

Vaccine Hesitancy Among Evangelicals Through Lens of Secularization Theorists

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Immunization is one of the most successful public health interventions, estimated to have saved 154 million lives in the past 50 years (World Health Organization 2024). As an example of its success story, in 1980, smallpox was marked as eradicated (World Health Organization 2010). Vaccine hesitancy, however, continues to pose public health challenges, as reflected in the recent measles outbreak in Texas that is continuing to spread across the country (Halpert 2025; Kekatos and Zubair 2025). Among those who are unvaccinated in the United States, White Evangelical Christians comprise a significant portion. For example, Pew Research Center conducted a survey and found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, White Evangelicals were less likely to be vaccinated than other religious groups (Funk and Gramlich 2021). In May 2022, White Evangelicals were found to account for almost a third of unvaccinated adults in the US for COVID-19 (Guidry et al. 2022). This research aims to understand how vaccine hesitancy spreads among White Evangelicals and analyze the phenomenon from multiple secularization theories.

Vaccine hesitancy among White Evangelicals can be viewed as a product of authorizing discourse against the established practices of vaccination. Asad argued that power creates the conditions for experiencing the religious truth through an authorizing discourse, which entails excluding, rejecting, or denouncing certain discourses or practices (Asad 1993, 35). In the context of vaccine hesitancy among White Evangelicals, power is inherent in the church and its clergy. They lead the authorizing discourse that replaces scientific knowledge and practices governing today's society with a biblical worldview, emphasizing divine sovereignty over everyday life (Asad 1993, 49; Smith 1998, 44). This authorizing discourse against vaccination was promoted by Evangelical pastors and political community among White Evangelicals.

Evangelical pastors embody charismatic authority, a form of power Weber (1946, 327–328) describes as rooted in perceived divine inspiration or extraordinary ability as characterized in prophets. Pastors are similar to prophets in that they influence congregants by guiding them to let their faith shape their choices and actions (Pearce 2022). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, congregants placed a high degree of trust in their religious leaders for vaccine-related guidance—often exceeding the trust they placed in state and local officials or news media. This trust positively correlated with regular religious service attendance (Nortey and Lipka 2021). With their religious charisma, Evangelical pastors influenced their congregants to form negative perspectives on COVID-19 vaccination. Research found that Evangelicals who relied on religious leaders for advice on vaccines were significantly less likely to be vaccinated, demonstrating the powerful influence of charismatic authority (Guidry et al. 2022).

Evangelical pastors advance a broader biblical worldview that directly conflicts with the dominant institutional framework of American society. Among all major Christian traditions, Evangelicals adhere most strongly to orthodox theological beliefs, particularly biblical inerrancy, or complete faith in scripture as absolute truth (Stokes, Chicotsky, and Billings 2018; Smith 1988, 22). In addition to their unwavering belief in religious scripture, Evangelicals maintain a worldview in which God actively intervenes in everyday life (Smith 1998, 44). This perspective shapes a way of living that diverges sharply from mainstream American society (Smith 1998, 37). Geertz (1965, 207) would describe the biblical worldview as both ‘model for’ and ‘model of’ since it explains how the world is organized around God’s interventions and guides actions on whether to accept or reject vaccination. Geertz (1965, 213) would also point out that the biblical worldview relies on the sense of “really real,” which is reflected in Evangelicals’ strong belief in biblical inerrancy. Weber (1946, 327–328) would state that the biblical worldview is what

Evangelical pastors promote to disrupt existing systems. By promoting the biblical worldview, Evangelical pastors challenge the rational-legal authority of the federal government that prioritize science and logic over biblical teachings. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a pastor at an Evangelical church in Oregon urged believers to only trust God and not the “wrongful” governmental authority. He portrayed the public health interventions as threats to religious freedom to act according to their faith (Richlin and Reinemer 2025). As charismatic authorities, Evangelical pastors promote the biblical worldview as an alternative framework for congregants’ lived experiences, directly opposing the rational-legal system rooted in science and logic.

The biblical worldview defers health concerns to God and rejects public health interventions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Evangelicals believed that the pandemic was God’s way of telling humanity to change its ways and that God will protect them from the coronavirus. Both interpretations imply that the COVID-19 pandemic was part of God’s plan and that God will intervene in the secular world. The biblical worldview eliminates a need for public health interventions, as they have an involved God who is omniscient and overpowering (Beyerlein, Nirenberg, and Zubrzycki 2021). In fact, research found that those who see God as an involved figure were not willing to receive COVID-19 vaccine (DiGregorio, Corcoran, and Scheitle 2022).

Evangelical pastors promoted the authorizing discourse by rejecting the governmental authority and disseminating the biblical worldview. The current condition where science accredits public health interventions is authorized by the federal government. As a charismatic authority, Evangelical pastors establish a different condition where public health interventions are deemed irrelevant according to the biblical worldview. For example, they interpreted the

COVID-19 pandemic as intentional and unserious, citing God as the only rightful intervention they should receive. This shifts the power from the federal government to pastors within the Evangelical community and authorizes rejection of vaccination based on a religious narrative.

The rejection of governmental authority by Evangelical pastors can be examined through secularization frameworks, particularly those proposed by Berger, Chaves, and Gauchet. Berger's initial secularization theory outlines a progression where modernization leads to rationalization, followed by privatization, and eventually secularization (Gorski and Altinordu 2008). Public health interventions like vaccination exemplify modernization, emerging from industrial and technological advancements. Their widespread implementation reflects rationalization, as the federal government embraces scientific reasoning. As a result, the biblical worldview—once dominant—became confined to religious communities, marking privatization. This shift suggests that secularization was underway, diminishing religious authority over individual worldviews. Evangelical pastors' promotion of the biblical worldview represents an attempt to counter the growing dominance of scientific and rationalist frameworks. Their rejection of vaccination reflects a broader response to perceived religious decline, as faith-based perspectives are increasingly displaced by scientific authority.

Chaves links secularization to the diminishing influence of religious values, leaders, and institutions (Gorski and Altinordu 2008). As a result, religious leaders—such as pastors—must compete with other sources of authority, including government officials and scientists. For instance, while religious attenders expressed more trust in their clergy than in state and local elected officials or news media, primary care doctors ranked above clergy among some congregants (Northey and Lipka 2021). In response to this decline, Evangelical pastors adopt charismatic authority, reinforcing their leadership through religious framing. During the COVID-

19 pandemic, they reinterpreted the crisis through a biblical worldview, portraying it as God's call for humanity to change. Through sermons, they effectively advanced this worldview, ensuring their influence reached congregants even as scientific and governmental authorities challenged their stance.

Gauchet argues that secularization is defined by religion's loss of ability to structure the entirety of social life beyond individual belief (Gorski and Altinordu 2008). The world-shaping authority that religion once held has now been largely replaced by science. While Evangelical pastors advance a biblical worldview as an alternative perspective, it no longer defines collective institutions or the broader social order. However, one of the characteristics of White Evangelicals is their strong political engagement with the conservative causes, demonstrating that while religion may no longer structure collective institutions, it still significantly influences public discourse and policymaking.

White Evangelicals have long been deeply intertwined with conservative politics, playing a key role in shaping the agenda of the conservative movement and comprising a significant portion of the Republican Party's voting bloc (Steensland and Wright 2014). Scholars suggest that their alignment with conservatism stems from a perceived threat to their religious values, posed by societal changes such as immigration, nontraditional gender roles, and same-sex marriage (Marti 2019). Geertz (1965, 206) would interpret these forces as symbols of moral differences that White Evangelicals recognize within modern society. Rather than passively accepting these shifts, they view themselves as having a duty to reshape American society to better reflect God's will, harkening back to a time when religious values held greater influence (Smith 1998, 39; Marti 2019). Geertz (1965, 208) would further explain this as the motivations instilled in congregants through the biblical worldview. White Evangelicals, then, engage in

conservative politics as a means of actively promoting their biblical worldview, using political advocacy to advance a moral agenda shaped by their faith.

White evangelicals perceive political affiliation as a matter of moral stance. As mentioned previously, one of Evangelical's major characteristic is belief in biblical inerrancy. Their complete faith in the scripture reflects their uncompromising moral standards. In fact, they frame their political involvement as a battle between Christianity values and moral relativism, which contrasts with their absolutist attitude towards the scripture and is attributed to liberals (Bean 2014, 66). Although not explicitly addressed, there are clear cues about the "right" party identification within the community of White Evangelicals. In essence, Christian identity is developed in opposition to liberals both in religious and political terms. The political and religious identity fuse, making it difficult to separate religious practice from the political affiliation with the Republican party within local religious community (Bean 2014, 87). This entanglement of faith and politics illustrates Wilde's (2018) concept of complex religion, where religious identity operates within multiple institutional spheres, making political affiliation an extension of theological commitments rather than a separate domain.

White Evangelicals have a perceived sense of marginalization that is crucial to their identity (Martí 2019). They believe they are losing the debate on determining the modal codes of the nation that should, in their opinion, follow the God's will. This can be tied back to the secularization theories addressed in the previous sections. Gauchet argued that secularization happens when religion loses its world-forming power. If the biblical worldview is not accepted at an institutional or political level, it cannot become the dominant way of living in the society and hence Evangelicals cannot structure the social life. Only the White Evangelical communities will encourage the fulfillment of the biblical worldview—functionally equivalent to privatization, if

not an outright sign that secularization is already underway. The perceived sense of marginalization reflects White Evangelicals' fear of secularization, motivating them to actively work toward embedding the biblical worldview within political and institutional structures.

In recent years, White Evangelicals have demonstrated strong support for Donald Trump, despite his seemingly unchristian attitudes at times. They view Trump as a defender of their interests, positioning him as another charismatic authority alongside pastors in advancing the biblical worldview. For example, in January 2016, Trump declared, "We're going to protect Christianity." Trump acknowledges the sense of marginalization that is crucial to Evangelical identity. By saying "protect," he implies that there are forces attacking Evangelicals to destroy their secure base. This rhetoric suggests that Trump is taking on the role of a charismatic authority, like a prophet. He is volunteering to challenge the system that is threatening the Evangelicals, even if it might disrupt the existing systems. His brash, uninhibited, and hard-hitting persona also invokes charisma, generating trust among supporters who perceive him as a leader who speaks with conviction (Martí 2019). However, he also represents the rational-legal authority as a leader of the federal government. As both a charismatic figure and a representative of the rational-legal authority, Trump bridges these two sources of legitimacy, making the vision of fully integrating the biblical worldview into institutional power more tangible for White Evangelicals.

Political communities arise in religious congregations of White Evangelicals. Their political affiliation is shaped by their adherence to the biblical worldview, which demands a better society that fulfills God's will. Their political identity does not arise simply with belief but is enforced through religious attendance and socializing at church. Evangelical member can influence and reinforce one another's beliefs in addition to receiving influence from pastors (Seto



and Ortiz 2024). When political communities arise in religious congregations, it creates a strong idea of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, members in White Evangelical rural communities in Oregon expressed common distrust of governmental and public health officials. They portrayed the current bureaucracy and institutions including hospitals and schools as cold, emptied of care, and solely profit-driven. United by both their religious viewpoint and negative characterization of the ‘other,’ White Evangelicals invoked far right and Christian conspiracy theories propagated by right-wing media and popularized by Donald Trump (Richlin and Reinemer 2025). Arising from a religious congregation that can act as an echo chamber, White Evangelicals’ commitment to embedding the biblical worldview within government structures is intensified.

White Evangelicals’ political engagement is shaped by multiple factors, including their absolute belief in scripture, a growing sense of marginalization as they perceive moral decline, the portrayal of Trump as a defender of Christianity amid increasing secularization, and the politicization of religious congregations—all reinforcing their drive to shape society in accordance with their faith. Interaction with politics adds a new dimension to the authorizing discourse led by Evangelical pastors. While pastors construct this discourse at a community level, creating a distinct lived reality for congregants, Evangelical political communities seek to expand its influence nationally, aiming to embed the biblical worldview within federal institutions. Donald Trump serves as both a charismatic and rational-legal authority, strengthening their political movement. As a charismatic authority, he legitimizes the moral framework guiding Evangelical politics, positioning himself as a leader who champions their religious vision. As a rational-legal authority, Trump has the power to revise existing systems so that it better reflects God’s will. Trump possesses institutional power to reshape governance in

alignment with their biblical ideals, making their vision more tangible within established systems. The 'us versus them' mentality further intensifies Evangelicals' political mobilization. Their oppositional stance toward liberals, who represent perceived threats to their Christian identity, reinforces a strong ingroup cohesion, especially in homogeneous communities where religious congregations also function as political hubs. This deepened sense of solidarity fuels collective action, making the biblical worldview not merely a belief system but an active framework for shaping governmental policy.

The emergence of Evangelical political communities to advance the biblical worldview can be analyzed through secularization theories, particularly those of Casanova and Bruce. Casanova argued that secularization occurs when religion ceases to interact with other spheres of society (Gorski and Altinordu 2008, 58). For example, religion can shape the public sphere by influencing political debates, cultural norms, and policy decisions. Evangelical political communities actively reject secularization by reinforcing a direct connection between religious belief and political action. Their efforts go beyond general overlaps between faith and governance; they intentionally prioritize their religious identity, making political engagement an extension of their theological commitments. By promoting a conservative agenda, supporting political candidates, and consuming far-right theories from right-wing media, they ensure that faith remains central to institutional decision-making and political debates rather than confined to private life. In essence, White Evangelicals avoid secularization by mobilizing as a political force, merging faith, governance, and ideological allegiance. Their engagement spans beyond moral issues to include broader structural concerns, such as health care and national policy, demonstrating that their religious identity is not just influential but actively embedded in institutional power.

Bruce argues that religion persists if and only if it fulfills roles beyond simply connecting individuals to the supernatural (Gorski and Altinordu 2008). The political communities of White Evangelicals exemplify this expansion, serving as more than just religious groups. Rooted in the biblical worldview, these communities provide a space for Evangelicals to engage politically, discuss pressing policy agendas, and express shared concerns about institutional authorities, including the federal government and public health systems. Bruce asserts that religion remains relevant when it functions as a means of cultural defense, reinforcing collective identity and moral norms. In the case of Evangelicals, cultural defense manifests through their political communities, where the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is deeply ingrained. Evangelical identity is constructed in opposition to liberals, further solidifying ingroup cohesion. Within these communities, individuals reinforce one another's beliefs, share emotionally charged experiences that generate collective effervescence, and disseminate far-right and Christian conspiracy theories, further homogenizing their worldview while deepening alienation from the outgroup. By embedding religious identity into political structures and mobilizing around cultural defense, White Evangelical political communities ensure that their faith remains publicly and institutionally influential. Rather than undergoing secularization, as Bruce describes, they actively resist separation of religion from other spheres by merging their religious and political influences on institutions in fields like public health.

White Evangelicals are uniquely characterized by their biblical worldview, which contributes to their high rates of vaccine hesitancy compared to other religious groups. This paper frames vaccine hesitancy as a product of authorizing discourse against vaccination, shaped by two primary sources of power: Evangelical pastors and political communities. Evangelical pastors discourage public health interventions, asserting that divine intervention—rather than

medical measures—ensures protection, in accordance with the biblical worldview. Meanwhile, Evangelical political communities elevate these moral concerns into the political arena, framing vaccination as a violation of religious freedom. Through engagement with rational-legal authority, these communities influence broader institutional decisions on public health policy. Additionally, this paper examines different secularization theories to analyze how each source of power—pastoral influence and political mobilization—contributes to shaping the authorizing discourse around vaccine hesitancy. The analysis revealed that with modernization, religious authority has to reject or compete with scientific knowledge in order to avoid secularization. It also found that religious engagement with other fields, particularly politics, served as a way to avoid secularization in the ways by leaving impact in other spheres of life and fulfilling distinct purposes such as reinforcing collective identity. Ultimately, both Evangelical pastors and political communities function as mechanisms of resistance against secularization. By embedding religious narratives within institutional and political frameworks, they ensure that the biblical worldview remains a dominant force in shaping the public sphere—particularly in areas like public health, where vaccine hesitancy becomes a direct expression of their rejection of secular authority.

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