Violence and Constitutional Faith

Paul Kahn

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At the heart of recent American upheavals lies a question the resonance of which extends far beyond the United States: What becomes of a constitutional democracy when faith in civic order gives way to a violence that mimics sacrificial politics? The killing of Charlie Kirk, the surge of Christian nationalist movements, and the willingness of power to mobilize state violence against "enemies within" mark a critical turning point – one that forces jurists and political scientists, in America and abroad, to confront the fragile boundaries between constitutional ideals and the politics of grievance, identity, and exclusion.

Young men and guns: suicide as sacrifice

Gun violence in the United States has become so common as to be a public health problem. We are routinely "shocked" by disturbed young men turning to murderous violence. Interpreting the Second Amendment to protect individual gun ownership has not helped, but there remain many things we could do to address the problem if we had the political will. It is a shocking statement about the condition of our national community that we cannot act.

Our failure to act on guns is, however, no more shocking than our inability to address the public health crises of climate change and vaccine resistance. These are just two of the fault lines in America's culture wars. The costs in lives lost are immense. Once an issue is politicized in America, our capacity to accept suffering seems without limit. In the perverse calculation of costs and benefits in a sacrificial culture, suffering proves commitment.

The murderous young man presents a pathological reflection of the American political imaginary. These violent young men are often loners without faith, friends, or loved ones. Their violent act is both murderous and suicidal. It mimics the form of political violence, a sacrificial killing and being killed. The political imagination finds in self-sacrifice a warrant to kill the other. These young men are, in their own way, following an American political script.

A nation that no longer supports a fulfilling public faith is thrown back on the private resources of family, civil society, and work. When these fail as well, despair can mimic the pattern of meaning-making that sustained the political culture: killing and being killed. The young man with a gun knows his existence as a force in the world at the moment he commits the twofold act. He, too, finds life through death. America's mass murderer is the nation writ small.

America has a problem with gun violence, not because of the Second Amendment or because we have an abundance of guns, but because of who we are. We are at a new chapter in a nation built on sacrificial violence. A similar redeployment of the social imaginary is at work in the rise of a Christian nationalist movement. When the Church becomes political, its message of sacrifice for love becomes one of sacrifice as a warrant to kill. This is deepest threat of political violence in America today.

Charlie Kirk: martyr for the church or the state?

Charlie Kirk was the founder of Turning Point USA, a conservative youth group aligned with President Trump and Christian nationalists. On September 10, he was murdered, while speaking on a college campus. Tens of thousands, including political and religious leaders, came to his memorial service two weeks later. He was claimed as a martyr by both state and church. The double meaning of his death – political and theological – was visible in the colloquy between his spouse, Erika, and the President. She spoke of an inclusive Christian love, forgiving the murderer. He replied that he hated his enemies and did not "wish them well."

In the movement from Erika's love to Trump's enmity, we see the paradox of Christian nationalism: love or hate? Peace or violence? Erika spoke of Jesus and imagined his sacrifice as a practice of love. This is the church as a break in the cycle of killing and being killed; it would overcome political violence through Christ's love. Trump's immediate response spoke to a politicized church that would deploy the violence of the state against its enemies. Erika may want to embrace the sinner, but MAGA frames Kirk's sacrifice as an occasion for revenge. Their exchange raises a deep question: Can the Church have a political theology?

If the conflict of our age is between a secular culture grounded in pluralism and expertise, on the one hand, and a conservative, Christian culture, on the other, divisions within the latter may not appear to matter. The secularist is likely to think that Erika's views open the way for Trump to follow – a sort of bait and switch for the Christian faithful. But from a historical perspective, this conflict within the Christian right matters a great deal. It raises the ancient question of the Church's relationship to the violence of the state. Can the church tame politics by putting love before violence, or will politics draw the church into violence?

America as a political-theological project

The United States has imagined itself as an Enlightenment project of constitutional construction. Citizen identity was tied to belief in a constitutional creed that promised unity despite difference. By the mid-20thcentury, the creed was less a catechism than an affirmation of the power of speech to sustain a single community across a diversity of views about the common good and the sources of individual meaning. According to the creed, America spoke itself into existence; the nation would continue as long as the dialogue continued. A republic of speech tied government by the people to the rule of law.

The constitutional creed, however, no more explains the sacrificial character of American politics than does the Christian creed of love explains the violent history of the Church. Alongside the constitutional faith ran another deeply Christian idea: meaning is realized in the world through sacrifice. American political life was an extension of the religious wars that marked Christian Europe as the New World opened to Old World settlement. Those were civil wars within the Christian community. America's first one hundred years as a nation were marked by civil war. War provides an occasion for, and a test of, commitment to an ultimate faith. A civil war generates that opportunity internally. For this reason, in the decades after the Civil War, North and South could celebrate together their reciprocal practices of sacrifice for the nation. Each side gave the other an occasion for sacrifice; each said to the other that there is no higher meaning.

America was a non-sectarian project in the form of the Christian imagination, linking creed to sacrifice. The sacrificial practice meant that there was always more to the meaning of the state than could be set forth in the constitutional text. In the mid-19th century, Lincoln became the great symbol of this melding of reason and faith. He is the great debater, the self-taught lawyer committed to the constitution as the foundation of his faith. He is also the sacrificial citizen, who will command citizens to kill and then die for the sake of a nation that carries with it the very meaning of history.

The political success of America lay in the discovery that ordinary people would kill and be killed for the sake of a political idea. American politics asked not only what you will say, but what you will do. This made it a political-theological project. Those of my generation carry two memories of schoolhouse rituals of citizenship: the pledge to the flag representing the republican virtues of freedom and justice, but also the drill of nuclear attack representing instantaneous, universal sacrifice. We were learning that our constitutionalism was a matter of life and death, and that we were all citizen-soldiers.

This double commitment to constitution and sacrifice was the meaning of the idea that America was a "Christian nation." Christian, but without Christ. Lincoln was the American Christ; the innocent sacrifice enabling the state to live in a deeper truth. Yet,

Lincoln was claimed by no church. His faith was in the constitution; his church was the nation.Citizens faithfully joined that church, accepting its creed and its sacrificial practices.

The American martyr: Lincoln or Kirk?

Today, the Christian right would put Charlie Kirk in Lincoln's place as the American martyr. Lincoln was a political-theological figure; Kirk was a religious figure with a political mission. To those who believe that only God can be a source of ultimate meaning, the American redeployment of the Christian imagination to support a secular political formation represented at best a loss of faith and at worst idolatry.

Kirk's Christian nationalism became viable only with the collapse of the Lincolnian, political-theological state. Christian nationalists had always been with us, but they were marginal until the American faith in its constitutional creed could no longer support a practice of sacrifice. Citizens no longer heard in the constitution the voice of a transcendent, inter-generational collective-subject—the popular sovereign.

We should not be surprised that even a secular political-theological project would collapse as religious faith generally retreats. America had been a successor church to sectarian faith. The popular sovereign was a successor god. That god has been dying at least since the Vietnam war where claims of sacrifice failed, leaving only a murderous state. This failure brought with it a parallel failure of our constitutional imagination – one marked by the turn to originalism. Parsing 18th century dictionaries is not an interpretive method that can support a faith in the transcendent claim of the state. The American political project of faith and sacrifice had been living on borrowed time for several decades before Trump arrived.

Many, if not most, Americans are no longer believers in the secular church that was the constitutional republic. They no longer respond to the constitutional claim as Abraham responded to God's sacrificial demand with the simple, "I am here." Instead, they ask, "What's in it for me?" Of course, many Americans maintain a morality of concern for others in the form of respect for their rights and support for amelioration of their material conditions. But these moral concerns are detached from a political faith. They are attached instead to a legal framework set free of a practice of sacrifice: human rights.

From political theology to a theological politics

In the post-War era, a Christian movement chose law over politics, understanding it as a choice for peace over violence. Contemporary Christian nationalists are making the opposite choice. They would deploy the instruments of state violence in pursuit of sectarian ends. As I write this, President Trump is addressing an extraordinary gathering of military leaders, telling them that the military should train through deployment in American cities. Christian nationalist leaders often embrace the violence.

The politicalization of Christian conservatives has been a pressing topic for more than a decade. It is, in part, a story of opportunity beginning with the collapse of America's secular, sacrificial faith. With that collapse, America divided in the culture wars. On one side were those who could navigate this new terrain in which individuals were on their own, without the support of extended families, churches, civic associations, or community leaders. Success, under these circumstances, usually required wealth. On the other side were those who lacked the resources to succeed. Many of them found support through faith in conservative Christian churches. This faith marked an identity in a rapidly emerging conflictual space. Under the right circumstances, it could become explicitly political.

Those circumstances arose with Trump. The first Trump administration promised a transactional presidency appropriate for an age that had lost its political faith. When he said he would end our forever wars, he was announcing an end to sacrificial politics. Healthcare and infrastructure would be our politics. He approached the religious right in this same transactional manner, garnering their votes not by his awkward expressions of faith but by promising reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and relief from a tax provision that prohibited church participation in political campaigns.

A transactional politics, however, was not enough to get Trump reelected, and it was not enough for a nation suffering from a loss of faith. Biden, too failed, to win support through a transactional politics that deliberately directed benefits to his political opposition. Americans remained profoundly unhappy with what was on offer.

The failure of transactional politics made Trump entirely dependent on the Christian right as his base. He came to support their effort to occupy the empty space of a secular political faith that no longer made present an ultimate meaning. Occupying this space, the movement has shown us a deep truth about America: the line between religious faith and political faith is so thin as to be nonexistent. Culture, politics, and religion endlessly entail each other in America.

When the church becomes a state, however, sacrifice takes on its political character of a killing and being killed. The religious martyr's message of love – of a non-reciprocating death – becomes a political message of hate – a killing and being killed. This is what Trump explained to Erika Kirk. The church may imagine a universal faith of inclusion, but its political practice will be civil war. A politicized church will, accordingly, always be called out as a fallen church. It will be accused of yielding to the temptation of power.

In the days since Kirk's murder, we have witnessed an administration bent on identifying enemies and deploying state violence against them. Our new Christian patriots believe the political work of the state is also God's work. In the end, the work of their church will become that of the state: a killing and being killed. Trump's new department of war has no wars to fight except in our own streets. Remarkably, he acknowledged this before the generals. America's civil wars are not yet done.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Kahn

Paul W. Kahn, the Robert W. Winner Professor of Law and the Humanities at Yale Law School, is the author of more than a dozen books on law and political culture.Paul W. Kahn, the Robert W. Winner Professor of Law and the Humanities at Yale Law School, is the author of more than a dozen books on law and political culture.

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