

Examining the Symbolic Use of Two Flags by Christian Nationalists

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EXAMINING THE SYMBOLIC USE OF TWO FLAGS BY CHRISTIAN NATIONALISTS

While individual national identities are typically conveyed using a single flag, some nationalists choose to express their identity with two flags. For instance, Christian nationalists in the USA and South Korea have started flying the Israeli flag beside their country's national flag at right-wing Christian rallies or outside their homes.

Dr Amílcar Antonio Barreto and **HyungJin Kim**, two researchers at Northeastern University, have recently carried out a study exploring the symbolic meaning of this double flag use among Christian nationalists.

One Identity, Two Flags

Throughout history, flags have been used by civilisations, political parties and individuals to convey a sense of national identity or their belonging to a specific group. Generally, feelings of national identity are conveyed through the use of a single national flag. Some people, however, can express their national identity and ideology using more than one flag.

In recent decades, many Christian nationalists in the USA and in South Korea started flying the Israeli flag alongside their national flag. In the USA, this dual flag phenomenon has been ongoing for approximately two decades, while in South Korea it started around 2017.

The involved Christian nationalists are primarily evangelical, yet they use the Israeli flag – a symbol of Judaism – as a pan-Judeo Christian symbol. While flying the Israeli flag might be perceived by some as an act of support for Israel or Zionism, in this context it appears to hold an entirely different meaning.

Dr Amílcar Antonio Barreto and HyungJin Kim, both based at

Northeastern University, recently carried out a study assessing the symbolism behind the use of the Israeli flag alongside the national flag by Christian nationalists in the USA and South Korea. Their paper outlines the different meanings associated with the Israeli flag inside and outside of Israel, focusing on those attributed to it by Christian nationalists.

The Use of Flags by Religious Nationalists

Symbols are abstract or material objects that are inherently meaningless, yet they carry an emotional charge and a complex web of meanings for those using them. In society, symbols can create conflicts between groups with different ideologies or religious beliefs.

Religious nationalists often use symbols to express their beliefs and sense of identity, including flags, rituals, slogans, hand gestures, and so on. These symbols are often ambiguous, as they can be interpreted differently by different groups of people.

Flags have been among the most used symbols expressing nationalistic and religious beliefs for years. At political

rallies, extremists and religious nationalists often use these flags to convey their belief of being superior to other religious or ethnic groups in their nation or even sub-groups within the same religion that do not share all their beliefs.

In their paper, Dr Barreto and HyungJin Kim specifically looked at how the Israeli flag is being used by Christian nationalists in the USA and South Korea, comparing the meanings they attribute to it to the meaning it holds for others around the world.

The Israeli Flag

The Israeli flag, depicting the Star of David (Magen David) on a white background sitting between two horizontal blue stripes, was adopted in 1948, shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel. The Star of David is an old symbol that appeared in ancient synagogues, although it was once more of an aesthetic drawing than a religious emblem.

It became more closely associated with Judaism in the 19th century and even more so in the 20th century, after Hitler ordered Jews to wear this star as a sign



of exclusion from society during his horrific regime. The Zionist movement then started using this symbol to express their mission to establish a recognised state for Jews, supported by some evangelicals who perceived this Jewish state as a necessary step preceding the return of their Messiah.

Outside of Israel, people often use the Israeli flag and the Star of David to express their support for the establishment of the state of Israel. In Northern Ireland, on the other hand, the flag is often used by Unionists (the segment of the population that wishes Northern Ireland to remain in the United Kingdom), to counter flags displayed by Republicans (those who oppose this view and seek to unite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland).

This is because Ireland, like Israel and Palestine, is a politically divided region, thus Northern Ireland (the part of the island that remains attached to the UK) partly reflects the dynamics underlying the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. In this case, the Israeli flag does not hold a religious meaning, but rather a political and ideological one.

Christian Nationalists in the USA

In their paper, Dr Barreto and HyungJin Kim highlight the difference between the use of the Israeli flag by Unionists in Northern Ireland and that by Christian nationalists in the USA and South Korea. While Irish Unionists use the flag as a political symbol, for Christian nationalists it expresses their religious and social ideology.

In the USA, many Christian nationalists reject the country's democratic and equalitarian society, as they believe that white, straight and pious evangelicals are superior to all other religious and ethnic groups. As such, they feel that they should be placed at the 'top' of society, while others should have an inferior social standing.

In this context, the Israeli flag assumes a biblical role, representing biblical values and their idea of a 'white evangelical' America. As such, many evangelical pastors

hang Israeli flags in their Church along with the American flag to express their support for this ideology and a disdain for feminism, homosexuality, abortion, secularism and other modern social phenomena.

Christian nationalists in the USA are predominantly pro-capitalists, against abortion and feminism, while sharing patriarchal and homophobic ideas. For these individuals, the Israeli flag alongside the American flag expresses these chauvinistic and patriarchal beliefs, while projecting an illusory idea of Israel as a tough and godly nation. When American Christian nationalists fly an Israeli flag during rallies, they are thus expressing their wish to exclude non-pious Americans from what they perceive as the 'authentic' and 'most worthy' part of American society.

Christian Nationalists in South Korea

In South Korea, the Israeli flag recently assumed a very similar meaning to that attributed to it by Christian nationalists in the USA. In South Korea, most people do not have a strong religious identity, but rather, identify themselves through Confucianism, the ancient Chinese belief system that outlines certain ethics and morals.

Christian nationalists in South Korea do not embrace their country's official national identity, as they also wish to live in a biblically centred society. Like their American counterparts, they frown upon the changing role of women in society and the tolerance of sexual minorities.

In 2017, right-wing Koreans attended rallies flying the South Korean flag alongside the Israeli flag and American flag. To them, these flags showed their support for Trump's rule in America and the right-wing ideology embraced by Trump's supporters, while also expressing their anger in response to societal changes, including feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights.

The Countless Meanings of Flags

The recent paper by Dr Barreto and HyungJin Kim offers some interesting insight into the meanings and symbolisms that Christian nationalists in the USA and South Korea attach to the Israeli flag. In addition, it emphasises the crucial role that flags and symbols still play in polarised modern societies.

While the use of the Israeli flag by these Christian segments of the population might be perceived as a sign of affection for Israel or the Zionist movement, it conveys entirely unrelated meanings that are in no way connected to the state of Israel. Studies like the one conducted by this team of researchers could inform people worldwide about the multitude of ideologies associated with flags and other symbols, so that they can better navigate the complexities of modern society.



Meet the researcher

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Dr Amílcar Antonio Barreto is a Professor in the Department of Cultures, Societies & Global Studies, a Professor in the International Affairs programme, and a Professor in the Department of Political Science. He holds a PhD in Political Science, a JD in Law and an MA in Political Science from the University of Buffalo, and a BA in Political Science from Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico. He started teaching at Northeastern in 1996 and has since taught several classes that are part of the International Affairs and Political Science Programmes. Dr Barreto has conducted extensive research focusing on different cultural political science topics. Most of his studies focus on nationalism, social, racial, political, and religious issues in Puerto Rico and the USA. Throughout his career, Dr Barreto has published prolifically. In addition to peer-review papers, he has authored books, editorials and encyclopaedia articles. In light of his outstanding contributions, he has received several awards, including the Distinguished Faculty Award by Northeastern University's African American Institute in 2013 and the Outstanding Teaching in Political Science Award by the National Political Science Honour Society in 2005. In 2001, his book 'The Politics of Language in Puerto Rico' was named one of the best books of the year by the Puerto Rican Newspaper 'El Nuevo Día'.

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FURTHER READING

AA Barreto, H Kim, [One identity, two flags: Christian nationalists, the Israeli flag and national authenticity](#), *Ethnicities*, 2021, 23(1), 110–127. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968211067213>

