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POPULISTS OR INTERNATIONALISTS? EVANGELICAL TRIBES AND GLOBALIZATION

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Evangelical Internationalism in Comparative Perspective: Discerning a Global Social Ethic

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Populism's Internationalist Roots

As right-wing populism has veered increasingly toward isolationist, nationalist and protectionist policies, it sits uneasily with a faith that knows neither Jew nor Greek and bids Christians live as citizens of a divine kingdom that transcends borders. As one surveys the way in which Christian evangelicals respond to populism around the world, one finds beneath the surface the latent roots of its global vision.

In my international relations classes, we used to date the liberal internationalist movement back to Woodrow Wilson and the idealists of the early 1900s. But, in fact, it must be rooted even earlier in the Whiggish activities of evangelicals in modern Britain—and later America. In the mid-twentieth century, William Wilberforce's [Clapham Sect](#) had sown the seeds of liberalism. It was not a major step to move from abolitionism to the public health campaigns of [Florence Nightingale](#), the Christian social relief of [William Booth's Salvation Army](#) or the Transatlantic medical and relief mission of [Wilfred Grenfell](#).

But while North Americans turned away from the liberal instincts of the social gospel movement in the 1900s, British Christians mostly stuck with it. [Niebuhrian realism](#), which justified the use of coercive state power in the pursuit of global justice, was an American phenomenon. British evangelicals shared American concerns about atheism and totalitarianism in the Soviet Union and its satellites. But they added to these worries an interest in social issues at home and (later) abroad. The lines that divide mainline churches and evangelicals in Britain were never as definitive as they were in the U.S. Recall for instance that even C.S. Lewis—a hero to many a North American evangelical—[attended the \(Episcopal\) Church of England](#) throughout his adult life. He and his scholarly compatriots had a decidedly negative view of the modernism and glorification of technology that

became the motors of modern globalization. They represented a more cautious embrace of Cold War anti-Communism.

British Christians dallied with the peace movement and nuclear disarmament, even on occasion [partnering with Communists](#) in the 1960s. In the 1970s, a group of British Christians began what has become the annual [Greenbelt Festival](#), a self-styled music, arts and justice event that demonstrates the open-minded form of British evangelical Christianity. Over the years, it has hosted evangelical music stalwarts like Michael W. Smith, Amy Grant and Delirious?, and also progressive musical acts such as U2 and Sinéad O'Connor. Though the festival is now described as “post-evangelical”, to this day the music combines with liberal and left-wing causes, from environmentalism to aid and debt relief to justice for Palestinians. Right-wing populists are not likely to feel at home here.

British evangelicals in the 1990s continued to embrace the liberal internationalist vision. [Martin Dent](#), said to be the great, great, great grandson of Claphamite [Thomas Fowell Buxton](#), planted an idea in 1990 that became the Jubilee 2000 movement. Dent's idea was to apply the Biblical principle of jubilee to the heavily indebted countries of the Third World. He caught the attention of the Debt Crisis Network, but most notably evangelical Christian development agencies in Britain. [Reflecting on the inertia behind the campaign](#), Ann Pettifor of the DCN notes that “Jubilee 2000's first key supporters... were mainly evangelical Christians organized around the aid agency Tear Fund.” That idea went on to inspire politicians, activists, the pope and even rock stars. One might even say that U2's Bono seemingly rediscovered faith after hearing about Jubilee 2000 and shared it all over the world—even [reportedly bringing conservative U.S. senator Jesse Helms “to tears.”](#) The result was a set of dramatic efforts to reduce debt throughout the developing world in the early 2000s.

Elsewhere in the Anglosphere

Elsewhere in the Anglophone world, Christian evangelicals often find a middle way between U.S.-inspired populist and nationalist ideas and the liberal internationalist vision. In Canada, evangelicals share a common subculture with their American coreligionists. However, scholar Jonathan Malloy observes that [the Canadian parliamentary and party system](#) does not encourage the sort of religious partisanship that has arisen in the American case. What is more, Canadian foreign policy is not highly politicized. Canada does have a strongly moralist tradition in its foreign policy, one that in fact has its [origins in Canadian Christian missionary activity](#). Nevertheless, the content of Canadian foreign policy has strongly favored a liberal internationalist tradition that suits its middle power status.

Canadian evangelicals tend to embrace the multilateral vision. However, they do show some interest in combining such internationalism with an application of conservative policies abroad, in imitation of their neighbors to the south. This has periodically had an impact on Canadian foreign policy priorities. For example, while Canada has no analogy to the U.S. Mexico City policy, which forbids funding non-governmental organizations that advocate abortion rights, the [Conservative government of Stephen Harper limited federal funding](#) to such organizations under its maternal health initiative after 2010. His government [also pursued a stronger tilt toward Israel](#), mirroring American conservative Christianity's staunch support of that nation's foreign policy. In 2013, the Conservative government [appointed its first Ambassador for International Religious Freedom](#), Andrew Bennett, following the lead set by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Each of these initiatives was commonly seen to cater to the interests of Canadian evangelicals, but communicated in a way that communicates a global social ethic.

Arguably, however, the defining issue of contemporary nationalists—global migration and the refugee crisis of 2015—put Canadian evangelicals decidedly in the liberal internationalist camp. Canada maintains a private sponsorship system in addition to government-sponsored refugees, following the election of a Liberal government in late 2015 and the new prime minister's decision to expand the number of incoming refugees to 25,000. Evangelical churches responded very positively to this call, taking in [over 3,000 of the refugees through private sponsorship in 2015-2017](#), according to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. By and large, Canadian Christians view foreign resettlement in Canada through a very positive lens—and an anti-immigrant posture [does not present a winning political strategy](#) in most areas of the country, including among Christians.

Down under, Australia's hybrid voting system has allowed some evangelical Christians to score political gains over the years, most notably in the case of the Family First Party, which occasionally won a seat in state elections over the past decade. Under John Howard's populist Liberal Party governments in the early 2000s, government members "clearly felt more at home with the individualist aspirations and traditional family values contained in the messages of the newer evangelical churches," [according to one observer](#).

In August 2018, [Scott Morrison, an evangelical, became Australian Prime Minister](#). Though his Liberal Party espouses what are often considered hardened populist positions on immigration and the environment, these are not typical of Australian evangelicals. What is more, Prime Minister Morrison cuts a much lower profile than populist firebrands in other contexts. He keeps a studied distance between his politics and his faith in an attempt to appeal to a broader and more secular conservative base.

Korea: A Regional Vision for Evangelicals?

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) presents a fascinating example of a state in which a growing Christian population has had an important, if often private, impact on foreign policy. The overall framework of Korean foreign policy [matches that of a small middle power](#) with a high degree of commitment to the maintenance of international peace and security. While the U.S. strategic alliance and Korea's relationship with North Korea are by far the most dominant questions in Korean foreign policy, in other ways, South Korea is highly committed to the preservation of multilateralism and a more liberal international system. The United Nations played an important role in the birth of the Republic of Korea, and since gaining membership in the U.N. in 1991, Koreans have contributed generously to the budget of the organization. The country has been an active participant in U.N. peacekeeping and global aid initiatives. There is little evidence that Korean Christians present a challenge to Korean multilateralism.

[Rapid modernization and globalization combined with democratization in the 1990s](#), providing new opportunities for Korean Christians to have an impact on the country's foreign relations. About one third of Korea's population of 59 million profess Christianity. However, Korean Christian commitment to evangelization and their fervor for the faith are legendary. [One historian observes](#) that "[t]hey give you the impression that South Korea is a very religious country, when in fact it isn't. But the ones who are religious tend to be very fervently religious."

Korea is said to have the [second-largest population of foreign Christian missionaries](#) (after the U.S.). Korea's business and missions relationships throughout central Asia extend Korean culture and

foreign policy, contributing to its internationalist foreign policy. On occasion, missionaries present a challenge, such as the 2007 abduction of 23 Koreans by the Afghan Taliban. The government responded by seeking to [ban missions activity](#) in dangerous environments such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. Nevertheless, Korean missionaries remain a major part of that country's regional presence.

Korea's Christians are largely conservative, with close ties to American evangelicalism and a long memory of the nationalist and anti-communist policy that built an independent republic in the south. The spectre of totalitarian state atheism in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK, or North Korea) contrasts sharply with the tolerance of religion they enjoy in the Republic of Korea (the ROK, or South Korea). Under former President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), Christians came to be [closely associated with the Korean right](#). However, the [implication of Lee and his successor President Park in government scandals](#) weakened the right's moral authority. The church's involvement in political corruption, as well as [a corruption scandal within the most prominent Korean megachurch](#), have brought significant disillusionment.

Writing in the wake of the North Korean charm offensive in South Korea during the 2018 Winter Olympic Games and the emergence of U.S.-North Korean détente, Diane Winston noted the way in which Korean Christians widely embrace American suspicions about the world. They are therefore [wary of a thaw with the north, but fully committed to pursuing deeper change](#) in the northern part of the peninsula. Christians beam the Gospel message to North Korea, sponsor efforts to integrate North Korean defectors into South Korean society and seek to build an infrastructure that will enhance religious freedom in a future reunited Korean peninsula.

Conclusion: The Global Vision of African, Latin American and Asian Evangelicals

Going beyond the English-speaking world and East Asia, one may find important Christian influences on the foreign policy of a number of states around the world. Leaders in several African states have clerical and other backgrounds in evangelical Churches. One prominent example is Nigerian Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, a pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God. In a state in which Muslim-Christian amity is vital to the maintenance of peace and stability, Osinbajo [presents a vocal case for peace and reconciliation](#). In Latin America, evangelicals have a growing profile as leaders and (often) critics of Western globalization. Even Colombian evangelicals, stalwarts of the conservative perspective and vocal critics of the peace process with the leftist opposition, have become [players in the process of reconciliation](#). Elsewhere, churches in Brazil have been on the front lines [welcoming Venezuelan refugees](#) to otherwise unwelcoming spaces, even if [many support right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro](#) for his support in the culture wars. In India, evangelical Churches, though a small minority of the population, [have become targets of the Hindu nationalist movement](#). Christian populism in that country is far more likely to cluster around themes of social justice, upward mobility for outcastes and critical perspectives on the nuclear project.

While the cultural influence, financial support and power of Evangelical populism in the U.S. remains influential throughout the world, context clearly makes a significant difference in the appeal of political populism among Christians. Put simply, it is impossible to read contemporary populism among evangelicals through a narrow lens. At its heart is a widespread internationalist social concern. Populism may easily veer toward nationalism, intolerance, opposition to global migration and critiques of social justice and global initiatives. In these cases, the internationalist roots of

evangelicalism make for an uneasy embrace of populism. In the final analysis, evangelical populism cannot easily shed a global concern for justice, the poor and the downtrodden, and the nativist appeals of populists are rarely the most effective tools to undertake such action.

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