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# Religion in the Age of Trump

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DANIEL A. MORRIS

# Religion in the Age of Trump



I teach and write about volatile political topics. My training is in religious studies. Within that broad discipline, I work at the intersection of Christian ethics, American religious history, and democratic politics. The “democratic” part of my work means that I focus on “the people,” especially as

they are included or excluded from their own governance. Here at Augustana College, the classes I teach that deal most directly with these issues are: “Race, Ethnicity, and Religion;” “Sexual Ethics;” and “American Christianities.” I love teaching these classes; it is a tremendous privilege and uniquely fulfilling to introduce undergraduates to ongoing conversations with obvious contemporary relevance.

It’s hard, though, to know whether and how to allow my own political voice into the classroom. I am firmly committed to a pedagogical model that empowers students to inform themselves about political debates and stake out their own positions within them. I consider it an abuse of my power in the classroom to persuade students on religious, moral, or political questions. Also, objectivity is presumably an important value in scholarly inquiry. I feel an obligation to model objectivity within the classroom, even (or especially) when dealing with divisive topics. And yet, complete objectivity is obviously not possible. I make choices to include, exclude, and emphasize certain voices

when constructing and revising the syllabus, for example, and we all make moral judgments, even in the classroom, about politics, religion, and America’s history of racial and sexual oppression. I have never heard anyone call for strict objectivity in discussions of the transatlantic slave trade, and yet for some reason teachers are expected to maintain moral neutrality when discussing the murders of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and others. In recent years I have also come to the painful realization that students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and Muslim students often perceive academic objectivity in the classroom as a glaring lack of support. To make this pedagogical difficulty worse, the murmuring public perception that academics shamelessly promote political liberalism was recently turned up to 11 when Betsy DeVos, the United States Secretary of Education, stated that “faculty, from adjunct professors to deans,” tell students “what to do, what to say, and more ominously, what to think” (Jaschik).

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I will likely never stop thinking about what objectivity means in the context of teaching classes at the nexus of religion, ethics, politics, race, and sexuality. I am certain, though, that my political activism and my scholarly activity must now inform each other more than they did before Donald Trump won the Electoral College vote in November, 2016. I am both a scholar of religion and politics, and a political actor in our democratic experiment. I cannot ultimately separate these two roles. And now, under the Trump presidency, I feel called to bring them closer together. If I don't make my research and writing active in

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civic life, I will fail in my responsibilities to empower the oppressed and restrain the forces that would dominate them. If I leave my political vision completely out of the classroom, I will fail in my responsibility to show students how high and asymmetrical the stakes are in debates about religion, politics, race, and sex. As I watch Trump's policies and rhetoric tear families apart, abandon the poor, and strike fear in the marginalized, I am convinced that my scholarship and political action must inform each other more directly than they had before. Other scholars who feel this pull must determine for themselves where their expertise and political passions meet. For me, at this moment, they coalesce around one main question: what is the role of religion in Trump's America?

As I think about this question, my mind turns immediately to evangelical politics and the status of Islam. If you are reading *Intersections*, you are likely aware that 80% of evangelicals voted for Trump in this election. I want to reflect on that statistic within historical contexts of evangelicalism in American politics, and I want to suggest the following two theses: (1) evangelicals' standard conception

of Godly participation in political life has lost the coherence it once had; and (2) evangelicals' historical tendency to exclude others from political life has now become directed at Muslims. Telling a story with these two theses at its heart is one way in which my scholarship and activism mutually inform each other.

This story must begin by noting that evangelicals have believed consistently throughout American history that their religion has a very important role to play in political life. The Puritans believed that God had led them away from the repressive political and religious climate of England, where their vision of church and government was not being accepted, toward New England, where they could establish their own Godly society. A Calvinist style church was at the center of Puritan society and politics. Leaders of this community, especially John Winthrop, insisted that the Puritan faith and practice was absolutely necessary for New England's political society to thrive. According to Winthrop and others, God had selected Puritans to lead England and the world by showing everyone that the perfect society is one with this specific church and set of religious beliefs at its center. Winthrop likened the Massachusetts Bay Colony to a "city on a hill" in his famous sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," which he preached aboard the *Arbella*. His reference was biblical; he was drawing on Matthew 5, which attributes these words to Jesus: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:14-16). This vision imagined the Puritan experiment as a model for the entire world to follow, which is the origin of the "exceptionalist" tendencies in American evangelicalism. The Puritans thought of themselves as "exceptional" because they offered a moment of Godly discontinuity from typical human religious and political activity. The fate of America's political experiment (to say nothing of humanity's relation with God) depended upon the nation following this exceptional example. American evangelicals have maintained this sense of exceptionalism down to today, believing that their particular religious and moral vision was necessary as a grounding for American civic life. By our standards today, Puritan society was theocratic:

church power coincided with civic power, many forms of religious belief were not tolerated, and so forth. Roger Williams was exiled from Massachusetts Bay Colony partly because he critiqued Puritanism and began moving toward separatism. The example of the Puritans, then, shows us two important historical tendencies in evangelicals' political activity: they have believed that their religion must guide American politics, and they have excluded others as part of that belief.

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Evangelicals' participation in politics has ebbed and flowed throughout American history. They were highly engaged in political life in the early nineteenth century, bringing their religious beliefs to questions about temperance, dueling, and the morality of slavery. In each case, they believed that their religious morality needed to shape policy or else American civilization would fail. This is the basic tenet of evangelical belief that the United States is a "Christian nation." As they turned toward premillennialism after the Civil War, they started to invest less in civic life. The Scopes Trial of 1925 sent many evangelicals retreating into a sub-culture, further away from political life than before. Then, in the mid-1970s, evangelicals came storming back into politics in a major way, through the formation of the Religious Right, a coalition of conservative evangelicals who resisted the perceived liberalism of the counter-culture, the sexual revolution, the Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, and the civil rights movement. This coalition has shaped evangelicals' engagement of politics from the late 1970s to today. The Religious Right is the primary reason why evangelicals tend to embrace political conservatism in America, although, as I will explain shortly, the religious fervor behind this embrace lacks the coherence it once had.

Just as evangelicals' engagement of politics has waxed and waned, so too has their social and political exclusivity changed over the years. After the ratification of the First Amendment in 1791, evangelicals accepted, however grudgingly, the fact that the federal government would not support, sanction, or mandate any specific religion. (Even though on the state level, Connecticut and Massachusetts didn't disestablish the Congregationalist church until well into the nineteenth century.) While they didn't usually try to explicitly or overtly dismantle the wall of separation, evangelicals did continue to believe that, because their religious and moral vision was divinely inspired, other groups should not be allowed full participation and inclusion in our democratic experiment.

One obvious example of this belief is how evangelicals thought about black Americans in the nineteenth century. Writers like George Armstrong argued that slaves should not be freed because they were inherently inferior to the more civilized race of white people, that God had made the races in such a hierarchy that a Godly social order would reflect that, and that slavery actually protected such an inferior race from being destroyed by their superiors on a level political playing field. Evangelical abolitionists weren't much better in their assumptions about racial superiority and inferiority. Evangelicals have harbored deep suspicions about Catholics, too. They regarded Catholic immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a clear threat to the moral and political stability of the nation. Their perceptions of Catholic drinking, superstitious ritual, and deference to papal authority made evangelicals believe that Catholics could not participate well in American democracy. Such assumptions persisted well into the twentieth century. When John F. Kennedy made his case for the presidency, he faced evangelical pearl-clutching about whether a Catholic could govern the country effectively, and what a Catholic in the White House might mean for our collective identity as a Christian nation. These are just a few examples of evangelicals' tendency toward political exclusion, which is the flip side of the claim that evangelicals must have a privileged place in United States politics.

Now, on to Trump. What is the status of evangelical participation in politics today, after the 2016 presidential election? One answer to this question is that evangelicals

are still engaged in American politics, and their engagement generally follows the model of the Religious Right, which has been the norm since the 1970s. However, the religious story on which their political activity is built is not nearly as coherent or compelling as it once was. Back in the 1970s, politically conservative evangelicals could tell a story about how God desired an orderly society, leavened by the religious morality of born again Christians. That orderly society, they thought, would properly acknowledge differences between sexes, respect authority, value life, and resist government interference in church and market. Whether you think that story has merit or not, at least it was coherent and consistent with some premises developed from Christian sources like the Bible.

Things were different in 2016. There was no coherent story motivating evangelical support for Trump. Trump spoke awkwardly, at best, about his own religion. He has been divorced twice, and divorce has always been a major moral concern for evangelicals. He doesn't have clear positions on the basic political issues that have motivated politically conservative Christians since the 1970s, such as abortion or same-sex marriage, and on and on. (Of course, the disconnect between Trump and politically liberal

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Christianities is even greater. Trump's disregard for "the least of these" makes him an even worse fit with politically liberal Christianities, but that's not the point I'm trying to make.) The poor fit between Trump and evangelicals is likely a major reason why he selected Mike Pence as his running mate. The "normal" connection between political figures and conservative evangelical voters simply was not there. And yet, they voted for him. Overwhelmingly. Eric Metaxas, a prominent evangelical writer, argued that evangelicals should actively vote for Trump—not abstain from voting or vote for a third party, but actually vote for

Trump—because he was anxious about Hillary Clinton's ability to shape the Supreme Court, her private email server, the support she gets from Planned Parenthood, and so on. (Metaxas) His reasoning is thin and tortured. It is nothing like the robust story that grounded the work of the Religious Right in the 1970s. In the era of Trump, evangelicals are voting by inertia, without a clear and coherent story about why they engage in politics the way they do.

A second answer to the question, "What is the status of evangelical participation in politics today, after the 2016 presidential election?" has to do with evangelicals' tendency to exclude other groups. Whereas at one time evangelicals excluded African Americans, Catholics, and other groups, today the focus has shifted decisively toward Muslims. The dominant assumption among evangelicals is that Muslims cannot participate well in political life, largely because of the concepts such as jihad and sharia law. At a campaign rally in New Hampshire, a white male constituent had this comment and question for Donald Trump: "We have a problem in this country. It's called Muslims. You know our current president is one. You know he's not even an American...We have training camps growing where they want to kill us. That's my question: When can we get rid of them?" (Schleifer). Trump didn't denounce this terrifying question. He interjected with a comment that made light of this constituent's bigotry, and then he responded by saying, simply, that he would be "looking at a lot of different things." In addition, he issued this infamous statement December 7, 2015: "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on" (Horton). This statement came five days after the San Bernadino shooting, and Trump exploited the fear and ignorance of a huge portion of the American electorate, which was ready to castigate an entire religion as un-American and anti-democratic.

Ben Carson has made similarly misguided claims. He argued insistently against allowing a Muslim to become president because he, Carson, believes that sharia law is incompatible with the United States Constitution. Carson believes that in order for a Muslim to become president of the United States, he or she would "have to reject the tenets of Islam." He elaborated on this belief by saying, "I would have problems with somebody who embraced all

the doctrines associated with Islam...If they are not willing to reject sharia and all the portions of it that are talked about in the Quran—if they are not willing to reject that, and subject that to American values and the Constitution, then of course, I would” (Bradner). Carson’s and Trump’s beliefs about the relationship between Islam, sharia, and the United States Constitution are ignorant. They also clearly violate the spirit and (maybe the letter) of the First Amendment, which says in part, “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” and Article VI of the Constitution, which prohibits tests of religion as a prerequisite for serving in public office.

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These beliefs are not, however, at odds with one of the basic political impulses of American evangelicalism. If the story grounding evangelical politics has fallen apart, the tendency to exclude has not. The assumption that Muslims cannot be good participants in American democracy is consistent with evangelical views from earlier eras about black people, Catholics, and other groups. It is an intolerant and factually ill-informed assumption, but it is consistent with evangelicals’ engagement of politics. So what is the state of religion in Trump’s America? With regard to evangelicals and Muslims, it is, in part, this: evangelicals have lost the coherent narrative informing their politics but have maintained their exclusive and

intolerant impulses, while Muslims are subject to anti-democratic forms of intolerance.

Muslims are not the only people who face intense persecution in Trump’s America. Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ people do, too. I offer this story about evangelicalism and Islam in America as a way of engaging issues of power and oppression at a moment of crisis in United States history. Scholars who work on similar issues have the power—and thus the responsibility—to tell such stories in ways that restrain the powerful and empower the restrained. In Trump’s America, telling these stories well means being both scholarly and politically active. If our appeals to objectivity lead us away from this task, we abandon our Muslim, Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ students and neighbors at a critical moment, and we indulge in a luxury that they are not afforded.

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