

## Columns & Commentary

**In Development:** New works at the intersection of art, news and life.



"GAIHAB," FROM THE SERIES BATIK, 2025, ALIA ALI, VIA GALERIE PETER SILLNER

Growing up in Yemen, the artist Alia Ali often visited fabric markets, where she would sip tea or coffee and feel the imported material — silk, linen, brocades. Then she'd head to a tailor to create a custom outfit, a process in contrast to the invisible labor that drives global trade today. This is a theme in her new photography series, Batik, named for the Indonesian fabric-dyeing technique. Textiles, she says, "collapse time and make us reimagine geography."



### Footnotes: Pass the Crown



Bob Iger, the chief executive of Disney for nearly two decades, is due to step down in early 2026, as the entertainment company nears the end of its search for a successor. But Disney's previous efforts to replace its top boss haven't always gone according to plan. Mr. Iger, 74, has postponed retirement five times, and after he left the job in 2020, he staged a coup just two years later and returned. Historically the process of replacing a corporate or political leader has often been roiled with intrigue and sometimes even violence. Here are a few things to read, watch and listen to about successions.

#### READ ‘The World: A Family History of Humanity’

“Succession is the great test of a system; few manage it well,” writes Simon Sebag Montefiore. In his 2023 book he explores dynasties, from the Mongol Empire’s to North Korea’s, to show how world history can be traced through the families in power.

#### READ ‘The Spinach King: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty’

Seabrook Farms in New Jersey once supplied a third of the country’s frozen vegetables. In this 2025 book, the New Yorker writer John Seabrook traces the history of his grandfather’s produce empire.

#### WATCH ‘The Murdochs: Empire of Influence’

This 2022 docuseries from CNN in collaboration with The New York Times examines Rupert Murdoch’s trial-by-combat strategy in determining which of his children would succeed him as head of News Corp.

#### LISTEN ‘Dalai Lama Dilemma’

China has long asserted its authority to name the Dalai Lama’s successor. This episode of the Economist podcast “Drum Tower” explores the uncertainty for Tibetans as they brace for the death of their leader, who is 90 years old.

ROSS DOUTHAT

## Christianity In Today’s Nationalism

As soon as he was nominated to be secretary of defense, Pete Hegseth, with his Crusader cross tattoo and his attendance at a hard-edge Calvinist church, became a natural vessel for liberal fears about that dread concept, “Christian nationalism.”

This is a term that can be understood in two ways. The first understanding emphasizes the “Christian” part and imagines nationalism as the vehicle through which conservative believers impose their doctrines on a pluralist society. This is the vision that inspires the strongest liberal paranoia, with images of inquisitions, witch trials, the Republic of Gilead.

But there’s a second understanding, in which “nationalism” is the controlling word and the religious modifier is the pinch of incense that makes believers comfortable with worldly deeds and choices.

With this kind of Christian nationalism, the core fault might not be too much religious moralism in politics, but too little. And this second understanding often seems closer to the realities of the second Trump administration. Start with the current controversies surrounding Hegseth — his orders to rain down death on Venezuelan boats believed to be carrying drugs, and the alleged decision, in at least one instance, to ruthlessly finish off survivors.

I don’t want to say that a policy of direct attacks on drug cartels is inherently inconsistent with Christian ideas about just war; perhaps a case could be made and a strategy constructed that clarifies when exactly a drug mule becomes a combatant.

But I do not hear such a case from Hegseth or the administration. The argument instead

### There’s an absence of religious-informed policy.

is mostly a bloody-minded utilitarianism: Bad guys being killed saves American lives; you can trust us that these are all bad guys; no, you can’t see the legal justification; and anyway, Obama killed more people with his drone strikes. Traditional Christian just-war considerations don’t seem to enter in at all.

This particular lacuna is hardly unique to the Trump era: From Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the post-9/11 era, American hawks have never felt especially constrained by religious attempts to put limits on the use of force.

What’s notable about this administration, though, is how widely the religious deficit extends. When the Trump administration slashed foreign aid programs that often reflected an explicitly Christian humanitarianism, some religious conservatives welcomed or made their peace with the cuts. But with the exception of the transgender issue, more “right-wing”-coded religious priorities have also received little attention from this administration.

It has conspicuously kept the pro-life movement at arm’s length. It has offered at best symbolic moves toward the regulation of spreading vices (pornography, drugs, gambling) that evangelical Christianity especially once vigorously opposed. Nor has it yet offered serious responses to the newer religious concern over falling birthrates.

And it has done little to address growing Christian anxieties about the dehumanizing effects of an artificial intelligence future. If the right’s coalition is divided between an A.I.-boosting donor class and a potentially A.I.-skeptical base (which has Steve Bannon as its would-be spokesman), the Trump administration has strongly favored the side that wants to build the Machine God.

The administration has offered a lot of general rhetoric about the value of Christianity to American civilization, along with presidential complaints about Christian persecution overseas and pious social media posts on Catholic holidays. But in the absence of religious-informed policymaking, this sometimes feels more like a performance of a Christian politics than a full reality.

In offering this analysis, I should stress that sincerely Christian policymaking can go badly astray (where the Middle East is concerned, I prefer Trump’s pagan transactionalism to George W. Bush’s evangelical idealism) or simply prove unpopular (I don’t imagine that a war on porn would dramatically improve Trump’s approval ratings).

And sometimes the Trump administration’s not especially religious priorities simply reflect what its supporters want. The right’s coalition is more secular than in the past, and even many churchgoing conservatives seem more concerned about immigration than abortion. Many very-online converts are more invested in meme wars than morals legislation. And religious fears about A.I. are inchoate: There isn’t some clear “trad” alternative to outraging the Chinese.

Nonetheless, I think a more Christian politics could serve the White House on three fronts. In policymaking, a Christian social vision would help the administration come to grips with the central social problem of our time, the substitution of transient hedonic vices for permanent commitments. In politics, a public rhetoric infused with more Christian charity might win an increasingly unpopular administration some badly needed friends.

And morally, in certain concrete cases — from the treatment of the detainees we shipped to a Salvadoran prison to the fate of alleged drug runners our missiles might have left helpless in the sea — a little more Christianity in its nationalism might simply prevent this administration from doing wicked things.