



Sarah Posner, *Unholy: Why Evangelicals Worship At The Altar Of Donald Trump* (New York: Random House, 2020).

Investigative reporter Sarah Posner set out to explain “the seemingly improbable evangelical attraction to a biblically illiterate libertine [Donald Trump]” (xi). Posner came to the conclusion that Trump “was the strongman the Christian right had long been waiting for” (xiii). A leader “who wasn’t afraid to attack, head-on, the legal, social, and cultural changes that had unleashed the racist grievances of the American right, beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* and persisting through the 1960s and ‘70s in

opposition to school desegregation and government policies to promote it – long before evangelicals made opposition to abortion their top issue” (xiii). According to Posner the Trump phenomenon is based on a populace movement founded on resentment, race, and religion.

The New Right = The Christian Right *plus* the American Right

Mike Pence is the type of candidate that fits the Christian right. He is pro-life, pro-marriage between a man and woman, and anti-government when it comes to child-care, school curricula, business, and the environment. Donald Trump is not and never was that type of politician.

Posner distinguishes between the Christian right and the American right. Trump didn’t use the language of “faith” and “Christian values.” Instead, he used the “lingua franca of the American right – the rhetoric of resentment, of lost domination, of grievances against ‘special’ rights for others at the expense of white Christians” (xvii). Trump had crossover appeal, combining the modern religious right and the “crude politics of white nationalist grievance” (xvii). He became the hero of the Christian right “despite being a thrice-married philanderer who talked about dating his daughter, paid off a porn star to keep quiet about an affair, and was terrible at God talk” (xviii).

Trump became the strongman savior who tied the Christian right to the alt-right movement. He branded a new conservatism built on the language of grievance against “political correctness” related to civil and human rights. He was empowered by opposition to “the entire arduous project of maintaining a pluralistic, secular, liberal democracy” (xviii). *In this case, two “rights” equal a wrong.*

The Christian Right’s Rights

The Christian Right is looking to preserve a Christian moral order. They cling to the notion that America is a Christian nation, an exception among the nations of the world. They seek to overcome secular pluralism and the erosion of Christian values. They want the world to conform to their sense of right and wrong and to be less worldly. With Old Testament zeal they see it as their religious duty to fight government regulations dealing with sexuality, the environment, the work place, and education. They don’t want the government to pass laws defending the LGBTQ community, legalizing gay marriage, and supporting a woman’s right to have an abortion.

A draft of Trump’s executive order to establish “a government-wide initiative to respect religious freedom” stated that “Americans and their religious organizations will not be coerced by the Federal Government into participating in activities that violate their conscience” (4). The broad sweeping document was never signed and in the end a more symbolic edict was issued. But Trump signaled that he would fight for the Christian right’s version of religious tolerance.

Posner offers this perspective on the Trump-evangelical merger: “He may not be one of them, but they idolize how he loudly and fearlessly articulates their shared grievances – that alien anti-Christian, anti-American ideologies have taken over the government, judiciary, media, education, and even popular culture and forced edicts upon a besieged white Christian majority, cowing them into submission by invoking ‘political correctness’ that aims to censor, silence, and oppress them” (9).

Let me interject a perspective here. There is a significant difference between the anger of resentment and the ministry of reconciliation to which we have been called (2 Cor 5:16-21). Even if secular society is a perverse enemy of Jesus’ kingdom ethic and the household of faith, as it well might be in many instances, we are not free to fight with the weapons of the world (2 Cor 10:4).

The “Trump-evangelical merger” sounds like something on the order of Old Testament power politics, but the Lord Jesus gave us his personal and political strategy in the Sermon on the Mount and in the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are not at liberty to act like Samson or Saul. We haven’t been given Joshua’s conquest strategy; we’ve been given Jesus’s Great Commission strategy.

The Christian Right has taken a hard Christ-*against*-culture position, but if we read about the early church in the New Testament, Christians were known for their Christ-*for*-culture compassion.

A neighbor’s front yard sign reads:

IN THIS HOUSE, WE BELIEVE:
BLACK LIVES MATTER
WOMEN’S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS
NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL
SCIENCE IS REAL
LOVE IS LOVE
KINDNESS IS EVERYTHING

There’s a lot of truth to the saying, “Secularism is the pursuit of Kingdom values, minus the King.” Many of the values sought by the world are the shared values of Christ and his kingdom. Christians are for each and every human being, even the vilest sinner is a person for whom Christ died. There is a lot of common ground when it comes to justice and humanitarian concerns. There is plenty for the Christian to work with here. But the situation is complex because many of the world’s values are not Christian values. Human autonomy, self-centeredness, sexual freedom, and practical materialism are deeply ingrained in our culture and these worldly values greatly influence the lives of many Christians. The world and the church share positive and negative values. Christians and non-Christians alike struggle with racial prejudice, sexual promiscuity, material indulgence, selfishness, and hate.

The Right’s Case for Civil Rights

Trump managed to gain the enthusiastic support of white evangelicals by convincing them that he alone could save them from “liberal oppression” (12). He captured an evangelicalism characterized by televangelists, the prosperity gospel, and megachurch celebrities. He promised that he would fight for them and defeat the liberal elite. At the same time Trump’s campaign appealed to the alt-right’s propaganda. Steve Bannon floated phrases, “drain the swamp,” “build the wall,” “deep state,” and “race realism,” to fan the flames of anti-immigration and white nationalism. Posner writes, “Trump and Bannon, the propagandist who took credit for giving the alt-right its platform, understood early on how to

capitalize on the seething underbelly of the American far right” (75). They appealed to the “grievance-driven, anti-establishment core of the modern conservative movement” (79).

Posner believes that the Christian right’s fixation on abortion and sexual politics has its roots in the movement’s opposition to the federal government’s efforts to desegregate schools. “The Christian right movement was born out of grievance against civil rights gains for blacks, and a backlash against the government’s efforts to ensure those gains could endure” (124).

Posner sees the race issue at the heart of the Christian right’s support of Trump. “For the Christian right, success is flipping the script on civil rights, casting conservative Christians as the real victims of prejudice and discrimination, undermining the separation of church and state, and implementing a totalizing legal structure of ‘biblical’ law. Their symbiotic relationship, in which Christian right leaders regularly glorify Trump, and Trump in turn gives them carte blanche to radically reshape law and policy, has brought the country closer to the Christian right’s aspirations than it ever has been in the movement’s history” (187).

Posner’s conclusion is sobering, because if she is right, it would mean that many Christians are promoting a view of the world that has little to do with Christ and his kingdom and much to do with American nationalism and the New Israel myth.

Posner writes: “Both the alt-right and Christian right claim to be saving ‘Western civilization’ or ‘the Judeo-Christian West.’ But what those slogans really mean is that America and the western European countries that dominate the European Union are already dead, having succumbed to ‘globalists’ and ‘political correctness.’ What both the Christian right and the white nationalist right are looking toward now – with or without Trump – is a new locus of power in the world, one defined by a rejection of the hard-won fragile American values of democracy and human rights, and by an exaltation of authoritarian nationalism, xenophobia, and homophobia” (218).

Today’s politics, like social media, is built on deception and manipulation. In her chapter “The Undrained Swamp Loves an Autocrat,” Posner traces the influence of Republican political strategist Arthur Finkelstein on Trump’s campaign. Finkelstein died in 2017 but his influence lived on in Roger Stone, Paul Manafort, and others in the Trump campaign. He promoted the idea of targeting one group to hate and to blame for all failures. This created “an energy source around which these movements [promoting a strong man] take place.” Finkelstein emphasized to his political proteges that they must always remember “no one knows anything about anything” and your job is tell people what they should know and “make it interesting” (223).

A Christian Supremacist Agenda

Posner offers this assessment: “The vast majority of white evangelicals are all in with Trump because he has given them political power and allowed them to carry out a Christian supremacist agenda, inextricably intertwined with his administration’s white nationalist agenda. Conspiracy theories and lies about the core of our democracy – separation of powers, a free and independent press, and the dedication of public servants – run rampant through their print and social media, podcasts, and television programs. The depth and durability of their fervor have disproven the mantra ‘the religious right is dead’ again and again– and their ability to sustain a presidency in the face of unprecedented scandal is the most compelling evidence against that mantra yet. Trump’s white evangelical supporters make up an army of partisans decades in the making, and they will not quietly retreat in the face of defeat” (266).