

Es Hethcox

Religious Freedom Essay

Dr. Jennifer Barry

March 5, 2018

### Trump's America: Redefining Religious Freedom

In the fall of 2016, Donald Trump secured his position as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, disrupting not only the landscape of contemporary politics, but religious freedom. Trump's political campaign rode on the back of ultra-conservative and far-right platforms, reinvigorating America's long-standing support of Christian nationalism in America. According to author and journalist Michelle Goldberg, Christian nationalism is not a religion, but a political ideology. This belief works to restore an imagined 'Christian America,' and above all, the Christian right to rule. With that definition in mind, Christian nationalism considers American identity synonymous with identification as an evangelical Protestant. Non-western religions, such as Judaism and Islam, fall outside the shadow of America's white cross, and are considered a danger to the security of the nation. An example of Christian nationalism can be seen in the statement issued by the Family Research Council (FRC) in response to the first congressional invocation offered by a Hindu priest. FRC stated:

While it is true that the United States of America was founded on the sacred principle of religious freedom for all, that liberty was never intended to exalt other religions to the level that Christianity holds in our country's heritage...Our founders expected that Christianity — and no other religion — would receive support from the government as long as that support did not violate peoples' consciences and their right to worship.

The FRC's statement is a direct contradiction of the American concept of religious freedom, and seeks to actively oppress other religious practices in the United States.

The ideology of Christian nationalism echoed throughout Trump's campaign, with the candidate deploying alarmist and alienating rhetoric towards minority groups and American

Muslim receiving the brunt of such attacks. Trump's pre-election rhetoric and threats toward American Muslims has remained consistent and carried into his presidency via immigration policies.

Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric has instigated a river of societal prejudice against American Muslims, and resulted in a rise of hate crimes targeting American Muslims. The FBI's 2016 crime report shows that there was a 25 percent rise of hate crimes in the final three months of 2016, following Trump's election. The report further shows that attacks against Muslims doubled and anti-Muslim hate groups tripled in 2016. While this increased hostility has not constitutionally changed American Muslims' religious freedoms, the sentiments surrounding this right have shifted. Of the religious bias hate crimes reported by the FBI, anti-Islamic attacks stand at 24.8 percent, followed by anti-Jewish attacks at 54.2 percent. Christian nationalism serves as the ideological basis for such an increase in hate acts and anti-Muslim sentiment in the US.

The idea that American Muslims' religious freedom is actively being threatened typically evokes strong reactions from conservative groups, who deny that any individual's freedom is at stake. Although Muslims' religious freedom is not lawfully threatened, they are still facing extreme opposition from their communities in their effort to worship. In 2017 the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported that the year 2016 was the second worst year on record regarding attacks against mosques. Many Muslim communities received graphic, anti-Muslim and pro-Trump letters and experienced physical acts of violence. In June of 2017, Nabra Hassanen, a seventeen-year-old Muslim woman, was beaten and killed as she walked home after attending a pre-dawn meal at her mosque, as reported by NPR. These hate acts are a direct result

of the hostile attitude enacted toward non-Western religions during Trump's campaign. It is clear that Muslims worshipping in America are not welcome, and certainly not free.

In addition to Muslims experiencing opposition to their worship centers, their daily safety is at risk. CAIR reports that hate crimes against Muslims accelerated throughout 2016 and spiked after the 2016 election. These dates and reports show an increase of Muslim individuals receiving death notes and physical assaults. In addition, CAIR reports that between Nov. 8, 2016 and Nov. 28, 2016, over 100 attacks against Muslims had been reported. These shocking statistics are sadly comparable to hate crimes reported directly after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, where over 400 violent acts against Muslims were reported.

While these attacks may not appear to be connected to Muslims' religious freedom, they are directly linked to Christian nationalism. This political-religious ideology has gained momentum since Trump's controversial election—still, it did not suddenly emerge in contemporary America without prompt. Rather, it fed on Trump's hostile rhetoric toward non-Christian religious groups in America, and was activated (and sustained) by people who have misconstrued the real meaning of religious freedom post-9/11. Since Trump's election, religious freedom has shifted in meaning for people in America. For some, such as Christian nationalists, it has become a safeguard and weapon against non-Western religions believed to be a threat to American life. These people feel that if non-Western places of worship are destroyed, and their communities threatened and harassed, then the sanctity of America's Christian majority is secure. For members of non-Western beliefs, religious freedom continues to be an inaccessible "inalienable right" in America. They have the location and option to worship, but their actual freedom is neither protected nor insured. The reality is this: Americans cannot have religious freedom as long as Christian nationalism has a place in America. This ideology seeks to

eradicate all religions but the traditions of evangelical Protestantism. A country that complies with such a prejudicial belief is not one offering freedom of worship to its citizens.