



A review of: *The Faith of Donald J. Trump: A Spiritual Biography*, David Brody and Scott Lamb (Harper, 2018).

The authors' of *The Faith of Donald J. Trump* draw a modest conclusion: *the President believes in God*. Beyond that it is hard for them to say. Three hundred pages give ample proof that Trump is very receptive to praise and he enjoys being prayed over. The President welcomes the attention of enthusiastic evangelicals who make up a crucial segment of his political base. Mutual admiration is due to a clear alinement between his political platform and theirs. They are pro-life, pro-traditional marriage, pro-Israel, pro-religious freedom, and pro-business, and so is he. They want to cut taxes, cut regulations, cut environmental mandates, cut social

programs, cut the Affordable Care Act, cut immigration, and cut foreign aid, and so does he.

Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign resonates with many evangelicals who desire to "take back America," and "recapture America's values." Trump, the straight-talking strong man sent from God, is just the person evangelicals have been looking for. He came disguised "as a New York businessman in a golden tower," but he has turned out to be "a kind of knight in shining armor." Of course he's not perfect, but then who is? His self-righteous critics have unreasonable expectations of moral perfection and they fail to understand the meaning of grace. In his forward, Eric Metaxas likens those who rage against Trump to the Pharisees, the religious leaders who opposed Jesus. They are like "the elder brother in the parable of the Good Samaritan" (I think he meant the parable of the Prodigal Son).

The authors' thesis is simple: "Trump is the product of American culture, not an anomaly to it" (xvii). They hold that the President's faith in God and in the American people reflects the mainline Presbyterian Church of his youth and the religious ethos of nominal Christianity. The son of Fred Trump, "one of the great real estate developers of the twentieth century," and the "glory of the Trump family name" instilled within Donald Trump "1950s sensibilities" which included a strong work ethic and a grand vision for business success. His boarding school experience hammered home traditional masculinity, black and white moralism, family pride, and a feeling of superiority.

Fred Trump's Lutheranism triggers in the authors' imagination the story of the great Reformer Martin Luther and Mary Trump's Scottish Presbyterianism evokes the story of John Knox. There is little effort to connect this history to Trump himself. Nevertheless the authors felt it was important to describe the historic Presbyterian churches of New York City, the fundamentalist modernist controversy of the 1920s, and the power of positive thinking popularized by Norman Vincent Peale, in order to explain the nominal Christianity of the 1950s. Donald Trump wanted to be like his father and these are the factors that shaped his father. The authors explain, "Both Peale and the Trumps were products of their time, but they also helped shape the cultural moment, bringing shiny and hopeful updates to what they saw as dusty doctrines and buildings in disrepair."

Donald Trump built his financial empire and made a name for himself in the 80s and 90s as a New York playboy. He mastered the art of the deal, promoted gambling, lived like Tom Wolfe's master of the universe, declared bankruptcy, and employed an army of lawyers. In spite of all that, the authors are

quick to defend the flamboyant philanderer by insisting that Christian leaders, like Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert, were doing the same thing. So people like Trump had “no reason to respect God’s morality when preachers played the part of a hypocrite.” “To be clear,” they admit, “the Donald Trump of this period would have never been able to ascend to the White House. But America is the land of second chances – or even third chances if you live long enough.”

Sadly there is nothing the authors can say here about Trump’s “second chance.” They give Augustine’s famous line, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” They quote Pascal about our God-shaped vacuum and Bruce Marshall on sex as a substitute for religion. But the authors admit “that Trump’s ambition stems from a deep-rooted need to command respect – a basic, simple drive to prove that he is the best.” They quote Trump biographer Timothy O’Brien’s comment on the “three stereotypes . . . tap dancing in Donald’s mind and in his imagination of himself, it’s Clint Eastwood, James Bond, and Hugh Hefner.”

The authors’ apparent strategy is to describe as many Christian notables in Trump’s world as they can without overstating their impact on Trump himself. Clearly, the President is drawn to high profile Christians who make him feel important. But we never hear from Trump himself about what he believes. His understanding of the faith is very thin. When asked, “Have you ever asked God for forgiveness?” Trump responded, “That’s a tough question. I don’t think in terms of – I have – I am a religious person. Shockingly – because people are so shocked when they find this out, I’m Protestant, I’m Presbyterian, and I go to church, and love God, and I love my church.”

When asked what is your relationship with God? Trump answered, “Well, I pray, I go to church. I do things that are wrong? I guess so. You know, I’m a businessperson, I really do well at business, I’ve done great. I’ve made some of the great deals. I own some of the greatest properties in the world.” If we’re honest, Trump’s testimony sounds more like King Saul’s god talk than David’s heart for God. Trump is far closer to King Nebuchadnezzar than he is to Daniel. Trump would have to say with Pilate my kingdom is of this world. He reminds us of Solomon before he learned the lessons of Ecclesiastes.

The authors earnestly want to defend Donald Trump’s nominal Christianity against “the piety-inspectors” and the cynics who have the self-righteous audacity to question Trump’s faith journey. They never hint that Christians should be wary of a President who repeatedly tells bold face lies, bullies people who disagree with him, and blatantly promotes violence. We have become accustomed to the President’s praise of brutal dictators and his disdain for America’s allies. Market value trumps moral vision.

It is striking that the major source for what Donald Trump believes about the Bible and Jesus Christ comes from others and not the man himself. It’s as if Trump was an historical figure who lived in the past and could no longer speak for himself. The author’s interviews yield virtually nothing from Trump himself that indicate he is a follower of Jesus Christ. His political testimony to evangelicals boils down to, “You fought hard for me, and now I’m fighting hard for all of you.”

Evangelicals nurture a wish-dream, driven by fear, populism, and nationalism, that desperately wants the President to be a humble, committed follower of Jesus Christ. Sincere evangelicals have projected their hopes and dreams on a man who has an insatiable hunger for praise, but who has given no indication that he shares their faith in anything other than faith in a generic deity and the American

people.

The paradox of this presidency was on full display last week in the Oval Office when rapper Kanye West visited on Thursday and Pastor Andrew and Norine Brunson visited on Saturday. Two very different constituencies met before the President who passively received what they had to offer: Kanye's unintelligible rant and hug and Andrew's earnest prayer on a bended knee. Trump's question to Norine captured the President's political strategy: "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question? Who did you vote for?" If you want to know the real man and what makes him tick, you have to read *The Art of the Deal*. Donald J. Trump is the master deal-maker and evangelicals should not be fooled. They are being played.

Doug Webster
Beeson Divinity School