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Eastern Kentucky University

"For I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me In": Explaining White Evangelical Attitudes Toward Immigrants and Refugees

Honors Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

Of The

Requirements of HON 420

Fall 2019

By

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"For I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me In": Explaining White Evangelical Attitudes Toward Immigrants and Refugees

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White evangelical Christians in the United States are a population that plays a vital role in political influence. Data supports the assertion that a significant number of white evangelicals in America harbor negative attitudes toward immigrants, refugees, or the perceived "other." A contradiction then arises between the political attitudes of white evangelicals toward migrant groups and the main tenants of the faith that evangelicals so firmly proclaim, such as compassion, justice, and love. This thesis will specifically seek to answer the question what explains white evangelical attitudes toward immigrants and refugees? This research utilizes a cross tab analysis consisting of data from the Pew Research Center to support the hypothesis that the stronger a white evangelical identifies with their white identity, the more likely they are to oppose immigrants and refugees. This research contributes new findings to the existing literature on white evangelical political behavior by arguing that the very faith they so strongly proclaim directly contradicts their political attitudes. Rather than letting love, compassion, and the teachings of Jesus motivate their political views, the data reveals that racial perspectives represent a much stronger predictor.

Keywords: Evangelicals, Immigrants, Refugees, White Identity, White Privilege, Racism, Christianity, Politics, Trump

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The relationship that exists between religious affiliation and political attitudes in the United States is both complex and inextricable. Level of religiosity is often times the greatest predictor of what an individual's political views are going to be. Evangelical Christians in particular make up a significant portion of America's population, and therefore maintain a significant amount of influence in the country's political arena. According to a study done by Pew Research Center, 25.4% of Americans identified themselves as evangelical protestants in 2014, the largest percentage of any other religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2015). Complexities occur when the political attitudes of these religious individuals do not align with the main doctrine and teachings of their particular faith. While this complexity has existed throughout political history, it has never made itself more clear than during the political activity that has occurred between 2016 and now.

The 2016 presidential election reached new heights of polarization and brought with it a new age of political chaos. Twitter politics, personal attacks, and outwardly racist rhetoric are all elements that were carried into the administration by Donald Trump when he was elected as president. During his campaign, he made immigration and refugee intake central issues by "proposing to step up deportation of undocumented

immigrants, construct a wall on the southern border, and halt immigration from Muslim nations" (Sherkat and Lehman 2018, 1792). The election of Trump as the 45th President of the United States was an unexpected outcome that shook the entire country, causing citizens and political scientists alike to question what led to his victory. In regard to public support, white evangelicals were one of the largest groups who overwhelmingly approved of Trump as a presidential candidate. A preliminary analysis of the 2016 election showed that roughly 8 in 10, or 80%, of individuals who identify as white born-again evangelicals voted for Trump (Martínez and Smith 2016). After assuming office, the Trump administration swiftly began implementing the severe policies and statements that he made during his campaign in regard to immigrants and refugees. For example, within the first month of his presidency, the administration implemented a travel ban on individuals from seven Muslim majority countries that prohibited them from entering the United States. Another example would be how the administration has remained publicly committed to its immigration plan of building a wall on the southern border between the United States and Mexico. An addition that has come with this plan is a heavier utilization of immigration officers to create a harsher crackdown on illegal immigration, leading to the family separations at the border that have been occurring since 2018.

The implementation and publicization of these policies have heavily contributed to the topics of immigrants and refugees being pushed to the forefront of contemporary political conversations. Despite the fact that a majority of these policies are broadcasted on a platform of xenophobia and racial stereotypes, white evangelicals continue to possess predominantly negative attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. Only 31 percent of white evangelical protestants support allowing Syrian refugees into the

country, the lowest among any other religious group (Newman 2018). In a poll conducted by the Washington Post and ABC, 75 percent of white evangelical Christians rated "the federal crackdown on undocumented immigrants" as positive, compared with 46 percent of U.S. adults overall, and 25 percent of nonwhite Christians (Boorstein and Zauzmer 2018). This thesis argues that there is a contradiction between the negative attitudes of white evangelicals toward immigrants and refugees and the main tenants of the faith to which they claim, such as love and justice (Schoenfeld 1974). The research question that this thesis will seek to answer is what explains white evangelical attitudes toward immigrants and refugees? Research on this topic is relevant due to the "virtual absence of religion in the literature" on immigrant and refugee attitudes (Knoll 2009, 313) and due to the societal significance of white evangelical political behavior. Previous studies will be reviewed in order to develop theories that can answer this paper's research question, including anti-Obama sentiment, group identities, white racial solidarity, nationalism, white Christian nationalism, and class culture.

Biblical Contradictions

The negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees that are commonly held by white evangelicals are a perplexing phenomenon because they directly contradict the main tenants of Christianity and Jesus's teachings. Love, compassion, hospitality, and kindness towards others are repeatedly proclaimed in the Bible as foundational guidelines for how followers of Jesus should live their lives. The Bible even specifically mentions that these guidelines are to be applied to foreigners, the poor, and the oppressed within society (Heltzel 2009). Leviticus 19:33-34 proclaims, "**33** When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. **34** The foreigner residing among you must be

treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt" (New International Version). Isaiah 10:1-2 states, "**1**Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, **2** to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless" (NIV). Colossians 3:12 also states, "therefore, as Gods chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (NIV). Not only does the Bible establish love and compassion as essential tenants of the Christian faith, but Jesus himself and the life he led provides the ultimate example of what Christians today are to be like. After his birth, Jesus himself was a refugee in the land of Egypt. Matthew 2:13 tells us that, "**13** When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him'" (NIV). In the story where Jesus feeds the four thousand, Matthew 15:32 tells us that "**32** Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way'" (NIV). Jesus's life even provided multiple examples of being welcoming towards those who were often rejected by society, such as the story of Jesus accepting the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10), and the story of Jesus conversating with the Samaritan woman (John 4).

Not Applicable to All

It is essential to recognize that not all members of the white evangelical community hold negative and contradictory attitudes toward immigrants and refugees. Several prominent protestant ministers and the National Association of Evangelicals

"have urged for less hostile treatment of immigrants and refugees" (Sherkat and Lehman 2018, 1791). In October of 2018, evangelical leaders released a statement calling for comprehensive, compassionate immigration solutions. They wrote, "beyond the role of the government, we encourage churches to respond with Christ-like love to the vulnerable families and individuals who form this caravan" (Evangelical Immigration Table 2018). In August of 2018, leaders from the Evangelical Immigration Table sent a letter to the Trump administration to admit more refugees, "citing religious liberty and our history of offering safe haven to people fleeing religious persecution" (Evangelical Immigration Table 2018). In June of 2018, "delegates at the Southern Baptist Convention's annual conferences passed a near-unanimous resolution affirming the dignity of migrants and refugees" (Burton 2018). Evangelical religious leaders are not the only individuals who have opposed the ever-growing negative attitudes and policies towards immigrants and refugees. Evangelical Christians of all races have formed organizations based on the premise that negative policies toward immigrants and refugees go against the teachings of Jesus. Red Letter Christians is an example of an organization that is based on that very premise. The mission of Red Letter Christians is to "stay true to the foundation of combining Jesus and justice by mobilizing individuals into a movement of believers who live out Jesus' counter-cultural teachings" (Red Letter Christians). The organization does this through blogs, newsletters, podcasts, and gatherings. While various forms of progress towards justice have been made within the evangelical community, the data continues to show that on average, white evangelicals in the United States still have opposing attitudes towards immigrants, refugees, and the perceived "other."

Who are Evangelical Protestants?

Before diving into a conversation on what motivates white evangelical political behavior, it is important to first define and describe what it means to be an evangelical protestant and the history of the tradition. As previously stated, evangelical protestants comprise "one of the most significant religious traditions in America" (Putnam and Campbell 2010). From America's earliest days, white Protestants have "dominated American culture" (Clemmitt 2017, 4). Evangelicalism was the dominant form of American Protestantism throughout most of the nineteenth century, until the late 1800s and early 1900s when protestants split over a debate between modernists versus fundamentalists. Mainline protestants can be identified as descending from the modernist perspective, who today are more likely to emphasize the Social Gospel – "the belief that a Christian's priority should be the reform of social institutions" – than personal piety (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Evangelical protestants today can be identified as descending from the more fundamentalist sect, which "held fast to a more traditional, and thus conservative interpretation of scripture" (Putnam and Campbell 2010). These are the roots of what modern day evangelical Protestantism has bloomed to be.

It is essential to gain an accurate understanding of what the characteristics are of modern American evangelical Protestants. Evangelical Protestantism can most commonly be identified by three main characteristics; the belief that the Bible is the true word of God, the belief that "salvation can only come from a personal relationship with Christ" (Tranby, Hartmann 2008, 343), and a dedication to spreading the faith to others. Wald and Calhoun-Brown (2018) also define evangelicals by "their certainty of God and the divine origins of the bible, the self-reported centrality of religion to their lives, and their

high rates of reading scripture, praying, and sharing their faith with people outside their own religion." A religious landscape study done by the Pew Research Center revealed that 92% of evangelical protestants consider scripture the word of God (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018). Indeed, one of the most important parts of evangelical Protestantism is biblical literalism. This characteristic of evangelical Protestantism is one of the main areas where the beliefs and the political attitudes of those same believers contradict each other. If biblical literalism of certain scriptures is meant to be embraced, then it makes sense that the scriptures regarding compassion and welcoming the stranger should be embraced just as equally.

The political and social characteristics of American evangelicals are also vital to understanding the population as a whole. White evangelicals, on average, identify with the Republican party and are ideologically conservative. These individuals are sometimes categorized under the popular term the Christian Right, "a network of politically active organizations and individuals who consistently support certain conservative policies and aspire reassert the public moral authority of Christianity" (Clemmitt 2017, 4). This alliance between the Republican party and evangelicals began in the 1980s when conservative Christian leaders began offering to deliver votes in exchange for "the party's support for Christian priorities, such as banning abortion" (Clemmitt 2017, 15). Thus was born the Christian Right, one of the most powerful alliances between a political party and a specific demographic group that continues to influence American politics today. The Religious Landscape Study done by the Pew Research Center revealed that 56% of non-Black evangelical protestants identify with the Republican party, and 58% self-described themselves as politically conservative (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018).

As previously stated, roughly 80% of individuals who identify as white born-again evangelicals voted for Trump in the 2016 election, an overwhelming majority. There are a number of reasons for why white evangelicals voted for Trump and for why they possess the political attitudes that they do. Frequency of church attendance and economic status are two indicators that are essential to understanding the political characteristics of white evangelicals. Trump performed stronger in the 2016 election among individuals who rarely attend church than among individuals who are frequent church goers. Political and religious literature shows that "evangelicals who attend church at least weekly ("frequent" attenders) have higher incomes and are more likely to have a college degree, compared with those who attend church infrequently (never, seldom, a few times a year, or once or twice a month)" (Layman 2016). Infrequent church attenders "cared less about the traditional Christian Right policy agenda and more about Trump's agenda of creating jobs, improving Americans' economic welfare, and stemming the tide on immigration" (Layman 2016). According to data from the 2016 American National Election Survey (ANES), infrequent church attenders were less likely to prioritize moral and cultural issues such as abortion and cared much more about jobs and economic welfare (Layman 2016). Another characteristic of infrequent church attenders is the particular minority groups that they criticize. While the Christian Right "traditionally has focused criticism on groups such as feminists, gays, and lesbians," Trump and his base of infrequent church goers have targeted religious and racial minority groups, such as Muslims, Hispanics, and Blacks (Layman 2016). Philip Gorski, a sociology professor at Yale University, has identified this particular base of white evangelicals as a symptom of Trumpism; "a reactionary and secularized version of white

Christian nationalism" (Gorski 2017). By understanding the history of American evangelical Protestantism, the beliefs of its members today, and the strong political associations among its followers, the foundation can be laid for a conversation on the attitudes of white evangelical protestants toward immigrants and refugees.

Why White Evangelicals?

Readers may now be questioning why this thesis is racializing the topic of attitudes toward immigrants and refugees by focusing on white evangelicals in particular. Why not focus on all evangelicals as a whole? The reason why race is essential to a discussion on favorability towards immigrants and refugees is because race is inherently embedded in the formation of these attitudes. White evangelicals are the only demographic within the evangelical protestant faith who significantly oppose immigrants and refugees and conform to a culture of exclusionary policies when it comes to racial minorities.

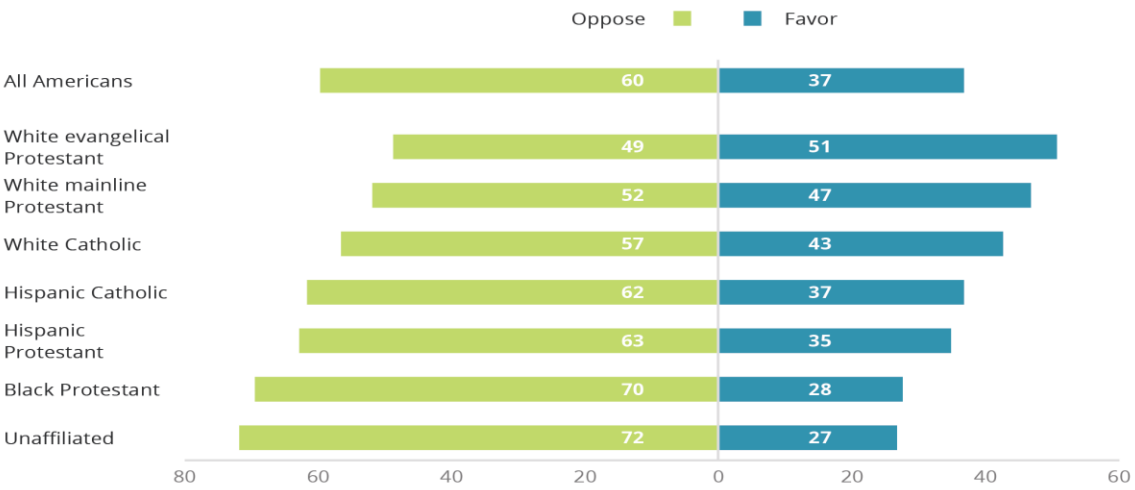
American evangelicals are not by any means exclusively white. There is an increasing rate of Black and Latino evangelicals joining historically white denominations and traditions. About "one in three evangelicals in America today is Latino, Black, or Asian" (Burton 2018), and around two-thirds of these individuals oppose Trump's immigration and refugee policies (Gorski 2017). These evangelicals of color are significantly more welcoming and more supportive of comprehensive immigration reform than white evangelicals (Burton 2018). This trend can also be seen by comparing white evangelicals to Black protestants. Black protestants and white evangelicals possess relatively similar theological beliefs. They both believe that the Bible is the word of God, they both believe that the acceptance of Jesus as savior is the only way to salvation, and

they also both believe in sharing their faith with others. However, 58 percent of Black protestants support allowing refugees into the country, compared to the 31 percent of white evangelicals (Newman 2018). In addition, while the theological beliefs of Black protestants and white evangelicals are quite similar, roughly 90% of them voted for Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, contrasting the 80% of white evangelicals who voted for Trump (Gorski 2017). As seen in Figure 1, 51 percent of white evangelical Protestants favor passing a law to prevent refugees from entering the U.S., compared to only 28 percent of Black Protestants and 35 percent of Hispanic Protestants. In addition, Figure 2 shows that 53 percent of white evangelical Protestants think that the growing number of newcomers from other countries threatens American customs and values, compared to only 31 percent of Black protestants and 23 percent of Hispanic Protestants. It is clear from the data that negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, which contradict the main teachings of Christianity, is a phenomenon that exclusively exists among white evangelical protestants, not evangelical protestants as a whole.

Figure 1. Refugee Attitudes Based on Religious Group

FIGURE 11. Catholics, Nonwhite Christians, and Religiously Unaffiliated Opposed to Preventing Refugees From Entering U.S.

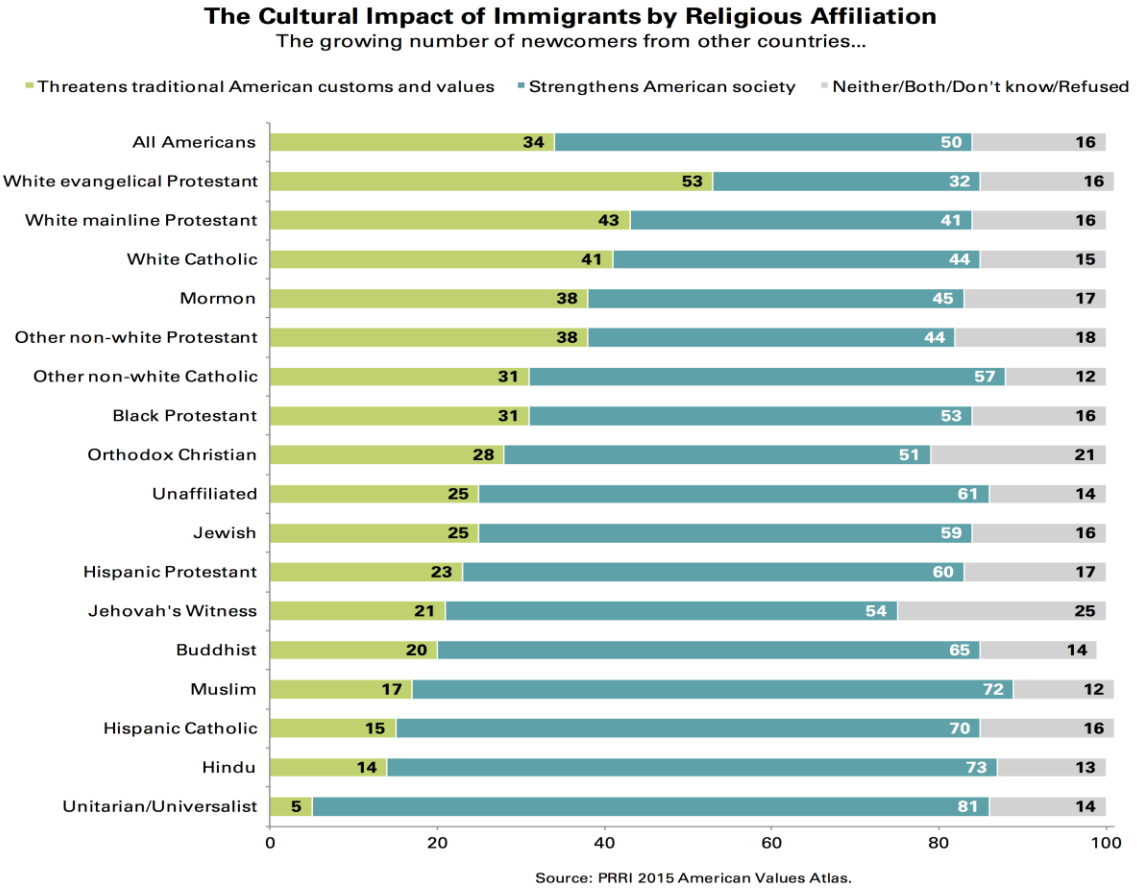
Do you favor or oppose passing a law to prevent refugees from entering the U.S.?



Source: PRRI 2018 American Values Survey.

https://www.prri.org/research/partisan-polarization-dominates-trump-era-findings-from-the-2018-american-values-survey/

Figure 2. Immigrant Attitudes Based on Religious Group



https://www.prri.org/research/poll-immigration-reform-views-on-immigrants/

Theoretical Development

Post-Obama Era

An existing theory that can explain white evangelical attitudes toward immigrants and refugees is the increasing influence of racial attitudes on politics as a result of the Obama presidency. Tesler (2016) argues that after Obama was elected as the first African American president in 2008, many thought the country was entering into a period of post-racial politics. However, Americans ended up becoming even more racially polarized than before. In the years following the 2008 election, racial attitudes have come to

increasingly influence multiple aspects of political decision making (Tesler 2016). A few aspects of politics that Tesler specifically defines as being influenced by racial attitudes include public policy preferences and the expanding of the political divide between white and nonwhite Americans. Tesler uses various sets of data in each chapter to support his argument that racial attitudes have had increasing influence on American politics and political decision making since the 2008 election. The author uses data from the 2012 American National Elections Study (ANES) to reveal how racial resentment during Obama's presidency influenced support for government health insurance. Support for government health insurance among the most racially resentful white Americans was .4 on a scale from 0 to 1 in 2008. In 2012, the end of Obama's first term, the data shows it was predicted to drop to .2 (Tesler 2016). This data reveals how the Obama era strengthened pre-existing racial resentments and influenced white Americans' support or opposition to certain policies.

The theory that the country is in an era of increasingly racialized politics due to the Obama presidency can be used to provide an argument that aids in explaining white evangelical attitudes toward immigrants and refugees. Individuals who already harbored hints of racist thinking prior to Obama's presidency became even more polarized on racial issues after having an African American as president for 8 years. This argument that racial attitudes have had increasing influence on virtually all sectors of American politics since the 2008 election can be used to explain why white evangelicals possess negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, despite the fact that this very behavior explicitly contradicts the core values of Christianity.

Group Identities – Partisanship

Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2018) build upon the theory of increasingly racialized politics in the post-Obama era by arguing that salient group identities are what led to Trump winning the presidency. The theory that group identities were a driving factor in what caused Trump to win the election can be used to explain white evangelical attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, particularly since 2016. The authors argue that the state of the economy, the Obama presidency, and the demographics of the political parties, produced the unexpected outcome of the election (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). The authors assert that Trump's victory was "foreshadowed by changes in the Democratic and Republican coalitions that were driven by people's racial and ethnic identities" (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). Trump's campaign reinforced and exacerbated political differences by focusing on issues related to race, immigration, and religion. One of the group identities that the authors define as having particular importance is partisanship. The authors employ a number of graphs as data to support their argument that party was an influential factor in the outcome of the 2016 campaign and election. A graph showing favorability towards Muslims was taken from the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which shows the different ratings of Muslims based on political party from 1992-2012 on a scale from -60 to 30. The graph clearly shows a higher approval rating of Muslims amongst the Democratic party than amongst the Republican party. In 2012, Democrats rated Muslims at 0, whereas Republicans rated them at -50 (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). A second piece of data used by the authors to support their argument of the influence of group identities on the 2016 campaign and election was a graph taken from the Pew Values Survey. This graph shows attitudes toward immigration restrictions based on party from 1992 – 2012 and was also placed on a scaled from -60 to 30. The

Democratic respondents showed a strong opposition towards immigration restrictions in 2012 (+30), whereas the Republican respondents showed a strong support for immigration restrictions (-30) (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). These results support the authors' argument for the influence of group identities by proving that attitudes surrounding certain policies and populations are associated with a particular partisanship. Diamond (1996) also argues for the importance of partisanship when it comes to attitudes toward certain populations. The author asserts that Republican politicians will focus on anti-immigrant themes, "especially when focused on 'illegal' immigration, because it is likely to be advantageous at the polls" (Diamond 1996, 166). The Republican party's association with anti-immigrant policies has become so strong that Republican candidates cannot hope to reach election or reelection without aligning themselves with that same rhetoric.

This theory's argument for the relevance of group identities can be used to provide a theoretical explanation for why white evangelicals, although their religion preaches compassion for the poor and the stranger, continue to perform politically on the basis of their group identities. The findings and arguments made by the authors can explain white evangelical negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees by arguing that it is partisanship that drives their political behavior, rather than their faith.

White Racial Solidarity

Closely related to group identity politics is the theory that racial solidarity, or white identity, plays a significant role in explaining white evangelical attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. Jardina (2019) asserts that due to our country's changing racial landscape, many whites have described themselves as "outnumbered, disadvantaged, and

even oppressed" (13). The United States is becoming increasingly diverse, and this trend can be seen through a number of recent developments, such as a growing non-white population, the anticipated loss of white majority status, and increasing political power among people of color (Jardina 2019). These political and cultural developments are now perceived as a threat to many white Americans. When the status quo of white privilege is challenged, it results in a sense of fear or anxiety among those who ascribe to that group. It is this perceived threat that has led to a sense of "commonality, attachment, and solidarity" with their racial group (Jardina 2019). This racial solidarity now plays a pivotal role in the ways that whites associate themselves on political and social issues, including a theoretical resistance to change (Smith 2010). The author empirically supports her claims using six primary sources spanning six years. These sources include survey questions to measure white identity as well as data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). One possible weakness of the author's methods is that she is not always able to measure racial identity with the full range of appropriate questions. The author's proposed measure of white identity comprises the following questions: *how important is being white to your identity? To what extent do you feel that white people in this country have a lot to be proud of? How much would you say that whites in this country have a lot in common with one another?*

White racial solidarity is the theory that when whites perceive that there is a threat to their way of life, their solidarity or attachment to their whiteness will become more salient. Once this solidarity takes root, it will then become a driving force in determining the political attitudes and decisions of those individuals. This theory of white racial solidarity can be used to explain white evangelical attitudes toward immigrants and

refugees. White evangelicals may continue to possess negative attitudes towards these populations because their white identity has become salient enough to reflect onto their political attitudes. Although these negative attitudes contradict the very teachings of their faith, they may continue to possess them due to the perception that these populations are a threat to their way of life, their idea of America, and their status quo.

Nationalism

A theory that can explain white evangelical political attitudes towards immigrants and refugees is nationalism and pre-existing ideas of what it means to be an American. Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) argue for the importance of nationalism as a means to explain political behavior. The authors assert that understanding how Americans conceive their nation can provide insight into cultural motivations that influence political choices (Bonikowski, DiMaggio 2016). One of their data sets revealed that in 2004, respondents answered that the most important qualities to being "truly American" were "American citizenship, ability to speak English, feeling American, and 'respecting America's political institutions and laws'" (Bonikowski, DiMaggio 2016, 955). Similar to nationalism, Bean (2014) argues that visions of national solidarity "play a critical role in linking religious practice to political attitudes and civic engagement" (166). This vision of national solidarity in regard to white evangelicals most commonly includes the assertion that America was founded as a Christian nation, and that Christianity is the rightful foundation for an American identity (Bean 2014). Evangelicals who possess a vision of national solidary are more inclined to exclude individuals from membership in the nation if they are seen as a symbolic threat to this vision (Bean 2014). The author uses multi-sited ethnography to compare two evangelical congregations in the United States

and Canada, analyzing how evangelical congregations in the United States and Canada differently construct subcultural identity.

The theories of nationalism and national solidarity are relevant in determining white evangelical attitudes toward policies surrounding immigrants and refugees. A strong adherence to nationalism and visions of what it means to be an American can be used as plausible answers as to why white evangelicals continue to hold negative attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, despite their faith's teachings of compassion and inclusivity.

White Christian Nationalism

White Christian nationalism is a plausible theory that exists to explain white evangelical attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. Sherkat and Lehman (2018) assert that white Christian nationalism "plays a role in structuring negative views of immigrants and Muslims" (1791). Historically, for conservative protestants, a Christian America could only be achieved by making certain that "Catholics and non-Christians were prevented entry" (Sherkat and Lehman 2018, 1793). It was this belief that led to 19th century protestant anti-immigrant groups becoming quite powerful. These ideas of a Christian America have pervaded into modern day white evangelical ideas of who is worthy of being given the opportunity to become an American. The authors contend that white Christian nationalism has been embraced by biblical inerrantists and white evangelicals. The journal *Christianity Today* was in fact originally chosen to "demonstrate an evangelical perception of a proper, divinely ordained, American identity" (Vinz 1997, 13). For their research method, the authors utilize a choice-based conjoint design to obtain comprehensive data on citizens' opinions about who to admit

into the country. The experiment puts respondents “in the position of immigration officials, asking them to make decisions between pairs of immigrants applying for admission” (Sherkat and Lehman 2018, 533). The data revealed that Americans were less likely to admit immigrants into the country who come from Muslim countries, who had never been to the United States before, and who don’t speak English. Individuals who are not Christian, such as Muslims, as well as individuals who come from a nation whose culture and ethnicity falls outside of the scope of the norms of white Christianity, go against the traditional view of a Christian America. It is because of this pervasive view of America being defined by its whiteness and its Christianity that individuals who come in the form of immigrants and refugees are often subject to opposition.

Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) contribute to a discussion about white Christian nationalism by analyzing how prejudice and ethnocentrism are tied to ideas of American identity. The authors assert that “native born white Americans are likely to be more supportive of immigrants from Europe” than immigrants from countries that are more ethnically and culturally distinctive (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015, 532). The authors also argue that a norms-based approach is relevant when analyzing ideas of American identity. Attitudes towards immigrants might thus “hinge on whether they are seen as upholding American norms” (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015, 532). For example, “over 90% of Americans indicate that speaking English is an important element of American identity” (Hainmueller and Hopkins 205, 532).

The theory of white Christian nationalism can be useful in an analysis of white evangelical attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. This theory explains how racial and religious visions of what America should ascribe to are what allow some white

evangelicals to oppose immigrants and refugees, instead of letting their faith be what allows them to support these populations.

Class Culture

A theory that has been developed to explain white evangelical attitudes towards immigrants and refugees is class culture. Brint and Abrutyn (2010) argue that religious identity itself has little net impact on political attitudes, and that instead, "social circumstances and beliefs associated with particular religious memberships are the real underlying causes of political conservatism" (329). As economically vulnerable members of a dominant racial group, lower-income and less-educated whites are reluctant to change that could lead to greater opportunity for minorities (Brint and Abrutyn 2010). The authors' study uses data from the 2000-2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) to compare five competing explanations of the relationship between religion and conservative political views in the United States. These explanations focused primarily on religiosity, moral standards traditionalism, gender and family ideology, class culture, and cultural geography. The class culture variables were measured according to three categories of differentiation; income level, managerial authority, and education (Brint and Abrutyn 2010). Moral standards traditionalism demonstrated the most consistent and the strongest effects across dependent variables, however, the researchers' discussion of class culture is what can be useful in explaining white evangelical attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) also argue for the importance of class and economic concerns when attempting to explain attitudes towards immigrants and refugees. The authors assert that "the native-born perceive immigrants as competitors

for scarce jobs and will oppose immigrants if they have skill profiles and occupations similar to their own" (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015, 531).

The social circumstances of lower-class whites due to their economic standing can be used as a plausible explanation for white evangelical negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, despite the fact that it goes against Jesus's teachings of compassion and open heartedness. White evangelicals who are from a lower economic class are more concerned about policies that promote their economic well-being than they are about policies that may provide opportunities for others, even if those policies are aligned with the foundations of their faith.

Method

In order to answer this thesis's research question, three hypotheses will be developed and tested. Hypotheses two and three will have two parts; part A will pertain to immigrant attitudes and part B will pertain to refugee attitudes. All data will be taken from two surveys conducted in 2018. The first is the 2018 Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel. This Wave 32 survey was conducted between February 26 – March 11, 2018. The total number of respondents was 6,251. The second survey that will be used is the Pew Research Center May 2018 RBS/RDD Study Questionnaire. This study was conducted by phone call and took place between April 25 – May 1, 2018. The total number of respondents was 4,000. All data will be placed into five cross tab analyses for each of the five hypotheses and will specifically be coded to show responses from non-Latinx white evangelicals only.

There are numerous possible reasons for why white evangelicals might contradict their faith by harboring negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees. As discussed in the theoretical development, white identity can be one of the strongest predictors of white evangelical feelings toward newcomers to America. As Jardina (2019) argues, a salience in white racial identity often results in "an effort to maintain political, social, and economic systems under the control of the dominant group" (1361). White racial identity is also typically unified with a general blindness to the inherent privileges that are afforded to whites over racial minorities. In order to operationalize this theory, this thesis will utilize the following hypothesis:

H1: *If a white evangelical does not think that white people benefit from advantages in society, then they are more likely to think that immigrants threaten American values.*

The independent variable for H1 is strength of white identity, and the dependent variable is likelihood of thinking that immigrants threaten American values. Strength of white identity will be measured by using data from a survey question asked in the 2018 Pew Research Center American Trends Panel. Respondents were asked, *how much, if at all, do white people benefit from advantages in society that black people do not have?* Respondents answered from the following options; a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or not at all. Respondents who think that white people do not benefit at all from advantages in society will rank high on strength of white identity. The dependent variable, likelihood of thinking that immigrants threaten American values, will be measured by using a survey question where respondents were asked, *which statement*

comes closer to your own views – even if neither is exactly right? Respondents answered from the following options; the growing number of newcomers from other countries threatens traditional American customs and values, or the growing number of newcomers from other countries strengthens American customs and values. White born-again evangelicals who have a higher strength of white identity are hypothesized to be more likely to respond by saying that the growing number of newcomers from other countries threatens traditional American customs and values. To prove this hypothesis, the data from the independent and dependent variables will be analyzed through a cross tab.

Many white evangelicals are disconnected with their faith and the stances that their religious leaders have taken on the issues of immigration and refugee intake. As discussed in this paper's introduction, infrequent church attenders make up a large base of the white evangelicals who support Trump, whose main policy points have been about reducing the country's immigrant and refugee intake. This trend leads to the theory that a disconnect with one's faith and religious teachings will lead to the support of policies that contradict that very faith. In order to operationalize this theory, this research will use the following hypotheses:

H2, A: *The less often a white evangelical attends church, the more likely they are to think that immigrants threaten American values.*

H2, B: *The less often a white evangelical attends church, the less likely they are to think the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees.*

The independent variable for H2, A is frequency of church attendance, and the dependent variable is likelihood of thinking that immigrants threaten American values. Both variables will be measured by using the 2018 Pew Research Center American Trends Panel. The data for frequency of church attendance will be measured by using the survey's demographic profile variable codebook. Respondents were asked, *aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services*? Respondents could then choose from options 1-6; more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never. It is hypothesized that the more frequent a white evangelical attends church, the less likely they are to think that immigrants threaten American values. This hypothesis will be proven by placing the data from each variable into a cross tab analysis.

The independent variable for H2, B is frequency of church attendance and the dependent variable is likelihood of thinking the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees. Both variables will be measured using data from the Pew Research Center May 2018 RBS/RDD Study Questionnaire. The independent variable will be measured through the same survey question used to measure church attendance in H2,A. Likelihood of thinking the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees will be measured through the question which asked respondents, *do you think the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees into the country, or do you think the U.S. does NOT have a responsibility to do this?* Respondents who attend church less frequently are hypothesized to be more likely to think the U.S. does NOT have a responsibility to accept refugees. The data from each variable will be analyzed by placing them into a cross tab analysis.

Economic interests represent another theory that exists to explain white evangelical attitudes toward immigrants and refugees. As previously mentioned in the theoretical development section of this paper, class culture represents the theory that economically vulnerable members of a dominant racial group will oppose opportunities for newcomers and racial minorities. Brint and Arbutyn (2010) argue that "relative powerlessness of lower-status whites leads to greater insecurity and hence heightened distrust of unfamiliar others" (331). This thesis will utilize the following hypotheses in order to operationalize this theory:

H3, A: *As the self-reported income of a white evangelical goes down, their likelihood of thinking that immigrants threaten American values goes up.*
H3, B: *As the self-reported income of a white evangelical goes down, their likelihood of thinking the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees goes down.*

The independent variable for H3, A is self-reported income and the dependent variable is likelihood of thinking immigrants threaten American values. Self-reported income will be measured using the demographic profile codebook for the 2018 Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel. Respondents were asked, *last year, what was your total family income from all sources, before taxes*? Respondents answered from options 1-9; less than $10,000, $10,000 to less than $20,000, $20,000 to less than $30,000, $30,000 to less than $40,000, $40,000 to less than $50,000, $50,000 to less than $75,000, $75,000 to less than $100,000, $100,000 to less than $150,000, or $150,000 or more. It is hypothesized that as the self-reported income of a white evangelical goes

down, their likelihood of thinking immigrants threaten American values will go up. The data from each variable will be analyzed be placing them into a cross tab analysis.

The independent variable for H3, B is self-reported income and the dependent variable is likelihood of thinking the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees. The data for each variable will be taken from the Pew Research Center May 2018 RBS/RDD Study Questionnaire. The independent variable will be measured through the same survey question used to measure income in H3, A. It is hypothesized that respondents who have a lower self-reported income are more likely to think the U.S. does NOT have a responsibility to accept refugees. This research will seek to find empirical support for this hypothesis by placing the data from each variable into a cross tab analysis.

Results[1]

The results from Table 1 reveal that there is empirical support for a relationship between white identity and attitudes toward immigrants among white evangelicals. 87.37% of respondents who said white people do not benefit at all from advantages in society thought that the growing numbers of newcomers threaten American values, whereas only 28.21% of respondents who said that white people benefit a great deal from advantages in society thought that newcomers threaten American values. This relationship is statistically significant through the P value ($P < 0.001$).

[1] All crosstab results were developed with the help of Dr. Kerem Kalkan, thesis mentor.

Table 1. White Identity and Immigrant Attitudes Among White Evangelicals

	How much, if at all, do white people benefit from advantages in society that black people do not have?				
Which statement comes closer to your own views?	A great deal	A fair amount	Not too much	Not at all	Total
The growing number of newcomers from other countries STRENGTHENS traditional American customs and values	71.79%	47.76%	20.70%	12.63%	30.08%
The growing number of newcomers from other countries THREATENS traditional American customs and values	28.21%	52.24%	79.30%	87.37%	69.92%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Pearson chi2(3) = 137.47 P value = 0.000					

Source: 2018 Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel.

The results from Table 2 reveal that there is not empirical support for a relationship between worship attendance and immigrant attitudes among white evangelicals. H2, A hypothesized that the more often a white evangelical attends church, the more in tuned they would be with their faith, and therefore would be more likely to support immigrants. The data reveals that there is a constant trend of opposition toward

immigrants among white evangelicals regardless of frequency of church attendance, which is further shown through the P value (P < 0.828).

Table 2. Worship Attendance and Immigrant Attitudes Among White Evangelicals

	Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?						
Which statement comes closer to your own views?	Never	Seldom	A few times a year	Once or twice a month	Once a week	More than once a week	Total
The growing number of newcomers STRENGTHENS American customs and values	22.22%	24.71%	30.93%	31.48%	31.52%	29.81%	30.14%
The growing number of newcomers THREATENS American customs and values	77.78%	75.29%	69.07%	68.52%	68.48%	70.19%	69.86%
Total	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %
Pearson chi2(5) = 2.1561 P value = 0.827							

Source: 2018 Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel.

The results from Table 3 reveal that there is not empirical support for a relationship between worship attendance and refugee attitudes. H2, B hypothesized that a greater frequency of church attendance would result in more favorable attitudes toward refugees. However, the data shows a pattern of negative attitudes toward refugees regardless of how often a white evangelical attends church. For example, 55.56% of respondents who never attend religious services outside of weddings and funerals oppose refugees, which is not far off from the 59.38% of those who attend services more than once a week.

Table 3. Worship Attendance and Refugee Attitudes Among White Evangelicals

	Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?						
Do you think the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees into the country?	Never	Seldom	A few times a year	Once or twice a month	Once a week	More than once a week	Total
YES	44.44%	35.29%	31.25%	19.35%	33.68%	40.62%	33.87%
NO	55.56%	64.71%	68.75%	80.65%	66.32%	59.38%	66.13%
Total	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %
Pearson chi2(5) = 4.7840 P value = 0.443							

Source: Pew Research Center May 2018 RBS/RDD Study Questionnaire.

Table 4 reveals that there is not empirical support for a relationship between income and immigrant attitudes among white evangelicals. H3, A hypothesized that white evangelicals who have a lower income will be less favorable toward policies that provide opportunities for newcomers, and therefore will be more likely to oppose immigrants. These results show that there is still a trend of negative support for immigrants in America among white evangelicals regardless of self-reported income, which is further shown through the P value ($P < 0.882$).

Table 4. Income and Immigrant Attitudes Among White Evangelicals

	Last year, that is in 2017, what was your family's total income from all sources, before taxes?								
Which statement comes closer to your own views?	< $10,000	$10,000 to < $20,000	$20,000 to < 30,000	$30,000 to < 40,000	$40,000 to < $50,000	$50,000 to < $75,000	$75,000 to < $100,000	$100,000 to < $150,000	$150,000 or more	Total
The growing number of newcomers STRENGTHENS American values	20.93%	28.81%	31.03%	30.00%	26.03%	30.72%	30.97%	34.33%	32.43%	30.39%
The growing number of newcomers THREATENS American values	79.07%	71.19%	68.97%	70.00%	73.97%	69.28%	69.03%	65.67%	67.57%	69.61%
Pearson chi2(8) = 3.7222 P value = 0.881										

Source: 2018 Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel.

Lastly, the results in Table 5 reveal that there is not empirical support for a relationship between income and refugee attitudes among white evangelicals. H3, B hypothesized that when income goes down, support for refugees among white evangelicals will go down also. However, these results show that a higher income or a lower income makes no significant statistical difference in refugee attitudes among white evangelicals. Through these results, income is revealed to not be a significant driver of refugee attitudes, which can be further supported through the P value ($P < 0.927$).

Table 5. Income and Refugee Attitudes Among White Evangelicals

	Last year, that is in 2017, what was your family's total income from all sources, before taxes?								
Do you think the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees into the country?	< $10,000	$10,000 to < $20,000	$20,000 to < $30,000	$30,000 to < $40,000	$40,000 to < $50,000	$50,000 to < $75,000	$75,000 to < $100,000	$100,000 to < $150,000	$150,000 or more	Total
YES	42.86%	35.29%	40.00%	34.78%	25.00%	34.48%	41.38%	32.26%	25.81%	34.42%
NO	57.14%	64.71%	60.00%	65.22%	75.00%	65.52%	58.62%	67.74%	74.19%	65.58%
	Pearson chi2(8) = 3.1279 P value = 0.926									

Source: Pew Research Center's May 2018 RBS/RDD Study Questionnaire.

Discussion

This research's findings revealed that there is empirical support for Hypothesis 1 and the relationship between strength of white identity and attitudes toward newcomers to America. The data shown in Table 1 revealed that white evangelicals who do not think that they benefit from advantages in society are more likely to think that newcomers are a threat to American values. When whites believe that they are not afforded higher status based off the color of their skin, it means that they have a higher strength of white identity. These individuals are blind to the privilege that they have and perceive their placement in society as the status quo. Therefore, these individuals become more concerned when newcomers are offered opportunities in society because it leads to the perception that they are a threat to the privileges that they experience, but regard as normal. The results from hypotheses 2A, 2B, 3A, and 3B showed some trends, but did not reveal statistically significant numbers. By analyzing the data from all hypotheses, the empirical claim can be made that white evangelicals contradict their faith by opposing immigrants and refugees, not because of infrequent worship attendance or because of economic concerns, but because of racially driven political interests.

There are a number of implications that can be made due to the results of this research. The first is the implication on future research and the importance of analyzing how white identity and perceptions of white privilege affect white evangelical political attitudes toward minority groups. Political and social scientists should seriously consider the influence that a culture of denying the reality of white privilege has on public support or opposition to certain policies. White identity can represent a critical factor in what drives policies that inherently harm racial minorities, such as building walls, separating

families, limiting refugees, and prohibiting migrants based on their religion. Future researchers can adequately explain white evangelical support for these policies and opposition toward the groups they target by analyzing perceptions of white privilege.

Another implication that can be made as a result of this research's findings is that white evangelical leadership should openly and publicly recognize that there is an issue of race relations within their community. Proper and necessary steps toward racial reconciliation should be taken, rather than proclaiming racial justice on the outside while remaining apathetic within. Reconciliation cannot begin until there is an acknowledgement of white evangelicalism's racist past (Heltzel 2009). Once this recognition has been made, the evangelical church can begin to reconcile by making room for more diverse leadership, reaching out to other religious communities of color, and holding their members accountable for opposing those in need.

The third implication of this research is that evangelicals and their church communities should take a more active role in the political advocacy for immigrants and refugees in this country. The evangelical church has the power to assert itself as an agent of social change (Sharp 2004), whether it be through protests, outreach to political representatives, the mobilization of their believers, or even the use of the word of God. No one who claims to be a follower of Jesus should remain silent when families are being forcible separated, when children are dying in U.S. custody, or when those escaping from war are denied refuge.

Reflection

The social and political dynamic of the United States is evolving at a fast pace. The growing number of racial and ethnic minorities are changing the standard of what it

means to be an American. Political, social, and governmental systems and institutions are all experiencing an era of change to go along with the changing population. This change has been met with resistance from white Americans who perceive racial and ethnic minorities as a threat. White individuals, on average, receive "greater material benefits, social esteem, and political accommodation" (Jardina 2019, 41). When these privileges – ones that whites regard as natural – are challenged, "many whites react defensively, condemning and resisting changes to the racial status quo." (Jardina, 2019, 41). This perception has been given the label strength of white identity. When it comes to political attitudes toward minority newcomers to the country, white evangelicals in the United States perform based off of this white racial identity, rather than based off of their faith. The reason why contradictions arise between the political behavior of white evangelicals and the teachings of their faith is because they are not basing their political views off of the teachings of Jesus, for if they did, they would overwhelmingly support pathways to citizenship for immigrants and they would overwhelmingly support refugee intake. However, the data continues to show that white evangelicals possess the lowest numbers of support for these very individuals. Despite the fact that the Bible says to "love those who are foreigners" and to "love your neighbor as yourself," we see that white evangelicals are letting their racial insecurities be what allows them to exclude the foreigner, their neighbor, and those who are most at need (Deuteronomy 10:19, Matthew 22:39, NIV).

Unfortunately, this trend of white evangelicals possessing negative attitudes toward minority groups is a pattern that has repeated itself throughout American history. Many evangelical protestants during the 1800s used Christianity to defend slavery. A

great number of white evangelicals during the Civil Rights Movement resisted efforts toward social and political progress for African Americans. There are countless stories of LGBTQIA+ individuals being mistreated and rejected by an evangelical church in the late 90s and early 2000s. Today, we see the same cycle of resistance and exclusion repeating itself with immigrants and refugees. It is always important to note that being a white evangelical does not implicitly mean that one harbors hostility toward minority groups. There have been numerous churches, organizations, religious leaders, and evangelical activists who have embodied the ideals of love and compassion for the world's most oppressed peoples. However, the empirical significance of white evangelicals opposing immigrants and refugees is relevant to study and discuss in the uncertainness and polarization of today's political climate. More importantly, these topics must continue to be discussed because the world and its most oppressed inhabitants can no longer afford to be overlooked by those who have the power to help them. It is time for the evangelical church and its members to step away from their legacy of racism, xenophobia, and exclusion, and make the long overdue strides toward the true meaning of Jesus; inclusion for the outcasted, compassion for the desperate, justice for the oppressed, and most importantly, love for all peoples.

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