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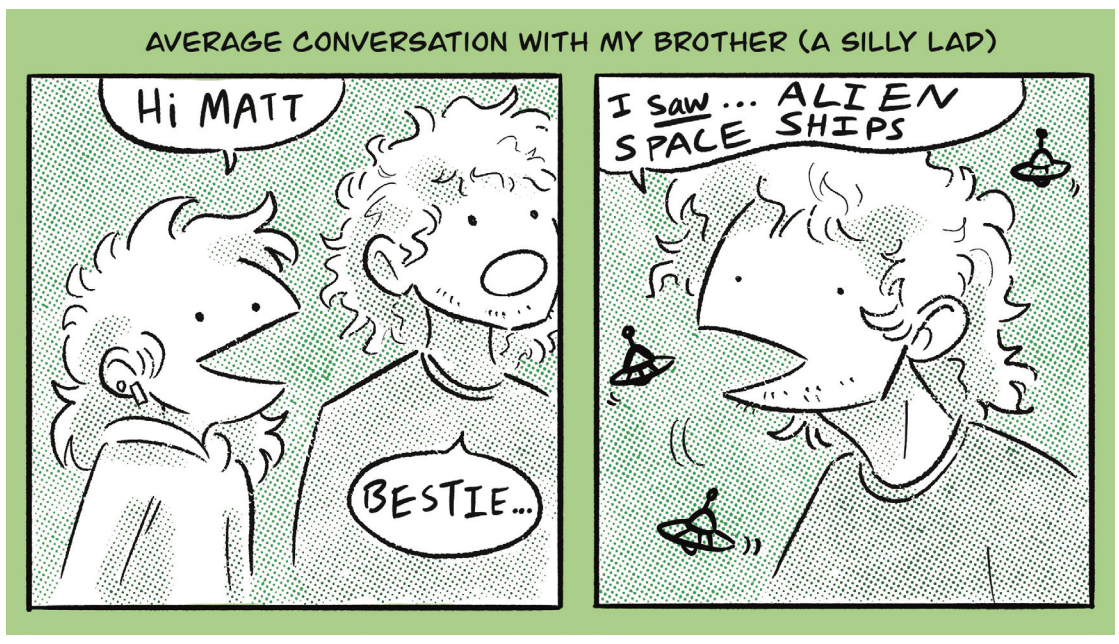

COMIC BY SAM HASS, ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Patrick's Politics:

CHRISTIAN FANATICISM AND THE UNHOLY WAR IN IRAN

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On March 25, within the walls of the Pentagon, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth held a prayer session. His preaching included a chilling encouragement of U.S. troops to commit "overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy." These words took place in the context of America's war against Iran, which has dragged on for weeks with no clear end in sight. The war has taken on an explicitly religious context for the Christian right. For them, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a biblical enemy, one they are justified to eliminate by God. Their violently fanatic belief has spread like a disease into the explanation for starting the conflict, and it is an abuse of faith itself.

In the beginning of Trump's second term, I wrote about how Christian nationalism would undoubtedly influence his presidency. In particular, I pointed out how Hegseth, then the nominee for Defense Secretary, hailed from an extremely conservative sect of Christianity. That splinter holds unequivocally that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation and that the religious purity of the state is paramount. Once you recognize this philosophy, it is clear Hegseth has been eager to apply it to the Iran war. During a CBS News interview, Hegseth claimed that "the providence of our almighty God is protecting those troops." In other words, Christianity's God apparently favors America's mission in Iran – whatever that constantly shifting justification is. During the aforementioned prayer service in the Pentagon, Hegseth wished, "Let every round find its mark against the enemies of righteousness and our great nation." That is how weapons of war, for the Christian right, are transformed into instruments of religious zeal. And who are the enemies of this supposed "righteousness"?

Luckily, Hegseth lays it out for us. In his 2020 book "American Crusade," he argued that "Islamism" must be pushed back by the "unapologetic sword of Americanism." He also writes, "The longer Americans live with the delusion that Islam is a religion of peace... the more difficult our task."

The mention of the Crusades, which pitted Christian forces against Islamic caliphates, is an intentional callback to an era of expressly religious war. For Hegseth and other Christian nationalists, the Iran war is just another iteration of a centuries-long faith-based conflict. During the Crusades, both Christians and Muslims justified their conquests with assertions of God's favor. On the Christian side, rulers of the Byzantine Empire regularly gave speeches that exhorted their troops to fight against Islamic forces for the glory of God. So too did the kingdoms of western Europe. In many respects, this usage of religion as a tool to support the state's military action is related to the Divine Right of Kings – a doctrine that argues rulers are chosen by and answer only to God. Trump echoed a piece of this concept after surviving an assassination attempt in 2024, saying he had been picked by a "supernatural hand" to lead the country.



LOGO BY SAM HASS, ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

The authoritarian concept of the Divine Right of Kings, taken together with religious fanaticism in wartime, is a potent mix that has bled through America's actions in the war against Iran. According to the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, U.S. commanders have been telling their troops that the war is "all part of God's divine plan." When placed in this context, it becomes clear why the U.S. has been unbending in its demands for Iran's total submission. Fanatical faith is nonnegotiable. It is the very idea of an uncompromise; if you believe God backs your side to win, then you cannot lose or appear weak. Otherwise, the religious underpinnings of the war crumble into ruins. At the same time, if Trump subscribes to the idea that he chosen by God, he needs no voice but his own. Under this justification, the assent of Congress – necessary to declare war according to the Constitution – becomes moot. Even asking for approval is considered weak in this extremist outlook, which is part of the reason the Trump administration has been especially loath to get congressional support.

Religious justifications for the Iran war run directly counter to what the foundations of Christianity actually teach. In the Bible, Jesus Christ says, "Blessed are the peacemakers,/ for they will be called children of God." It can hardly be argued that Hegseth and the Trump administration are making peace in Iran. Pope Leo used this logic in his recent statement that "This is our God: Jesus, king of peace, who rejects war, whom no one can use to justify war...He does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them." The idea of Christianity being used to further military goals is abhorrent and antithetical to its original doctrine of nonviolent faith. No one says "conflict be with you" when exchanging greetings in church; it is peace that Christians are supposed to spread.

It is especially ironic that Christian nationalists arguing for war in the Middle East cite Iran's own theological fanaticism as a reason to attack them. Hegseth has called the Iranian regime "apocalyptic" and claimed that they seek "religious Armageddon." It is true that Iran's government is explicitly based in a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law, and that this view has caused Iranian leaders to see the war in a religious light. Iran's president Mahmoud Pezeshkian declared that the killing of Ayatollah Khamenei, the country's Supreme Leader, meant a "war against Muslims." However, the religious right is using essentially the same logic to defend America's actions. The only difference is which God you believe in more, which is the fundamental issue with relying on religion to justify war. It relies on the abstraction of God's favor, which many throughout history have claimed for themselves. And yet no empire, no nation and no country has ever been able to prove it.

The Christian nationalist view of the Iran war is sustained only by its own warped faith. Their fervency is supported by violence and autocracy, not the teachings of Christianity itself. Both believers and nonbelievers alike should beware of religion being used as a cudgel in support of the state. This abuse of faith in service of conflict is wrong wherever it arises, and now the world must deal with its bloody consequences.