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God, make America great again!

Why so many American Christians are bowing the knee to Donald Trump

Read this article in German.

One of the stranger quirks of American politics is the determination with which white evangelical Christians have nailed their flag to Donald Trump's mast – even when the man himself stands in opposition to the most basic of Christian values. He describes other countries as 'shitholes', his alleged extra-marital affairs are well publicised and, by his own admission, he's never asked for forgiveness.

He's also racist, having called Mexicans rapists and killers, advised Nigerians to 'go back to their huts' and imposed a travel ban on Muslims. His ideology and contempt for the weak smacks more of Nietzsche than of Christ.

So why is it that 80 percent of white evangelicals gave him their votes in 2016 – a higher share than either Ronald Reagan or the self-confessed born-again Christian George W. Bush received?

Perhaps because Trump's most prominent supporters on the religious right are prepared to sweep any and every scandal under the carpet so long as they get what they want: protection and power in an America that has no room for 'the Other'.

Evangelicals' Faustian pact

For leading evangelicals, Trump is a dream president. In exchange for access to the White House, they stand behind him when he needs them most. Tele-evangelist and Trump's spiritual adviser Paula White-Cain has dismissed stories of Russian hacking as 'nonsense'. Responding to the president's 'shithole' comments, pastor and radio host Robert Jeffress told CBN's *Brody Files* that Trump was 'right on target in his sentiment'.

Church leader and New York Times bestselling author David Jeremiah

has hailed Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner the modern incarnation of Mary and Joseph, called by God to help Christians. Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Liberty University and an outspoken Trump supporter even backed Roy Moore's senate bid, despite charges of repeated sexual misconduct. Trump's religious backers seem to tolerate and forgive Trump's sins with the same largess God is said to extend to his children.

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Pastor Franklin Graham has achieved particular distinction in this regard. By placing Trump in a line with the Persian ruler Cyrus (2 Chronicles 36:23), who liberated the Jews from the Babylonians, Graham has made him a messianic figure who heralds a golden age for evangelicals. His followers are redeemed from the dominant liberal hegemony. America can be itself again, free to practise and interpret religion as it will.

If Trump is the Redeemer in evangelical minds, then Hillary Clinton is the whore of Babylon. Calls to 'lock her up' went way beyond the normal election period rough and tumble: they were a rallying cry to the faithful.

62 million people in the US identify as evangelicals. That's 25 per cent of the total population, making them the largest religious group in the country, ahead of Catholics (22 per cent) and moderate Protestants (15 per cent). Their beliefs are defined by a narrow interpretation of scripture, the centrality of Christ's work of redemption, an emphasis on personal conversion and an active commitment to spreading the Gospel.

'Moral' majority?

Formerly a progressive movement that opposed slavery and supported prison reform, over the past decades evangelicals have become increasingly reactionary. They feel co-opted and deprived of a voice.

They believe liberal America is on the attack. Thus the right to abortion becomes synonymous with the death of millions of innocent children, the prohibition of prayer in public schools is a challenge to parental authority, the legalisation of same-sex marriage goes against religious freedom, and the loss of tax benefits to counselling centres for pregnant women who decide against abortion amounts to repression.

Evangelicals believe they live in a constant state of siege from which there are only two means of escape: surrender, or resistance at all costs. With Trump they have opted for the latter.

Trump's invoking of Christianity (or at least a powerful subset of it) is identity politics par excellence.

And the man in the White House? He's described himself as the 'greatest president that God ever created' – an advocate for and liberator of evangelicals. Not exactly 'blessed are the meek', but he has at least learnt the stock phrases of the religious right. Speaking at the annual national prayer breakfast, Trump declared that 'faith is central to American life and to liberty'. He's called the US a 'nation of believers' predestined to do great things for itself and others.

Evangelicals saw Trump's election as the start of a new era, when America would return to its rightful inhabitants. Not the Native American, mind. Because white evangelicals believe in a nationalist, flag-waving God who represents their interests.

Words and actions

Trump has done more than make overtures to evangelicals. He's nominated conservative judges, a move that will affect America's judicial system for decades. Religious leaders were invited to speak at his inauguration, but Muslims were not among them. Republicans have pushed protections for health services with a religion-based stance against abortion.

He's also set up bodies guaranteeing the rights of employers who refuse to prescribe contraceptives. That's hardly surprising given the socially conservative views espoused by members of his inner circle. Vice President Mike Pence and ex-CIA director Mike Pompeo have a long history of opposition to LGBT rights, while Pompeo accused Muslim clerics of being 'potentially complicit' in the 2013 Boston attacks.

Trump's invoking of Christianity (or at least a powerful subset of it) is identity politics par excellence. It works by discriminating against and downgrading others.

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In the 50s, New York pastor Norman Vincent Peale wrote a book called The Power of Positive Thinking which seems to have shaped Trump's view of Christianity. The book's central thesis is that your attitude determines the kind of life you will lead. Wealth and success are seen as evidence of your own hard work or good deeds (giving generously to church ministries can also

reap financial rewards from God).

In other words, God stands behind the winners. The Almighty loves the rich and the strong – it's Darwinist capitalism in its purest form. In the USA, where churches large and small are pervasive, this view finds fertile ground. The result is a highly individualistic interpretation of faith. Believers – religious customers as it were – can choose from hundreds of Christian denominations till they find one tailored exactly to their needs. Essentially it's a market-driven approach to 'the truth'.

Swathes of American Christians have entered into a Faustian pact with Trump. They've sold their souls – out of fear, for the sake of power, to preserve their identity, and at other people's expense. 'Hail Mary, Jesus and Joseph' laments the famous American rapper Kendrick Lamar on his album *Damn*. 'The great American flag is wrapped in drag with explosives… barricaded blocks and borders… Donald Trump's in office.'

Thankfully, no situation's beyond salvation… God willing.



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