

## Editor's Note

# The Unexpected Orthodoxy of Donald J. Trump: White Evangelical Support for the 45th President of the United States

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*By now, most political observers have absorbed the pervasiveness of white Evangelical support for Donald J. Trump not only in the 2016 presidential election results but also in the poll numbers showing continued approval since then. Nevertheless, many social scientists—even those who are Evangelical themselves—remain puzzled regarding Evangelical enthusiasm for Trump, a man who has frequently demonstrated seemingly “un-Christian” speech and behavior. Drawing on Brophy’s outstanding analysis of orthodoxy as project and the notion that behavioral standards are both variable and subordinate to the defense of orthodox identity, Trump can be understood as fully orthodox within an Evangelical framework insofar as he occupies a pivotal role in forcefully affirming their feeling of being threatened and working to maintain their interests into the future. Thus, despite Trump’s apparently non-Christian actions, his public support and political enactment of Evangelical priorities through federal appointments and policies reveal him to be unexpectedly orthodox after all.*

*Key words:* elections; evangelicals; evangelicalism; orthodoxy; politics.

Discerning the underlying legitimation that propelled and sustains Donald Trump in his presidency is an ongoing topic of conversation—whether with the policy analyst on cable news or with my neighbor next door. For example, I recently had dinner with a group of social scientists at my institution where the conversation inevitably turned to politics. They knew exit polls from the 2016 election had revealed that Trump received overwhelming support (81%) from white Evangelical or “born-again” Christians.<sup>1</sup> Yet, these academics were sincerely confused since the months leading up to the election revealed a morally compromised candidate who never confesses or asks for forgiveness, is unaware of

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<sup>1</sup>“Election 2016: Exit Polls,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/politics/election-exit-polls.html>.

forms of talk among Evangelicals (e.g., “Two Corinthians”), and had no concrete religious affiliations and therefore lacked an understanding of basic doctrine or liturgical practice. Since the election, the new president continues to be criticized as untruthful, radically narcissistic, and unsympathetic to those facing poverty or prejudice—yet white Evangelicals stay with him.<sup>2</sup> My colleagues asked: *How can these Christians support such an obviously unChristian person?* They somehow believed that Evangelicals needed to be convinced that Trump was not actually worth their allegiance since examples abounded for how Trump did not fit any definition they held of being Christian—even a “baby” Christian. But I disagreed, letting them know that what they needed to grasp was a properly sociological understanding of religious orthodoxy.

Many otherwise educated colleagues in the social sciences with little training in the study of religion view religious orthodoxy as consisting of morally upright actions like being “loving,” “truthful,” and “sexually pure.” Yet as a sociologist of religion, I knew that Trump’s white Evangelical support required an understanding of religious orthodoxy that included more than just individualistic virtues. For example, Brophy (2016) points out in an article published in this journal that religious communities are accustomed to managing a wide range of interpretive practices and beliefs, citing an array of previous sociological research showing how common discrepancies between prescriptions of religious traditions and actual practice actually are (see also Martí 2008, 2010, 2015; Martí and Ganiel 2014). For Brophy, being orthodox is primarily about acting to preserve a group’s identity over time. Therefore, orthodox orientations are defined not only with an eye toward their past but also—and perhaps more importantly—toward projections regarding their future. As Brophy (2016:125) writes, “these actors are centrally concerned with maintaining their practices and beliefs *in the future*.”

In this note, I wish to briefly assert that white Evangelicals neither obscure nor ignore their religious convictions when they declare their allegiance to the 45th president. In fact, their actions indicate a preeminent concern with upholding orthodoxy. In the case of President Trump, *observers should focus on discerning the orthodoxy of an actor who is perceived as religiously legitimate primarily because he engages in actions in support of religiously defined group interests rather than as a result of statements of belief or piety of behavior.* While fear, nostalgia, racial resentment, and white nationalism have all been analytical pieces of the Trump support puzzle scholars have been weaving together since November 2016,<sup>3</sup> a critical aspect of Trump support is to assert, rather than deny, that he is indeed unexpectedly religiously orthodox in the conduct of his presidency.

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<sup>2</sup>Jones, Robert P., Daniel Cox, Rob Griffin, Maxine Najle, Molly Fisch-Friedman, and Alex Vandermaas-Peeler. 2018. “Partisanship Trumps Gender: Sexual Harassment, Woman Candidates, Access to Contraception, and Key Issues in 2018 Midterms.” PRRI. <https://www.prrri.org/research/abortion-reproductive-health-midterms-trump-kavanaugh>.

<sup>3</sup>See Djupe and Claassen (2018) for an excellent resource bringing several explanatory mechanisms together.

## EXPANDING THE ANALYTICAL SCOPE OF RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXY

In her award-winning article, “Orthodoxy as Project,” Brophy (2016) makes clear that although groups that enforce orthodoxy may appear homogeneous, they actually exhibit great internal diversity. Those who misread white Evangelicals seem to miss that they are so concerned about the loss of orthodoxy that they are willing to accommodate variation in *orthopraxy*, that is to say the accomplishment of orthodoxy in practice. As Brophy (2016:127) makes clear, “orthodox communities are centrally concerned with resisting a decline from orthodoxy.” Further, she (2016:141) encourages us to examine “how these communities engage in future-oriented projects, theorizing, anticipating, and responding to current issues in light of perceived future threats to organizational identity.” I agree. While white Evangelicals are surprisingly heterogeneous, their assertion of unity with President Trump is a bulwark against the seeming deterioration of a valued, and highly racialized, religious orientation (see Edgell’s 2017 note also published in *Sociology of Religion*).

President Trump himself is not a devout Christian, and his white Evangelical supporters concede that they do not see Trump as a strong, ideal Christian when saying, “We’re not electing a pastor, we’re electing a president.” Yet he resonates with a majority of white Evangelicals and continues to do so while in office. Research has shown that conservative white Evangelicals had felt that their interests were excluded from the Obama presidency and that their religious convictions were under attack (Parker and Barreto 2014). Indeed, perceived marginalization has long been central to Evangelical identity (Smith 1998). In contrast, Trump declared himself early on as a defender of their interests. For example, in January 2016 in a speech delivered to a packed auditorium at Liberty University, he said, “We’re going to protect Christianity.” Trump generates strong support among white Evangelicals, even among those who do not attend church, because of his willingness to enforce their convictions through the apparatus of the State.<sup>4</sup> As Franklin Graham declared in a 2018 interview, “I never said he was the best example of the Christian faith. He defends the faith.”<sup>5</sup>

Among the central imperatives among white Evangelicals is resolving anxieties emerging from “liberal” political movements throughout the twentieth century, stoking the fervor of reactionary conservatives, taking up the desire to save America by becoming active in government and promoting policies and

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<sup>4</sup>An emerging literature is revealing not only why personally pious Americans are able to support a notoriously impious man but also why “secularized evangelical discourse” as a form of “public religious expression” is supported by a majority of Americans who do not belong to white Evangelical subculture (e.g., Delehanty et al. forthcoming; Stewart et al. 2018; Whitehead et al. 2018).

<sup>5</sup>“Franklin Graham: Trump ‘defends the faith’.” *Axios*, November 25, 2018. <https://www.axios.com/franklin-graham-donald-trump-6b18159f-d481-48e2-9eb3-ca48f4eb26aa.html>.

politicians that best serve Christian interests (see [Ruotsila 2015](#)). Trump interprets himself in this light. At a private meeting of white Evangelical leaders in August 2018, he described the political left as consisting of dangerous people, warning that Democrats “will overturn everything that we’ve done, and they’ll do it quickly and violently”—that is, if Republicans lose their majority in Congress in upcoming midterm elections. In this elaborate gathering, Trump attributed resistance to his presidency as motivated by his support for white Evangelicals, saying, “The level of hatred, the level of anger is unbelievable. Part of it is because of some of the things I’ve done for you and for me and for my family, but I’ve done them.” Occasions like this demonstrate that white Evangelicals have the ear of the President, with regular meetings and consultations in the White House. Trump said, “They really have silenced you. But now you’re not silenced anymore.” In the same meeting, one minister looked to the president and said, “Now we have a warrior at the helm who is willing to stand up and fight.”

## NOT WHAT YOU BELIEVE BUT WHAT YOU FIGHT FOR

An image widely circulated through social media shows Donald Trump sitting at his desk in the Oval Office, signing a piece of legislation, backed by a ghostly figure of Jesus Christ, arms reaching around Trump, with a hand guiding the president as he signs the paper. This piece of art went viral, generated millions of impressions, perhaps the most prominent visual legitimization of Trump’s presidency as guided by God. The picture is ambiguous but sacralizes support for his presidency, saying his actions actualize the purposes of God on earth. Of course, President Trump is not recognized as religious for his doctrinal beliefs or church involvement (made manifest in his failure in December 2018 to publicly recite the Apostles’ Creed during the funeral service for former president George H. W. Bush) but rather for his endorsement of sentiments that align with the white Evangelical political right. Profession of belief is not most important among white Evangelicals but rather support for policy initiatives that would enforce white Evangelical priorities in all sectors of government.

Though America functions under the broad assumption of a separation between church and state, the influence of religion in many ways has grown as certain groups have become more particular in their agendas and more active in advocating for them. For example, it was not until well into the twentieth century that the phrase “In God We Trust” was inscribed on our currency and in the halls of congress and that “under God” was placed in our classrooms through the Pledge of Allegiance, both by a group of powerful, white Christians ([Kruse 2015](#)). Today, conservative white Evangelicals feel tied to a nostalgic, seemingly more pious past, and they believe that the nation is exceptional in the eyes of God. Therefore, these same Evangelicals fight against forces they view as tainting

the purity of American identity, forces that include immigration, nontraditional gender roles, and same-sex marriage. So while Evangelical movements of the past have latched on to politicians like Ronald Reagan in hopes of establishing a stronger Christian presence in public policy, the politician of choice for white Evangelicals today is the brash, hard-hitting, and seemingly unintimidated Donald J. Trump.

Based on many years as an observer of Evangelicalism in America,<sup>6</sup> I believe that today's Evangelical conservatives have given up on spiritual revival as a means of change. Even in the recent past, *conversion*—a change of heart and mind that is the fruit of repentance and spiritual regeneration—was thought to be the means by which America would become a morally upright nation: change enough individuals, and the change on a personal level would result in broad change on a collective level. The politics of Ronald Reagan endorsed this understanding among the Moral Majority; as recently as George W. Bush, such sentiment still reigned. However, the accumulated frustrations of not being able to ease their sense of religious decline, their continued legal struggles against abortion and gay marriage, and the overwhelming shifts in popular culture promoting much less religiously restrictive understandings of personal identity have prompted politically active religious actors to take a far more pragmatic stance. Their goal is no longer to morally persuade the public of their religious convictions; rather, their goal has become to authoritatively enforce behavioral guidelines through elected and nonelected officials who will shape policies and interpret laws such that they cannot be so easily altered or dismissed through the vagaries of popular elections. It is not *piety* but *policy* that matters most.

Borrowing Max Weber's framework, white Evangelicals have turned away from the charismatic authority of the Church in favor of the rational-legal authority of the State. They view themselves as a shrinking group that needs the protection of the State. While the pulpit can still mobilize the faithful, white Evangelicals understand that they are too few to rely on churches alone to influence politics, so they embrace the State to curb the changes they fear, holding government accountable to do so on their behalf. Of course, the State is viewed as a legitimate instrument for asserting a distinctively conservative Christian privilege because of the belief that America is a nation chosen by God and built by Christians (Whitehead and Perry forthcoming; Whitehead et al. 2018). In their eyes, a national identity that coincides with the tenets of Christian morality will be showered with blessings from above and will prove to be still more prosperous. So on January 20, 2017, when Donald Trump placed his hand on the Bible and was sworn into office, it represented a significant victory for moral crusaders who had been fighting to rescue America—a move that would advance

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<sup>6</sup>First approached in Martí (2005), and then more recently in Martí (2016, 2017, 2018) and Mulder et al. (2017).

government-enforced initiatives to further purify America, one that would be rooted in Christian values, and one that, if successful, would be rewarded by the hand of God himself.

## TRUMP THE FIGHTER

On September 28, 2018, Liberty University's President Jerry Falwell, Jr., put out a Tweet, saying:

*Conservatives & Christians need to stop electing "nice guys." They might make great Christian leaders but the United States needs street fighters like @realDonaldTrump at every level of government b/c the liberal fascists Dems are playing for keeps & many Repub leaders are a bunch of wimps!*

Similarly, a t-shirt from a Trump supporter that went viral in 2016 simply states, "Jesus Died For You—Trump Lives For You." I suggest that a truer meme would say, "Trump Fights For You."

White Evangelical news media widely report that President Trump has "kept his word" about issues that matter most, like the pro-life agenda. While on the campaign trail in 2016, Trump stated that women having an abortion should be criminally prosecuted. Even after this remark was "walked back" with "abortionist" doctors instead facing punishment, his words spoke volumes. Later, the Supreme Court nomination and aggressive support for Judge Brett Kavanaugh during his controversial hearings in 2018 further affirmed Trump's support for white Evangelical concerns and energized this political base. Also, the Trump administration has pushed for a narrow definition of "religious liberty," one that favors the upholding of religious conviction of conservative Protestants as sufficient for refusing service to gays or for receiving federal funding despite lack of following established guidelines against discrimination. More examples could be added; suffice to say that the integrity and witness of Christianity are being defined not by private morality but by the heavy-handed imposition of a public agenda.

Again drawing on Brophy (2016:13), white Evangelicals, like other orthodox communities, embrace a "spectrum of standards," meaning that different standards are expected for individuals based on their perceived proximity to the ideological center of their group. The tension with Trump is palpable: as a public figure, it is important that he strongly support the political interests of white Evangelicals; yet as a person with no prior investment in Evangelical activities or organizations, he is only marginally expected to uphold conventional standards of piety. Rather, he is orthodox because he actively works to protect orthodoxy, even when he fails to be a very good Christian. Brophy's analysis further affirms that members of orthodox communities readily accept that some core members create uncomfortable tensions when aggressively working to preserve key aspects of orthodoxy (as when ultra-conservatives are labeled "mean-spirited"). Forceful action deemed impolite, uncaring, and certainly "not politically correct" is itself

justifiable. As demonstrated by the Falwell quote above, some of Trump's supporters assert that his being a religious "outsider" allows him to fight even more aggressively for the causes they hold dear.

In the end, perhaps the unexpected orthodoxy of Donald Trump is not so unexpected after all, especially given the many ways he appeals to the priorities of white Evangelical voters. He presented a campaign platform—served with a pugilistic attitude of strength—to a religious group among whom it deeply resonated, a group whose support continues despite his widely publicized controversies in office. He's a fighter on their behalf, and their enthusiasm for him upholds the righteousness of his stance. Sarah Diefendorf recently wrote, "Today, U.S. white Evangelicals do not necessarily need political candidates who are going to carry their understanding of Christian values into personal actions but instead want candidates who will help them defend their identities and public cultural influence."<sup>7</sup> Given this observation, it is entirely plausible to suggest that *the greater the threat of religious decline, the greater the expansion of acceptable orthodoxy*—as long as those actions are perceived to protect and enhance orthodoxy rather than further diminish it. Preliminary indicators seem to support this relationship. As Trump himself said in an exclusive interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network a few days before the November midterm elections in 2018, "I know they're very happy with me. We've seen they're very happy."

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<sup>7</sup>Diefendorf, Sarah. 2018. "What U.S. Evangelical Voters Really Want in Politics." *Scholars Strategies Network*, November 6. <https://scholars.org/brief/what-us-evangelical-voters-really-want-politics>.

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