. Religion became an indispensable part of the American experience and an essential element in the functioning of American democracy and the portrayal of American identity.

This intersection of religion and politics in the context of liberal democracies continues to garner attention in contemporary scholarship especially that the trend towards secularization is facing increasing challenges with the rise of populism and populist discourse. Although secular political practice was once believed to be a definitive trajectory for democratic governance, the re-evaluation of this particular notion seems inevitable today. Recent studies highlight that religious influence on politics is not restricted to one particular context but that it can also be observed in different regions of the world and in countries like India and Turkey where political leaders continue to integrate religious nationalism into their governance models (Yilmaz, 2021). J.J. Castle & P.L. Schoettmer (2019) further argue that secularism manifests differently across various national contexts and is far from being a uniform process especially in the U.S. where there is an increasing interrelatedness between religion and political practice particularly in conservative circles. By the same token, P. Gorski & S. Perri (2022) examine the impact of religious nationalism on American politics and make the argument that this movement can be perceived as a serious threat to democracy seeing that it promotes an exclusionary view of American identity while posing challenges to liberal democratic principles. Their work further asserts that religious nationalism can result in ideological polarization by fostering divisions in public and political discourse. Moreover, A. Whitehead & S. Perry (2020) highlight the overlap between religious discourse and policymaking by highlighting how religious nationalism is intertwined with American identity and contending that it has been used to justify political actions concerning immigration, abortion, and gay rights. In terms of foreign policy orientations, a recent study by Z. Taydas & L.R. Olson (2022) demonstrated that “Americans vary significantly in their international threat perception and support for militant or cooperative internationalism based on their religious affiliation”. Their work showcased that, for instance, religious affiliation with evangelical protestants often implies policymaking preference in favor of hawkish and unilateral foreign policy approaches. The entanglement of religious paradigms with foreign policy approaches has also been supported by a previous work by G. Bettiza (2019) who contended that U.S. policymaking on the international level is heavily influenced by the resurgence of religious motifs and frameworks.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to provide a critical assessment of the intersection between religious and faith-based approaches and the realm of American political practice. It explored the role of religious themes and motifs in shaping political decisions and framing policy justifications from both historical and contemporary

lenses. It further attempts to demonstrate the existence of a gap between the secular ideals enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and the Federalist Papers and the reality of American policymaking and political discourse. Consequently, the objectives of this paper revolved around examining the historical and contemporary intersections of religious rhetoric and political discourse in shaping U.S. domestic and foreign policies, assessing the implications of the religion-politics nexus on U.S. democracy, and analysing the role of American Exceptionalism in supporting a post-secular political framework.

Materials and Methods

The conceptual and theoretical framework of this paper relied on three major theories: secularism, post-secularism, and American Exceptionalism seeing that they provide complementary dimensions that pertain to the intersection of religion and politics in the U.S. Relying on these three theories can facilitate the task of critically assessing how the intersection of religious paradigms with political action and discourse impacts American democracy and its domestic and foreign policies. They can also reveal how the founding principles of the American nation, although they theoretically upheld the separation of Church and state, they practically paved the path for an exceptional (post)secular model within the American context.

The primary framework that this study relies on is secularism and more particularly in the context of American political thought. To understand this notion within the American context, this study relies on primary sources such as the U.S. Constitution (1787) and the Federalist papers (1788) as well as statistical data from reliable sources such as the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) (2024), Pew Research Center (2024), and Gallup (Newport, 2023). Traditionally, secularism refers to the separation of Church and state, but “a more accurate definition of secularism today might be that it promotes the separation of religion and the state” (Phillips, 2011). It is simply the doctrine of separating religious practices and dogmas from public and political life. Indeed, in his recent book titled “Secularism: The Basics”, J. Berlinerblau (2022) contends that “a secular state, in theory, pushes theology out of its governance philosophy”. However, this paper critiques how this separation is not absolute in practice, particularly within the American context where theological motifs and themes continue to guide political approaches. To complement the study of secularism, the concept of post-secularism is also employed in this paper to emphasize the resilience of religious paradigms within American political frameworks. The introduction of this concept by J. Habermas (2008) propagated the notion that modern societies can accommodate religious voices in public and political spheres even when secularism is theoretically dominant. For this reason, S. Obirek (2019) emphasises the idea that contemporary works must have “a different look at religion but also a different evaluation of secularity”. This paper adopts this particular approach and attempts to assess secularity in the U.S. in light of American Exceptionalism, which suggests that the U.S. is a unique country. This analysis evaluates the unique blend of secular and religious principles in the U.S. as an extension of Exceptionalism both in theory and in practice.

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper will consequently pave the path for a comprehensive analysis of how American Exceptionalism informs the intertwining of religion with political life in approaching both domestic and foreign affairs.

Results and Discussion

American exceptionalism and religiosity. Understanding religious culture in the U.S. requires accounting for one of the most vital components of the American creed: American Exceptionalism. On the most intrinsic level, American Exceptionalism refers to the belief that “the United States, in terms of its values, political systems, and history, is unique and exemplary when compared to other nations across the globe throughout history” (Raine, 2024). It can also be described as “America’s perception of itself as morally exemplary and how its power is contingent on said moral excellence impels it to explore elements of its domestic projects in its foreign policy” (Amoah, 2021). This concept reflects the notion that the United States, as a nation and as an idea, is not only distinct but also superior in its principles of democracy, liberty, and equality. It is therefore evident that once the term ‘Exceptionalism’ is linked to any national or cultural background it usually refers to the belief in a certain group’s superiority and uniqueness. In the American case, this idea of inherent moral and cultural superiority has been redundantly emphasized by American leaders and scholars. The American belief in the nation’s divine uniqueness dates back to J. Winthrop’s (1838) description of the “Chosen People” who settled on a “City upon a hill”. This description denotes that the Puritan settlers believed that their social experiment was not only different but also exemplary. W. Bradford (1651), who governed Plymouth colony, significantly contributed to popularising this idea by articulating that “America is a land deliberately placed by God between two vast oceans to be home to a special people”. This strand of moral superiority presents a considerably religious description of the exceptional nature of the American people. This nexus between American moral superiority and Christian religious Exceptionalism can also be noticed at numerous instances through contemporary political discourse. For example, President George W. Bush, arguably the most religious American to ever head the state, once replied to a question about his favourite philosopher by saying “Christ, because he changed my heart” (Borger, 2005). His father, George H.W. Bush, explicitly stated suspicion and scepticism of atheists when he said that they should not be “considered patriots, nor should they be considered citizens. This is one nation under God” (Ritchey, 2009). Such statements reveal a religiously conservative mindset that does not replicate secularism or irreligious political practice, and which arises from tight bonds between the ideals of American Exceptionalism and Puritanical religious devotion. The implications of such deeply rooted ideas may reveal an intact correlation between American culture and American religiosity which denotes the inevitable coupling between Exceptionalism and divinity.

Although Christianity is the most widespread religion in the U.S. with 66% of the American population identifying as Christians (PRRI, 2024), this does not deny the

presence of a wide spectrum of faiths and the existence of religious diversity. Indeed, “over one-quarter of Americans (27%) are religiously unaffiliated, and 6% belong to a non-Christian religion” (PRRI, 2024). Non-Christian minorities such as Jews (2%), Muslims (1%), Buddhists (1%), and Hindus (1%) contribute to American religious diversity. The inseparable ties between American Exceptionalism and religiosity combined with the dominance of Christianity and the existence of several religious minorities in the U.S. create a challenging situation in terms of upholding a secular democracy and promoting irreligious political practice in terms of domestic and foreign policy.

Secularist principles in the American founding documents. It is of paramount importance to tackle the theoretical understanding of secularism seeing that it can pave the path for a critical comparison between the promises of the U.S. Constitution (1787) and its actual policies in dealing with political practice. Secularism “is synonymous with government neutrality and a formally imposed distance between the state and religious identity of any kind” (Clarke & Barker, 2024). It can also be understood in the sense that “state secularism does not necessarily reject religion, but denotes an intention to not justify behaviour on religious grounds” (Clarke & Barker, 2024). Simply put, secularism can be found in the indifference to, or exclusion of, religion and religious considerations from public and governmental affairs. In certain contexts, this concept can refer to anticlericalism or atheism. It can be interpreted as the desire to exclude religion from social activities or civic affairs as well as the banishment of religious symbols from the public sphere. But the general consensus is that secularism can be usually found in state neutrality towards religion, the separation of religion from public affairs, or in the complete separation of church and state, otherwise known as “disestablishment” (Hartog, 2019). Indeed, secularism can be broadly identified as a philosophical approach that seeks to interpret life on principles taken solely from the material world and without any form of recourse to religious principles. In political action, secularism is the principle of the separation of governmental institutions and persons mandated to represent the state from religious institutions and religious dignitaries. The objective of such separation is to set legal, cultural, and societal paradigms that can protect and promote religious pluralism and religious tolerance. This can also guarantee the neutrality of state policies and the absence of dogmatic beliefs in shaping governmental strategies whether domestically or abroad.

The founding fathers of American democracy attempted to shape the American political system in a manner that could tolerate religious pluralism. Their vision included an American nation free of sectarian violence and religious persecution. Theoretically, the American political system supports a secularist perception of political practice and governmental policies. This can be seen in the Federalist Papers (Madison & Hamilton, 1788) and more explicitly in the U.S. Constitution (1787). Founding fathers who wrote jointly under the pen-name of “Plubius”, addressed the issue of religion in the social and political spheres through the publication of a series of 85 essays which were described by T. Jefferson (1788) as “the best commentary on the principles of government, which ever

was written". These essays attempted to provide a number of principles capable of minimising political tyranny. For instance, Federalist Papers 57 briefly elaborates that no qualification of wealth, birth, or religious faith, is allowed to fetter the judgment or affect the inclination of the people. The writer of Federalist Papers, James Madison, also rejected the Church incorporation measure because it "exceeds the rightful authority to which governments are limited by the essential distinction between civil and religious functions" (Boston, 2001). The Church incorporation bill attempted to legitimise the Church's involvement in relief measures and education. J. Madison's vehement rejection of this bill provides considerable evidence that there was a desire amongst the founding fathers to impose secular ideals within the American public sphere. This desire is more explicitly portrayed in the U.S. Constitution (1787) as illustrated in the next paragraph.

The religion provision of the First Amendment, which is part of the Bill of Rights (1791), states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof". This amendment explicitly prevents the government from making laws that favour or benefit an establishment of religion, or prohibits the free exercise of religion. This amendment breaks with "the Old World's tradition which had consistently linked public office to religious affiliation" (Dagh-rir, 2013). It emphasizes the separation between church and state in order to ensure the general protection of religious freedom and to prevent the establishment of an official or preferred religion by the federal government. It is also important to mention section 2 of Article VI of the U.S. Constitution (1787) which states that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States". This provision supports the idea that no federal officeholder or public servant should be required to adhere to any particular religious doctrine as a prerequisite condition for holding a federal office or any public position.

Ultimately, the Federalist Papers (Madison & Hamilton, 1788), Article VI, and the First Amendment (Bill of Rights, 1791) of the U.S. Constitution (1787) serve to capitalize on the vitality of religious freedom and separation of State and Church. This provides a significant theoretical paradigm for secularist ideals within the American political system. It becomes then valid to maintain that American political practice is supposed to maintain an equal distance from all religious agendas alike and that it should not function under the influence or through the paradigm of a particular religious ideology. The U.S. Constitution (1787) provides the necessary tools to keep such religious influence outside the sphere of domestic and foreign policy. The proceeding section seeks to assess the validity of such theoretical background in comparison to political practice.

American secularism in practice: Domestic and foreign policy orientations. The impact of religion on American domestic and public policy can be tackled through three major themes: religious discourse in American politics, the confinement of the American political spectrum to a religious paradigm, and finally the marginalization of rational political thinking. To begin with, religious discourse in American political practice represents

considerable evidence of an existing gap between secularism in theory and practice. For instance, Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th U.S. President, claimed that he saw Armageddon in the 1912 election when he stated that "we stand at Armageddon, and we battle for the Lord" (Roosevelt, 2012). The utilization of such religious notions as "Armageddon" and "battling for the Lord" can legitimize policy orientations and persuade people to accept political decisions and rally behind a certain political candidate. This can also be seen when Franklin Roosevelt, the 32nd U.S. President, invoked a theme of divine justice as he shared a story about Jesus at the Democratic Convention of 1936, or when Ronald Reagan, the 40th U.S. President, spoke of a "spiritual revival" as he defended American values of faith (Heclo & McClay, 2003). The overlap between political discourse and religious themes virtually nullifies secular political practice. Al Gore, the 45th Vice President of the United States, proclaimed himself a born-again Christian while Joe Lieberman, Presidential candidate in the 2004 election, relentlessly spoke about the importance of religion and his nickname as "Holy Joe" (Heclo & McClay, 2003). More recently, in his inaugural address on January 20, 2021, President J. Biden (2021a) explicitly invoked religious motifs when he quoted Psalm 30:5 saying "I promise you this: as the Bible says weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning". This biblical reference sought to convey a sense of hope and resilience as the American nation faced the pandemic amidst significant political division. By the same token, President D. Trump (2020) referenced divine providence and the power of prayer in addressing the pandemic when he said: "We will never forget that prayer guides and empowers our Nation and that all things are possible with God". In his 2024 campaign, D. Trump further argued that "when you have faith, when you believe in God, it's a big advantage over people that don't have that" during a townhall meeting held at a Church in Atlanta (Paternoster, 2024). After his assassination attempts, Trump also sought to frame his survival in religious terms through significant reliance on religious discourse after posting on social media that "it was God alone who prevented the unthinkable from happening. We will fear not, but instead remain resilient in our Faith and Defiant in the face of Wickedness" (Trump, 2024). This historically prevalent tendency of relying on religious rhetoric and depending on religious paradigms to convey political messages and shape public opinion undermines the notion of secular democracy. Ultimately, the continuous reliance on invoking religious themes in American political discourse serves to confine the political spectrum to a limited religious paradigm.

Indeed, the American political spectrum is confined to a religious paradigm in the sense that it does not contain political parties that identify as non-religious or eliminate religion from their political practice. The American two-party system only allows religious conservatism and religious liberalism (Schuck & Wilson, 2008). On the one hand, religious conservatism is often associated with the Republican Party, and it emphasises the traditional values and beliefs that are grounded in orthodox interpretations of religious texts. It is usually associated with conservative Christianity and more precisely evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics, and other religious groups

that prioritize moral and social teachings. Indeed, D. Arli & G. Setiawan (2023) explicitly assert in their research on religiosity and politics in the U.S. that individuals affiliated with the Republican Party are generally more religious than non-Republicans and that “most religious groups, especially mainline Protestants, are more Republican affiliated”. Additionally, recent Gallup statistics showcase that 56% of Republicans identify as Protestant and 25% as Catholic compared to 38% and 23% of Democrats respectively (Newport, 2023). What is more important is that the same study asserts that republicans are less likely to identify as non-religious but much more likely to identify as Protestant (Newport, 2023). Only 11% of Republicans identify as non-religious compared to 26% of Democrats (Newport, 2023). Such statistics explain why Trump’s campaign relied heavily on a program known as “Believers for Trump”, which primarily sought to engage with conservative religious leaders and mobilise their congregations in an effort to secure their votes (Paternoster, 2024). On the other hand, religious liberalism is associated with the Democratic Party and more centrist political ideologies seeing that it emphasises a more flexible and progressive interpretation of religious texts. It incorporates modern ethical values, scientific understanding, and social justice principles and can be associated with mainline Protestants and progressive Catholics. This is why religious affiliation within the democratic party is also considerable with approximately 74% of democrats identifying as religious, the majority of which are Protestants (38%), compared to only 26% of non-religious individuals (Newport, 2023). Non-religious individuals represent a minority on both sides of the political spectrum compared to religious individuals.

The dominance of the religious paradigm within both parties often constrains political debates in the U.S. by framing political and public policy discussions within a moral and religious framework especially concerning contentious issues like abortion, gay rights, and the death penalty. For instance, The Supreme Court overturning Case No. 410 U.S. 113 “Roe v. Wade” (1973) in 2022 with the “Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization” (2022) decision reflected the entanglement of religion and public policy in terms of the abortion debate. Pew Research Center (2024) polls revealed strong public opinion differences that were shaped almost entirely along religious lines with 73% of White evangelical Protestants believing that abortion should be illegal in most or all cases and 86% of religiously unaffiliated Americans fully supporting the legality of abortion. Moreover, public policy discussions around issues pertaining to gay rights have also been framed by religious beliefs and presented through mostly religious paradigms. A report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) showed that evangelical and conservative Christian groups have consistently framed sexual minorities’ rights as a threat to religious liberty (Beirich, 2016) while the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs also highlighted in its report the internal ideological battles pertaining to minority rights and other social issues in the U.S. and how they are often framed through theological arguments (Sharp, 2021). These tensions showcase how religious beliefs influence societal issues and public policy debates while constraining them within moralistic rather than civic paradigms. This duality also creates

a dependence on moralistic and faith-based arguments and marginalises or trivialises more integral social issues.

In consequence, the marginalisation of rational political thinking within the arena of public and domestic policy can be seen in the nature of the binary moral thinking that shapes the prioritisation of public debates. Indeed, a recent study by K.R. Bishop (2023) at Georgetown University addressing the role of religious framing in public discourse found that “American reactionary binary oppositional thought processes are built across an interdisciplinary arc from fear-based psychology through a uniquely American legacy of Calvinist social contract of moral binaries” and that such moral binaries are “reenforced in the American mind through the incessant use of binary framing by commercial news media, entertainment media, and social media”. The utilisation of binary morality within religious paradigms frames public policy issues within a Manichean framework that marginalises rational political thinking. The impact of religious themes on American public and domestic affairs can therefore significantly impact the efficiency and well-functioning of American democracy. This approach creates a reliance on religious interpretations of limited social issues at the expense of rational discussions addressing societal problems in civic terms. For example, “state-run public-school administrations are locally elected and follow constituencies’ moral views of purity reflected through the Calvinist social contract” (Bishop, 2023). The dependence on a social contract that implicitly revolves around religious perceptions can result in polarisation and potentially biased policy orientations. The theoretical basis of a healthy democracy within a secular context allows more space for the debate of matters that are not interpreted primarily from a religious perspective. It further inhibits faith-based preaches and seeks to separate religion from the public sphere or to at least maintain a certain level of neutrality. However, in a clear incoherence with the theoretical basis of secular democracy, the religion-politics nexus in the United States continues to confine public debate to a limited religious paradigm of morality and dichotomous analysis. The nexus between American religious and political institutions is “tapping directly into the cognitive mechanism of preference for dichotomy” (Bishop, 2023) resulting in the fact that public discussions in the U.S. tend to “frame complex national issues into simplistic binary constructs, including immigration, economics, social issues, and international affairs”. This means that the religion-politics nexus in the United States does not only impact domestic policy, but it also plays a significant role in shaping U.S. policy on the international stage. This issue is examined in more detail in the next section.

The American approach to foreign policy exhibits a variety of religious values that guide the U.S. perception of international affairs. The influence of these religious values on foreign policy conduct can be tackled through two major themes: Religious discourse in American foreign policy and the impact of American Exceptionalism on foreign policy formulation. In this respect, religious discourse in American foreign policy represents a prevalent theme that can be seen in the nature of the binary American worldview that is usually conveyed through Manichean rhetoric. This worldview operates in terms of

dichotomies: “Good” versus “Evil”, “Light” versus “Darkness”, “Angels” versus “Devils”, and “Them” versus “Us”. The U.S. tends to identify with the forces of “Good” that are “called upon” to defend the world against the forces of “Evil” (Daghrir, 2013). Defending this position of moral superiority often occurs through religious rhetoric. For instance, President Reagan talked about Communism as a “totalitarian evil” that threatens the “rule of law under God” (Daghrir, 2009). President George W. Bush described the war on terrorism as a mission conveyed to him by the “Maker of Heaven” (Daghrir, 2013). In a more general context, President Woodrow Wilson stated that the United States would work to achieve “the redemption of the world”, and during WWII President Theodore Roosevelt talked about American heritage as a “divine heritage” (Daghrir, 2013). A more recent example of the same religious Manichean discourse in shaping U.S. foreign policy can be seen during President D. Trump’s 2017 speech to the United Nations when he asserted that “if the righteous many do not confront the wicked few, then evil will triumph” and emphasised that the U.S. “has been among the greatest forces for good” (Trump, 2017) while casting adversaries like North Korea and Iran as evil and corrupt. This religious discourse within the context of American foreign policy serves to legitimise policymaking processes through emphasising the idea of American Exceptionalism.

The idea that the U.S. is an exceptional country ordained by God to carry out its exceptional duty towards the rest of the world is a predominant theme within the context of foreign policy. It is usually carried out and approached through the conception of a moral crusade implying that the U.S. is on a divine mission to preserve freedom and democracy all around the globe. This predominantly religious rationale can be noticed when Harry S. Truman expressed the U.S. obligation to contain Communism as a “feeling of duty towards the civilized world” (Daghrir, 2013). This worldview enforces a sense of moral certitude and religious righteousness that often serves to legitimize and validate foreign policy decisions. It revolves around the belief that the U.S. is bound to a divine mission to defend the world against the forces of ‘evil’. During the 2021 Munich Security Conference, President J. Biden frequently invoked American Exceptionalism in the context of rising global challenges by positioning the U.S. as the defender of human rights, freedom, and democracy. He emphasized that the U.S. needs to reassert itself on the world stage as a defender of democratic principles by stating that “America is back” and arguing that the model of American democracy is “the single best way to revitalize the promise of our future” (Biden, 2021b). The same strand of American Exceptionalism in shaping U.S. foreign policy approaches can be seen in Biden’s address to the United Nations’ General Assembly in 2021 when he asserted that the U.S. “seeks to rally the world to action, we will lead not just with the example of our power but, God willing, with the power of our example” (Biden, 2021c). This theme of righteous leadership resonates with the American Exceptionalism narrative and the unique role that the U.S. adopts on the global stage. The emphasis on the righteousness and moral superiority of the American nation provides a premise for American Exceptionalism which in turn further imposes the idea of the American mission.

Throughout such a paternalistic worldview, religious motifs provide a sense of moral certitude and divinity that marginalise scepticism and criticism concerning foreign policy decisions.

Indeed, interventionism in U.S. foreign policy can be portrayed, for example, through President H.S. Truman’s “Containment” strategy and President G.W. Bush’s “War on Terror”. The Containment strategy was created to contain Communism and notably led to the Korean War, The Vietnam War, U.S. involvement in Latin America, American military intervention in Cambodia, and general destabilisation of several regions. The War on Terror strategy was implemented to fight Terrorism and resulted in the Iraq War and the American military intervention in Afghanistan. Throughout both doctrines, the utilisation of religious motifs to convey and justify military involvement and the use of hard power was prevalent. In his 1947 speech, H.S. Truman framed the U.S. fight against Communism as a moral duty to support “free peoples” resisting oppression (President Truman’s message..., 1947). He positioned the U.S. as a force for divine justice and argued that aiding Greece and Turkey in their struggles was not just a strategic approach but also a righteous battle between the forces of freedom (good) and the forces of totalitarianism (evil). This religiously infused rhetoric ultimately rallied domestic and international support for the containment strategy. President G.W. Bush followed a similar approach when he used religious language after 9/11 to justify the War on Terror. For example, he quoted a biblical verse in his address to the nation after the events of 9/11 when he stated “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me” (Statement by the President..., 2001). In his Second Inaugural Address (2005), he also argued that the U.S. has a duty to liberate oppressed peoples and preserve American ideals especially that such ideals “bear the image of the Maker of Heaven”. G.W. Bush also believed that the U.S. mission to spread freedom is based on a divine calling especially that God told him to “end the tyranny in Iraq” (MacAskill, 2005). He frequently depicted the fight against terrorism as a moral struggle between good (freedom and democracy) and evil (terrorism) and relied on the notion that the U.S. was on a God-ordained mission. The impact of religious beliefs on U.S. foreign policy in the same context can also be seen through the Trump administration’s “ideological shift” (Ülgül, 2021) from “globalism to patriotism” which increased the effects of “conservative evangelicals in the American foreign policy decision-making process” (Ülgül, 2021). The ramifications of this shift resided in a more aggressive policy towards Iran based on the conservative evangelical belief that “Iran will launch an apocalyptic war prophesized in Ezekiel 38 and 39 and kick off the end events” (Ülgül, 2021). This belief complemented the administration’s scepticism of Iran’s nuclear program and intensified tensions between both countries during Trump’s presidency. The religious motif that characterizes American foreign policy becomes therefore undeniable through the unshakable belief that the U.S. is on a divine mission to defend the world against the forces of “evil” by whatever means necessary.

Although the existence of religious frameworks within the paradigm of U.S. foreign policy can create public

support by presenting international conflicts in spiritual or moral terms that resonate with the American electorate, it can also blur the lines between theological and geopolitical objectives. This approach leads to policy decisions that are usually influenced by ideological and religious dogmas rather than political or pragmatic decision-making processes. For example, U.S. President Ronald Reagan approached the Cold War using a faith-based rationale and consequently framed American foreign policy towards the Soviet Union in terms of a battle between Christian virtue and Soviet atheism. Indeed, "Reagan's faith profoundly affected his attack on Soviet communism... the enemy to Reagan was not merely Soviet Communism but, more pointedly, atheistic Soviet Communism" (Kengor, 2007). His approach can be described as a "Cold War crusade against the Soviet Union" (Kengor, 2007). R. Reagan framed U.S. foreign policy as a divine mission and elevated the Cold War beyond mere politics. This moral and messianic framing of international affairs creates a sense of religious righteousness and accordingly complicates diplomatic efforts by turning political adversaries into moral enemies and entangling foreign policy with religious ideology. Such behaviour makes compromise appear like a betrayal of core values rather than a practical solution. This combination of religious and political objectives can also be seen in U.S. involvement in the Middle East with U.S. President Jimmy Carter. He emphasized Christian values of peace and reconciliation seeing that religion played a central role in his perception of the presidency and "nowhere was that clearer than in his attempt to bring peace to the Middle East" by "pursuing a faith-based foreign policy" (McDonald, 2015). The mixture of theological and geopolitical approaches to policymaking was also prevalent during the D. Trump administration through the "Christianisation of key governmental institutions" (Ülgül, 2021). For example, it is worth noting that a number of conservative evangelical members within the administration and more particularly within the cabinet formed a "Bible Study Group" inside the White House for "the first time in at least 100 years" (Ülgül, 2021). What is even more important is that the individuals within this study group provided justifications and political support for controversial foreign policy decisions including family separation policies that were applied by the Trump administration to prevent and reduce illegal immigration. Not only does this approach contradict with secular political practice, but it also risks negatively impacting the principles of democratic governance.

Ultimately, the intertwining of religious ideals with domestic and foreign policy-making within the American political arena does not reflect a traditional implementation of secular ideals. Although the state theoretically attempts to avoid adopting an official religion or promoting one particular religious ideology at the expense of others, traditional political practice heavily relies on religious motifs to formulate and justify domestic and foreign policy decisions. This creates an exceptional status quo whereby the country is theoretically and legislatively secular, but it does nonetheless rely on religious ideology throughout its traditional political culture.

The American model: Exceptional secularism. The political system in the U.S. theoretically promotes and

supports liberal, egalitarian, progressive, and democratic values as the American Constitution (1787) guarantees a myriad of liberties and freedoms to all Americans regardless of their religious or ethnic backgrounds. In fact, the separation of state-church in the U.S. serves to highlight the ideal of secularism as an elemental component of American social and political paradigms. This separation is imposed and guaranteed by the Sixth Article and the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (1787), which emphasise the exclusion of any correlation between religious affiliations and political practice. This particular emphasis on secularism takes place in a country with significant religious diversity but with a predominantly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) population. However, the conception of American citizenship transcended religious affiliations, especially with the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Immigration and Nationality Act (1965). Both Acts signalled the triumph of the liberal conception of American citizenship at the expense of the nativist perception of Americanness. In consequence, the religious conception of Americanness became relatively inconsistent with the liberal conception of national identity especially since collective interest was seen in economic progress rather than ethnic or religious belonging. While promoting religious pluralism served to create a more culturally diverse environment, the political culture in the U.S. remained under the heavy influence of religious ideology particularly in shaping and justifying domestic and foreign policy orientations within a theoretically secular democratic framework.

Secularism is typically used to describe a political philosophy that establishes its ethics, values, principles, ideals and morals without reference to religious beliefs and doctrines. In the American context, this notion is theoretically promoted through the U.S. Constitution (1787) and supported by the Federalist Papers (Madison & Hamilton, 1788) but neglected to a large extent in political practice whether in terms of rhetoric or policymaking. Religious orientations are not explicitly adopted or enforced by the state, but they do nonetheless influence domestic and foreign policy decisions to an extent that is sufficient enough to shape the public domain and justify foreign entanglements, which makes the American model of secularism a rather exceptional one in a post-secular context. Secularism in the U.S. is based more on the idea of state neutrality towards issues of a religious nature than on the promotion of irreligious or anti-religious policymaking. The state-church separation was a pragmatic decision seeing that the framers of the U.S. Constitution (1787) sought to preserve the union by minimising religious conflicts and accordingly avoiding social polarization, political friction, and religious persecution. However, the neutrality principle is compromised in practice seeing that U.S. policymaking processes continue to refer to religious paradigms in terms of both the formulation and the justification of governmental policies. Secularism in its American format is founded on principles such as the absence of an official state religion and the toleration of religious diversity within a predominantly Christian nation. Indeed, "America remains more Christian, and more religious, than most of the countries of Europe, and that gives our politics a distinctive flavour... Christian practice and heritage are still a

key glue that bind Americans to the political Right, as well as fertilizer for the broader cultural soil in which American classical liberalism has flourished" (McLaughlin, 2018). The American perception of secularism is an exceptional one in the sense that it does not exclude religiosity and religious ideals from the public sphere and the domain of political practice although the state itself does not adopt a particular religion and is mandated by the U.S. Constitution (1787) to remain neutral and irreligious. American secularism is therefore incoherent with the traditional understanding of secularism which argues for a separation between public political issues and private religious convictions. Instead, it presents an exceptional hybrid model that promotes religious diversity and legislatively separates the state from the Church but practically allows religious ideologies to shape and legitimize domestic and foreign policy orientations. This strand of exceptional secularism significantly resonates with the concept of post-secularism (Habermas, 2008), which acknowledges the enduring and impactful role that religion plays in public life even in the existence of a formal separation between state and Church. The exceptional nature of the American secularist model challenges the assumption that modernisation leads to the decline of religion and reflects instead a political system whereby religious beliefs not only coexist and interact with secular institutions but also shape institutional behaviour. The theoretical and legislative neutrality of the American model tolerates a practical openness to religious influences in both policymaking and public discourse alike. It adheres to the post-secular conception of the state in that it incorporates religious frameworks into democratic and pluralistic governance. Although this integration highlights the exceptional nature of American political practice, it also delineates numerous challenges pertaining to democratic governance and puts into question the clarity of motives and intentions behind domestic and foreign policy decision-making processes.

Conclusions

The religion-politics nexus in the United States of America generated a religious interference in determining and implementing domestic and foreign affairs. This entanglement challenges the theoretical pillars of secularism as laid out in the U.S. Constitution and reflects several gaps between theory and practice when compared to the traditional conception of secularism per se. Religious rhetoric has been frequently utilized as a tool for determining and legitimising policy decisions both domestically and internationally. The fact that religious motifs succeeded in

blurring the lines between theological ideals and political orientations can be seen in Woodrow Wilson's moral justification for World War I, Ronald Reagan's Cold War crusade against "atheistic communism", G.W. Bush's faith-driven War on Terror, J. Biden's citation of biblical verses in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, and D. Trump's dichotomous "wicked and righteous" approach to Iran and North Korea to name but a few examples. These religious motifs also impacted public debates about abortion issues and sexual minorities' rights and shaped public discussion in Calvinistic moral binaries that marginalised civic values. The Supreme Court overturning "Roe v. Wade" in 2022 reflected the religious turn that questions pertaining to civil liberties and human rights can end up taking. Indeed, religious rhetoric has been increasingly used by both the D. Trump and J. Biden administrations to frame moral certainties, mobilise support, and address contentious issues like abortion, gay rights, and immigration. This situation resulted in a paradoxical setting whereby the U.S. Constitution theoretically promotes state neutrality and secular political practice, but the reality of such political practice heavily incorporates religious ideology. This paper highlighted how this paradox reveals an exceptional and post-secular American model within which religious rationale is still capable of shaping both domestic and foreign policy approaches. It further contributed to the existing body of literature by assessing how American Exceptionalism complicates the traditional understanding of secular governance seeing that American political practice seamlessly intertwines with religious exceptionalism despite secular constitutional provision, which invites us to consider a post-secularist framework in the analysis of American political practice. Ultimately, this paper highlighted the notion that the American model is exceptional in character and post-secularist in practice as a key theoretical contribution that challenges the applicability of conventional secularism within the American context.

Prospects for further research on the interaction of religion and politics in the United States could include an analysis of how religious motives shape international relations, particularly in the context of modern conflicts in the Middle East or Ukraine or in policymaking approaches towards countries with predominantly atheistic systems.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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