

# **'Prayers were more important than votes'**

## **Donald Trump and the Christian Right**

**John Newsinger**

*God and Donald Trump*

Stephen Strang

Frontline Books, 2017

*The Faith of Donald J. Trump: A Spiritual Biography*

David Brody and Scott Lamb

HarperCollins, 2018

*Choosing Donald Trump: God, Anger, Hope, and Why Christian Conservatives  
Supported Him*

Stephen Mansfield

BakerBooks, 2017

*God's Chaos Candidate: Donald J. Trump and the American Unravelling*

Dr. Lance Wallnau

Killer Sheep Media, 2016

*Why God "Trumped" America*

Robert B. Scott

CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017

**W**hen Donald Trump refused to condemn the conduct of the Far Right in Charlottesville, his various business advisory boards collapsed as a succession of corporate CEOs very publicly resigned in protest. This was after a confrontation in which one protestor, Heather Heyer, had been killed when a car driven by a Nazi deliberately ran into a crowd of anti-racist protestors. Trump made his infamous quip that there were 'very fine people' on both sides of the confrontation. His *spiritual* advisory board, however, was made of much sterner stuff and stood by their President. As one member, Eric Metaxas, put it: 'We're going to stand up for Trump a hundred times more.'<sup>1</sup> It tells us something when a country's leading businessmen have a more developed moral sensibility than its supposed moral guardians.

Why did this assembly of evangelical preachers and pastors decide to condone Trump's racist, white supremacist, neo-fascist and authoritarian

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<sup>1</sup> Brody and Lamb p. 305

sympathies? The short answer is that they had done a deal with him. Trump had promised to deliver their domestic agenda of a cultural counter-revolution in the United States. In return he got for their support in the Presidential election and their silence as he converted the 'Washington Swamp' into his personal toilet. The result is the quite remarkable spectacle of America's supposed moral arbiters endorsing a billionaire conman and crook, the embodiment of greed and dishonesty, a bully and braggart, a man of profound ignorance, someone who is congenitally incapable of telling the truth, a confessed sexual predator, a racist and bigot, an authoritarian demagogue; and, moreover, someone whose actual knowledge of the tenets of Christianity is virtually zero. How did this unholy alliance come about and how does the Christian Right justify it?

The five books under review here, all written by stalwarts of the Christian Right, give us some insight into this remarkable phenomenon and its likely consequences. The importance of the Christian Right in the United States is not new. It has been a growing influence within the Republican Party since the 1970s, and played an important role in both the Ronald Reagan and George W Bush Administrations. In order to ensure their support in the 2008 Presidential election, John McCain had to install the appalling Sarah Palin as his running mate. Such is their influence that the Republican candidate in 2016 was inevitably going to have to be someone acceptable to them. What was astonishing was that, while there were a host of candidates for the Republican nomination with evangelical credentials – men who knew their Bible and had served their time as 'born again' Christians – they threw their weight behind the positively grotesque candidature of Donald Trump, a man who was considerably more Herod than he was Jesus.

For all Trump's campaigning bombast, what this involved was an old-fashioned political deal whereby Trump agreed to give the Christian Right his support in carrying through their domestic counter-revolution, rolling back the supposed secular humanist threat to America's position as God's Chosen Nation. Same-sex marriage, indeed gay rights generally, abortion and birth control, women's equality, immigration from the Middle East and Central America, state education, environmental protection and big government – excepting the military – all had to be rolled back. As far as they were concerned the free market was God-given and the rich were blessed. Crucial was Trump's promise to hand the federal judiciary, from the Supreme Court down, over to them. As far as US foreign policy went, the overriding concern of the evangelicals, since the downfall of the Soviet Union, has been that the interests of Israel had to be paramount. Trump managed to convince the leaders of the Christian Right that he could and would deliver on this agenda.

The adoption of Mike Pence, a long-time champion of the Christian Right, a true-believer in every sense of the word, as his running mate was testimony to his good faith. America under Trump would be remade as a Christian Nation. The result was the positively obscene spectacle of evangelical preachers laying hands on Donald Trump of all people, proclaiming him to be chosen by God and praying for his victory both before the election and for his success in office afterwards.

The importance of this Alliance has never really been recognised by British commentators, at least partly because the Christian Right is so alien to them that they have found it difficult to take it seriously. The reality, however, as Barack Obama once pointed out, is that 'substantially more people in America believe in angels than they do in evolution'.<sup>2</sup> When it came to covering the 2016 election even so relentlessly superficial an observer as Jon Sopel, the BBC News North American editor, could not help noticing that as far as religion is concerned, 'America is bucking the trend that can be observed throughout the rest of the developed world'. The American 'sense of faith is one of the most surprising things I have found about living in the US' with 'well over half of all Americans' describing themselves 'as seriously religious', (some of them regarding atheists, for example, as on a par with rapists). 'This country', he observes, 'does a lot of God'.<sup>3</sup>

How to does the Christian Right justify support for Trump? There are a number of strategies in use. One is to recognise what he was in the past but to argue that he has reformed, that he has actually found Jesus. The key figure here is Paula White, a televangelist and megachurch leader, whom Trump invited to be his spiritual adviser as long ago as 2002. She has been credited by many evangelicals with bringing Trump to God. Predictably, she is an advocate of the 'Prosperity Gospel' which teaches that God rewards the faithful by making them rich. One can see the attraction that this scam has for Trump, although it seems clear that the theology behind it is completely beyond him.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008) p. 87

<sup>3</sup> Jon Sopel, *If Only They Didn't Speak English: Notes From Trump's America* (London: Penguin Random House/BBC Books, 2017) pp. 155, 157, 174

There are a growing number of US studies and journalistic accounts, both academic and non-academic that have chronicled and warned about the rise of the Christian Right. For those interested, the volume of essays edited by Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, *God at the Grassroots 2016* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018) is particularly useful. They co-edited similar volumes examining the 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2004 elections in the United States. Also very valuable is Lee Marsden, *For God's sake: The Christian Right and US Foreign Policy*, (London,: Zed Books, 2008). Particularly useful non-academic volumes are Chris Hedges, *American Fascists* (New York: Free Press, 2006) and Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006). There are many more.

How could a conman like Trump not be impressed by the likes of Jesse Duplantis, another Prosperity Gospeller, the author of that theological classic, *Heaven: Close Encounters of the God Kind* (1996)? Speaking from his \$3 million Louisiana mansion, he recently called on his followers to 'crowdfund' the cost of a new private jet – even though he has a personal fortune of \$40 million. There is every reason to believe that his appeal will be successful, as were previous such appeals for access to personal air transportation.

The best way to regard many of the leading evangelical preachers is as spiritual entrepreneurs who sell salvation for money, lots of money. Clearly these are Trump's kind of Christians. Not only is Paula White seen as having been instrumental in convincing Trump of the need to reach out to the Christian Right, if his bid for the Republican nomination was to have any chance of success. She also persuaded the leaders of the Christian Right that he was someone they could do business with and usefully embrace in return. She went on to preach at his inauguration and is chairwoman of his Faith Advisory Board.

Much more difficult, of course, was the task of convincing the grassroots faithful that this lying, bullying, semi-literate braggart, who lacked even a passing knowledge of the Gospels, was a reformed character who had found Jesus, when his whole public persona shouted the opposite. What does Stephen Strang have to say in his *God and Donald Trump*? As far as he is concerned Trump has acknowledged that he has 'been rude and undisciplined for much of his life', something of an understatement, but over recent years he has come to understand 'the importance of sincere faith . . . he has made a sincere effort to expand his knowledge of and his fluency with essential Christian beliefs'. (p. 2) This belief requires considerable faith because of the singular lack of any evidence to support it. But Strang's faith is bolstered by prophecy. As far back as 2007, the charismatic prophet, Kim Clement, had prophesied that 'Trump shall become a trumpet' and indeed that God had warned that he 'will raise up the Trump to become a trumpet' (p. 69).

The following year, another prophet whom Strang regarded as particularly reliable, Chuck Pierce, had a four hour visitation from the Lord who told him that 'America must learn to play the trump card'. (p. 70). And, of course, God was to impart this prophetic message to more and more people as the 2016 Presidential election approached. As far as most conservative Christians were concerned, Trump presaged 'a cultural counter-revolution' and was 'an answer to prayer'. (p. 15) The result was that Trump received the votes of 'more than 80 percent of the white born-again Christians' with the evangelical vote counting 'for nearly a third of all the votes cast for Trump' (p. 26). He quotes Pastor Robert Jeffress to the effect that millions of Christian Americans

believed that 'the election of President Trump represented God giving us another chance – perhaps our last chance to truly make America great again[. . .] We thank God every day that He gave us a leader like President Trump'. (p 176) While Strang personally gives credence to the notion of a reformed, born-again Trump – indeed he actually suggests that Trump has himself been exhibiting prophetic abilities – he nevertheless argues that even if Trump turns out not to be a Christian, God is still clearly making use of him.

Others have attempted to discover evidence of Trump's spirituality by inventing stories of his incredible generosity and kindness. According to Lance Wallnau, in his *God's Chaos Candidate*, this is a side of the great man that he does not want people to see. Wallnau tells a classic Good Samaritan story about how Trump's limousine once broke down and the chauffeur was having trouble changing the wheel. A passing motorist stopped and helped out. Trump we are told 'paid off that man's mortgage. That's the side of him you don't hear about'. (p. 51) Seriously! Of course, the very idea of Trump himself helping his driver change the wheel was just too incredible, too far-fetched. One cannot help feeling that it is only a matter of time before he is credited with curing the sick and raising the dead by some of his more determined evangelical supporters. The reality is, of course, that Trump's defining characteristics are greed and selfishness. His supposedly charitable Foundation provides concrete evidence of the man's venality. Everyone who knows anything about Trump recognises that the Trump Foundation is a scam that bears the same relationship to charity as Trump University did to higher education. At the time of writing it is under investigation by the New York authorities, who are demanding it be closed down.

What of David Brody and Scott Lamb's *The Faith of Donald Trump*? Writing a spiritual biography of someone like Donald Trump was always going to be a considerable challenge but they do their best. Once again we are assured that Trump has 'a history of unseen kindness', that he is – despite every appearance to the contrary – a Good Samaritan. (p. 234) We are assured that, when he first approached Paula White for spiritual comfort, the Holy Spirit actually whispered to her that she should 'Show him who I am'. (p. 134) She was obviously successful because when Trump later got in touch with her about his running for the Presidency in 2015, he told her, 'I really believe the Lord is speaking to me, that maybe I'm supposed to run for President.' (p. 135) Of course, the idea that God told Trump to run for President is positively grotesque, but it was a necessary lie for the Christian Right constituency that he knew was going to be crucial to any possible win. And as far as Brody and Lamb are concerned, '. . . clearly God is using this man in ways millions of people could never imagine. But God knows and that is good enough.' (p. 220)

On a more mundane worldly level, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council (an important part of the Christian Right) met with Trump's people in order to ensure that the Republican platform 'stayed true to the pro-family agenda'. They found that Trump was, according to Perkins, was prepared to endorse 'the most pro-life platform the party has ever produced. It was solidly pro-family, pro-traditional marriage, pro-religious liberty. I think that was critical for him.' (p. 220). He was much more amenable than the likes of Bush, McCain and Romney had been. The man handling these negotiations was Paul Manafort, Trump's campaign manager, the corrupt businessman who, at the time of writing, is in prison for witness tampering. Trump gave them everything they wanted. As Jerry Falwell put it on Fox News: '. . . evangelicals have found their dream president' (p. 300) and the authors wholeheartedly endorse this sentiment. As they point out, there were 'more prayers read during Donald Trump's inaugural ceremony than at any other presidential inaugural in American history' and he has appointed a 'faith-filled cabinet'. Indeed Trump's cabinet looked like 'a Believers in Politics all-star team'. (p. 261)

There are some problems of course. They do not shy away from the fact that Trump's knowledge of the Bible is virtually non-existent. During one television interview, Trump was asked about the Bible, about 'your favourite book'. Could he tell viewers about his 'most favourite Bible verses'? Trump was unable to oblige beyond insisting that 'the Bible means a lot to me . . . the whole Bible is incredible . . . I just think the Bible is something very special'. (p. 158). This lack of even a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible was to prove to be a recurring problem, but no matter: the Christian Right had got what they wanted. Even if Trump was not a genuine Christian, they believed he had been chosen by God to do his work – and they found a Biblical precedent for this in the person of Cyrus the Great. This has become the Christian Right's great let out as far as Trump is concerned.

The early attempts to find Biblical sanction for supporting someone as wholly unChristian as Trump compared him to Baalam's donkey. (Scott p. 10) If God could speak through a donkey then why could he not speak through Donald Trump? Given Trump's readiness to take offence, comparing him with a donkey was soon abandoned and instead a comparison with Cyrus the Great was invented. Inevitably, the comparison was first suggested by God himself to Lance Wallnau, something he recounts in his *God's Chaos Candidate*. The Lord told him to 'Read Isaiah 45' and here he found that God described the pagan Cyrus the Great as 'his anointed' and charged him with rebuilding Jerusalem for the Jews. (p. 22) And of course the significance of Isaiah 45 was that the 2016 Presidential race was to elect the 45<sup>th</sup> President. Clearly God had chosen

Trump to be the Christian candidate, regardless of his personal character and past history. And this transparent crazed sophistry has become the way that the Christian Right has justified their continued support for Trump, no matter what. Wallnau had the opportunity to tell Trump himself all about his 'remarkable "Cyrus" discovery' at one of the many meetings the evangelicals had with their candidate. Trump came into the room carrying a Bible, 'almost like a steering wheel'. Wallnau told Trump of how he reminded him of George Washington and then 'shared Isaiah 45, and the word to Cyrus, and how I believed it applied to him'. Trump 'nodded . . . trying to understand what he could'. (pp. 73, 78) Obviously Trump must have found being compared to a brutal tyrant more flattering and amenable than being compared to a donkey. Wallnau also recognises that Trump is 'prophetic', although he actually believes that all 'great entrepreneurs . . . tend to be prophetic'. He praises 'Trump's prophetic foresight' in predicting the Brexit vote, for example, something which 'Christians should take note of'. (p. 70)

Wallnau identifies Trump as God's answer to a great historic crisis that confronts America, what he calls 'the Fourth American Crucible'. America is unravelling, Wallnau claims, because there is a 'Thunder Road', a 'shadow cabinet' operating behind the scenes, made up of 'billionaires and millionaires, politicians, consultants, academics and activists'. A hundred of these conspirators met in secret and each contributed a million dollars to a fund with which they could begin to 'remake America'. (p. 10). They are intent on reviving the 'lawless spirit . . . of the 1960s'. They want 'a revolution and they are so close they can taste it'. (p. 13) This great conspiracy has made use of 'Marxist/Lenin doctrine: lie, divide and conquer' to bring America down. Wallnau singles out the late historian Howard Zinn (who died in January 2010) as one of the leading 'false preachers' aiding this cause. And if Hillary Clinton is elected then all will be lost and America will 'be forever changed' (pp. 9, 17). A man of destiny is required to save the country and God has chosen Donald Trump. He has been 'served up by the hand of Providence' like 'Margaret Thatcher, George Patton, Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln' before. (p. 64) No one should doubt what is at stake. 'Satan', he tells his readers, 'considers taking this nation down to be his number one priority. With us removed, hell can advance against the church globally'. There is 'a malevolent and demonic agenda aimed to destroy the global force for kingdom expansion that is America' (pp. 143-144). So much is at stake that no one can seriously suggest that Donald Trump, 'God's Chaos Candidate', should be called to account for who and what he is. The Christian Right has pretty much given Trump permission to behave how he likes, as long as he advances their cultural counter-revolution.

Even more disturbing than Wallnau's book is Robert B. Scott's *Why God "Trumped" America*. Here we have a straightforward attempt to scare the faithful into supporting Trump as the only way to save America from 'witchcraft control'. The Clintons are 'this pair of Luciferian witches'. Hillary Clinton is a 'modern Jezebel' who 'not only sponsored the most evil forms of abortion but also, as many elites of the Rothschild-born Illuminati, favoured those government elites who kidnapped, raped, tortured, and murdered in Satanic sacrifice young children, burning them to Moloch as ancient Baal worshippers had done'. Obama was 'the political son of these Luciferian witches'. And as for Trump, he is 'the modern Jehu' who will bring them down. He looks forward to Hillary Clinton 'going to jail for her murderous crimes'. (p. 11) As far as Young is concerned, Trump was 'God's choice' and those who oppose him 'are fighting the God who chose him'. He was elected by the prayers of the faithful because in 2016 'prayers were more important than votes'. (p. 14) Indeed, God who is a 'wow God', actually 'rigged' the election: 'This was the first vote I'd ever seen rigged by God. Yet many still don't see it'. (p. 13). Wow indeed! It is tempting to just dismiss all this as the inconsequential ravings of a disturbed mind, but, as an incredulous Jon Sopel observes, the story of Hillary Clinton being involved with a Washington DC paedophile ring, the so-called 'Pizzagate' affair, actually got massive traction on social media. It was even retweeted by Trump's security adviser General Michael Flynn. One man, Edgar Welch, actually drove over 350 miles to the pizzeria that the ring supposedly operated out of, armed with an assault rifle, determined to rescue the children from their underground prison. Fortunately, even though Welch fired his gun inside the restaurant, no-one was killed.<sup>4</sup>

### **'A vile, idolatrous man chosen by God'**

Which brings us to Stephen Mansfield's *Choosing Donald Trump*. Mansfield is the author of over a dozen books among them *The Faith and Values of Sarah Palin* (2010), *The Faith of Barack Obama* (2008), *The Faith of the American Soldier* (2005), *The Faith of George W. Bush* (2004), *Lincoln's Battle with God* (2012) and my personal favourites *The Search for God and Guinness* (2009) and *Mansfield's Book of Manly Men* (2013), this last with a Foreword by General William Boykin, the former commander of Delta Force. How does he grapple with the Trump phenomenon?

Mansfield acknowledges that during the 2016 election Trump made 'the worst presentation of religion by a presidential candidate in recent memory'. He 'either had a faith he could not articulate and knew little about or he was

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<sup>4</sup> Sopel (see note 3) pp. 289-293

faking religion for political gain'. On one occasion when 'asked about who God is to him, he spoke at length about buying a golf course' (pp. 30, 31). This was a man who could tell an interviewer that 'he had never asked forgiveness of God but would as soon as he did something wrong'. (p. 30) Nevertheless, Mansfield seems to accept Paula White's testimony that when Trump first approached her, he was 'a man with a keen spiritual hunger'. She found him 'adrift spiritually' (pp. 88, 89). He goes on to acknowledge White as 'the architect of Donald Trump's influence among religious conservatives', even that she 'helped deliver the Oval Office into Donald Trump's hands'. (pp. 93, 97)

There is an interesting paradox here that Mansfield is very much aware of. While Trump has to continually strain in a futile attempt to demonstrate his Christian faith, his great enemy Barack Obama was both a sincere and knowledgeable Christian. For the Christian Right, however, Obama was anathema. His was a liberal Christianity that had declared 'war on Americans of faith'. (p. 112) For the Christian right, the Obama years had been a period of 'unrelenting war on religion'. (p. 110) He 'seemed . . . to never have heard of an abortion he didn't like', he was 'the first US president to speak at a Planned Parenthood convention' and supported gay rights, even having 'the White House lit up in the colours of the rainbow flag, symbol of the gay pride movement'. (pp. 112, 113). Trump promised to reverse all this and the pastors gathered round, 'laid hands on Donald Trump, wrapped him in prayer shawls, called him "anointed", and compared him to some of the greatest leaders in history'. (p. 147) One over-enthusiastic rabbi even 'claimed he had found the Hebrew word for "president" (nasi) next to the Hebrew word for "Donald" coded in the book of Deuteronomy'! (p. 147) Still as Mansfield admits, of 'all the efforts by clergy to repackage Donald Trump, little had equal impact to the claim that he is the modern version of Cyrus the Great' (p. 148). As he puts it, 'millions of Americans came to believe that Donald Trump, just like Cyrus the Great was a vile, idolatrous man chosen by God'. (p. 150)

What Mansfield does criticise is the Christian Right's desperation to maintain its Unholy Alliance with Trump. He believes they have foresworn their moral duty to hold him to account when, for example, he has made 'racially inappropriate if not outright racist statements'. As he puts it, they 'ought to have been voices from another realm. They ought to have been more than echoes and done more than merely sanction a secular conservative consensus'. (p. 140). There will, one suspects, be a growing number of evangelicals who come to share this sentiment as time goes by and the United States continues to unravel under President Trump, although there is little sign of the Unholy Alliance starting to fracture yet. The Christian Right resolutely stands by Trump for the time being.

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