Tracing the routes to pro-Trump Evangelicalism

American Blindspot: Race, Class, Religion, and the Trump Presidency, by Gerardo Marti, Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020, 319 pp., US$90.00, £69.00 (hb), US$27.00, £20.95 (pb), ISBN 978–5381–1608–1 (hb), ISBN 978–5381–1609–8 (pb), ISBN 978–5381–1610–41 (eb)

Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America, by Daniel Vaca, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019, 329 pp., US$39.95, £31.00 (hb), ISBN 978–0–674–98011–2

Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States, by Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 268 pp., US$29.95, £19.95(hb), ISBN 978–0–1900–5788–6 (hb), ISBN 978–0–1900–5790–9 (e-pub), ISBN 978–0–1900–5789–3 (updf), ISBN 978–0–1900–5791–6 (online)

As many look back to the US presidential elections in 2020 with a mixture of relief at the outcome and exasperation at Donald Trump's refusal to concede defeat, others are still incredulous that he won first time around. Did that really happen? In so many ways Trump defied expectations and, just as he remains iconoclastic in his approach to statecraft, his path to power revealed

similarly unanticipated insights into his supporters and their values. In 2016, 81% of white evangelicals—a populace characterised by its advocacy of strict conservative moral principles often oriented around 'traditional' understandings of the family—voted for Trump, making up almost half of his support base. Yet Trump himself appears to fall woefully short in moral terms by most evangelical standards. Moreover, according to research by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), in 2011, during the Obama administration, 61% of white evangelicals denied that elected officials could fulfil their duties when behaving unethically in their personal lives; after Trump had assumed office in 2016, this figure dropped dramatically, with 72% of white evangelicals saying personal ethical conduct *did not* matter for a person's capacity in public office (Marti 2020, 216). Evangelicals became *more* tolerant of immoral conduct by an elected official after Trump had taken office—a complete reversal of the sentiments expressed during the 1990s, when Bill Clinton's marital infidelity was the target of fierce public condemnation by those on the political right. Even after his election defeat, Trump remains a popular figurehead among US evangelicals, with initial indications that they came out in even stronger numbers to support him in 2020. How best to explain Trump's buoyant approval ratings among evangelical Christians, even following a number of controversial revelations and his impeachment by the US Senate? Similar to US politics, the contours of US Christianity appear somewhat less predictable than they were just a few years ago.

But are these trends really new? Are we witnessing an entirely

unprecedented shift in the interlocking forces of US politics and religion or does pro-Trump Christianity represent the culmination of something deeper, something rooted in a process that has been underway for some time? In three excellent recent books, the path to a pro-Trump evangelicalism is illuminated, each offering invaluable clues as to what paved this path and what might happen next.

Trump's popularity among evangelicals may be explained with reference to a complex set of alignments, rooted in US history. One aspect has to do with business, wealth, and free enterprise. When economic success is viewed as the reward of individual effort *and* divine endorsement, the expansion of the state and its intervention in free markets become condemned as both socially dysfunctional *and* ungodly. In such contexts, successful entrepreneurs become the "ultimate exemplars of virtue" (Marti 2020, 114). The alignment of evangelicalism with capitalist interests has been the subject of ardent sociological debate since Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was published at the start of the twentieth century. A fresh perspective on this topic is presented in *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* by Harvard historian Daniel Vaca, who traces the relationship between evangelicalism and the initiatives and values of commercial endeavour in an historical analysis of the evangelical publishing industry.

Vaca's argument that evangelicals have strategically engaged segments of the population through commercial endeavour since at least the nineteenth

century is not unprecedented. However, his meticulously evidenced analysis of the way this process illuminates the complex interplay between commercial and spiritual goals unpacks this claim with impressive nuance. Concepts usually associated with neoliberal cultural developments are harnessed here to great effect in tracing evangelical initiatives from the more distant past. In historical detail, Vaca explores the markets for Christian revivals nurtured by and embodied in evangelist Dwight L. Moody during the 1870s, the development of a Reformed brand of Christian product by the Eerdmans company in the 1920s, and the market segmentation of more recent decades, which has fed the binary oppositions of the 'culture wars' by matching warring publics with alternative consumer choices. Vaca argues that it is not enough to trace cultural affinities between evangelical and capitalist aspirations; the relationship between the two is more intimate and more consequential. The publishing companies that are the principal agents in Vaca's account did not simply exploit a receptive evangelical market, they contributed to the cultivation of a "common consciousness through commercial endeavour. By cultivating evangelical markets, they have generated evangelical publics." (Vaca 2019, 12)

Vaca sees Trump's rise as the evangelicals' presidential choice as flowing from the same set of alignments, Trump being "a media celebrity who had become adept at conjuring publics through print and television" (Vaca 2019, 227). These are the strategies for a certain kind of success, but there appears to be a set of values that make Trump's persona and message

appealing in a way that goes beyond the celebration of capitalism and free markets. Gerardo Marti's excellent *American Blindspot: Race, Class, Religion, and the Trump Presidency* takes the long view, unpicking the historical processes that led to the privileging of a particular understanding of what it means to be 'American': white, pro-capitalist, Christian. Trump's success, according to Marti, is due to his elevation of this version of American identity as definitive, his stoking of fears among grassroots voters that this America—*their* America—is under threat, and his promise to restore it to pre-eminence.

The strong alliance between the Republican Party and evangelical Christian voters has endured at least since the rise of the New Christian Right in the 1970s and its support of President Ronald Reagan during the 1980s. It was arguably intensified under George W. Bush, who was born again and a crusader in the 'war on terror' and whose agenda played to the Manichean worldview of those who see the world in terms of us and them, good and evil, Islam and the West. In many ways Trump's success echoes Reagan's, rather than his more immediate Republican predecessor; unlike Bush, neither Reagan nor Trump spoke the language of 'born again' Christianity and their most passionate Christian supporters cite values that are economic and political, rather than religious. It is advocacy for the causes of the Christian Right that secured their support, rather than any personal moral integrity or Christian piety Reagan or Trump may or may not have possessed. As prominent Trump supporter Jerry Falwell Jr commented, "we're not electing a pastor in chief, we're electing a commander in chief." <Q>source of quote?

Such comments reflect the presentation of Trump as the 'Cyrus' candidate, named after the Persian ruler who is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as an instrument of God, who enabled the Jewish people to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. This now common rhetorical device justifies the Christian vote for Trump with a trope of biblical legitimacy coupled with stark pragmatism—Trump backs their corner. However, if large numbers of white evangelicals support Trump for pragmatic reasons, what is he promising that secures their support? According to Marti, the key inspiration in presidential terms is not Reagan, but Barack Obama, whose administration was most publicly attacked by Tea Party libertarians for undermining the vision of American identity they held as definitive and true. Obama himself became the target of this populist brand of identity politics during the so-called 'birther' controversy, stoked by right-wing media and prominent public figures (Trump among them) who questioned his legitimacy as a presidential candidate. According to the most sceptical of his opponents, Obama was "immoral, lived as a secret Muslim, and expressed religious bias, discriminating against faithful Christians" (Marti 2020, 167).

It is the concern that the 'true' America is disappearing—playing on the fear of immigrants and grassroots racism—that was, according to Marti, most salient among Trump supporters in 2016. If Obama is viewed as an illegitimate incursion into a white-oriented narrative of American history, it is easy to see how Trump's presidency could be viewed as a restoration of the correct path. It is the fear of white conservatives that their America is under

threat from immigrants and non-white minorities that drives their determination to uphold a racialised version of US identity. This is not a new phenomenon—the myth of the beleaguered white evangelical was instrumental in the rise of the New Christian Right in the 1970s who exploited anxieties about changing social mores introduced during the previous decade. The focus of outrage for the likes of Jerry Falwell and televangelist Pat Robertson was the case of Roe vs Wade, feminism, and homosexuality—all viewed as threats to the 'traditional' nuclear family. This was reinforced by a right-wing economic agenda that promoted individualism, small government, and an unregulated free market. These remain the hallmarks of the Christian Right, but Trump's rise has exposed how a form of racialised nationalism has achieved priority, a distinctive development in US conservatism which is closely allied with white evangelicalism.

Marti's *American Blindspot* is a response to the phenomena that have come to distinguish the Trump presidency, including the racial tensions that provoked strong expressions of global solidarity in 2020, but it roots these issues in a social history of race, class, and religion in US society. Marti's argument is that we cannot understand what is happening now without understanding what has gone before, specifically the enduring tendency to privilege the white man's experience within narratives of American identity. His account is painstaking and demonstrates in a series of chronologically ordered chapters how an alignment of interests framed by class, race, and Christianity has evolved over the almost 250 years since the nation's

foundation. The legitimisation of slavery as a divinely ordained part of the social order; the transformation of laws of enslavement into laws restricting blacks, as social hierarchies were more explicitly racialised; the colonialist retelling of the founding of America as an act of white discovery and civilisation; the failure of post-civil war reconstruction that was driven by reintegrating treasonous states and minimising the chances of future conflict, rather than eradicating racial exploitation or hierarchy—Marti builds a rich account of how the structural inequalities of the US present are deeply rooted in its past. He also makes a strong case for taking a view that is unflinching in its confrontation of the darker elements of American identity. This is a reclamation of a hidden history, often neglected in US school classrooms, especially those aspects that appear incongruent with the American narrative of "equality, opportunity, and success" (Marti 2020, 21).

American Blindspot is a blistering exposé of the dark truths that underpin the public face of Christian piety in contemporary America—America's perennial blind spot. The marshalling of evidence is relentless and persuasive, drawing on attitudinal surveys alongside historical sources and building on a wealth of established scholarship that spans political, cultural, legal, and economic dimensions of American life. The discussions of neoliberal economics are especially impressive and it is exciting and refreshing to see economic factors considered with such careful lucidity within a work located in the sociology of religion.

While pointing in the same direction, Andrew Whitehead and Samuel

Perry's new book ploughs a narrower furrow, focusing on the recent rise of a particular strand of Christian nationalism and its relationship to Trump's support base. This account is principally supported by survey data, augmented by 50 in-depth interviews with a cross-section of US citizens who, "to varying degrees—endorse or challenge the privileging of Christianity in the civic life of the United States" (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 6). The wealth of data is carefully unpacked in a devastating analysis, the weight of the evidence reinforced in over 50 pages of appendices which outline research methods and set out key data in tabular form. *Taking America Back for God* has a very specific goal: if Marti is painting a vast mural, bringing all the resources at his disposal to lay bare an historically embedded set of cultural myths, Whitehead and Perry have made it their business to elucidate a particular aspect of the picture in assessing its status and consequences in the present day.

The two authors conceive of Christian nationalism as a "cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life" (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 10). This perspective is strongly associated, they argue, with support for authoritarian control, heteronormative understandings of the family, and a notion of American identity that privileges those who are Christian, white, and native-born. Whitehead and Perry generate from their survey data a typology of US individuals based on a spectrum of support for Christian nationalism:

‘Rejectors’ are most sceptical, favouring a high wall between church and state; ‘Ambassadors’ are most supportive, with ‘Resisters’ and ‘Accommodators’ falling in between. Importantly, these distinctions do not precisely correspond to traditional political or religious affiliations: 55% of Ambassadors are evangelical Protestant, 56% align with the Republican Party—majorities, but not overwhelming ones, pointing to the way the current conditions of US public life are re-drawing the boundaries of politico-religious identities. Even more striking is that 65% of African Americans are either Accommodators or Ambassadors and thus support Christian nationalism—the largest proportion of any racial category. As Whitehead and Perry comment, “It is inaccurate to assume, as many have done recently, that ‘white evangelical’ is synonymous with Christian nationalism or that all Democrats want religion banished from the public sphere” (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 44). When so much public discourse on religion and politics suffers from crass polarisation, it is heartening to see such careful mapping that follows the evidence.

Whitehead and Perry present a powerful case that, in understanding contemporary American politics, what matters most is not whether individuals affirm a particular religious, party or even ethnic affiliation; what matters most is whether they support Christian nationalism. Those most supportive are also: more comfortable restricting the political freedoms and civil liberties of Muslims, most opposed to abortion, most supportive of ‘traditional’ gender roles, most likely to have supported Trump in 2016. Moreover, and contrary to much popular and scholarly opinion, Whitehead

and Perry argue that being an evangelical was *not* in itself an important predictor for voters supporting Trump in 2016; by contrast, supporting Christian nationalism, as they understand it, was (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 20).

While the two volumes are in most respects complementary, they do differ on one important point. Marti attributes Trump's support to "devout Christians", invoking a positive correlation among evangelicals between frequency of church attendance and likelihood of voting for Trump (Marti 2020, 225), while acknowledging that motivations for the majority are driven by considerations of the economy rather than the Bible. Whitehead and Perry's pro-Trump "white Christian nationalists" are not necessarily devout; in fact, their analysis separates indicators of religious commitment from indicators of assent to Christian nationalism; the two are strongly correlated, but also often influence political views in opposite directions. For example, support for Christian nationalism is a predictor of agreement with the idea that support of the military is important to being a good person; religious practice, however, is negatively associated with this point of view (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 14). A similar set of correlations is found with respect to cultural boundaries: Christian nationalism is positively associated with a white nativist understanding of American identity and suspicion towards refugees, non-whites, and non-Christians, while personal religiosity appears to promote greater acceptance of cultural and religious 'others' (ibid, 117). The exception is issues of gender, sexuality, and divorce, for which religiosity and

Christian nationalism work in similar ways, both associated with conservative positions. The authors suggest that such issues are more "elemental" for religion among contemporary Americans (ibid, 145), presenting religious commitment as "more personal" and "less oriented toward societal order and hierarchies" (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 146). This is the least persuasive aspect of their book; it is not entirely clear why why religion in general—or Christianity in particular—should function in this way, and it would have been helpful to see the possible reasons for the importance of this model in the US more extensively examined in relation to the data available.

Whitehead and Perry's study reinforces a case against a polarised analysis that places 'religion' firmly on the side of the reactionary, conservative forces threatening to exacerbate divisions in American culture. Instead, religion emerges as a complex variable, sometimes emerging as a conciliatory, accommodating power pushing against those forces, which mobilise religious identity markers principally to consolidate expressions of group identity that are political and populist. As the authors put it, "Christian nationalism … is political at its core" (ibid, 148). In the twenty-first-century US, public religion matters because it is integral to a moral and economic agenda that is determinedly seeking cultural dominance.

Together, the two books make for a formidable scholarly force, not only in unveiling some of the complexities of Christianity within Trump's America, but also in the way they offer models for the future sociology of religion. Both reflect the vibrant, accessible prose often found in monographs

by US authors; both are data driven, thorough, and unafraid of complexity. They are also framed by a determination to use their sociological analyses of religion to speak to some of the most urgent moral issues of our time. Whitehead and Perry point to the social consequences of Christian nationalism, including heightened intolerance, which they describe as "a threat to a pluralistic democratic society" (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 161). Marti's analysis exposes the ways in which US religion has repeatedly privileged the interests of particular racial and economic groups and highlights how neoliberal economics obscures structural injustice. Daniel Vaca's book – historical in approach but closely informed by a range of social scientific sources – illustrates how the close interconnections between economics and evangelical religion have a long and complex legacy, and so furnishes us with the historical context that cannot be ignored if emerging ethical questions are to be negotiated effectively. The Trump presidency has exposed changes among evangelicals that are a serious concern for progressive Christians, secularists, and many academics, who see a populist reactionary force gaining momentum. If one response is the inspired scholarship represented in these three volumes, another consequence might be a re-engagement with ethical responsibility as a central concern within public scholarship on religion. This reviewer hopes so.

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