



The Evangelical Agenda And Its Avatar, Mike Pence, A Heartbeat Away

Lurking behind the trainwreck that is Donald Trump is the even more chilling prospect of a Pence presidency. While Trump exhibits grotesque character flaws and is a singularly ineffective leader, Pence's evangelical agenda is laser-focused on making the U.S. a Christian theocracy.

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By Claire Bernish

WASHINGTON (Analysis) — Far right-wing theocratic fascism has crept into the halls of the United States government. It now permeates the often unstated agendas of certain politicians and officials, whose Christian dogma demands that they act to make the United States a bastion for like-minded souls — meaning only those souls ardently worshiping the same God, for the same reasons, and in the same manner as they do. Everyone else is, for all intents and purposes, the enemy.

Although this storyline would have once been read as fiction, it surprisingly turns out that — in reality — the prospect of rule by an evangelical Christo-fascist [theocracy](#) isn't out of the question in the United States. That is, now that President Donald Trump has scammed his own base, made mortal enemies of a host of spurned officials and major media players, broken new ground in the racking up of presidential disapproval ratings, and may ultimately face impeachment.

That last prospect, impeachment, would amount to the ultimate coup for this sect of stringent conservatives — as Trump's dethroning would put Vice President Mike Pence at the controls, ready to unleash a tidal wave of restrictive domestic, social, and economic policies aligning tightly with authoritarian, [“evangelical Christian” principles](#).

The evangelical's evangelical

Raised in a Roman Catholic home, Pence experienced an epiphany of faith as he neared the end of his college years. After briefly identifying as an [‘evangelical Catholic’](#) during a transition period, he became fully immersed in his new spiritual life as an evangelical — straight up, no chaser.

But, although his particular religious denomination might have morphed, Pence's devotion remained and continues to remain steadfast. As Brian Howey, a political columnist in the vice president's home state of Indiana, [once put it](#),

Pence doesn't simply wear his faith on his sleeve, he wears the entire Jesus jersey.”

Separation of church and state seems, for Pence and his ilk, to have deteriorated to at most a kind of boilerplate doctrine. In practice, religion-based morality provides the only compass for office-

holding adherents to this political action-oriented evangelism. As an illustration of this worldview at work, consider Pence's bumbling of a disease outbreak with the potential to cause widespread suffering.

Local, state, and federal health officials all implored then-Governor Pence in March 2015 to implement a clean-needle exchange program to stave off a massive HIV outbreak in his state.

Rather than rushing to stem the contagion as requested, Pence [advised](#) that people pray about the matter — [waiting](#) two full days before capitulating to the chorus of officials pleading for the welfare of Indianans. That example is one of many in which politicians espousing this deeply conservative, faith-driven *modus operandi* allow religious tenets to override the needs and wellbeing of the general public.

At the Republican National Convention last year, Pence himself made plain his priorities, [assuring](#) an enthusiastic crowd, "I'm a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican — in that order."

Pence as point-man for theocratic transformation

Pence constitutes *the great, white, law-and-order hope* to those who find such policies and principles imperative in government. It was to ensure that he would ascend to the upper echelons of power that this silent community of evangelical activists, wealthy families, and politicians quietly and tirelessly [supported](#) Pence's political ambitions.

Pence has generally been regarded — at least, in comparisons with Trump — as the lesser menace. There is a real danger in this of confusing less florid with less menacing. The quiet politician with a fondness for authoritarianism must not blithely be given a pass as an innocuous choice to rule the nation with the largest military on the planet. Nothing would please the praying supporters of the vice president more than the Trump-dethroning developments that would lead to [enforcement](#) of "[biblical values](#)" as law in the United States of America.

"The enem, to them, is secularism. They want a God-led government. That's the only legitimate government," [warns](#) Jeff Sharlet, author of *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*. "So when they speak of business, they're speaking not of something separate from God, but they're speaking of what, in Mike Pence's circles, would be called biblical capitalism, the idea that this economic system is God-ordained."

Lest the rise of the Christian fascists to power be mistaken for a tinfoil hat-worthy conspiracy theory, it must be noted that multiple voices have [asserted](#) as much — [including](#) *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt, and award-winning journalist Jeremy Scahill of *The Intercept*. Each of these observers regards as all too real the threat of law and order taken to a rights-crushing extreme, should Pence end up in the White House.

Trump's [Twitter tantrums](#) and his administration's musical chairs aside, the sitting president's theatrics amount to distractions from the steady advancement of the evangelical right's program — with Pence quietly plotting, inured to the serial firestorms. As Scahill [elaborated](#) in the wake of last November's election:

Trump is a Trojan horse for a cabal of vicious zealots who have long craved an extremist Christian theocracy, and Pence is one of its most prized warriors. With Republican control of the House and Senate and the prospect of dramatically and decisively tilting the balance of the Supreme Court to the far right, the incoming administration will have a real shot at bringing the fire and brimstone of the second coming to Washington” [...]

How the GOP foisted Pence on Trump is undoubtedly a fascinating story that hopefully will some day be revealed. Obviously, Pence gave Trump badly needed credibility with evangelical voters and the GOP establishment, but Pence’s selection portends a governing apocalypse. While Trump has flip-flopped on a variety of issues, from abortion to immigration to war and health care, Pence has been a reliable stalwart throughout his public life in the cause of Christian jihad — never wavering in his commitment to America-First militarism, the criminalizing of abortion, and utter hatred for gay people (unless they go into conversion therapy ‘to change their sexual behavior,’ which Pence has suggested the government pay for)”. [...]

Pence opposed efforts to widen hate crimes laws to include attacks on LGBT people. He tried to block federal funding of HIV treatments unless they came with a requirement to advocate against gay relationships. Pence opposes non-straight people serving in the military.”

A tightly controlled, theocratic society needs mega-surveillance

The social left and the LGBTQ community has of course been natural targets for the über-right theocrats. But Pence reaches beyond such groups, championing the most invasive surveillance programs and methods — imposed upon any or all Americans — as necessary for the security of an ‘exceptional’ America.

In fact, the former Indiana governor’s fondness for the U.S. surveillance state was well understood long before his installment as Trump’s second-in-command. Pence was a gung-ho supporter of pernicious programs under the Patriot Act and, frighteningly, the revival and amplification of CIA torture, of which he would also end congressional oversight. Although he has since publicly sterilized such discussion, at a House Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties in May 2008, Pence excoriated relation-building tactics as toothless compared to coercive interrogation (torture and similar techniques) — despite [accounts from high-ranking former military officials](#) asserting that the former were consistently more effective. Addressing the committee, Pence [asked](#) rhetorically:

What about the hard cases?“ Like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who was a mastermind of this a September 11 attacks in this country. How would you respond to the observation that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed probably is not susceptible to relationship-building methods? I can tell by your grin that you acknowledge the somewhat absurd thought that you could move people who have masterminded the death of 3,000 Americans by Oprah Winfrey methods. How would you have sought, how do you think the United States should seek to gain information from a mastermind like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed if he refuses to answer questions voluntarily, when additional American lives could be on the line with information that he is refusing to provide?”

Although Pence backpedaled a bit at the second hearing in July, acknowledging that “torture is illegal, torture is banned by various provisions of the law,” he [stuck by](#) his contention — still

citing the case of Mohammed, and despite the aforementioned contrary evidence — that torture may be necessary from time to time.

Looking beyond the rather narrow category of genuine government suspects, Pence advocates unrestricted, warrantless domestic surveillance be conducted against all Americans — and, as Scahill notes, he supported retroactive immunity for the giant telecommunications companies accused of cooperatively engaging in such activities.

Unbelievers, non-Christians broad-brushed as enemies of the state
Because it tends to identify church with state, the Christo-fascist right regards as enemies of the nation the same entities deemed enemies of their particular brand of religion.

Their worldview thus [errantly conflates](#) radical extremist Islam — which of course no more represents the Islamic religion for all Muslims than the Christo-fascists represent all Christianity — with predominantly Muslim nations, as well as with actual Islamic theocracies.

“The practitioners of terror harbor a special hatred for the followers of Christ, and none more so than the barbarians known as ISIS,” Pence [stated](#) in May, elaborating on reports that the self-designated caliphate was actively waging genocide against Christians inside its Middle East strongholds. “That brutal regime” Pence went on, “shows a savagery, frankly, unseen in the Middle East since the Middle Ages. And I believe ISIS is guilty of nothing short of genocide against people of the Christian faith, and it is time the world called it by name.”

Reassuring hard-right evangelicals of both his support for the president and condemnation of genocide, Pence stressed that Trump “sees these crimes for what they are: vile acts of persecution animated by hatred — hatred for the Gospel of Christ.”

Erik Prince and Blackwater: new theocracy enforcers on call

That these are not mere arm-chair musings is brought home by the linkage between Pence and Erik Prince, notorious founder of the international mercenary contracting firm Blackwater — one of several disturbing [affiliations](#) between Pence and groups devoted to actively advancing the Christo-fascist agenda.

That Prince and Pence [share](#) similar Christo-exceptionalist ideologies must be considered in historical and present contexts to make clear why the Christian supremacist movement, as Scahill terms it, presents as great a threat to the democratic process and traditions of government as do the opposing extremists it assails.

Blackwater security contractors slaughtered or injured dozens of Iraqi civilians in Baghdad’s Nisour Square on September 17, 2007. As the *Times* recently [described](#) it:

The shooting killed or injured at least 31 civilians when contractors unleashed a torrent of machine-gun fire and launched grenades into a crowded downtown Baghdad traffic circle from their heavily armored trucks. An F.B.I. agent once called it the ‘My Lai massacre of Iraq’ [...]

Three of the contractors — Dustin L. Heard, Evan S. Liberty, and Paul A. Slough — were convicted in 2014 of voluntary manslaughter and using a machine gun to carry out a violent

crime. They were sentenced to 30 years in prison, a mandatory sentence on the machine-gun charge. A fourth, Nicholas A. Slatten, a sniper who the government said fired the first shots, was convicted of murder and received a life sentence.”

Earlier this month, a federal appeals court [tossed out](#) these convictions, in a decision that intimates mercenary contractors will not be held responsible for even the most egregious of crimes.

Meanwhile, with contractors like Blackwater continuing to ride the war-on-terror gravy train, politicians like Pence and others advancing the religious right’s agenda continue to receive their tithe of the profits. Prince [gave](#) \$100,000 to a Trump/Pence super PAC at the end of the election cycle. He and his parents are long-standing contributors to Pence’s political campaigns — Erik’s mother, Elsa, donated \$50,000 — as well as to other demonstratively religious and conservative politicians, particularly those most fiercely opposed to pro-choice and gay marriage initiatives. Successful in manufacturing, the Prince family has bankrolled such mainstays of the radical religious right as Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council.

The CIA gets religion

Although individuals like Erik Prince, his family, and other wealthy, politically-active [evangelicals](#) would relish a Pence presidency, Indiana’s quiet conservative is clearly not the sole vector for the realization of their goals.

Consider, for example, the breach in imperative separation of church and state taking place inside the Central Intelligence Agency under new Trump-appointed Director Mike Pompeo. For months, complaints have been mounting throughout the U.S. intelligence community of rapidly evaporating diversity and the concomitant influx of white, male, Christian operatives and their ascribed values—a troubling trend, given the agency’s global directive.

According to testimony from insiders quoted in a [new report from *Foreign Policy*](#), the shift has not occurred covertly, but includes such uncomfortable public events as Pompeo’s regular attendance at religious functions in government buildings, as well as his intent to establish a chaplaincy on the CIA campus.

Longtime agents, the report explains, reasonably perceive the encroachment of a single religious perspective as a drastic turn in agency policy. Unsurprisingly, the report adds, Pompeo’s agency supporters cast the new regime in terms of the free exercise of religion — falsely equating religious adherence with an individual’s ethical and moral decision-making on the job. They glibly dismiss both the complaints of a multitude of non-Christian, non-white agents, as well as the rather obvious need for diversity in a workforce that must assimilate with diverse populations around the globe.

As founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, Michael Weinstein received an ongoing deluge of complaints citing the creep of oppressive evangelical Christianity into the intelligence community since Pompeo’s appointment. *Foreign Policy* recounts one eyebrow-raising example:

According to Weinstein, agency employees don't want to go public with their complaints because of fear of retribution or being labeled as 'leakers.' They don't typically file formal complaints within the government. But certain things are making them especially uncomfortable, such as officials signing off with the phrase 'have a blessed day.'”

“That’s something ‘straight out of *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Weinstein continued, referencing [Margaret Atwood’s](#) raw depiction of a dystopian theocratic society having overtaken the United States — a now-classic, frequently-banned book, warning eerily of what might befall the nation if warning signs are ignored.

Weinstein — who would only vaguely acknowledge working with hundreds of concerned employees, most installed at Langley — further told *Foreign Policy*, “*In the intelligence community, we see supervisors wanting to hold Bible studies during duty hours [and] inviting lower-ranking individuals to their homes for Bible studies.*”

With once-genial intraoffice relations [frosting over](#), Weinstein added, “*our clients at CIA feel extremely isolated in a way they have not felt before.*”

Indeed, previous efforts to broaden the already-expansive diversification efforts at the CIA virtually halted when Pompeo took the helm. The report continues:

A West Point graduate and former small-business owner, [Pompeo] never made a secret of his conservative social viewpoints during his time as a lawmaker. He has visited college campuses to talk about his disapproval of same-sex marriage, arguing that ‘the strength of these families having a father and a mother is the ideal condition for childbearing.’ He has sponsored several pieces of legislation that would have weakened the rights of gay couples and supported organizations that champion those same beliefs.”

The LGBTQ community isn't the only target of the clandestine agency head's bigoted bile. In Pompeo's own words to a Wichita, Kansas church group in 2014, as [reported](#) by *The Intercept* in November last year:

This threat to America” comes from a small minority of Muslims “who deeply believe that Islam is the way and the light and the only answer. They abhor Christians and will continue to press against us until we make sure that we pray and stand and fight and make sure that we know that Jesus Christ is our savior is truly the only solution for our world.”

The U.S. born again as dystopia

Debatably, Pence has already [received](#) one wish: Trump's “religious liberty” executive order, [signed](#) earlier this year, which permits churches and professedly religious individuals greater exemptions and exceptions under the law, in areas such as healthcare. As controversial as such a measure may seem, it is the barest beginning of what may be in store.

In cautioning against Christian supremacy and fascism, it would be irresponsible to sound alarm bells prematurely. Unfortunately, according to multiple indicators, the caution is both warranted and of considerable urgency. There awaits, if Pence and his politico-religious cohorts take

control and implement their political agenda, a [grim and dystopian future](#), not just for the typical targets of religious and nationalistic bigotry but for a far broader swath of American society.