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Christian Extremism in the United States

In the early 1800's when American soldier Francis Scott Key coined the phrase, "land of the free, home of the brave," he did not realize the lasting effects his words would have on the United States of America. For hundreds of years and still today, America has prided itself for upholding its promise of freedom both in our national anthem and in our Constitution. Throughout history, the ability to freely express one's beliefs and ideas has lead to various attacks from different groups across our nation. A combination of the radicalization of the Bible's view on sin and changes in American culture have contributed to the creation of Christian extremism.

Sin is defined as, "An immoral act considered to be a transgression against a divine law." The concept of sin was first introduced in the Bible when Adam and Eve defied God's instruction to refrain from eating the forbidden fruit that would be presented to them. Following that event, sin and evil were accepted into the world. Throughout the rest of the bible, sin is mentioned many more times in the form of either stories or letters. It is described as bad, evil, guilty, and godless, and is closely associated with temptation from the devil. The stories told in the Bible were written in order to serve as a model for Christians to live out their lives. The creation of these stories successfully portrayed the different aspects of living out the Christian faith, but the scenarios in many of the stories left room for further interpretation. Most Christians

can agree that sinning is morally wrong, but how sinning should be dealt with is where conflicts often arise.

The issue of how to deal with sin and potential wrongdoings has been persistent throughout much of American history. However, increasing improvements in technology and the media have caused these issues to become more apparent to people in the US. Many Americans began to call attention to the strong divide in issues that are not clearly stated in the Bible as right or wrong, and as a result, various interest groups formed. In Doug Rossinow's journal, *Christianity and Dissent in Modern America*, he explains:

This is the world of Christian prophecy and politics in the twentieth-century United States. This is the world of moral indictments and searing judgments that rages beneath the sometimes apparently narrow or anodyne surface of formal political debate in modern America. We can stuff the storming, teeming reality of religion and American politics into our received categories of right and left if we will. . . The concept of a broad divide in America's religious politics, between progressive and conservative cultural perspectives, cutting across denominations and faiths. . .

His depiction of religion and politics in the twentieth century correctly reflected the feelings of Americans who were exposed to the growing divide on controversial issues. Later in his journal, Rossinow stresses the heavy influence of the media on this growing divide, and blames it for contributing to social unrest. The controversial issues that became increasingly apparent in the twentieth century are extremely complex, and to this day they remain unsolved.

Controversial issues particularly effect the beliefs of religious groups. Christianity has been present in America from the moment it was founded, and has always been a prominent religion in the country. As time has passed and the country has undergone changes, beliefs in Christianity have changed as well. Following the Civil War, the struggle of racism in American was at its peak. Much of the country was now strongly against the discrimination of blacks, while others were still in favor of it. A group of white Christian extremists came to form the Ku Klux Klan, a hate group based in the southern, confederate states. The group was based on the core value that if you are not white and not a Christian, you were the enemy. The KKK used the ultimate Christian symbol, the cross, to represent themselves, burning them in the lawns of blacks, Jews, and other minorities. Still today, on the KKK's national website, Klan member and advocate Rachel Pendergraft wrote a brief history of the party where she referred to it as, "a Christian organization with Christian principles as its purpose." The KKK uses sporadic verses from the Bible to defend their actions, such as "I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart from all other people" (NLT, Lev. 20:24). Although it is nice to be able to interpret the Bible openly, it sparks potential radicalization from extremist groups such as the KKK.

Another major event that can shift American culture is the passing of new laws. Up until 1973 when the Roe vs. Wade decision was put into law, abortion in the United States was illegal and not highly publicized. The passing of this law did far more than allow women to legally abort their children because it prompted nationwide controversy that still exists today. This law made a lasting impact on Christianity in the United States because it gave women the option to make a major life decision that hadn't been previously offered to them. The Bible mentions countless times that murder is wrong, and is even listed as one of the Ten Commandments. Many people are able to identify the fact that murder is the killing of one human by another; However,

it is extremely difficult to identify when a human is first considered a human. Some people believe human rights should begin at conception, while do others at birth.

From the earliest teachings of Christianity, sin has been explained as the act of disobeying God. Although the Christian belief is that God forgives our sins, the goal of Christianity is to live out a life following God's plan and avoiding sin. Different denominations within Christianity view sin slightly differently. Some denominations believe sin should be handled in a more formal manner, while others do not. The discussion of whether some sins are worse than others in the eyes of God is a constant discussion among Christians. For those who believe this to be true, their question is, which sins are worse than others? A major cause of radical behavior in Christianity is the idea that instead of letting God deal with one's sins, it is their duty to act themselves. The idea of punishing others for their sins prompted the creation of a Christian extremist group in America referred to as the Army of God.

The Army of God first emerged in the US in the early 1980's. Founded as a Christian, anti-abortion activist group, they quickly became a domestic terror threat. The Army of God has strong beliefs opposing abortion, and believe that whoever may support it should be punished. Since the formation of the group, they have launched numerous attacks and bombings of abortion clinics, killing doctors, patients, and other clinic workers and supporters. The Army of God contributes their actions to the Bible, using radicalized verses and stories. This means of defending themselves has proven to be highly controversial, therefore furthering the question of Christianity and its means of handling sin.

The existence of this group quickly became well known across the country with help from the media. The ongoing technological advances in America have proven to both help and hurt its people. As technology improves, the media improves, and as the media improves, people

have easier access to current stories and issues. The publicizing of this group's attacks on the news and in newspapers caused a sense of widespread fear for abortion clinics across the country, giving the terror group the response they intended to receive. Without the media's involvement, stories of these attacks would not reach much further than the local area surrounding it. The media is able to take everyday events and amplify them into major headlines, potentially making them a bigger of an event than they truly are. Similar to the Army of God, many terror groups thrive on the sense of fear that the media creates for them.

Christianity is a holy and peaceful religion, and has many followers who devote their entire lives to the service of others. With over 2 billion followers and over 30,000 denominations, it is a major presence across the world. All of the good deeds that Christians do cannot makeup for extremism and terrorism; It is an everyday struggle to combat the groups who radicalize the majorly kind and generous way of life. Changes in American culture and the constant pressure to improve the quality of life can often cause shifts in religious and political groups. The existence of groups with similar ideas can either benefit or hurt the country, depending solely on how they choose to express their ideas to the public. Although the Ku Klux Klan and the Army of God have proven to be dangerous Christian extremist groups, there are also thousands of Christian groups throughout the country who come together to freely and publicly express their beliefs. Freedom is a generous right the United States of America offers, and it is the civic duty of Americans to morally practice that right.

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