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Ambassadors for the Kingdom of God or for America? Christian Nationalism, the Christian Right, and the Contra War

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Abstract: This essay uses the concept of Christian nationalism to explore the religious dynamics of the Contra war and U.S.–Nicaraguan relations during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Religious organizations and individuals played crucial roles on both sides in the war in Nicaragua and in the debates in the United States over support for the Contras. Evangelistic work strengthened transnational ties between Christians, but also raised the stakes of the war; supporters of the Sandinistas and Contras alike alleged a victory by their adversary imperiled the future of Christianity in Nicaragua. Christian nationalism thus manifested itself and intertwined in both the United States and Nicaragua. Examining how evangelicals and Catholics in the United States and Nicaragua, as well as the Reagan administration, the Contras, and the Sandinistas, used Christian nationalism to build support for their policy objectives sheds light on both the malleability and the power of identifying faith with the state. Having assessed Christian nationalism as a tool and a locus of conflict in the Contra war, the essay then steps back and considers the larger methodological implications of using Christian nationalism as a category of analysis in U.S. foreign relations history.

Keywords: evangelicals; foreign policy; Reagan; U.S.–Nicaraguan relations; Christian internationalism; Christian nationalism

On 16 July 1974, Billy Graham addressed over two thousand evangelical Christian leaders who had gathered in the large assembly hall at the Palais de Beaulieu in Lausanne, Switzerland. Flags from each of the 150 nations that the members of the audience represented lined the stage. A massive screen hanging from the ceiling projected live video of Graham, who stood gripping the podium with one hand as he gestured toward the crowd with the other, so even those sitting far in the back of the hall could see his face as he spoke. He welcomed the men and women before him to the International Congress on World Evangelization, an unprecedented gathering he hoped would inspire Christians across the globe to rededicate themselves to the evangelistic mission of the church. In his plenary address, Graham highlighted the challenges that Christians faced as they worked toward their goal of spreading the Gospel to all people on earth. Significantly, he emphasized the threat that Christian nationalism posed to world evangelism ([1], p. 30).

With his voice rising, Graham condemned the impulse to conflate a particular culture, political system, or country with the Christian faith, and confessed that this tendency had even endangered the efficacy of his own ministry. In emphatic tones, he boomed: “when I go out to preach the Gospel now, I go as an ambassador for the Kingdom of God—and not America. To tie the Gospel to any political system, any secular program, or any society is dangerous and will only serve to divert the Gospel” [2]. As the translation of his words made its way to the audience members’ headphones, applause erupted throughout the hall. Evangelical leaders from Latin America, Africa, and Asia welcomed his sentiment. Some of the speakers who hailed from these regions had incorporated strong critiques of American Christian nationalism or “American culture Christianity” in the papers they pre-circulated and then

presented at the Congress ([3], p. 136; [4]). Yet despite Graham's entreaty, and the emphasis that the Congress participants and subsequent Lausanne movement placed on developing both indigenous and cross-cultural evangelism, nationalism and Christianity remained deeply entangled in the decades that followed.

Indeed, despite his intentions, Graham's insistence that he represented his faith rather than his country when he preached abroad only served to underscore the extent to which people living in other parts of the world viewed him and his fellow American evangelicals as representatives of the United States. In the paper he presented at the Congress, Latin American theologian C. René Padilla suggested that U.S. interventions abroad, not to mention the country's position as a world superpower, shaped how people who lived in nations that received American missionaries perceived Christianity ([3], p. 136). Padilla saw "American culture Christianity"—or the conceptual fusion of Christianity with American capitalism and "socio-political conservatism"—as a hindrance to evangelism and a reason to impose a moratorium on foreign missions ([3], pp. 125, 136; [5,6]; [7], pp. 36, 42). Graham and many other U.S. evangelical leaders opposed the suggested moratorium. Yet, tactical disagreement aside, both Graham and Padilla recognized the power that identifying Christianity with a particular nation held, not to mention the damage it wrought. For this reason, the debate over Christian missions and "culture Christianity" that unfolded at the Congress on World Evangelization revealed an important fault line that existed within the global evangelical community, and particularly between U.S. Christians and those they sought to evangelize. As American evangelicals grew more influential as a political bloc in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this disjuncture between how they and their brethren abroad understood the relationship between their faith and their nation became increasingly consequential for U.S. foreign relations.

For this reason, thinking about Christian nationalism in a global context holds great analytical value for historians. Christian nationalism, an ideology or worldview which merges religious and national identities, shapes the beliefs that individuals hold about the role their country should play in the world and how their country should interact with other nations. In the late twentieth century, many members of the Christian right believed that the United States was a Christian nation and that its culture as well as its laws, politics, and foreign policy should therefore embody the core religious values that they embraced. In this way, religious nationalism informed their views on international relations, contributing to the development of an American Christian internationalism that conflated Christianity with American political and economic principles, and sought to export these values globally.¹ Christian nationalism and internationalism are not exclusively American phenomena, though. Studying the relationship between Christian nationalism, domestic public opinion, and foreign relations in the United States as well as in other countries illuminates how ideology and religious beliefs influence political rhetoric as well as policy.

Even though Graham, Padilla, and the other evangelical leaders at the Congress did not use the term "Christian nationalism" in their debate over the future of world missions, their efforts to describe and grapple with the underlying issues that inspired the discussion illuminate key aspects of the concept. Unwittingly or not, many Christians and non-Christians in the mid-1970s did see a link

¹ Over the past two decades, historians of modern U.S. foreign relations have become increasingly open to using religion as a means for analyzing or understanding policymaking and foreign affairs. More recently, scholars such as Andrew Preston and Melani McAlister have focused on evangelical Christians, examining how their religious beliefs blended with American politics, culture, and identity to shape the U.S. role in the world. For example, Preston argues that evangelicals in the mid-twentieth century acted as internationalist agents, "bring[ing] the world to Americans" as they spread their faith—and American culture—to the world ([8], pp. 190–91). McAlister brings this concept of "evangelical internationalism" into her work as well, as she explores American evangelicals' vision for and interest in global affairs, seeking to understand how their internationalist outlook shaped evangelical culture and political beliefs [9]. This essay builds on this concept of evangelical or Christian internationalism, but focuses more explicitly on the concept of Christian nationalism and the relationship between Christian missions and U.S. politics, policymaking, and diplomacy, including democracy promotion during the Reagan era. For other recent work on Christian internationalism, broadly defined, see: Thompson [10], Preston [11], Inboden [12], Herzog [13], and Thomas [14].

between the Christian faith and Western, specifically American, culture. Yet, as Padilla and Graham made clear in their Congress remarks, Christians throughout the world contested the identification of their faith with any one culture, country, or system of government. They and others committed to world evangelism sought to promote Christianity as a universal faith. Nevertheless, the link between Christianity and the nation persisted. Furthermore, religious and political leaders could (and did) operationalize this link, using it to justify, impel, or promote national and international policies. Examining Christian nationalism as both an operational tool and a contested concept in U.S. foreign relations can help us better understand how religion shaped U.S. policy and the reception those policies enjoyed abroad.

To this end, this essay will use the concept of Christian nationalism to explore the religious dynamics of the Contra war and U.S.–Nicaraguan relations during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Religious organizations and individuals played crucial roles on both sides in the war in Nicaragua and in the debates in the United States over support for the Contras. Evangelistic work strengthened transnational ties between Christians, but also raised the stakes of the war; supporters of the Sandinistas and Contras alike alleged a victory by their adversary imperiled the future of Christianity in Nicaragua. Christian nationalism thus manifested itself and intertwined in both the United States and Nicaragua, due in part to the internal religious dynamics in each country that infused the rhetoric about the conflict. Examining how evangelicals and Catholics in the United States and Nicaragua, as well as the Reagan administration, the Contras, and the Sandinistas, used Christian nationalism to build support for their policy objectives sheds light on both the malleability and the power of identifying faith with the state. Having assessed Christian nationalism as a tool and a locus of conflict in the Contra war, this essay will then step back and consider the larger methodological implications of using Christian nationalism as a category of analysis in U.S. foreign relations history.

When the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) overthrew the reviled dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in July 1979 and established a revolutionary government, Nicaragua became a major flashpoint in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. U.S. leaders perceived the Nicaraguan revolution as evidence of Soviet and Cuban interference in Central America. Eager to counter communist incursions in the region, Ronald Reagan committed his administration to providing military aid to the nascent anti-Sandinista counterrevolutionary movement, known as the Contras, when he took office in 1981.² The ensuing war between the U.S.-backed Contras and the Sandinistas lasted until 1988. Tens of thousands of Nicaraguans died in the fighting and many more suffered atrocities ranging from torture, maiming, and rape to forcible relocation and the loss of their property. Christian groups within Nicaragua and the United States involved themselves in the conflict; Catholics and evangelicals in both countries found themselves divided over which side to support, and regardless of denomination or nationality, supporters of both the Contras and the Sandinistas claimed the mantle of Christianity and country.³ Christian nationalist rhetoric infused the debate in the United States and in Nicaragua over the war, and proved particularly resonant with the public and with legislators in discussions about religious persecution and U.S. military aid for the Contra forces.

In Nicaragua, church-state relations and religious freedom lay at the heart of these intra-denominational political divisions among Christians. Though predominantly Catholic, Nicaragua had a small Jewish community as well as a Protestant population that began expanding rapidly in the

² There is a wealth of scholarship on the Contra war and U.S.–Central American (and U.S.–Nicaraguan) relations during the Reagan administration. For background, see LeoGrande [15], LaFeber [16], Grandin [17], and McCormick [18].

³ Much of the existing literature on religion and the Contra war focuses either on denominational change and political involvement in Nicaragua itself, or on the Catholic and Protestant left’s activism against Reagan’s foreign policy. For the former, see Gooren [19], Smith and Haas [20]; for the latter, see Strauss [21], Smith [22], Nepstad [23], Peace [24], and Keeley [25]. Unlike these works, this article takes a different tack by examining the relationship between Christian nationalist rhetoric, public diplomacy, and policy among evangelical Protestants and Catholics across the political spectrum in both the United States and Nicaragua. Sara Diamond’s work on the Christian right reflects some of these themes, and though she completed and published her research before the Contra war ended and only devotes part of a chapter to the conflict, her book remains a very useful primer. See Diamond [26].

1970s. The national constitution guaranteed religious freedom, yet for decades the Catholic Church had enjoyed special state privileges due to its close relationship with the Somoza regime. As the Catholic clergy and laity grew increasingly critical of the dictator's corruption and penchant for brutality during the 1960s and 1970s, the Church leadership tempered and then withdrew its support from Somoza [19,27,28]. By the time of the revolution, the vast majority of Catholics and Protestants in Nicaragua welcomed his ouster. That said, this did not mean they universally welcomed Sandinista leadership. In November 1979, just a few months after Somoza fled Managua and the FSLN claimed victory, the Catholic Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference released a pastoral letter that praised "the current revolutionary moment" as "a propitious occasion to make real the Church's option for the poor" ([29], p. 144). This phrasing alluded to Liberation Theology, a theological movement that emerged from the Catholic Church in Latin America during the 1950s and 1960s and continued to enjoy broad influence in the region [30,31]. Liberation theology promoted economic and social justice for oppressed peoples. Yet the Bishops' statement remained cautious and did not offer unreserved approval of the Sandinistas or their socialist political aims ([29], p. 144). This caution reflected internal tensions among the bishops about the relationship between the Catholic Church and the revolutionary government that only hardened as the FSLN consolidated power in 1981 and 1982.

Despite the hopeful if wary tone that the Bishops' pastoral letter struck about the possibilities for achieving social justice and the broad aims of Liberation Theology after Somoza's exile, the Catholic church found itself divided deeply over support for the FSLN. A delegation of U.S. evangelicals who visited Nicaragua in 1982 noted that while "large numbers of clergy and laity (the so-called 'popular' or 'people's church') are enthusiastic about the revolution," the church hierarchy had split: "four of the eight bishops are supportive and four are not" ([32], frame 294). When a number of revolutionary Catholic priests received appointments to important posts in the Sandinista government, including the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, the archbishop of Managua Miguel Obando y Bravo and other conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy attempted to discipline them for their involvement in the government ([19], p. 344; [32], frame 292). In his study of religious change in Nicaragua during the 1980s, anthropologist Henri Gooren noted that "the conflict was essentially a political power struggle over the control of the Roman Catholic believers," with the official church hierarchy retaining strong support from "rural and urban elites" while alienating the poorer sectors of Nicaraguan society, which tended to support the Sandinistas and the popular church ([19], p. 344).⁴

Similar divisions wracked the evangelical Protestant churches. Most evangelical denominations belonged to the Evangelical Committee for Aid Development (CEPAD), an organization that Gustavo Parajon, a Baptist medical doctor, founded in 1972 to assist in relief efforts after a devastating earthquake struck the country ([32], frame 295). In addition to spreading the Gospel, CEPAD promoted progressive causes and development projects, and received funding from the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches [33]. As investigative groups from the United States reported, CEPAD had a friendly though not totally uncritical relationship with the Sandinista government. According to one account, "about three months after the fall of Somoza, 500 evangelical pastors connected with CEPAD endorsed a document thanking God for the fall of the Somoza dictatorship and affirming the goals of the revolution," though they maintained the primacy of their commitment to Jesus Christ and the Gospel ([32], frame 295). A number of anti-Sandinista groups in the United States, including the Institute on Religion and Democracy, criticized Parajon and the members of CEPAD for their willingness to work with the Sandinista government, which they alleged suggested Parajon was "a loyal Sandinista" and a promoter of Liberation Theology [34].

Yet the CEPAD pastors noted that the evangelical community as a whole held mixed views. According to them, even though most evangelical denominations belonged to CEPAD, a slight majority

⁴ Gooren also notes that this disillusionment with the Catholic church led some of the laity to convert to Protestantism (typically Pentecostalism); the Catholic church lost considerable market share to the Protestant churches during the 1980s ([19], p. 340).

of Nicaraguan evangelicals were actually “conservative, fearful of Communism and involved only with spiritual matters” ([32], frame 295). In 1980, a small group of conservative pastors who opposed the FSLN and its political aims joined together to form the National Council of Evangelical Pastors of Nicaragua (CNPEN) [35]. This organization developed close ties with political conservatives and evangelical groups in the United States, such as the National Association of Evangelicals and the World Evangelical Fellowship ([36], p. 2). Still, as the CEPAD pastors told the interviewers, a significant number of evangelicals, including the majority of young evangelicals, were “progressive moderates” who supported the Sandinistas with some reservations ([32], frame 295; [37]). Additionally, these pastors reported that a small number of evangelicals identified themselves as “radical revolutionaries strongly influenced by liberation theology” ([32], frame 295). Age played an important role in these ideological divisions within the evangelical churches. A group of Baptist seminary students related numerous examples of young Baptists, Pentecostals, and non-denominational evangelicals who worked actively for the revolution. They contrasted the beliefs these young evangelicals held with the views of older pastors and church members, who tended to embrace the same conservative ideological perspectives of their co-religionists in the United States and thus rejected revolutionary activity ([38], frames 245–48).

Meanwhile, those evangelicals and Catholics who had participated actively in the revolution shared a sense that the goals of the FSLN aligned with their Christian beliefs and the social teachings of the Bible. John Stam, a U.S. evangelical missionary based in Costa Rica who aided Sandinistas and refugees fleeing from Somoza’s forces in 1978 and 1979, shared numerous accounts about revolutionaries at the Sandinista safe house he served who blended their faith with their fight for the FSLN ([39], p. 201). He reported to evangelicals in the United States that Christian themes infused the most popular revolutionary songs and that the Sandinista fighters he met and prayed with yearned to promote social justice and “full and responsible Christian participation in the birth of a really new Nicaragua” ([40], pp. 2–3). After Somoza’s ouster, many of these Christian Sandinistas worked in the FSLN government or worked on its behalf through organizations they founded, such as the Protestant Commission for the Promotion of Social Responsibility (CEPRES) and the *Centro Ecumenico Antonio Valdiviso* (CAV) [41,42]. In one pastoral letter, CAV explained that it operated with the express aim of “proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom” while “denouncing those . . . that oppose the building of a New Society,” much as the revolutionary Christians that Stam had encountered in his ministry hoped to do ([43], frames 75–76).

The FSLN leadership seized on these links that the Sandinista fighters drew between the revolution and their religious beliefs in their attempts to build broader support for their movement among Catholics and Protestants. To this end, in October 1980, the FSLN National Directorate released an official statement that praised the role Christians had played in the revolution and pledged that the new Sandinista government would protect the religious freedom of all Nicaraguans ([44], pp. 2, 20–31). The statement celebrated revolutionary priests—such as Gaspar García Laviana, who attributed his willingness to die for “the liberation of the people” to his belief that God desired freedom for all—for blending their “Christian vocation and the revolutionary conscience” ([44], p. 11). It also played up the relationship between the FSLN’s political goals and the foundations of the Christian faith, incorporating Biblical verses about renewal and the command to care for all people as evidence that Christianity, the revolution, and Sandinista-style socialism went hand in hand ([44], pp. 4, 9; [45]). Yet these efforts to gain Catholic and Protestant support by relating the aims of the revolution to the Christian faith ultimately exacerbated the intra-denominational ideological divides discussed earlier.

Indeed, despite the promises the National Directorate made in its statement on religion, many conservative Catholics and evangelicals in Nicaragua and the United States doubted the sincerity of the FSLN’s commitment to religious liberty. These doubts, coupled with their skeptical reading of the religious rhetoric the FSLN had attempted to adopt, sowed the seeds for Christian nationalist conflict

as U.S.-backed anti-Sandinista forces began to coalesce in 1981 to 1982 and mount increasingly serious challenges to the Sandinistas' hold on power.⁵

Humberto Belli, a former Marxist and editor of the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa*, became a particularly influential critic of the FSLN's religious policies. After the Sandinistas shuttered *La Prensa*, Belli moved to the United States and began publishing damning screeds against the Sandinistas, focusing in particular on their attempts to politicize Christianity. In several pieces, he recounted how he and his fellow *La Prensa* editors unearthed a secret FSLN memo that instructed all regional leaders to transform Christmas from a religious celebration to "a special day for the children, one 'with a different content, *fundamentally political*,'" to ensure that everything—including the Christian faith—remained "inside the revolution" [46]. Likewise, he argued that the Sandinista government's 1981 New Year's address, which "proclaimed that 'the true Christians, the sincere Christians, embrace the option of the Sandinista revolution, which in Nicaragua today is the road toward the option for the poor,'" made manifest the FSLN's intention to cast opponents of the revolution as opponents of Christianity ([47], p. 45). Belli opposed this form of Christian nationalism, stating that the FSLN's demands that "Christians give unconditional support to the revolution, not to the Church" and efforts to merge Christian beliefs with Marxist-Leninist principles perverted Christianity ([47], p. 46). He noted that these imperatives also opened those Christians who did not pledge their fealty to the state to reprisals.

Along with the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) and other anti-Sandinista activists in the United States, Belli reported that such reprisals began in mid-1981 when the Sandinistas started harassing and marginalizing religious groups that did not lend their full support to the FSLN government. He argued that "the Sandinistas have achieved this partly by giving the revolutionary Christians exclusive access to the virtual state monopoly of the mass media," while preventing conservative Catholics and evangelicals from communicating with their followers through newspapers, radio, or television ([47], p. 47). In a booklet entitled "Nicaragua: A Revolution Against the Church?" the IRD stated that in July 1981, the Sandinistas barred the Catholic Archbishop of Managua from making his customary television broadcast of Sunday Mass because they wanted only "pro-Sandinista priests" on the air ([48], pp. 13–14). According to the IRD and Humberto Belli, this media blackout and new laws that forbade Nicaraguans from making negative statements about the regime to people abroad made it nearly impossible for these conservative Christians to share their plight with the rest of the world ([47], p. 48). Similarly, when the Sandinistas arrested and killed a number of Miskito Indians for engaging in guerilla warfare against the FSLN, and then forcibly relocated around 10,000 predominately Moravian Christian Miskitos to resettlement camps to contain them, Belli decried Sandinista efforts to isolate them and silence their protests ([32], frames 287–88; [47], p. 49).

According to U.S. evangelical observers, this pattern of harassment escalated further in 1982 when Sandinista organizations vandalized and seized a number of churches. These incidences occurred within the context of mounting counterrevolutionary pressures, which led the Sandinistas to impose a State of Emergency on the country in March 1982, restricting a number of civil liberties including freedom of speech and of the press. With this in mind, sympathetic observers described the attacks on the evangelical churches as a simple government misunderstanding, noting that after CEPAD complained, FSLN leader Daniel Ortega returned the church buildings, "apologized for the mistake and repeated the government's clear commitment to religious liberty" ([32], frame 290). Yet FSLN distrust of the conservative evangelical groups persisted, particularly as U.S.-based counterrevolutionary forces—which had ties to some of these Nicaraguan church groups—intensified their media and international public opinion campaign against the Sandinistas.

⁵ As historian Greg Grandin recounts, in these years the C.I.A. and some members of Reagan's National Security Council began providing covert aid to former members of Somoza's National Guardsmen, as well as to the anti-FSLN Nicaraguan Democratic Union, to help them form a counterrevolutionary movement that would oppose and seek to overthrow the Sandinista government ([17], pp. 113–14).

U.S. interventions aimed at undermining the Sandinista government raised the stakes considerably. In 1981, members of the State Department and Reagan's national security advisors were divided over how to best respond to the revolution in Nicaragua as well as to the civil war unfolding in El Salvador, which they viewed as connected developments and as evidence of Soviet and Cuban efforts to seize control of Central America ([18], pp. 75, 77). During a meeting of National Security Council (NSC) on 16 November 1981, the Reagan administration worked to come to an agreement on an appropriate policy response. Through these discussions, the president and the NSC developed National Security Decision Directive 17 (NSDD 17), which Reagan signed on 4 January 1982. NSDD 17 affirmed U.S. "support for those nations which embrace the principles of democracy and freedom for their people," and as such declared that the Reagan administration would "support democratic forces in Nicaragua" as well as lend assistance to anti-insurgency groups throughout Central America [49]. To this end, in April 1981, the Reagan administration suspended U.S. economic assistance to Nicaragua and, later that year, authorized the CIA to train and arm the Contras, a group of counterrevolutionaries which included former members of Somoza's National Guard. As historian David Painter notes, although Reagan claimed that the goal of these policies was to halt Sandinista aid to the growing insurgency in El Salvador, "[their] main objective quickly became the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government" ([50], p. 99). By 1982, Contra forces had begun to launch attacks in Nicaragua, leading the FSLN to seek support from the Soviet Union and Cuba to shore up its defenses and to declare an official State of Emergency.

In addition to laying the groundwork for the covert counterinsurgency war against the Sandinistas, NSDD 17 also set the stage for a pro-Contra public relations campaign in the United States, a campaign that would ultimately draw heavily on Christian nationalist themes. Reflecting Reagan administration concern about congressional and public opinion against lending support to counterrevolutionary groups, NSDD 17 placed the NSC's plan to "create a public information task force to inform the public and Congress of the critical situation in the area" first in its enumerated list of decisions [49]. The passage of the first Boland Amendment in December 1982, which prohibited the use of congressionally-appropriated funds to "furnish military equipment, military training or advice, or other support for military activities ... for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua," bore out the Reagan administration's concerns about congressional resistance to its policy agenda [51]. When Congress passed a second Boland Amendment in late 1983 prohibiting "covert assistance for military operations in Nicaragua," and then banned aid for military and paramilitary operations in Nicaragua entirely in 1984, the administration launched a concerted effort to bring congressional and public opinion around to supporting to the Contras [52,53].

Allegations that the Sandinistas violated the human rights of their political opponents and persecuted non-revolutionary Christians formed the centerpiece of White House outreach on behalf of the Contras. Faith Ryan Whittlesey, the director of the Office of Public Liaison, discussed this strategy to mobilize public opinion explicitly as she and her staff considered how to best communicate the president's aims in Central America. Department memoranda called for a strategy that would "trigger humanitarian emotions," by sharing the details of "the utter inhumanity and unspeakable cruelties of Marxist guerillas in Central America" through "case studies, documentation," and the like [54]. They also proposed religious theme lines, such as emphasizing the incompatibility of revolutionary activities and Christianity ([54], p. 5). The Office of Public Liaison noted that "nongovernment support must be recruited and prepositioned for activation," by inviting key groups to the White House for foreign policy seminars and following up with regular policy updates, which would provide them with information to incorporate into letter writing and lobbying campaigns ([54], pp. 12, 15, 18). The memo recommended that the White House look to conservative Protestant and Catholic religious organizations in the United States in particular to participate in these activities.

In May 1983, the Office of Public Liaison began holding weekly briefings on U.S.–Central American relations for political, business, and religious leaders from all denominations and political perspectives [55]. For a seminar on religious persecution in Nicaragua, Whittlesey invited a number of

“eyewitnesses” to share their experiences, including the former *La Prensa* editor Humberto Belli, a self-described Pentecostal preacher and Sandinista torture victim named Prudencio de Jesus Baltodano, and Geraldine O’Leary Macías, a former Maryknoll nun. When introducing the speakers, Whittlesey addressed the ideological divisions within the Nicaraguan churches and argued that “the Sandinista leadership is following a two-track policy of persecution and subversion” designed to weaken conservative Christian churches, especially Protestant denominations, while cultivating ties with more sympathetic churches ([56], p. 2). She also stated that “believers have been harassed, arrested, and even tortured,” by the Sandinistas, allegations that her guest speakers elaborated on in detail ([56], p. 2). Baltodano, for example, described Sandinistas tying him to a tree, torturing him, cutting his ears off, and leaving him for dead because they suspected him of supporting the Contras ([56], p. 7; [57]). Whittlesey invited Baltodano to speak at the briefings often because, as she wrote to U.S. Ambassador Terence A. Todman, his testimony about this experience “unfailingly effects a dramatic change in the attitude in the audience” [58].

To expand the reach of their messaging beyond the weekly briefings, the Office of Public Liaison sent speakers out to events across the country, began publishing and distributing a special series of White House *Digests* on the situation in Central America, and sent out targeted mailings to religious groups ([55], pp. 1, 3). Some of the speakers, including Geraldine O’Leary Macías, also traveled abroad under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency to share their testimony with foreign political leaders, religious organizations, and journalists in an effort to sway international public opinion [59]. The mailings and White House *Digests* suggested that the Sandinistas persecuted both Catholics and Protestants, prevented Christians from evangelizing “within Sandinista organizations,” and only allowed revolutionary Christians to participate in civic life [60]. They also included statements from Belli, Baltodano, and other Nicaraguan evangelicals.

Evangelical organizations in the United States, already publishing actively about religious persecution throughout the world and in Central America, amplified these messages from the Reagan White House. Christian news services that focused on religious freedom, such as *Jesus to the Communist World* and the *Open Doors News Service*, shared regular updates with their readers about evangelicals who faced arrest and torture at the hands of the Sandinistas [61–63]. The Institute on Religion and Democracy and other Christian organizations incorporated reports about Sandinista attacks on religious liberty into their fundraising campaigns [64]. In all cases, these groups conveyed the impression that the Sandinistas engaged in widespread yet selective religious repression, targeting only those “true” Christians who rejected Marxism and the FSLN. In this way, they attacked the Sandinista nationalism of revolutionary Christians in Nicaragua, while promoting their own version of Christian nationalism—an American Christian nationalism rooted in democratic and liberal capitalist principles.

Yet despite the allegations that the Reagan administration and its religious surrogates made about Sandinista religious persecution, U.S.-backed Contra forces committed extensive and appalling human rights abuses, which opponents of Reagan’s policies publicized extensively.⁶ Politically progressive and moderate Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and evangelicals spoke out against the war in Nicaragua through pamphlets, newspaper editorials, letter writing campaigns to their representatives, and testimony before Congress. These religious leaders focused on the Contras’ poor human rights record and questioned the Reagan administration’s foreign policy objectives in Central America. One brochure from the Inter-Religious Task Force, an interdenominational activist organization, compiled statements from a wide range of religious leaders who argued that the firsthand experiences of their missionaries and sister churches in Nicaragua made clear “that poverty, oppression and injustice are the primary causes of unrest in the region,” not “Soviet and Cuban-directed agitation and aggression,” as the Reagan administration claimed [65]. The prominent evangelical social justice activist Jim Wallis also

⁶ As Greg Grandin recounts, the Contras killed, kidnapped, and tortured thousands of civilians. He quotes one advisor to the Joint Chiefs of Staff describing them as “just a bunch of killers,” and notes the Contras themselves admitted to vast atrocities ([17], p. 115).

drew on firsthand experience in a searing piece in *Sojourners* about his trip to Nicaragua with the anti-Contra organization Witness for Peace, in which he recounted:

I will not easily forget another mother who tearfully told us how her 13-year-old daughter was decapitated by a *contra* mortar, or the Baptist pastor who could not understand the brutality of the *contras* who hacked to death with machetes a whole group of evangelical teenagers who were simply teaching campesinos how to read . . . Every Witness for Peace volunteer can tell stories of terror, torture, rape, pillage, and murder carried out by the *contras* ([66], p. 4).

Such essays aimed to counter the narratives of Sandinista brutality against Christians that conservative organizations shared, seeking to undermine their portrayal of the *contras* as defenders of religious liberty and American political values.

The fierce disagreements among and within Christian denominations over U.S. policy in Nicaragua greatly intensified the debates in Congress over Reagan administration requests for *contra* funding in 1985 and 1986. As historian Theresa Keeley has shown, the testimony of Catholic anti-*contra* activists, including Maryknoll nuns and Jesuit priests, played a significant role in shaping congressional attitudes against *contra* funding, yet also pushed the Reagan administration to recruit conservative Catholic allies to lend moral support to his cause ([25], pp. 548, 554). These allies, along with conservative Protestant and evangelical activists, proved effective at softening congressional resistance, particularly after FSLN leader Daniel Ortega sought direct aid from the Soviet Union and extended the State of Emergency, further restricting civil liberties, which bolstered *contra* supporters' negative claims about the Sandinistas ([25], p. 548; [67], p. 226; [68]). Evangelical and Christian fundamentalist media personalities such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, whom the White House invited to receive special briefings from Oliver North on U.S.–Nicaraguan relations, urged their followers to contact Congress in advance of pending votes on *contra* funding [69]. The Reagan administration's public relations efforts to undermine its liberal adversaries bore fruit in June 1985, when Congress passed a measure to extend humanitarian aid to the *Contras*. This aid did not include any funds for military purposes, however, so the White House shifted its religious outreach and lobbying efforts into high gear in advance of a March 1986 congressional vote over military funding.

Christian nationalist rhetoric took center stage in this campaign as Reagan pressured Congress to extend an additional \$100 million in aid to *contra* forces, most of it expressly intended for military purposes. In early 1986, the White House made a five-minute long videotape of President Reagan discussing the conflict in Nicaragua for the Christian media to air on its networks. In the tape, Reagan implored American Christians to contact their congressmen and tell them to support the *contra* "Freedom Fighters" in the vote on military aid [70]. He blended national and religious ideals as he castigated Sandinista restrictions on civil liberties, particularly religious freedom, and connected the Christian faith with American democracy and anti-communism explicitly in his closing words when he intoned:

In this time when freedom has flashed out like a great astonishing light in the most surprising places;—in this time when democracy is new again, and communism is more and more revealed as an old idea that's as tired as tyranny;—in this time it is nothing less than a sin to see Central America fall to darkness. Let's not let it happen. It won't if we work together. We can save Central America, with the help of your senators and representatives. Please let them know how you feel. Thank you . . . and God bless you all [71].

These media pieces mobilized evangelical Christians, many of whom had already donated money directly to the *contras* through fundraising campaigns that Pat Robertson coordinated through his aid organization Operation Blessing, and advertised on his television show *The 700 Club* [72–75]. In addition to the videotape, which the White House sent to Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and the Christian Broadcasting Network, the Trinity Broadcasting Network, and other major Christian

television outlets, Reagan also recorded a 60-second long audio message that went out to over 1500 Christian radio stations across the country [76,77]. These messages included instructions for listeners to call a 1–800 number, which would connect them with the contact information for their congressional representatives so that viewers and listeners could call or write letters urging them to support the president’s policies [76,77]. These constituent letters and phone calls poured in to congress, providing additional moral backing to legislators who supported White House policy on Central America.

Reagan’s approach of conflating Sandinista victory with “sin” and “darkness” in contrast to American democracy and freedom also proved effective in the congressional debate that followed. Senators and representatives who supported the president’s foreign policy agenda in Nicaragua reiterated these points, sharing details on Sandinista persecution of Catholics and Protestants; some even participated in hearings on the threats that communism and Liberation Theology posed to the survival of the Church in Central America [78]. Opponents of the military aid measure also appealed to religious themes, marshaling evidence of contra human rights violations and religious persecution, and incorporating statements and testimony from anti-contra Catholic and Protestant leaders into the proceedings [79,80]. In the end though, the contra supporters edged out their opponents. Congress approved the \$100 million spending measure.

This military support for the contras did not end the religious controversy over the conflict in Nicaragua, of course, which continued throughout the rest of the contra war and only intensified as the details of the Iran-Contra scandal emerged. Still, in 1987, evangelical news sources reported that “the Sandinista government has recently adopted a more relaxed approach toward the Church and that evangelistic activities within the country are at an all-time high” ([81], p. 9). Yet they also noted that the National Association of Evangelicals had announced its intention to participate in a worldwide prayer campaign to protest Sandinista religious repression, including the closure of religious radio stations and limitations on church publications, which they argued made evangelism “extremely difficult” ([81], p. 10). Conflicting reports about the extent of ongoing Sandinista persecution abounded. After the Sandinistas signed the Esquipulas Peace Agreement in 1987, in which they and the other Central American leaders committed to pursue economic cooperation, democratic reforms, and conflict resolution, they loosened some restrictions on internal opposition groups. By January 1988, the FSLN had ended the six-year long state of emergency, a move that conservative Christians in the United States and Nicaragua welcomed, though with some skepticism [82]. The democratic elections that followed in 1990 ousted the Sandinistas from power.

The ideological divisions that emerged during the revolution and the contra war continued to rive Nicaraguan Christian groups after the election and well into the 1990s. As Henri Gooren notes in his anthropological study of the post-Sandinista religious marketplace in Nicaragua, in the early 1990s “the Roman Catholic Church remain[ed] divided between a conservative hierarchy and a sizeable minority, made up of the so-called ‘popular church’” ([19], p. 354). Evangelical church members also seemed to vary in their political views; many worshippers who belonged to indigenous churches (a significant proportion of the evangelical population) continued to support the FSLN, while those belonging to churches with stronger ties to U.S. denominations tended to have more negative views of the Sandinistas ([19], p. 353). That said, some revolutionary evangelical organizations, such as the *Comisión Evangélica de Promoción de La Responsabilidad Social*, worked to strengthen their relations with liberal Protestant churches in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s [83].

Thus although to some extent the contra war compromised evangelistic efforts by U.S. churches due to the associations that Nicaraguans drew between them, the United States, and the contras—just as Billy Graham and C. René Padilla had warned decade earlier at the Congress on World Evangelization—the evangelical churches and organizations that cooperated with the Sandinistas

experienced tremendous growth during the 1980s.⁷ The Sandinistas had tended to brand their more conservative brethren, those with ties to U.S. churches and evangelists such as Pat Robertson, as imperialists, which somewhat dampened their appeal. In some ways, the evangelical experience in Nicaragua bore out C. René Padilla's vision: rejecting "American culture Christianity" and moving toward indigenous evangelism models enabled them to flourish. Their growth put the Roman Catholic Church in Nicaragua on the defensive, contributing to ongoing interdenominational conflict in addition to the intra-denominational ideological conflicts that affected both Protestants and Catholics.

Christian nationalism did not cause the contra war, obviously, but the rhetoric of Christian nationalism raised the stakes for all concerned. Religious beliefs, commingled with ideas about freedom and democracy, formed part of the ideological prism through which Reagan viewed U.S. interests in Central America. Operationalized Christian nationalism encouraged U.S. conservative Christians to rally around the president and promote his policy agenda. It also led revolutionary Christians in Nicaragua to lend their support to the Sandinistas, with some even opting to serve in the FSLN government. Nicaraguan Christians, emboldened by the Sandinista vision for a new nation which seemed to embrace their religious commitments to social justice, went to war to fight for the FSLN. Likewise, the contras and their U.S. supporters fought (or funded the effort) to "save" Nicaragua from the "sin" of communism, with its attendant state-sanctioned atheism and religious persecution. That both combatants adopted the mantle of Christian nationalism, and operationalized the concept, demonstrates just how malleable the concept was—but also how powerful. The tactic of conflating faith and nation, or national political principles, proved exceedingly effective in mobilizing people to take political and military action.

For this reason, using the lens of Christian nationalism to examine a conflict between two deeply Christian nations illuminates how ideology, core national values, and religious beliefs shape foreign policy. The belief that there was an enduring relationship between Christianity and American principles influenced how U.S. evangelicals defined their foreign policy objectives and shaped their success in projecting them abroad. When U.S. evangelicals lobbied their congressional representatives to fund the contras in order to protect religious liberty and prevent anti-religious totalitarian forces from gaining a foothold in Nicaragua, they brought American Christian nationalism to the global arena. From their perspective, threats to religious liberty posed a grave threat to their ability to spread the Gospel throughout the entire world and "make disciples of all nations" [84,85]. Regimes that repressed Christians also imperiled the advance of democracy throughout the world. Evangelicals viewed religious liberty as the foundation of human rights—and of democracy. Accordingly, states that denied religious liberty were undemocratic—and, in the context of the Cold War, a danger to American national interests as well as evangelical objectives. The United States, as a bastion of religious freedom and democracy, stood in stark contrast to such regimes [86].

Using Christian nationalism as an analytic concept thus allows us to sharpen our understanding of the essential ideas that motivated U.S. evangelical policy opinion and activism in the late twentieth century. It also allows us to better appreciate how Christians and non-Christians in other countries contested, rejected, and adapted this concept to suit their local contexts. The language that Reagan, evangelical leaders, and allies in Congress used to discuss the contra war reflected the intertwining of spiritual beliefs with American values and democratic principles that constitute American Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism (and internationalism) ultimately complemented the ideology and foreign policy objectives of the Ronald Reagan administration in Central America. Yet the deep divisions that Christian nationalist rhetoric drove into religious life in Nicaragua highlights why Graham and Padilla spoke about this concept with such anxiety and existential foreboding at the Congress on World Evangelism in 1974.

⁷ Gooren notes that the evangelical churches gained considerable market share between 1980 and 1989, with the evangelical population nearly doubling (from about 8% of the population to roughly 15% and continuing to grow) ([19], p 348).

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