

Trinity University

Digital Commons @ Trinity

Political Science Faculty Research

Political Science Department

4-24-2021

"Rev." Donald Trump and the Christian Right – A Secular Transformation of the Great Awakening Heritage

John Francis Burke

Trinity University, jburke4@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/polysci_faculty



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Burke, J. F. (2021, April 24). "Rev." Donald Trump and the Christian right – A secular transformation of the great awakening heritage [Virtual presentation]. In J. K. Loessin (President), *The 2021 Proceedings of the ASSR*.

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

“Rev.” Donald Trump and the Christian Right – A Secular Transformation of the Great Awakening Heritage

*John Francis Burke,
Trinity University*

Abstract

Over the past five years, the curious relationship between Donald Trump and many conservative evangelicals has been at the intersection of US religion and politics. Explanations for this curious linkage include:

- John Fea’s accent on the historical fear of evangelicals of the other.
- Ben Howe’s claim that evangelicals have chosen power over values.
- Whitehead and Perry’s articulation of a U.S. Christian nationalism.
- Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s feminist critique of U.S. Christian masculinity.
- Timothy Carney’s connection between social collapse and Trumpism.

This paper argues that each of these arguments capture important parts of the Trump-evangelical nexus, but not the complete picture. Fea’s historical approach needs to be complemented by Whitehead and Perry’s quantitative approach and vice-versa. By synthesizing these arguments and well as others, this paper shows how Donald Trump and his evangelical partners have fostered a civil religion that secularizes the Great Awakening heritage. This is particularly evident in Trump’s rhetorical style, public policies, and the character of his campaign rallies.

Paper

Since the 1970s, faith-based organizations, especially of the evangelical persuasion, have become politically mobilized in reaction to what they have seen as the moral relativism that emerged from the major shifts in cultural norms in the 1960s. First as the Moral Majority and later as the Christian Coalition, these political advocates have had a major impact on U.S. politics, not just at the national level, but especially at the state and local level.

Nevertheless, the embrace of Donald Trump by the Christian Right is quite striking. President Trump is not the first person who comes to mind in terms of being a paragon of moral virtue. He has never been known to be a regular church goer and his alleged sexual encounters with women would hardly qualify him as a Christian exemplar. Furthermore, in Christian terms, he has never been one to ask for forgiveness for his sins nor is he the humblest person in terms of personality. Yet, he has managed to gain a lot of support from evangelical leaders and voters. Indeed, in 2016, Trump received 81% of the evangelical vote in the general election. This support actually exceeded that George W. Bush, John McCain, and Mitt Romney received in previous presidential elections (Fea 2018, 5-6). In turn, in the 2020 fall election, Trump gained the support 75-80% of white evangelical Christian voters as well as 57% of white Catholics (Schor 2020b).

A growing number of journalistic and academic studies have explored this curious marriage between Donald Trump and the Christian Right. Ben Howe (2019) argues that in supporting Trump, evangelicals have chosen power over values. Katherine Stewart contends this pursuit of power is actually a political ideology that

can be traced to Rousas John Rushdoony's works on pursuing Christian Reconstructionism, "a theocratic movement seeking to infuse our society at all levels with a biblical worldview" (2019, 103). Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry (2020) suggest that this nexus is rooted in a white Christian nationalism that is distinct from religious commitment. Kristin Kobes Du Mez (2020) argues in turn that this nationalism is steeped in patriarchal thinking and projection of the traditional work v. home roles for men and women. Sarah Posner (2020) connects white Christian nationalism to the growing impact of the alt-right. Robert Jones (2020) contends there is a long legacy of white supremacy in US Christianity, although the connection to Trump's racist rhetoric is implicit rather than explicit in this study. John Fea (2018) maintains that the Christian Right's embrace of Trump is connected to the longstanding history of evangelical fear of "the other." Finally, Timothy Carney (2019) connects Trump's success at galvanizing conservative voters to communities whose economic opportunities and social intermediate institutions have collapsed and whose residents consequently feel "left behind."

The "marriage" between Trump and the Christian Right also reflects James Davison Hunter's culture wars thesis: that the liberal-conservative divide politically reflects a liberal-conservative divide in theology and philosophy. The liberal side is more open-ended and pluralistic in its conceptualization of the relationship of God to the world and tends to stress in political terms the pursuit of social justice. The conservative side, conversely, sees God in rigid, steadfast certain terms; it stresses the importance of cultivating personal virtue and politically what it sees as fundamentally evil threats, such as communism or relativists moralities (Hunter 1991). These competing spiritual imaginations increasingly have divided church communities (Radcliffe 2005). Trump's appeal to the Christian Right is clearly on the conservative side of this divide.

Although these studies are all extremely valuable, they either reduce the support given by the Christian Right to Trump to the different facets of the US culture wars since World War II or in Fea's case, primarily focus on the historical antecedents within US evangelicalism. To understand the nexus between Trump and the evangelicals, one has to first integrate the historical and contemporary analyses. More than just an ideological or cultural political movement, the politics of the Christian Right is the latest chapter in a long history of how the evangelical revival tradition has articulated ideas that has led to the marginalization and persecution of "others." Second, one needs to grasp that not only has Trump tapped into this heritage, but that his political engagement of his supporters has secularized both the affect and effect of the Great Awakenings in U.S. history so as to foster a divisive civil religion.

My methodology, pure and simple, is the interpretation of texts. My contribution is to integrate the contemporary focus of some of these scholars with the historical analysis of other scholars. I also draw from my own experience as a lay Christian liturgist to suggest how the format, ambiance, and effects of the Great Awakening revivals have been recast by Trump into political theatre. In turn, I am using the term "Christian Right" as an umbrella term for conservative traditions within U.S. Christianity. Although I will primarily be focusing on evangelicals, at times I will also make reference to the Puritans, fundamentalists, and even conservative

Catholics as being part of this larger Christian Right umbrella, both in history and present-day.

I will present my argument in four sections. The first section will review the extensive entanglements between Trump and the Christian Right. The second section will review the studies that contend this nexus has to be understood primarily in political ideological, not theological, terms. The third section will challenge this rendering by showing the theological concepts and historical antecedents that inform the Christian Right's engagement of politics. The final section will explore how indeed the growing secularism of U.S. society has provided a backdrop by which Trump, especially in his campaign rallies, has secularized the Great Awakening heritage.

The Christian Right's Embrace of Donald Trump

Several evangelical leaders have sung Donald Trump's praises. Robert Jeffress, of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, supported Trump on the basis, drawing from Augustine and Martin Luther, that we needed a strong government to restrain evil (Fea 2018, 124-29). The Independent Network Charismatics supported Trump on the basis that a leader was needed who would lead the U.S. back to prosperity and extend "the dominion of Jesus Christ over all the earth" (Fea 2018, 133). Paula White, one of the leading preachers of the prosperity gospel – "faith, wealth, health, and victory" – has been an integral member of Trump's entourage and actually claimed the president has had "a born-again experience" (Fea 2018, 136).

In political terms, this curious marriage between Trump and the evangelical community lies in a legacy of liberal laws and federal court decisions over the past six decades that, from the Christian Right standpoint, have eroded the Christian ideals that supposedly have informed U.S. political life since its founding. Court cases like *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) removing state led prayer in public schools and *Roe v. Wade* (1973) providing for state sanctioning of abortion, at least in the first trimester of pregnancy, in the eyes of evangelicals, have encouraged a growing moral laxity and relativism in U.S. society (Fea 2018, 56).

In the 1990s, the inability of conservative Congressional members to remove President Bill Clinton from public office on the basis of his sexual misdeeds with a White House intern signified to evangelicals to what extent U.S. politics and society seemed to be heading, so-to-speak, "to hell in a handbasket." By 2016, Hillary Clinton, both in terms of being emblematic of the post 1960s non-traditional woman, and whose advocacy of big government socio-economic policies that supposedly would further erode a Christian America, was in evangelical terms, "the enemy to be defeated" (Fea 2016, 71).

Previous Republican presidents such as Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush claimed to have the Christian Right political concerns at heart, but did very little in actual policies to realize them. In the past, evangelical leaders such as Billy Graham, Cal Thomas, and James Dobson had been brought into White House circles only to realize that they were just being used by Republican presidents to get the evangelical vote. David Kwo, in fact, shares that evangelical leaders, when out of sight, were even disparaged as "goofy" by key advisors in the

Bush White House (Fea 2018, 145-52). In turn, liberal secular society often has had a disparaging view of the evangelical world.

As much as two decades earlier, many in the Christian Right made a scathing critique of Bill Clinton's character, especially given the Monica Lewinsky sexual tryst; as a result, evangelical leaders became fed up with Washington politics and social/political correctness. Consequently, they were willing to abandon their scruples regarding character to turn, in the words of Robert Jeffress, to "the meanest son-of-a-you-know-what I can find" to push their political agenda (Du Mez 2020, 14; Wehner 2019, 84).

And indeed, Trump delivered on many Christian Right issues. He made extensive appointments of conservative justices to the federal judiciary, including three U.S. Supreme Court justices (Fea 2018 138). He encouraged conservative state legislatures to pass anti-abortion legislation that does not just make it more difficult to get an abortion, but seeks to challenge *Roe* by regulating abortion earlier and earlier in pregnancies. In addition, he moved the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

In turn, on church-state entanglements, Trump supported freedom of religious expression, as evidenced in his opposition to the Johnson amendment which curtails formal institutional church involvement in politics (Fea 2018, 142-43). On the other hand, he blithely ignored actions raising possible violations of the establishment clause. More to the point, the Trump administration was very generous in providing federal bailout loans to churches so as to protect church jobs. Paula White's church, City of Destiny received between \$150,000 and \$350,000 and Robert Jeffress's church, First Baptist Dallas received between \$2 million and \$5 million in paycheck payments. Overall, the Associated Press reported that the Trump administration gave somewhere between \$17.3 and \$42.3 million in terms of bailout loans (Schor 2020a). Clearly, President Trump provided tangible support to the Christian Right and conversely this community has become entangled in the political pursuit of power politics. As Howe (2019) insists, evangelical leaders have opted for power in ways inconsistent with Christian morality and ethics.

Explaining Christian Nationalism – Patriarchalism, Policy Issues, Political Idolatry

What explains this push for political power by the Christian Right, beyond just the lust for power in and of itself? The tendency in the prevailing explanations is to claim a political or social explanation rather than one taken from theology or spirituality. Kristin Kobes De Mez argues that "evangelicalism must be seen as a cultural and political movement rather than as a community defined chiefly by its theology [or the Bible]" (2020, 298). Susan Posner claims the Christian Right's "real driving force, though, was not religion but grievances over school desegregation, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, affirmative action and more" (2020, xvi-xviii). Katherine Stewart contends Christian nationalism is "not a religious creed," but a political ideology and movement principally seeking power (2019, 3). Andrew Whitehead and Perry claim that the Christian Right projects a Christian nationalism that is neither at root Christian nor religious (2020, 20).

Each of these claims merit further examination. Du Mez shows how over the past century, the Christian Right has focused on cultivating masculinity. Her review of key figures is a “who’s who” of key evangelical, political, and entertainment figures who over the past century promote or are used to promote this end: John Wayne, Billy Graham, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Oliver North, the Promise Keepers, and Marc Driscoll among others. Her interpretive lens dwells upon how this focus on Christian masculinity to sustain the strong American West hero, of which John Wayne is the exemplar, projects “patriarchy and submission, sex and power” in public and family life (Du Mez 2020, 94).

Whereas Du Mez dwells on the mythos of the American West, Sarah Posner looks to Eastern Europe for her portrayal of the Christian Right. Posner does an excellent job of illustrating how the Christian Right and the alt-right come to weave in and out of each other. Her most noteworthy claim is that in terms of foreign affairs, that the Trump administration, with the support of the Christian Right, has embraced strongmen like Putin in Russia and Orban in Hungary. The justification is that these strongmen are reinforcing traditional Christianity as a bulwark against the relativism of secular humanism which dominates Western Europe and the United States (Posner 188-218). This turn to the East also suggests that Donald Trump’s blind eye toward Eastern Europe is not just due to a personal scandal or financial entanglements with Russia. It also suggests why the Christian Right’s support of Israel is not just to save the Holy Land, but that semi-authoritarian leaders like Netanyahu, as well as conservative religious parties, are allies to rescue Western civilization from secular mores.

Stewart provides an exhaustive account of how Christian Right leaders have become interlocked with political and economic elites seeking, through political mobilization, cultural socialization, and domination of the country’s judiciaries, to replace pluralistic democracy with a conservative hierarchical social order. The normative basis of this movement she traces back to Southern religious thinking justifying the institution of slavery. This focus on sustaining “the South’s segregationist ‘way of life’” (Stewart 124) in turn has been recast, she argues, in the contemporary era by Rushdoony’s articulation of a Christian Reconstructionism “rooted in hierarchy” (112).

Whitehead and Perry go the furthest in showing how a Christian nationalism informs the support of the Christian Right for Trump. This perspective, they suggest, seeks to establish their vision of a Christian nation in the political and social spheres. This outlook, they contend, more than “just repackaged ethnocentrism, racial resentment, or authoritarianism” (Whitehead 2020, 20), is “a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and values systems” that integrate “Christianity with American civic life” (10). This integration entails white male supremacy in the political order and a traditional family structure. Their quantitative study suggests Christian nationalism as opposed to religious commitment of practices is connected to support of white supremacy politics. Essentially, Christian nationalism is a religious variation on what the nationalist literature would term an ethnocultural nationalism (Heywood 2017, 174-76).

Based upon these studies and others, I submit there are at least ten key components to this Christian nationalism. First, the Christian Right stresses that leaders need to be strong warriors. Precisely because previous presidents,

especially Republican ones, insufficiently delivered on the Christian Right's political agenda, evangelical leaders like Donald Jeffress threw their support to the irreverent strongman, Trump. Indeed, leaders of the Christian Right have characterized President Trump either as Cyrus, the secular leader who allowed the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem, or as the new Nehemiah, who actually rebuilt Jerusalem after the Jewish exile in Persia (Fea 2018, 123 & 131-32). Although Trump may be of dubious character, he is supposedly was a "vessel" through which the Lord was working his will (Howe 2019, 41).

Second, Christian nationalism promotes reinforcing traditional gender roles. Men are supposedly the protectors and women are supposed to be pure and submissive to men – again, the virile masculinity stressed by Du Mez. Men are the breadwinners and women are the stewards of hearth and home. This binary is quite vividly advocated not just by men but by Phyllis Schlafly and "traditional" women, especially members of Eagle Forum, a conservative political interest group which she founded and chaired, who mobilized to torpedo ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. As Du Mez stresses, and ironically so, given Du Mez' feminine interpretive scheme, Schlafly unites "white Christians around a rigid and deeply conservative vision of family and nation" (Du Mez 2020, 73). Specifically, she forged an effective coalition between Catholic, evangelical, and Mormon women, most of whom were in "the white middle and working classes" (Du Mez 73). In seeking the perpetuation of traditional gender roles in the public and family spheres, they raised "a larger moral and existential threat to women, and the nation." Not only did Schlafly's advocacy consolidate the worldview of the Christian Right, she and her ERA feminist adversaries had a lot to do with the Democrat and Republican parties realigning into genuinely liberal and conservative parties.

Third, Christian nationalism embraces the populist patriotism of the white working class that rises in response to the political protests of the 1960s and early 1970s, especially over Vietnam (Du Mez 2020, 51-62). This patriotism becomes even more volatile as the United States shifts from being industrial to being high tech. The decline of well-paid manufacturing jobs leads to a decline in the middle-class standard of living that white workers had access to in mid-century America. A candidate who comes along and says he is going to restore those jobs and make their lives great again is very seductive. As this so-called silent majority becomes a minority in the 21st century, except in small towns and rural areas (Whitehead 2020, 37), it is ripe for militant grievances and actions.

Fourth, Christian nationalism, thus, puts for the notion of a mythical U.S. past that we need to reconstruct. It is questionable that this idyllic past ever existed, but to the degree that it did, it represented a world in which White Anglo Saxon Protestant culture predominated. Rushdoony's propagation of the debatable notion that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation leads to the contemporary fight "to redeem America from its commitment to godless humanism" (Stewart 2019, 113). In addition, even the United States Conference of Bishops joins this chorus when it has called for "[restoring] America's lost godliness" (Whitehead 2020, 77).

Fifth, Christian nationalism argues that there are evils that have to be combatted to sustain the Christian way of life. During the 1950s and 60s, on the foreign front, communism was seen as antithetical to the Christian way of life. In the

twenty-first century, radical Islam is seen as the evil to be vanquished. Obviously, Trump was able to take advantage of this sentiment with his so-called Muslim ban. On the domestic front, in the 1950s through the 1970s, desegregation of schools was to be resisted insofar as it supposedly threatened the American way of life. This justified the creation of private Christian schools that remain overwhelmingly attended by whites. Today, LGBTQ rights is an anathema to threat to the Christian Right. Divorce is also problematic, even though some of the evangelical leaders have been divorced (Whitehead 2020, 143).

Sixth, Christian nationalists argue for the exclusion of others that threaten white supremacy. After all, in this nationalist view, real Americans are native-born whites (Whitehead 2020, 91). Consequently, in this “us v. them” binary, among the excluded are nonwhites, homosexuals, Muslims, Jews, seculars, and other non-Christians. Curiously enough, Christian nationalists see themselves as the ones who are the victims in a highly liberal secular society, not groups that have suffered subjugation and discrimination such as African Americans. In turn, opposition to affirmative action by Christian nationalists feeds off this sentiment (Whitehead 2020; Gorski 2021).

Seventh, Christian nationalism is devoted to supporting religious, social, and political institutions that “defend cultural preferences, preserve their political influence and maintain the ‘proper’ social order. In policy terms, Christian nationalist are strong supporters of the military, the death penalty, and gun rights (Whitehead 2020, 77-83; Gorski 2021). In symbolic terms, they wrap themselves in the American flag. Barack Obama’s 2008 remark regarding people who “cling to guns or religion or [show] antipathy to people who aren’t like them,” (Obama Angers, 2008), only reinforced the sentiment that a traditional moral and civil order had to be defended by the assault from liberal, secular culture. Hence, why again why one needs a strong warrior to stand up for traditional beliefs.

Eighth, building on this warrior motif, as aforementioned, the Christian Right, in terms of foreign affairs, is very attracted to foreign authoritarian-like leaders like Putin or Orban who rigorously sustain a traditional political culture. Giving Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilization” a new twist (Huntington 1996), the fight within Western civilization, according to Christian nationalism, is between traditionalist Christian culture and secular relativist moralities.

Ninth, given the global migrations begat by international unrest and the global economy, Christian nationalists stand staunchly opposed to non-white immigration. Donald Trump, especially through his border wall rhetoric and immigration policies, was very effective at playing to the racist fears of those who see white privilege being eroded by non-white hoards “invading” the country. At best, non-whites have a place as long as they assimilate to Christian nationalist values and viewpoints (Huntington 2004).

Tenth, and in sum, Christian nationalism stands in opposition to a pluralist, secular liberal democracy full of multiple religions, moralities, and viewpoints. Instead, the Christian right stands steadfast behind a clearly nativist defined set of values that “create, support, and maintain symbolic and social boundaries that exclude non-Christians from full inclusion into American civil life” (Whitehead 2020, 161). In sum, Christian nationalism is projected through white American cultural values.

The Historical Spiritual Lifeworld of the Christian Right

The suggestions made by the preceding scholars that the support of evangelicals for Donald Trump is not to be understood from the standpoint of theology or spirituality, but rather in the context of patriarchalism, public policy conflicts, and cultural ideology has a great deal of merit. However, their arguments downplay, and in some cases overlook, that almost from its inception in U.S. history, evangelical religion had both a populist fervor and a commitment to fostering and sustaining a clear vision of community life, steeped in genuinely religious narratives.

I contend the Christian Right's political mobilization is the descendent of what Philip Gorski argues is religious nationalism, going all the way back to the Puritans. Religious nationalists, according to the Gorski, "fuse religion and politics, to make citizenship in the one the mark of citizenship in the other, to purge all those who lack the mark, and to expand the borders of the kingdom as much as possible, by violent means if necessary" (2017, 17). Indeed, Whitehead and Perry acknowledge their study's articulation of Christian nationalism is indebted to Gorski's framework. (Whitehead 2020, 13-14).

Gorski contends religious nationalists draw their vision from the Jewish religious texts and the Christian Bible; these documents are not just window dressing for an underlying conservative ideology or patriarchalism. He adds two other components. First, religious nationalists push a conquest narrative. This narrative emphasizes blood sacrifices that go back to the animal sacrifices in Leviticus. But this leads to, according to Gorski, that "religion, people, land, and polity are cemented together with dried blood in form of blood sacrificed to God" (2017, 21).

The other narrative, especially taken from Revelation is an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil: Christ returns to smite Satan and establishes a harmonious thousand-year reign (Gorski 2017, 22). Well, this narrative plays very well into the contemporary evangelical insistence of standing up to and vanquishing the perpetrators of evil. One does not have to go looking for purely political sources that inform the "good us v. evil them" mentality. The Christian Right is drawing from longstanding narratives in the U.S. Christian tradition.

The legacy of the Puritans in this regard is both positive and negative. On the positive side, the Puritans emphasized that morally we have to be concerned about a common good. However, as Gorski points out, on the negative side, the Puritans articulated conquest and apocalyptic narratives. First, the Puritans saw the New World as a promised land, but saw the Indians as Canaanites who were to be removed (Gorski 2021). As much as evangelicals might claim the Puritans were a vanguard for religious liberty, they constructed exclusionary communities who persecuted nonconformists and witches (Fea 2018, 76-84). Second, as articulated by Cotton Mather, was the conviction that the New World "would be the central battlefield in the final struggle between good and evil" (Gorski 2021). Third, in their quest to "redeem the nations of the world," the Puritans set in motion the notion of American exceptionalism that will become in the 19th century, Manifest Destiny (Hogue 2018, 84-85). A fear of the "other," thus, is very much inscribed in these "pure" undertakings that will ultimately inform the politics of the Christian Right. This "us v.

them” moral binary was very much at work in the Capital insurrection on 6 January 2021.

In turn, the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries are pivotal in branding evangelicalism in both style and substance. On an institutional level, the initial Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s challenged the more formal hierarchical ecclesiastical structures of the Anglican among other traditions. Hence there is a very democratic spirit in the Great Awakening that both challenged “established religions” and put forth religious freedom, that in turn would lead to the fight for political independence in the American Revolution (Corbett 1999, 46). These revivals also placed great stress upon holiness as a voluntary realization and thus, conversion was a choice made by an individual. This movement emphasized the spirituality of the common person against that of the elite – a sense of individual agency essential for a democratic polity (Weaver 2009, 113-14; Corbett 1999, 46). This above-mentioned conversion also was a highly emotional experience through which a person achieved a new birth and ultimately chose Christ as their personal savior.

In turn, the frontier dynamic of the Great Awakenings, especially in the second one in the 1820s and 1830s, manifested a populist critique of ecclesiastical elites. In many respects, this critique anticipates the contemporary red state – blue state divide. Finally, the millennial aspect of the Great Awakenings meant that one was called to realize the kingdom of God. One was called to not just seek conversions, but bring about “a better social order” (Corbett 1997, 46). As Randall Balmer points out, evangelicals took from the Puritans an emphasis on piety, from Scots-Irish Presbyterianism an emphasis on doctrine, and from European pietists the demonstration of a warm-hearted faith. Living by the authoritative Bible, being born again, and evangelizing the Christian message became staples of evangelical Christianity (Balmer 2020, 79).

Over the next two and half centuries, this fusion of piety, doctrinal purity, and social engagement led to both progressive and conservative social movements. On the positive side, the evangelical concern for community life established crusades for “public education, prison reform, advocacy for the poor, and the rights of women” (Balmer 2020, 80). Charles Finney, a key figure in the Second Great Awakening, saw social responsibility as a “necessary corollary of faith” (Balmer 2020, 80). He was very leery of the impact of capitalism.

In turn, the evangelical heritage was deeply involved in the abolitionist movement and then at the turn of the twentieth century, was ingrained in the push for Prohibition. The latter involvement was not only because of the evil of drink but because of the abuse that women and children endured at the hands of their inebriated husbands/fathers. Without a doubt, the evangelical zeal for social reform influenced the social ministry of Jane Addams at Hull House. In turn, the Social Gospel Movement of Addams’s period was influenced by evangelical thinking in addition to liberal Protestantism. Evangelicals, especially in the nineteenth century “took special notice of those on the margins of society – women, slaves, the victims of war and abuse, prisoners, the poor – those Jesus called ‘the least of these’” (Balmer 2020, 83).

On the other hand, there are very negative examples of this evangelical fusion of piety, doctrine, and zealous social reform. The fear of a misbegotten

America, has had a long history in the history of U.S. evangelism. The First Great Awakening targeted both Catholics and Jews as embodiments of evil. Specifically, Jonathan Edwards, one of the leading preachers of the revival, projected the collapse of Islam and Christianity (Kidd 2010, 47). In turn, moving forward to the U.S. founding, evangelicals characterized the deist ideas of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine as perpetrating “godlessness” and “infidelity” that was deluging our land” (Fea 2018, 96-97).

In the 19th century, the Second Great Awakening, renewed evangelical fervor through camp meetings as the settlers spread westward across the United States. At the same time, evangelical rhetoric vilified the growing number of Irish and German Catholic immigrants. As John Fea points out, Lyman Beecher’s “Plea for the West” captures both dimensions of this Awakening. On the one hand, Beecher opposed slavery and also called for the expansion of women’s roles in public life. On the other hand, when articulating the intelligence, moral principles, and patriotism necessary to sustain the U.S. political compact, he referred to “immigrants ‘wielded by sinister design’” – a thinly veiled riposte against the Roman Catholic Church (Fea 2018, 88). In turn, the Know-Nothing movement in the 1840s and 1850s became a secular version of the evangelical oppositions to Catholic immigrants and propagated the notion of the United States being a Protestant nation (Fea 2018, 91-92).

In terms of race, Southern evangelicals found it easy to justify slavery and the South’s social order based on the Bible (Stewart 2019, 105-11). Even Finney supported segregation and race-based prejudice (Jones 2020, 81). Indeed, post-Civil War evangelical culture was integral to the reestablishment of White supremacy across the South – the so-called “lost cause.” A racist civil religion emerged. Statues rose to confederate heroes such as Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis. Catechisms were distributed on slavery. The Confederate Battle Flag became a symbol of a civil religion steeped in religious nationalism. The Ku Klux Klan, both in its inception circa 1870 and its reconstitution in the 1920s has always seen itself as a Christian organization. The Klan’s virulent opposition to Blacks, Catholics, Jews, and non-Christian immigrants is grounded in the evangelical notion of sustaining a Christian nation against the infidel (Fea 2018, 107-08).

In turn, the rise of fundamentalist preachers in 1920s, who railed against modernist interpretation of scripture as propagating heresy and skepticism defended the Klan’s campaign against “African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants” (Fea 2018, 108). They also strongly opposed the presidential candidacy of the Catholic Al Smith in the 1920s, reigniting the anti-Catholic sentiment of the Know Nothing movement decades earlier. Fea points out the Texas fundamentalist, J. Frank Norris, “connected Smith’s campaign to satanic forces” (Fea 2018, 107).

No doubt, the issues of doctrinal purity and piety in evangelical action led the fundamentalists to be active in the Prohibition movement on basis of being opposed to sinful activities. However, this moral zeal, on the intellectual level, let them to create an alternative higher education system opposed to the lure of secularism, especially found in modernist theological criticism and the teaching of evolution: “Bible colleges and other fundamentalist education institutions shielded the faithful from secular temptations that had the potential to undermine their faith” (Fea 2018, 110). Picking up on the religious nationalist stress apocalyptic struggle,

fundamentalist preachers sought “to scare the hell out of their followers with conspiracy theories about Catholics, communists, modernists, and ... isms of all kind” (Fea 2018, 111).

Finally, although perhaps not directly attributable to evangelicalism and fundamentalism, there are other political acts in U.S. history that fit into the narratives on pursuing the promised land and engaging in armed struggle against those who are evil. Andrew Jackson removed the Cherokee in the southeastern United States in the Veil of Tears march. The American First Committee in the 1940s, which came out of Yale University, manifested “racism and anti-Semitism” (Fea 2018, 171). The Eisenhower Administration in the 1950s conducted Operation Wetback which deported countless Mexicans, who a decade earlier during World War II, were given jobs in factories and fields to replace Americans serving in the armed forces. In turn, Richard Nixon in 1968 picked up on George Wallace’s segregationist rhetoric by pledging to institute law and order to quell urban riots committed largely by African Americans. Finally, Ronald Reagan enticed white working-class voters with his appeal to pursuing the Puritan’s “city on the hill” and his resistance to the rising tide of identity politics movements. All of these examples play into the fear conjured by the evangelical and fundamentalist triad of piety, doctrinal purity, and crusading zeal. When Donald Trump vilified Latin American and Muslim immigrants, he was tapping into a deep vein of fear and xenophobia in the U.S. religious nationalist tradition.

As accented in the previous section, the Christian Right has suggested that Donald Trump, despite his personal drawbacks, had been hailed by God to rebuild the U.S. infrastructure and to protect the United States from its enemies in desperate times. Indeed, much of President Trump’s rhetoric, both before and after his 2016 election, “trumpeted” an American national identity that was supposedly under threat from leftist enemies within and immigrants and aliens without (Fea 2018, 40-41).

Ultimately, rendering the impact of the Christian Right on U.S. politics since World War II as simply due to patriarchalism, reactions to progressive public policies, political ideology, or as a form of cultural nationalism is incomplete. Without a doubt, patriarchy, nativist sentiments, and reactions to progressive identity politics are very much part of the support the Christian Right has given Donald Trump, his questionable moral life notwithstanding. Still, beneath these explanations remains the key religious nationalist narratives of the pursuit of the promised land through conquest and the apocalyptic rendering of the bloody struggle between good and evil that goes all the way back to the spiritual norms propagated by the Puritans and in the evangelical Great Awakenings. Grasping this history provides normative depth to the more contemporary studies by Du Mez, Posner, Stewart, and Whitehead and Perry, among others and conversely, these more contemporary studies reveal the challenges Christian nationalism, in its pursuit of power politics, poses to U.S. democracy.

The Secularized Great Awakening

As much as theological narratives and historical precedents do inform the Christian Right’s support for Donald Trump, there are at least two dimensions in

which Trump has secularized this heritage. First, his “lost America” narrative, a recasting of the Southern “lost cause,” has played very well among those people who feel that the country has left them behind. In the 2016 Republican primaries, as Timothy Carney points out, Trump did well in conservative counties where the local economies and civil societies had collapsed. Beyond just people losing their livelihoods, the intermediate associations that had given people in these regions a sense of place and acceptance – what Robert Putnam terms the pursuit of social capital - had consequently disappeared. Many of these people were no longer even going to church. Instead, their political outlooks became shaped by conservative talk radio, television outlets, and internet sites. By contrast, where local economies and civil societies were thriving, such as Chevy Chase, Maryland, voters in the Republican primaries opted for John Kasich or Marco Rubio, not Trump (Carney 2019, 1-14). Of course, even in these prosperous counties, come the 2016 general election, many of these same voters shifted their support to Trump.

Whether justified or not, in places where the economic and civil society had collapsed, people saw themselves as victims and were receptive to rhetoric about the supposed internal and external “others” who were destructive of what they saw as the American way of life – a mantra that I have shown goes back at least to the First Great Awakening, if not the Puritans. Hence, these potential voters were drawn to someone who claimed that they would make America great again. Trump quite effectively has spun this contorted nostalgia to his advantage: “a masquerade of history...that is concerned with the past, but in a self-absorbed way, free of any concern with facts” (Snyder 2017, 121). He has been a master at manipulating people’s fears, angers, and resentments (Du Mez 2020, 249; Escobar 2020, 106). Ironically, people who had fallen away from church life due to the decline of local community institutions have found religion again, but this time in a civil religion that is well steeped in religious nationalism.

This twenty-first century articulation of “going to church” brings me to my second point. Finney, in the Second Great Awakening, when he turned from being a lawyer to being an evangelist, was moved by and learned from the organizing techniques of politicians (Weaver 2009, 140). Trump, on the other hand, has reversed the process. Instead of political techniques influencing religious evangelization, Trump took the dynamics of televangelists, pioneered by Billy Graham and others in the 20th century, and employed them effectively for political theatre: “his rallies were more like tent revivals, his speeches like a televangelist’s promise of miraculous success than considered policy prescription” (Posner 2020, 14). Moreover, the aura, much manufactured, of Trump’s financial success – his private jet and his properties such as Mar-a- Lago – resembles the lifestyle of those preachers pushing the prosperity gospel. His connection with Paula White is not mere coincidence. The personal reinforcement Trump has given to people at his rallies has a parallel to the hope prosperity gospel preachers give to their following (Posner 2020,12-16).

Whether by design or not, a Trump rally is a secularized version of evangelical camp meetings from the Great Awakening heritage both in style and content. When disaffected people, at least in their own eyes, attend a Trump rally, they are essentially going to a surrogate church. His evangelization is directed at the common person, especially of white background, who has felt left behind and

disparaged in the 21st century. The raucous and fervent character of many of his rallies provide a highly-charged emotional experience for the participants. He provides a congregational space where they feel they have a home and can recommit themselves – a conversion of sorts – to an America in which white dominance and social conservatism reemerge. The rallies provide a secularized spirituality of the heart rather than a theological spirituality of the head.

In content, just as past great awakenings sought to galvanize spiritual renewals by railing against church elites, Trump has used his “pulpit” to rail against the liberal political socio-economic elites that comprise the mainstream media and their identity politics agendas. These “sermons” resonate among those who either alienated by or have been subjected to political correctness. As previously illustrated, through U.S. history, those of the religious nationalist persuasion see themselves fighting a holy war against infidels who supposedly threaten the moral order – be it indigenous tribes, Catholics during the Know Nothing period, or African-Americans during slavery, segregation, and post-segregation. When Trump has vilified Mexican and Muslim immigrants or criticized Black Lives Matter protestors, but not right-wing militias such as the Proud Boys, he has played very much into this tradition that disparages the racial, ethnic, or religious others that supposedly threaten the nation’s well-being. Seen against this backdrop, the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021 immediately following a Trump rally was a secular crusade animated by the symbols and themes of religious nationalism, including the Confederate Battle Flag.

Unfortunately, Trump, enabled by Christian Right leaders, has promoted a strident civil religion that plays upon the fears of his followers, rejects religious and cultural diversity, and promotes a white nationalism, if not supremacy. Unabashedly, he has mined the politics of fear that has always been in the history of the religious nationalism so as to propagate an us v. them politics that is ultimately divisive and certainly in tension with a Christian sense of charity.

Ultimately in this bargain, the Christian right has settled for “the things of this world, rather than the things of Christ” (Howe 2019, 161). At least in rhetoric, Trump promised a prosperous economy and a sense of security for believers (Howe 2019, 16). But he provided this sense of well-being to his “congregation members” through vilifying other peoples, races, and faiths. Evangelicals who supported Trump have essentially soiled their souls in this this partial gaining of worldly power: “Bitterness over faith, Vengeance over justice. The world over the soul” (Howe 2019, 243).

The conventional fear regarding religious nationalism is that is that it will transform a democracy into a rigid theocracy. Ironically, Trump has done the opposite: he has taken the ambiance and content of the Great Awakenings and secularized it. Not only have many evangelical leaders been lured by access to political power, in the process, they have become enablers of a religious nationalism that continues to find undesirable “others” to castigate in the name of spiritual renewal. Trump’s civil religion is clearly antithetical to a genuinely pluralistic democratic society in which an increasing number of religious and secular moral heritages are able both to practice their beliefs and to contribute to charting a common good for society.

Conclusion

To summarize, whereas many have asked how could leaders of the Christian Right get behind a leader of such moral ill-repute such as Donald Trump, I have shown that Trump more so than his Republican predecessors delivered on many of the issues on the Christian Right's agenda in the contemporary culture wars. Other studies have rendered the Christian Right support for Trump as primarily a projection of male dominance, ethnocultural ideology, or simply an opposition to issues such as affirmative action and gay marriages. I contend each of these arguments, although valuable, too easily overlook that the Christian Right's engagement in the contemporary culture wars can be traced to a longstanding rejection of elites and opposition to some racial/ethnic/religious demonic other in the Great Awakening heritage. Trump's genius has been to tap into this normative vein and give it a secular rendering both in affect – his rallies – and in effect – his nativist policies and practices.

Biographical Note

John Francis Burke, Ph.D. teaches political theory, religion and politics, US politics, and comparative politics at Trinity University. Author of *Mestizo Democracy: The Politics of Crossing Borders* (Texas A&M Press, 2002) and *Building Bridges, Not Walls/Construyamos puentes, no muros* (Liturgical Press, 2021), his scholarly articles on contemporary and comparative political theory, Latinx issues, intercultural relations, and religion and politics have appeared in journals such as *The Review of Politics*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Concilium*, and *Commonweal*. Address: Dept. of Political Science; Trinity University; One Trinity Place; San Antonio, TX 78212; 713-203-9651; jfburke6@gmail.com

Works Cited

- Balmer, Randall. 2020. "Donald Trump and the Death of Evangelicalism." In *The Spiritual Danger of Donald Trump: 30 Evangelical Christians on Justice, Truth, and Moral Integrity*. Edited by Ronald J. Sider. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 78-87.
- Bellah, Robert N. et al. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bellah, Robert. 1992. *The Good Society*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Carney, Timothy. 2019. *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Corbett, Michael and Julia Mitchell Corbett. 1999. *Politics and Religion in the United States*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Du Mez, Kristin Kobes. 2020. *Jesus and John Wayne: How Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New York: Liveright.
- Escobar, J. Samuel, David Lim, & D. Zac Niringiye. 2020. "Voices from the Global Evangelical Community." In *The Spiritual Danger of Donald Trump: 30 Evangelical Christians on Justice, Truth, and Moral Integrity*. Edited by Ronald J. Sider. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 78-87.
- Fea, John. 2018. *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 96-106.
- Galli, Mark. 2019. "Trump Should Be Removed from Office." Available online: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/december-web-only/trump-should-be-removed-from-office.html>

The 2021 Proceedings of the ASSR

- Gorski, Philip. 2017. *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gorski, Philip. 2021. "White Christian Nationalism: The Deep Story Behind the Capitol Insurrection." Berkley Forum: Faith and the American Insurrection. Available online: <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/white-christian-nationalism-the-deep-story-behind-the-capitol-insurrection> .
- Heywood, Andrew. 2017. *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hogue, Michael. 2018. "Trump: The Apotheosis of American Exceptionalism." In *Doing Theology in the Age of Trump: A Critical Report on Christian Nationalism*. Edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins and Clayton Crockett. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 82-88.
- Howe, Ben. 2019. *The Immoral Majority*. New York: Broadside Books.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hunter, James Davison and Alan Wolfe, 2006. *Is There a Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations*. New York: Touchstone.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 2004. *Who Are We? The Challenge to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Jones, Robert P. 2020. *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Lipka, Michael and Gregory A. Smith. 2020. "White Evangelical Approval of Trump Slips, But Eight-in-ten Say They Would Vote for Him." Pew Research Center. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/01/white-evangelical-approval-of-trump-slips-but-eight-in-ten-say-they-would-vote-for-him/> .
- "Obama Angers Midwest Voters with Guns and Religion Remark." 2008. *The Guardian*. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/14/barackobama.uselections2008> .
- Posner, Sarah. 2020. *Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump*. New York: Random House.
- Radcliffe, Timothy. 2005. *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* New York: Burnes & Oates.
- Schor, Elana. 2020a. "Virus Loans Helped Entities Tied to Trump Evangelical Allies." AP News. Available online: <https://apnews.com/88a957426a09eb3b7db2dbceeffa25c0> .
- Schor, Elana and David Crary. 2020b. "AP VoteCast: Trump Wins White Evangelicals, Catholics Split." AP News. Available online: <https://apnews.com/article/votecast-trump-wins-white-evangelicals-d0cb249ea7eae29187a21a702dc84706> .
- Snyder, Timothy. 2017. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lesson from the Twentieth Century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.
- Stewart, Katherine. 2019. *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Weaver, Mary Jo and David Brakke. 2009. *Introduction to Christianity*, Fourth Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Wehner, Peter. 2019. *The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Whitehead, Andrew L. & Samuel L. Perry. 2020. *Taking America Back for God*. New York: Oxford University Press.