

***Politics before God:  
How America's political divisiveness is trumping religious identity***

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**ABSTRACT**

America's 2018 midterm elections provide an opportunity to assess white evangelical Protestants' counterintuitive embrace of Trump. Reports of the President's past infidelities, suspicious business deals, and possible electoral collusion with Russia appear to have done little to abate the support of America's most socially conservative law-and-order voters - white evangelical Protestants. PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) data demonstrates though Trump never polled above 50 percent favourability with white evangelical-Protestants during the primaries, since his 2016 election the constituency has only grown more 'Trump-drunk' with a record 75 percent endorsing the President and his commitment to put 'America First'.

Although America's Christian right have long-standing Republican inclinations, evangelicals' self-abasement under Trump remains difficult to understand. White evangelicals have migrated from a Christian movement guilty of overt partisan identification to a movement willing to corrupt their faith values and religious tradition for political opportunities. The effect, as Gerson (2018) notes, is a faith tradition now riddled with 'political tribalism and hatred for political opponents, with little remaining of Christian public witness.' Keller cuts deeper, saying 'evangelical' used to mean those who took the moral high ground, but now it's nearly synonymous with 'hypocrite' (Keller cited in Gerson, 2018). 'With an end-justifies-the-means style of politics that would have been unimaginable before [Trump]' (Jones cited in Coppins 2018a), it seems America's evangelicals are putting politics before God.

Subsequently, this article reflects on four dimensions of Trump's success with white evangelicals. First, it discusses how Trump and the GOP presented 2016 as the 'last chance election'. Secondly it explores Trump's 'priestly rhetoric' and evangelicals' 'priestly faith' in him. Thirdly, what have white

evangelical-Protestants achieved under Trump in return for their votes?  
 Lastly, how has Trump changed American evangelicalism and the nation? Is  
 nativism and tribalism consuming their faith-tradition just as it's dividing the  
 country?

## KEYWORDS

U.S., Republican, Trump, Evangelical, Protestant, Christian, Christian right,  
 values-voters, electoral-trends, U.S. domestic politics, priestly rhetoric,  
 nationalism, nativism, life-issues, religion and politics.

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## Introduction

Throughout 2016 and since his inauguration, Donald J. Trump has employed a form of priestly rhetoric towards his base. As he told CBN's David Brody, 'I'm Presbyterian. I'm proud of it. I'm very proud of it ... Believe me, if I run and I win, I will be the greatest representative of the Christians that they've had in a long time' (Blair, 2016). Of course, Trump's faith-based overtures are nothing new. From Nixon and Reagan to George W. Bush, Republican leaders have deliberately employed Christian 'narrowcasting' as Kaplan calls it, as part of Domke and Coe's 'God strategy' to court America's evangelical Christians (Kaplan, 2004; Smidt, 2013; Domke & Coe, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

White evangelicals used to make up just over a fifth of the US electorate (21 percent) but as of 2016-17 now represent just 15.3 percent (Jones, 2017, 240-249). Nonetheless three-quarters consistently vote Republican because of their historic 'values-platform' and, although their numbers are declining, ('greying') white evangelicals still represented 26 percent of the 2016 turnout. Typically, this constituency makes up the losses by being more politically active compared to other demographic groups and are often overrepresented by as much as 9 percent (Jones, 2017, 243). Because this faithful base has been such an electoral engine for the Republican party, with the white Christian strategy swinging elections for Reagan in the 1980's and again for George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004 (Bailey, 2017, Jones, 2017, 91), it is not that astounding that Trump alongside other Republican candidates embraced

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<sup>1</sup> There are numerous ways to analyze evangelicals; from attendance and belief-sets, to affiliation and religious tradition, amongst others. This article follows Smidt's work (2013) and employs a RELTRAD (religious tradition) approach. RELTRAD sees evangelicalism as 'affiliation with particular denominations and nondenominational congregations.' Though more suggestive than conclusive, depending heavily on one's interpretation of the boundaries of American evangelical-Protestantism, this approach in the author's opinion more accurately reflects the "flux of faith" and the evangelical low-church tribe.

the same efficacious electoral-formula of religious rhetoric to win over white evangelicals in 2016. What is a surprise is the scale of Trump's win. Higher than the 78 percent gathered by the overtly evangelical George W. Bush in 2004, Trump extended Republican support amongst white evangelicals to 81 percent (Smith & Martinez, 2017).

Trump's success with America's evangelical-Protestants remains one of the many surprises of the 2016 electoral saga, for Republicans fielded candidates who possessed far stronger evangelical credentials than Trump. Ted Cruz a Southern Baptist has a minister for a father, Marco Rubio, a conservative Catholic frequently relates his own relationship with Jesus. What perplexes commentators is why the white evangelical base was so attracted to Trump? Given Trump's past political stances, his character, even his language one would assume America's Christian conservatives would have run to exorcism over alliance. Certainly, his Christian inclinations during the primaries and even today are contextual and flitting. He lacked the typical faith-salvation story, for example George W. Bush's publicized 'walk' with Billy Graham relating his soul-searching reconnection to faith through the parable of the mustard seed (Zaimov, 2017). He vacillated on LGBTQ rights and abortion, he'd never asked God for forgiveness, the Presbyterian Church he says he attends in Manhattan stated he's not an active member; and he rarely issues a retraction to his sensational comments. He frequently curses from the campaign stump, he appeared on the cover of *Playboy* magazine, and remarkably was caught on tape graphically bragging about grabbing women's genitals without permission. It is no wonder that many faith leaders on the Christian right were unsure whether this reality-TV star known for his numerous wives, hotels and casinos had their interests at heart, especially when he failed to recollect his favourite Bible verse (Taylor, 2016). 'I wouldn't want to get into it. Because to me, that's very personal... The Bible means a lot to me, but I don't want to get into specifics' (Scott, 2016).

Nonetheless many within the Christian right base eagerly overlooked Trump's shortfalls, 'for we believe in second chances' (Coppins, 2018b).

Squeamishness over his style or moral scruples about his behaviour came second to the resonance they felt with Trump's nostalgic vision for America – Trump's tagline, 'make America great again' and his entreaties to protect Christianity: 'Christianity its being chipped away in this country. It's being chipped away at and I'm not gonna let this happen' (Trump 2016) – gave white evangelicals the restorative narrative they were desperately seeking. Under Obama, Trump's predecessor white evangelicals had to negotiate major social and cultural shifts that occurred between 2009-2016: growing multiculturalism, gender and identity flux, attacks on religious (read Christian) liberties. Trump's platform sought to reverse the 'damage' these social and cultural changes were believed to have wrought on American society.

Through appointing former Governor of Indiana Mike Pence, a committed evangelical, as his running mate, and Pentecostal televangelist Paula White as his 'spiritual advisor', he made a direct appeal to evangelical values-voters that he and his Republican administration share their concern for America. In contrast, Trump's Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton was viewed as avowedly secular, hostile to faith-based politics, and failed to connect with conservative Christians (Weiland, 2017) especially as she labelled them and half of Trump supporters, 'a basket of deplorables' (Clinton, 2016). Exploiting this 'God gap' Trump forged his Christian credentials via Mike Pence, 'a mild mannered, uber-Christian guy with a Midwestern accent who could tell voters, "Trump is a good man, I know what's in his heart"' (Coppins 2018a). As evangelicals identified and trusted Pence and his faith in Trump, with the GOP (Grand Old Party) stressing their shared values and historic binds of 'Republicanism', it was clear that many evangelicals would be persuaded to stay Republican, so as to protect the 'true Americans' who believe in 'God, country, and family' (Trump 2016).

Subsequently, this article explores four areas surrounding Trump and his relations with the white-evangelicals on the American Christian right. Firstly how 'Trump presented 2016 as the last chance election', why nostalgia won-over the Christian right. Secondly it will look at Trump's priestly rhetoric and evangelicals' faith in him and his administration, i.e. why are they so receptive to his messages? Thirdly, in their 'deal with Trump' what have evangelical-Protestants achieved under his administration so far, and what does it hold for the future? Finally, by putting politics before faith, white evangelicals have reinforced the tribalism of their faith tradition, but in so doing have contributed to the culturally divisive forces of nativism and nationalism wrought on American culture since Trump's 2016 election. The paper will conclude with an examination of these tribal trends, native vs. non-native and the growing gulf between the evangelical base and leadership over the overt politicization of their faith. In other words, a look at the context, pitch, achievements, and long-term impact of white evangelicals support for Trump.

### **The pull of nostalgia in the 'last chance election'**

As Coppins outlines, 2016 was a pivotal year (2018a). Many religious conservatives had become 'defensive offensive' in the culture wars (Glazer cited in Gerson, 2018), talk was less about 'remoralising America' as it had been for the past forty years: opposing abortion and gay marriage, stressing marriage and family values, etc.; instead it focused on defending Christian values, pushing back against the secular left's 'triumphalism' and a modern American culture that had grown hostile and oppressive to their religious world-view. Trump's campaign with its sweeping promise to 'make America great again' triumphed in converting the Christian right's self-described

values-voters into what Jones labels 'nostalgia voters' (2017, 246). As we've already discussed though vividly aware of Trump's moral and social flaws white evangelical-Protestants reworked their priorities; character mattered less than their fears about the present and a desire for a lost past. Bound together with their existing partisan attachment to the Republican party, the siren call of nostalgia seems to have ultimately overwhelmed voters' moral convictions. Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention explains, 'many evangelicals were experiencing the sense of almost existential threat... it was only a matter of time before cultural elites' scornful attitudes would help drive Christians into the arms of a strongman like Trump.' Brody continues:

[T]he way [American] evangelicals see the world, [U.S.] culture is not only slipping away, its slipping away in caps, with four exclamation points after that. It's going to you-know-what in a hand basket... where does that leave evangelicals. It leaves them with a choice, do they sacrifice a bit of that ethical guideline they've used in the past in exchange for what they believe is saving the culture? ... Trump always talks about bringing back "Merry Christmas" it's not about Merry Christmas it's about the idea behind it, they're voting for someone who will be a placeholder for their values... that's why many conservative Christians support any politician who will protect their traditions. (Brody quoted in Coppins 2018b)

Indeed, confronted with the cold reality of a rapidly changing American culture and demographic landscape, especially their own fall from demographic dominance, Trump's promise to restore a mythical golden age, 'where factory jobs paid the bills and white Protestant churches were dominant cultural hubs – tapped [powerfully] into evangelical anxieties about an uncertain future' (Jones, 2017, 246). This fear of the new and love of the old, the gravitation pull of nostalgia was strongly evidenced mere weeks before the November 2016 election, with 'white evangelical Protestants more likely than any other demographic group to say things have changed for the worse since the 1950s (74 percent)' (Jones, 2017, 247). As Coppins notes, 'after eight years of Obama and a string of disorientating defeats, conservative Christians... placed their faith in Trump and then incredibly ...won' (2018a). In this sense, one must understand how Obama's presidency had become a focal point for many white Christian voters:

[They] already felt as if familiar cultural touchstones were disappearing at every turn. Shifting social norms, gender fluidity, declining religious affiliation, changing demographics toward greater multiculturalism, a struggling economy reeling from the Great Recession – all were embodied in a powerful symbol (and cause), a black man in the White House. (Jones, 2017, 97)

2016 was an opportunity to pull on nostalgia but also the fear of the pending cultural precipice America had been brought to by Obama and his liberal coterie. Appreciating this context one can understand the ‘ends justifies the means’ bargain white evangelicals made with the self-described master dealmaker, Trump. For them as for many Americans the party system forces citizens into a big-tent binary: red vs. blue; Republican vs. Democrat; whomever is the lesser of two evils. Trump knew this:

...you have one magnificent chance to beat this corrupt system and to deliver justice for every forgotten man, every forgotten woman and every forgotten child in this nation. *This will never happen again – it will never happen again, folks.* In four years, not going to happen. Not going to happen. It’s never going to happen again. *Do not let this opportunity slip away* [emphasis added]. (Trump quoted in Jones 2017, 241)

In sum, America’s white evangelicals believed him and made their grand bargain on the over-riding hope that their alliance will stem the liberal tide, to turn the clock back toward a culturally familiar America before it was too late. Indeed, two-thirds of Trump voters agreed, ‘that 2016 represents the last chance to stop America’s decline’ (PRRI, 2017). Understanding the pull of nostalgia and evangelicals’ self-conception that they were now an anxious minority in retreat at odds with an alienating American culture, explains why theology came second to their bluntly expedient needs, especially when Trump promised them preferential protection. It was a desperate move against culture change trading their faith traditions’ distinct values for fleeting political power, what Bauer distastefully labelled a “United 93” attempt to gain back control (Bauer, 2016<sup>2</sup>); but Moore bluntly summed, as having adopted ‘a political agenda in search of a gospel useful enough to accommodate it’ (Moore cited in Jones, 2017, 248).

### Trump’s priestly rhetoric

Though we know the context why evangelicals were drawn to Trump; a mix of nostalgia and concern for American culture, desperation, apocalypticism and

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<sup>2</sup> Speaking at the 2016 “Values Voters Summit”, Bauer compared the U.S. to United Flight 93 on September 11th, warning that, “This country is the equivalent of that hijacked plane right now... We’re headin’ to a disaster unless we can get control of the cockpit again and then maybe, just maybe, we’ll have a chance.... Ladies and Gentlemen... this may be our last shot. It’s time to roll. It’s time to run down the aisle and save Western civilization!” Afterwards, the ‘Flight 93’ meme went viral amongst Tea Party and Christian right groups (Bauer cited in Gorski, 2017).

moral weakness, the following explains why they were so receptive to Trump's sales pitch; his rhetoric. 'Priestly rhetoric' Toulouse argues has become *de rigueur* for Republican leaders, for it allows them to understand, express and present events to their faithful 'base' (Toulouse, 2006, 16). Beyond the general allusions for "God to bless America", frequently Republican leaders relate policies to Biblical verse, and in the case of conflict often emphasize Manichean overtones so as to dehumanize the enemy as evil and to elevate themselves as goodly Americans (Cherry cited in Toulouse, 2006, 82).<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of 9/11 George W. Bush acutely expressed priestly rhetoric; addressing a shaken America, his multi-level message spoke to the heart of the evangelical-Protestant constituency: 'America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in this world. And no one will keep that light from shining.' This 'crusade ...will take a while,' and 'we must bring to justice these people who have no soul, no conscience, people who hate freedom' (Toulouse, 2006, 96-99). Such rhetoric in Toulouse's view 'places America clearly on the side of the angels, in the role of the Church, standing with God and with all that is good against the massive evil in the world' (Toulouse, 2006, 98). It is American exceptionalism articulated (Mead, 2001, 310).

Like Bush, Trump has expressed the same sentiments, inferring Psalm 133.1 in his inaugural address:

...the Bible tells us how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. We must speak our minds openly; debate our disagreements honestly, but always to pursue solidarity. When America is united, America is unstoppable. (Trump, 2017a)<sup>4</sup>

His next paragraph is haughtier with a direct appeal for divine protection he draws on a rich heritage echoing Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity* (Winthrop, 1630):

There should be no fear. We are protected and we will always be protected. We will be protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement. And most importantly, we will be protected by God. (Trump, 2017a)

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<sup>3</sup> Cherry (cited in Toulouse, 2006, 86) goes further arguing 'priestly language' is national elevation that justifies a xenophobic supremacy towards non-Christian nations; 'platitudes about "saving the world for democracy" are a racist myth that justify American actions abroad, because of Anglo-Saxon superiority. When Christians understand America acts on behalf of God in the world they slide into national self-righteousness quickly and rather costly.'

<sup>4</sup> 'A song of ascents, of David. How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!' (NIV, 2011, Psalm 133.1, New International Version).

Nevertheless, this is only one side of the dialogue. Trump's message is also dependent on being heard by the 'priestly faith' of America's evangelical-Protestants, as Toulouse (2006, 81) argues:

...priestly faith is equivalent to nationalism among certain Christians, ultimacy is attached to America and its cause, priests promote its culture, interests and democracy as if they were synonymous with everything that is good, just and righteous for the American people and the human community as a whole.

It is therefore understandable that orthodox conservatives of the Christian right, 'who represent priestly faith [want] to fill the symbols of public life with their own particular understanding of Christianity and then assert these meanings *represent the only true way of being a Christian and an American*' [emphasis added] (Toulouse, 2006, 81).

Trump's rhetoric aims to reinforce the priestly message, as Sclafani observes, his frequent imperative to 'believe me' is a plea to keep priestly faith in him and his Republican policies.

For supporters, it reinforces what they already believe about Trump inspiring confidence, [reassuring them and allaying doubts] that he has the answers to the nation's problems; but for sceptics this phrase and its repetition [suggests he's] an untrustworthy candidate who needs to command his audience to believe him – because he's unbelievable. (Sclafani cited in Mascaro, 2017)

The historic argument between Republican Party and the Christian right 'of whom is captive to who' rolls on, but so-far Trump as a priestly mediator appears to have maintained the bonds of 'Republicanism' with his priestly rhetoric urging evangelicals to keep their priestly faith in him and his administration. The 2017 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) bore witness to this co-dependency.

Remember great patriots. We all salute with pride, the same American flag and we're all equal, totally equal in the eyes of almighty God, we're equal... and I want to thank ...the evangelical community, the Christian community, communities of faith, rabbis, priests and pastors, ministers because the support for me was a record, as you know, [sic] not only in terms of people but percentage of those numbers that voted Trump... So I want to thank you folks, that was amazing, an amazing outpour... and I will not disappoint you... as long as we have faith in each other and trust God, then there is no goal beyond our reach. There is no



dream too large, no task too great, we are Americans and the future belongs to us. (Trump, 2017b)

Trump's priestly rhetoric is successful because of the inherent orthodoxy Republicans and evangelicals share, and their receptiveness to vertical authority, as Zagacki (1996) argues:

...responding to the social experimentation and elitist rhetoric of liberals and 'radicals', conservative Republicans have developed a "priestly" voice. Aimed at winning the moral and social high-ground from contemporary liberal opponents, their persuasive priestly rhetoric espouses a commitment to preserve a stable, prosperous, and tradition-bound American society.

In short, they believe they're the rightful owners of America. As we observed previously the pull of nostalgia is strong, 'when as candidate [Trump] talked of America in decline and heading toward destruction, which could be returned to greatness only by recovering the certainties of the past, he was strumming resonant chords of evangelical conviction' (Gerson, 2018). His rhetoric pulls deeply on existing American conservative lore that America's social exigencies can only be addressed by returning America's institutions and values to a 'golden age' of societal equilibrium; with secular and religious conservatives alike aiming 'to make America great again' by breathing new life into old forms. This appeal 'to restore' or 'claw back' a halcyon era when white Protestantism was dominant stimulates the conservative base with an urgent imperative to overturn what they see as the deleterious social trajectory of American culture, that progressives and radicals are somehow responsible for (Zagacki, 1996). As Kaufmann comments, essentially 'Trump's people feel culturally disorientated ... [so] they want to protect their demographic predominance' (Kaufmann cited in Friedman, 2017). As Haberman and Kaplan (2016) observed on the campaign, evangelical Trump supporters frequently refrained 'that his heart was in the right place, that his intentions for the country were pure, that he alone was capable of delivering to a troubled country salvation in the here and now.' These points fit Bean's observation that white evangelicals comport their religious worldview to take on a conservative hue, and that the Christian right-Republican relationship is sustained not only by political overtures, but also by the conservative nature of evangelical congregations themselves (Bean, 2014, 221). Trump's faith-laden pronouncements therefore reap Christian right reward as they're pitched to coordinate with their own faith traditions' 'inner voice' (Wuthnow, 2005, 173-183).

## Christian Right achievements under Trump

Certainly, the Christian right has already been rewarded for their electoral support. Internationally, one of Trump's first executive orders reinstated the 'Global Gag-Rule', (or 'Mexico City Policy') a Reagan-era law that blocks U.S. funds to any organization involved in abortion advice and care overseas (McVeigh, 2017). Recently Trump has gone so far as to engage in a tit-for-tat trade war with Turkey in 2018 over his demands to release U.S. pastor, Andrew Brunson an evangelical missionary. Brunson was arrested in 2016 and sentenced on espionage charges and links to the Gülen movement for the attempted 2016 coup against incumbent President Recep Erdogan (Sherwood, 2018). Brunson is not the only U.S. citizen detained in Turkey, but his plight has gained the most attention according to Eissenstat, in part because of his ties to the American evangelical community and because his story fits into a broader narrative of Christians being persecuted abroad (Eissenstat cited in Shesgreen, 2018). America's evangelicals like Trump playing their 'tough guy' Eissenstat continues '[for he's] standing up for Christianity and U.S. citizens around the world' (Eissenstat cited in Shesgreen, 2018).

Domestically, abortion remains a recurrent issue for evangelicals, and Trump's order follows a pattern that every Republican President for the past three decades has curbed funding in response to Christian-conservative lobbying. The depth of Republican-Christian right relations is also visible in Trump's cabinet-hires who are mostly evangelical. Amongst many others these include, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, Secretary of Housing & Urban Development Ben Carson, to ex Director of Central Intelligence and now Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. Responding to Trump's selection, Jerry Falwell Jr. said (2016), 'I've seen the cabinet go from a bunch of academics and theoreticians under Obama... to a dream team.'

Moreover, by appointing committed conservative and originalist<sup>5</sup> Neil Gorsuch, Trump has returned the Supreme Court to a 5-4 conservative majority stating he's very 'receptive to claims based on religious freedom' (Liptak & Flegenheimer, 2017). Certainly, with Justice Anthony Kennedy retiring, Trump and Republican leaders believe his replacement Brett Kavanaugh could be instrumental in pitching the ideological makeup of the Supreme Court to the right so as to leave a conservative imprint on the law for a generation (Costa et. al. 2018). Still, his appointment is controversial even

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<sup>5</sup> "Originalist" refers to someone who believes in the original intent or meaning of the U.S. Constitution, that its interpretation is stable over time, this is the opposite view of loose constructionists who believe in a living constitution that is dynamic and more readily adapts to the needs of contemporary society.

amongst the right, moderate Republicans are on edge about how Kavanaugh will respond to questions about social issues such as abortion, and hard-line organisations such as the fundamentalist 'American Family Association', denounced Trump's pick for not being sufficiently conservative. 'Judge Kavanaugh's reasoning on religious liberty, "Obamacare" (ACA) and issues concerning life have proven to be of major concern'.<sup>6</sup> No doubt Trump's dextral restructuring of the judiciary from the top-down, will have a lasting effect on America's public policies and the law for generations. One such example is his transformation of America's lower Federal courts, which decide regional district and circuit cases. 35 of his nominees have already been confirmed, more than double the total for President Obama (Costa et.al. 2018).

Certainly Trump's curried favour with evangelical Christian right leaders by proposing to 'get rid of and totally destroy the Johnson Amendment' at the 2017 National Prayer Breakfast; '[I will] allow our representatives of faith to speak freely and without retribution, I will do that – remember,' before encouraging the audience to pray for Arnold Schwarzenegger's ratings to improve after he'd taken over *The Apprentice (U.S.)* (Jenkins, 2017). Prayers for egos aside, since 1954 when the amendment was tabled by then Senator Johnson the federal tax law states that houses of worship and their pastors are not allowed to intervene in partisan political campaigns and keep their tax-exempt status. Groups such as the 'Pulpit Freedom Movement' an arm of the 'Alliance Defending Freedom' representing 4100 churches have been lobbying extensively during the past quarter-century to overturn the 63-year-old amendment, citing 'a long history of American pastors preaching electoral sermons, bringing Biblical truth to bear on the citizenship responsibility [sic] of Americans in selecting government leaders' (ADF, 2014). However, for most Americans, calls for religious groups to have greater political freedom don't appear to be that significant. A 2016 Christian 'Lifeway' poll found 8 in 10 church-goers believe it's inappropriate for pastors to endorse a candidate in church, as McConnell the report's pollster stated, 'Americans already argue about politics enough outside the church, they don't want pastors bringing those arguments into worship' (McConnell cited in Smietana 2016). Indeed, in March 2018 the push by Vice President Pence and House Majority Whip Steve Scalise to change the tax-code's amendment failed, for it ran into stiff opposition from non-profit organizations and many mainline church groups who argued that without the amendment they'd face pressure from politicians seeking endorsements (Gjelten, 2018). Tyler, a director of the Baptist Joint

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<sup>6</sup> AFA's Mission statement, 'It is AFA's goal to be a champion of Christian activism. If you are alarmed by the increasing ungodliness and depravity assaulting our nation, tired of cursing the darkness, and ready to light a bonfire, please join us. Do it for your children and grandchildren' (AFA, 2018).

Committee for Religious Liberty said in response to the defeat that ‘concerted efforts to weaken the long-standing law that keeps [them] free from partisan campaigning were rebuked yet again’ (Gjeltten, 2018). Overturning the Johnson Amendment would critics argue deepen the mire of campaign finance and tribal political-action-committees (PACS), but more controversially may transform America’s churches in political machines. Many conservative evangelicals nevertheless see the amendment and other life issues as a necessary ‘spiritual battle’ and have launched another repeal effort for the 2019 appropriations bill (Coppins, 2018b).

Given his extensive promises to protect religious freedom, Trump’s administration is also likely to pass the proposed First Amendment Defence Act (FADA). Following the 2015 Supreme Court ruling recognizing the right to same-sex marriage nationally, religious conservatives on the Christian right have been lobbying extensively to pass state-level Religious Restoration Freedom Act(s) (RRFAs) to exempt people from discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs. Enacted in 20 states and tabled in a further 16, RRFAs have frequently stoked discrimination fears. Indeed, following the contentious 2014, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* Supreme Court decision, the owners of Hobby Lobby, the Green family believed that Obamacare’s Affordable Care Act’s contraceptive mandate conflicted with their evangelical beliefs. The court’s judge (Neil Gorsuch) ruled in their favour that ‘closely held’ corporations, do have religious liberties and can enforce their religious beliefs on their employees. The decision essentially corporatized an individual’s religious belief, so U.S. companies can now be defined as ‘persons’ meaning there’s no difference between a business’ beliefs and its owners (Staff writers, 2014). Understanding this context, Trump’s FADA aims to:

Prohibit the federal government from taking discriminatory action against a person on the basis that such person believes or acts in accordance with a religious belief or moral conviction that: (1) marriage is or should be recognized as the union of one man and one woman, or (2) sexual relations are properly reserved to such a marriage. (Labrador, 2016)

Opponents have labelled FADA shameful legislation ‘that uses religion as a tool to discriminate,’ while others see FADA as mere grandstanding to give ‘Republicans a chance to show their conservative chops on social issues, to get (Christian right) votes on social issues even if they won’t ultimately be successful’ (Moreau, 2018). The implications of FADA are nevertheless far-reaching. If a person or corporation held sincere moral convictions and didn’t agree with another’s lifestyle choices, including homosexual relations, pre-marital sex, sexual health and contraception, women’s reproductive health etc., the FADA law would legitimate their right to ‘respectfully discriminate’.

FADA would therefore federalize and extend the protection provided by state-based RRFA's for conservative Christian individuals and groups to reference *their* right to protect *their* moral convictions over another's to be treated equally.

Evidently the Christian right under Trump has already enjoyed legislative success and will likely experience more as they seek to extend religious liberties (read: *their* religious liberties) domestically and overseas. However, by challenging the First Amendment, conservative Christians are using government to flatten politics to a binary of those who possess faith and are legitimated by the state and those who don't and are stigmatized. Christian right pressure and Trump's acquiescence therefore appear to be moving America away from Tocqueville's 'quiet sway' of religion informing civil society, towards Christian particularism (Tocqueville, 2003).

### **Nativism, the base's drive toward a (White) Christian America**

As already noted Trump's clarion call was eagerly heard and supported by America's evangelicals, they responded because he set out to 'restore a kind of cultural particularism and identity', that of the religio-ethnic majority, to protect white (European) evangelical-Protestantism. Instead of populism that views America's polis as multi-faceted, but one and pure, such as Obama's 2010 declaration of America's de-facto motto *e pluribus unum*: 'out of many one' (Obama, 2010). Trump instead chose a nativist strategy, viewing Americans as one in a cultural, ethnic, religious even predetermined sense (Friedman, 2017). One can hear this underlying message in Trump's 2018 Prayer Breakfast:

Our rights are not given to us by man. Our rights come from our creator. No matter what, no earthly force can take those rights away. That is why the words "Praise be to God" are etched atop the Washington Monument and those same words are etched into the hearts of our people. So today we praise God for how truly blessed we are to be American. (Trump, 2018)

Of course, appeals to a mythic golden age of faithful Americans have been employed before, George W. Bush pulled on similar sympathies with his faith and flag agenda, as Reagan did in the 1980s. What makes Trump's 'America First' appeal different to these nationalist precursors is that his nationalism readily blurs into xenophobia, a virulent nativism gleaned from the alt-right; that America should be a congruous state and nation, a shared political and cultural unit (SPLC, 2017).

As Friedman articulates, unfortunately the white Christian agenda is changing and now ‘perceives all non-natives as threatening, the non-native [being] not only people but their ideas’ (2017). Trump’s campaign centred on subliminal appeals to prejudice, that there’s multifaceted threats to the culture, security and economic well-being of natives being imposed on them by elites and outsiders. Enacted in policy, Hispanic immigration from S. America is pitched as a cultural threat to white America that requires a wall and greater immigration enforcement. ‘Radical Islamic terrorism’ is a security threat that warrants a travel ban from certain majority-Muslim states. Tariffs and ‘buy American’ protectionism seek to shelter American workers from China and foreign competitors to reassure Americans anxious about their economic future. The elite [read: Washington establishment] is considered corrupt because it works in the interest of non-natives to undermine the ‘true’ natives – remember Trump’s rally tagline, ‘drain the swamp’. The warmth with which many evangelical Christians have embraced former strategist Stephen Bannon and Donald Trump’s anti-globalist patriotism for political benefits is more than just political compromise however; it’s a revelation of the views held by a significant proportion of America’s white evangelical community. One that sees no moral confusion in associating their Christian faith with racism and nativism, nor no shame in seeking the political protection of man such as Trump, ‘the least traditionally Christian figure in temperament, behaviour, and evident belief to assume the presidency in living memory’ (Gerson, 2017). This sea change of evangelical morality has been tracked by PRRI. In 2011 a PRRI poll discovered only 30 percent of white evangelicals believed ‘an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfil their duties in their public and professional life’. However, when Trump was running for President in 2016, that number had risen to 72 percent (PRRI, 2017). Indeed since 2016 we’ve been experiencing an anomalous period when white evangelicals are now more tolerant than average Americans of elected officials’ immoral behaviour.

This political compromise by a large section of white evangelicals has prompted an internal backlash by those willing to call out fellow evangelical hypocrisy. ‘For what are we? Beth Moore argues ‘when we sell our souls to buy our wins?’ (B. Moore cited in Gerson, 2018). Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention, (SBC) labelled Trump ‘an awful candidate’ and criticized ‘the religious right’s political establishment’ for supporting him, despite Trump’s ‘serious moral problems’ (Gjelten, 2016). Gerson introspectively condemned the ‘prudential calculations’ made by faith leaders such as Dobson, Falwell, Graham, Jeffress, Metaxas and his fellow evangelicals for:

[P]roviding religious cover for [Trump’s] moral squalor, winking at trashy behaviour and encouraging the unravelling of social restraints.

Instead of defending their convictions, they're providing pre-emptive absolution for their political favourites... [undermining] the causes they embrace... Having given politics pride of place, these evangelical leaders have ceased to be moral leaders in any meaningful sense. (Gerson 2018)

Bock of the Dallas Theological Seminary notes nativism's contemporary hold amongst America's evangelical base remains a significant problem, 'there is now so much tribalism in the divisions that we have, that to speak against your tribe is to be seen as defecting from your tribe' (Bock cited in Gjeltén, 2016). Speaking of a pending 'precipice' within American evangelicalism, Jim Wallis talks of a 'moral and theological crisis'. In an open letter *Called to Resist Bigotry: A Statement of Faithful Obedience* Wallis and other faith leaders argue Trump manipulates their faith, and Christians should speak out against his administration's numerous hypocrisies (Wallis & Henderson, 2017).

[His] direct appeal to the racial, religious, and gender bigotry that is always under the surface of American politics is now being brought to painful public light... White evangelicals voted for Trump ...Now they have him and are responsible for him... but given he's now pursuing racist policies, the question is what are white evangelicals going to do about it? (Wallis et.al., 2016)<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless feebleness in the face of congregational prejudices has historical precedent, as Martin Luther King observed in 1960:

So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, *the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are* [emphasis added]. (King cited in Rubin, 2017)

Indeed, this 'crisis' may be a case for the leaders not the followers. Clearly many evangelicals comported their religious worldview to fit Trump's paradigm, a point Bean emphasised earlier, so Trump's priestly campaign

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<sup>7</sup> Wallis and other evangelical leaders have been making concerted attempts in the past decade to reframe evangelical concern beyond the rote of life issues. One such area is CIR (Comprehensive Immigration Reform) through his leadership of the 'Evangelical Immigration Roundtable' a vocal critic of both President Trump and his predecessor President Obama, he has called for a more welcoming immigration policy following the parable of Matthew 25, to 'welcome the stranger'. For more on the white evangelical take on U.S. immigration policy, see Kirkland, 2014.

evidently prompted a reworking of evangelical faith positions amongst the base to become more radical. Mudde labels this a 'paradigmatic shift from pathological normalcy' – although some evangelicals may seek alternative social engagements during the Trump tenure, many within the base are moving away from the assumptions and ideological pitch of the evangelical leadership (Mudde, 2010, 1167-1186) – they want to be tribal, they want to be political. As McAllister explains:

Conservative evangelicals...had learned from cultural elites on the left that in the struggle for power, idealism sometimes had to be sacrificed. I'm not saying that's a good thing, it probably isn't. We should be a society of reasoned debate and mutual affection, coming together in the public square to sing kumbaya. *But we're not. Everyone sees it as a fight* [emphasis added]. (McAllister quoted in Coppins 2018b)

The critical point is that Trump and his administration appear to have shifted the normative grammar of what it now means to be a white American evangelical, reducing it to Wuthnow's 'exclusivist Christianity' (2005, 173-183) echoing the rallying cry of past conservatives: 'America: love it or leave it'. However, by empowering white Christian nativism appealing 'to take back America', to reassert their ownership if you will, Trump's has also uncovered white nativism's dark prejudices, from their complicit support on banning foreign Muslims from entering the U.S., to tolerating the intolerance of the alt-right, neo-Nazis and the growing KKK movement. Certainly, following the Charlottesville, VA, 'Unite-the-Right' rally surrounding the legitimacy of Confederate statues Trump signalled his conservative credentials, 'you know where my heart is... they're trying to take away *our* culture. They're trying to take away *our* history' [emphasis added] white evangelicals see him not as the flawed figure depicted by the 'fake news media' but rather as *their* defender against liberal revisionism, as *their* faithful values-led President (Bradner, 2017).

## Conclusion

Naturally one shouldn't treat the evangelical swing to Trump monolithically not all evangelicals voted Republican, or for Trump, as Land notes, 80 percent of Calvinists labelled themselves 'never Trumpers' (2016). Remember, amongst the Republican party secular or otherwise Trump's primary and general election wins were deeply divisive, from those who wanted to reopen primaries to stop the Trump train, to others who reluctantly made a devil's bargain, to those who instinctively rallied round the GOP flag. But many within the evangelical base *were* persuaded by Trump's optimistic faith-laden verbosity and still are; especially his nostalgic narrative and his nativist conviction that their faith position is endangered, and he would protect them,



their interests and the nation. They had faith that Trump would guide them, and that they, not outsiders would own America again. This faith of course extended to Trump's other base, the no-particularly religious 'middle Americans' from the coal mines of Appalachia to the industrial centres of the Rust Belt; who felt they'd been overlooked by the elites, side-lined by foreign interests and the Democrats. Clearly his God Strategy was very successful, regardless of whether it's a heartfelt connection to conservative values or a ruse to win-over uncritical voters in the Christian right fold with lip service. Approaching the 2018 midterms the Christian right can tout many 'victories', from the Gag-Rule, to prompting a trade war with Turkey to free an evangelical pastor, from Trump's evangelical cabinet, to Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh's judicial appointments, to the pending repeal of the Johnson Amendment and proposed religious liberty FADA bill. All these demonstrate white Christian nativism is resonating in America and that white evangelicals are attempting to assert themselves as the owners of the nation's culture. Certainly, the dextral impact of the Trump tenure could be felt for generations, especially with his top-down politicisation of the judiciary. However, no victory is without cost, and for evangelicals putting politics before their faith and values has cost public integrity. For all sides, Republican and Democrat Trump's victory in November 2016 flattened America's domestic politics to a binary of support / oppose; but for evangelicals especially political tribalism now trumps religious identity. Trump's favourability remains nearly 35 percentage points higher amongst evangelicals than amongst America's public (Rubin, 2017) because despite his shortfalls, evangelicals have found their values defender, their President, and they're not going to lose faith in him for the culture war. 'When you're at the warfront, you just want the best guy next to you. You don't care what his morality is, it's just, "can you shoot that guy over there?"' (McAllister quoted in Coppins 2018b). It is 'prudential calculation' (Gerson, 2018). The internal dialogue over Trump and the new era of tribalism within contemporary American evangelicalism has prompted losses. The faith tradition is bleeding youth who see more shades of grey than the monochromatic lens evangelicalism would like them to believe; moreover, they're focused on social justice rather than political division and bitterness, especially the Christian right's Catholics. Americans have seen the political compromises evangelicals on the Christian right are willing to take as a revelation of their true priorities, though some may have lost their way, others gladly accept means-ends tribalism and the faith tradition's war footing against America's liberals. Regardless, Trump's tenure has made every day an introspective exercise for all Americans religious or otherwise, to ponder where their interests lie; to query the simple assumptions they'd taken for granted: 'who are we?' and 'what do we stand for?'

## Notes

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