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IN TRUMP WE TRUST? A THEOLOGIAN REFLECTS ON SOME CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FACING THE CHURCH

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The inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the USA took place exactly one year ago on Friday, January 20, 2017. Many watched open-mouthed as Trump, in his maiden speech, repeatedly invoked the new Presidential agenda: "America First!" The mantra-like phrase was a deliberate nod to the twitter-handle he had used in campaigning – #MAGA – "Make America Great Again".

This, we quickly learnt, would be done by burning any of the remaining bridges left. Adding to "Build the Wall", there would a bonfire of trade deals, trashing climate concordats on global warming, continuing use of socially divisive rhetoric, fickle political governance, and reckless temperament in foreign policy. The only surprising feature of Trump's first year in office is that it's been entirely predictable.

So when I mention to colleagues that I have been researching Trump's religious faith, reactions vary from mild scoffing ("I thought *he* was his own religion?") to bafflement and surprise. But Trump has a faith. And if you want to know how the next few years of his presidency will pan out, understanding Trump's religion is an important key. Indeed, possibly the major one.

Let us start with the inauguration. Not many people will have heard of Pastor Paula White. But she was one of the main nominated clergy to pray for Trump at his inauguration. Pastor White is a leading exponent of the (so-called) 'health, wealth

and prosperity' movement. She preaches the 'prosperity-gospel', an approach to Christianity that is, shall we say, unorthodox. Prosperity-gospel preachers teach that God wants people to be rich, and that he makes them wealthy as a sign of his blessing. So the richer you are, the more obvious it is that God loves you, and the stronger your faith is. Conspicuous wealth is a sign of God's favour.

Pastor White teaches that God rewards 'faithful' people who invest in God's promised providence. You invest by making deposits – your faith, prayers and gifts of money to God (Pastor White, naturally, will be the 'steward' of your financial gifts). So if you want to be healthy and wealthy, all you need to do is give, and then believe – *very hard* – and all your heart's desires will happen.

This is a kind of 'Spiritual Ponzi Scheme'. Punters believe the more they invest, the greater their likely rewards. In 2007, Senator Chuck Grassley (Republican, Iowa) launched a congressional probe into the spending habits of Pastor White's ministry. Grassley questioned White's use of church-owned airplanes and luxury homes. The Senate inquiry was eventually dropped, partly because White refused to cooperate with investigators.

White was one of several clergy selected by Trump to pray for him at his inauguration. Others included the Conservative Roman Catholic Cardinal Timothy Dolan – outspoken on pro-life issues; Pastor Paula White; and the Reverend Franklin Graham, son of the evangelist, Billy Graham. It was F. Graham who had told millions of America's evangelicals that they could vote for Trump with a clean conscience, since Trump was comparable to the ancient Persian ruler Cyrus, mentioned in the Old Testament.

How did this Cyrus-Trump comparison work? Cyrus the Great was an all-conquering Persian king. Around 550BC he overthrew the tyrannical Babylonians, who had persecuted the Jews, having driven them into captivity, and stripped them of their freedoms and customs.

But Cyrus, when he conquered the Babylonians, released all the captives. Moreover, Cyrus respected the traditions and religions of the lands he captured. Cyrus' regime offered liberation and devolved government to the former captives of Babylon. Cyrus also ruled with a lean, de-centralized administration.

For American evangelicals and fundamentalists, the government of Cyrus, 2500 years ago, was one that worked to the advantage of all its subjects – and especially God's chosen people. Cyrus is the only foreign ruler referred to as 'Messiah' (literally "His anointed one") in the Old Testament (see Isaiah 45:1), and is the only non-Jewish figure in the Bible to be given this accolade.

Franklin Graham, in signaling that Donald Trump was a kind of 'Cyrus', was simply saying that Evangelicals and fundamentalists could now rid themselves of a once dominant, centralizing liberal hegemony and reclaim their religious freedoms. They could do this even by voting for someone who manifestly doesn't share their evangelical faith. But Trump, in this equation, emerges as a liberator-messiah-ruler.

In this same vein of reasoning, Washington is portrayed as a centralizing Babylon. And you don't need to be a genius to work out that Trump is the Cyrus who delivers all God-fearing Americans from that awful prospect of the Whore of Babylon (Book of Revelation, chapters 17 and 18) living in the White House. 'Drain the swamp' and 'lock her up' are implicit religious rallying calls, not just injudicious hate-speech. These are the chants of the self-proclaimed righteous.

Donald Trump's use of his political rhetoric can be traced to the specious singularity of his religious roots. Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993) was the pastor of New York's Marble Collegiate Church. He presided at the wedding of Donald and Ivana in 1977. Peale had also been Pastor to Donald's father.

Peale had written the best-selling *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952),[1] which has so manifestly shaped the world of the Trumps. Peale's book launched the motivational thinkers' industry, and their practitioners are businessmen just like Trump. Peale's own book, and its spin offs, also shaped numerous Christian evangelical and fundamentalist marketing-related ministries, built on the pillars of confidence, pragmatism, expectations of exponential growth and realizing your dream, ambition or vision.

[1] Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1952).

So, *The Power of Positive Thinking* shaped the church growth movement, the health, wealth and prosperity movements, and many other expressions of capitalist-friendly evangelicalism and fundamentalism. The hypothesis was simple enough: if you believe it enough, have the faith for it, and keep saying it enough, it will be so. Your mind and your language, if fully positive, will ultimately reify your goal.

In some respects, then, we already know how Donald Trump's mantra – "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) – will pan out. The President believed the vision. It didn't happen. It wasn't his fault. It's yours. Not enough people had faith; too many doubted the vision. So you blame the faithless and the doubters.

To some this might seem perfectly rational. American church-going embraced the free-market long ago. The rejection of any religious establishment opened the way for competition between individual churches and then produced the extraordinary religious organizational and theological span that distinguished the US from all previous Christian societies. The price of this exuberant expansiveness was doctrinal incoherence. If there is a bespoke Christian faith for every customer wanting their own personal tailored religion, then faith will mean almost anything. And therefore almost nothing.

And this has effects that ripple out far beyond believers. It also relates to our emergent post-society era. A religion that is responsive to the pressures of the market becomes profoundly fractured. In the end, a market-driven religion gives rise to a market-driven approach to truth.

Trump's interior religious landscape is a kind of 'Political-Spiritual Ponzi Scheme', and his politics flow from this. Opportunism, pragmatism and positivism are the lessons Trump learnt from Peale's pulpit in New York. And as we know, operators of Ponzi grab the attention of investors by offering short-term returns that are either abnormally high or unusually consistent. Ponzi schemes rely on a constant flow of new investors to continue to provide returns. When the flow runs out, the scheme implodes.

The implicit religion of America is branded on every dollar bill: In God We Trust. Godly providence and worldly prosperity are spiritual and material realities for Americans, and politics and pragmatism their agents. Trump is merely the natural

progeny of a nation where the intercourse of God and mammon is seldom questioned.

So what is to be done about Trump's material-centred religion? Here, I take the counsel of Trump's predecessor seriously. It is all about perspective. Seeing this era or term as a blip; "a mere comma". This age will pass. But equally, we cannot afford to be complacent.

Nor can our churches. One of the most pressing challenges faced by public theology and the churches is how to engage with contemporary social, cultural and political situations. The Christian faith – and its reification in the form of congregations and churches – teaches us that ecclesiology itself is a kind of social theory.

Churches are a vision of social policy – how to live together as people, rather than merely setting out rubrics for a declining membership in a neatly ordered sacred club. If the post-institutional and post-truth age is to be addressed, spiritual courage, prescient wisdom and public theology will be needed – if Christianity is to survive as a challenging and prophetic agent for social capital.

Alongside this, we need our politicians to be social visionaries, political realists and exemplars of virtue and integrity. Trump, as we know, lacks in each and every one of these departments.

Meanwhile, we already know how the next few years of Trump's presidency will pan out. Ennui and disenchantment will set in amongst hard-core supporters. They will eventually become the Faithless Followers. Too many of investors will want a return, and when there are no new gullible recruits, even Political-Spiritual Ponzi Schemes unravel.

Reflection:

A religion that is responsive to the pressures of the market becomes profoundly fractured. In the end, a market-driven religion gives rise to a market-driven approach to truth. The consequences of this are serious, as 'economics', as a 'science', can then simply reduce everything to the realm of commodification: labour, services, relationships – and even religion. Michael Sandel thinks the balance may have tipped:

… we believe that civic duties should not be regarded as private property but should be viewed instead as public

responsibilities. To outsource them is to demean them, to value them in the wrong way…without quite realizing it, without ever deciding to do so, we have drifted from *having* a market economy to *being* a market economy.[2]

Sandel is keen to proscribe the limits of the free market economy. We cannot 'buy' friends, for example, as friendship is constituted by certain norms, virtues and attitudes that are beyond pricing: sympathy, generosity, thoughtfulness and attentiveness cannot be replaced by market values. To attempt to purchase such characteristics as commodities would be to simultaneously destroy them in the very act of procurement.

Money cannot buy love; and it can't buy true friendship either. Yet the marketplace has an uncanny knack of developing and producing simulacrums that replace the slow, patient business of building relationships and developing reticulation with something that is quick and instantly gratifying. Richard Sennett's essay, *Together* (2012) cites the example of Philippa, a token teenager who has 639 friends on Facebook, and claims to know the vast majority of them.

Sennett points out that if all 639 of Philippa's friends sent one message or image each and received a reply, that would amount to 816,642 messages to digest – simply impossible.[3] Sennett is alive to the limits of capitalism and market economies. In a world where relationships are increasingly stretched by the demands of economic life, friendship, education, family life and love emerge as forms of social bonding and human flourishing that put the market economy back where it belongs: something that society has, rather than something that 'has' society. Or as Paul says in *Galatians*, let's start with the spiritual; and not look to the material to make us perfect.

That said, there are some signs of hope in the midst of this current phase of human existence. Churches, denominations, theologians and campaigning groups have recently begun to focus on issues such as transparency (in business and government), fair trade and taxation. The realisation is this. Money and markets are not neutral in terms of their values.

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2 Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 129.

3 Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 146–147.

Christians are increasingly coming to see that the myopia of the market economy rests on a set of values and assumptions that prioritise the individual over the social, and wealth over wider concepts of flourishing. In calling government, business and financial services to account, the twenty-first century may yet see theologians and churches playing a key and prophetic role in enabling society to see that what it might initially desire may not be what people actually need, and that tempting though wealth and individual autonomy may be, we are all connected. No-one is an island. If we let the material subvert the spiritual, we do so at our peril.[4]

Despite some encouraging signs, the prevailing cultural current is perhaps unsurprising. In an emergent era of post-society and post-truth, we are now joined by the epiphany of the post-religious. The twenty-first century has seen the dramatic rise of the 'Nones' – the emergent millennial generation who are no longer atheists or agnostics; or Church of England by default; or Jewish because your parents were. People now, when asked what religion they follow, tick 'none'. 'Nones', as they are known, now comprise 50% of the population; and 75% of those under the age of 25. But 'Nones' *do* profess to believe in God. However, they also confess to doing little about it. The cultural landscape is therefore this: Moralistic Deism is on the rise. The emerging generation is kind, considerate, tolerant and good. It appears to be against racism, sexism, homophobia or xenophobia. The emerging generation believes in many good things, and in God: but does not join a faith to express this.

The impact of this cultural shift is detectable amongst the emerging generation of evangelicals. Members of College, Campus or University Christian Unions, who only a few decades ago might have thought nothing strange about joining a prayer group to intercede for missionaries in Muslim countries, and would have shunned their gay or lesbian peers, now behave quite differently. It is quite likely that individual members of Christian Unions will have gay and lesbian friends; and other friends who are not of the Christian faith, or belong to another

[4] See Corwin Smidt, ed. *Religion as Social Capital* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2003).

faith group altogether. In few cases do we see members of the Christian Union attempting to convert such people.

To a large extent, pluralism and globalisation, with increased access to knowledge and information, have relativized the moorings of evangelicals and charismatics. The larger map of the world that individuals in these movements can now see enables them to position themselves more honestly. Few members of a Christian Union would convene a prayer meeting to intercede for the conversion of India, Pakistan or any Gulf State. Those days are gone.

Because churches are inextricably rooted and grounded in distinctive cultures, it is likely environmental factors to play a part in their ongoing development. Recent studies carried out by Gallup in the USA show to what extent the cultural shifts on issues such as sexuality become, in the end, a force for change within the churches. For example, in 1977 it was the case that 56% of Americans thought that homosexual people should have equal rights in the workplace; the figure for 2004 is 89%. Support for gay clergy has moved in the same period from 27% to 56%. Some 60% of Americans in the 18–29 age-bracket now support same-sex 'marriage', compared to only 25% of those who are over the age of 65. The statistical surveys of churchgoers repeatedly show that there is growing toleration for same-sex unions in congregations and amongst clergy, across the ecclesial and theological spectra. Much of this support comes from those under the age of 25. Churches and Christian movements that will adapt and evolve in relation to their context. [5]

There are dangers here, however. I am personally not very much worried about the reduction in numbers where Christianity is concerned. I am far more concerned about the qualitative factor: what kind of Christianity are we talking about? There is a risk in being moral-with-no-compass. It is not so much that Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is probably degenerating into a much thinner version of itself. Another way of labelling 'moralistic deism'

[5] David G. Myers, Letha D. Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together?* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2005), 140ff.

is to say we are seeing the rise of what Kenda Creasy Dean terms the 'almost Christian'.[6] Religion is replaced by niceness.

We live in uncertain times these days: as Pankaj Mishra terms it, an age of outrage, austerity, anxiety, assertion, and even anger.[7] It all feels a bit unstable. In the midst of this, institutions such as churches are called to be stable, public bodies that transcend times like this – like great galleries, museums or places of learning – they are here for human and social flourishing, nourishing and learning. They are to be oases of moral agency and social capital; and to help create citizens and cultivate citizenship – even civilization.

According to Creasy Dean, any of today's teenagers tend to view God as either a butler or a therapist, someone who meets their needs when summoned ('a cosmic lifeguard,' as one youth minister put it) or who listens non-judgmentally and helps youth feel good about themselves ('kind of like my guidance counsellor', according to one student). Most young people (even non-religious ones) believe that religion has much to offer, and those who attend church tend to feel positively about their congregations even when they are critical of religion in general. So, 'niceness' may be the new faith; and 'Nones' are growing in number, across the generations.

That said, 'Nones' do value religion as being personally useful: in addition to helping people be nicer and feel better about themselves, religion can provide comfort amid turmoil, and support for decisions that (by and large) teenagers want to make anyway. Otherwise faith stays in the background. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has little to do with God or a sense of a divine mission in the world. It offers comfort, bolsters self-esteem, helps solve problems, and lubricates interpersonal relationships by encouraging people to do good, feel good, and keep God at arm's length. A self-emolliating spirituality; its thrust is personal happiness and helping people treat each other well – nicely, indeed.

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[6] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[7] Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

That said, it looks as though contemporary religious culture may struggle to defend itself against atomization and extremism. Where, I ask myself, is the middle ground to be found? One that might resist extremism and individualism? In his recent book, *Faces of Moderation*, Aurelian Craiutu argues that moderation is not an ideology, but rather a disposition.[8] It is a composite of character and virtues that does not divide the world into light and dark, true and false, good or bad. At the same time, moderation does not accept everything as equal and valid. It does not, for example, split the difference between racism and inclusion. It accepts that some opinions and ideologies and are irredeemable, and should be rejected. Rather, moderation works at unity and harmony. And it accepts that on our own, we cannot be entirely right or good. We need each other, and we need to value and cherish our differences – and sometimes our disagreements – if we are to progress.

In an earlier book, Craiutu argued that moderation was a virtue for courageous minds.[9] Tacitus mourned the lost virtue of moderation – calling moderation 'the most difficult lesson of wisdom'. Being a moderate, a bit like being ecumenical, is not weak-willed or sloppily liberal: it is about being charitable, generous and tough-minded. In other words, a difficult blend.

That is why I am so committed to the mild, temperate and middle ground so beloved on Anglican polity; and to the virtue of moderation, and the disposition of 'settlement' as a goal of public theology, not just clashes of conviction and culture within churches. And if churches can collaborate in creating a milder cultural climate, we may well discover that freedom and respectful debate flourishes in temperate zones.

Our freedoms will not easily survive the burning faith of demagogues, prophets and crowds. The call of our Christian faith is to be a people of unity, maturity and stability; to model stability and moderate, incorporative polity; to be a people of fervent faith and calm temperament; a people of moderation

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8 Aurelian Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation; The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

9 Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought*, 1748–1830 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

and passionate commitment. Of course, moderation and temperateness, with a call for togetherness, will not be enough. The practical-prophetic edge of the church – a tradition largely marginalized by current foci on evangelism and membership – is in urgent need of recovery. The churches need pastors and priests for sure. But its current lack of theological acuity and prescient prophetic voices is alarming, as much as it is demoralizing and damaging.

Conclusion

So what is to be done? One of the most pressing challenges faced by public theology and the churches is how to engage with contemporary social, cultural and political situations. For many, engagement, it seems, is a contested and risky affair. Some theological and ecclesiological traditions feel so threatened by the prospect of being overwhelmed or consumed by the task of engagement that they retreat before they have advanced; standing apart from key issues and debates in culture is seen to be the only way of protecting the integrity and identity of the Christian tradition. It has been my consistent contention – in some twenty-five years of writing on the subject – that theology and the churches do not have the luxury of such a choice.

The Christian faith – and its reification in the form of congregations, denominations and churches – teaches us that ecclesiology itself is a kind of social theory. Churches offer sacred space. But they are also a public space. Moreover, churches are, first and foremost, a vision of social polity – how to live together as people, rather than simply setting out rubrics for the membership of a clearly delineated sacred society. If the post-social, post-truth and post-religious age is to be addressed, spiritual courage, prescient wisdom and public theology will be needed – if the churches are to remain resilient, and Christianity survive as an agent of social capital.

In her prescient book, *The Precarious Organisation: Sociological Explorations of the Church's Mission and Structure* (1976) the Dutch ecclesiologist Mady Thung suggests that national churches in northern Europe have come under increasing pressure in the post-war years to become 'organisations' – nervous activity and hectic programmes constantly try(ing) to

engage members in an attempt to reach 'non-members'.[10] She contrasts the 'organisational' model and its frenetic activism with the 'institutional' model of the church – the latter offering, instead, contemplative, aesthetic and liturgical frameworks, that take longer to grow, are often latent for significant periods of time but which, she argues, may be more culturally resilient and conducive than those of the activist-organisational model. She suggests that the model being adopted by many national churches – a kind of missional 'organisation-activist' approach – is what drives the population away, leading eventually to sectarianism.

If all our churches are now merely for a small, depleting group of activist members, who simply want to go on perpetual recruitment drives, then congregations and Christian faith will further deteriorate into becoming a kind of suburban sectarianism. What we need now – engineered through prescient public theology – is some serious conversation and debate about how our churches can reclaim their identity as proper public forms of social polity. There is another concept of the church to rediscover and re-inhabit here. It is nothing less than the church finding itself as, what Dan Hardy (1930–2007) once described, as 'the social-transcendent'; and even more daringly, re-imagining churches as the 'social skin' of the world. [11]

But there is another vision. John Robinson, in *The New Reformation*, has this to say: "We have got to relearn that 'the house of God' is primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor's hut set up in the grounds…"[12] Put another way, the Church was only ever meant to be the Constructor's Hut on God's Building Site, which is the World (or if preferred, substitute 'world' for 'Kingdom of God'). The church is not God's main project. The world is. To put it in contemporary idiom, theologians and church leaders need to get with the programme.

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[10] Mady Thung, *The Precarious Organisation: Sociological Explorations of the Mission and Structure* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1976).

[11] Dan Hardy, 'Created and Redeemed Sociality' in Eds. C. Gunton & D. Hardy, *On Being the Church: Essays on Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989).

[12] John Robinson, *The New Reformation* (London: SCM, 1965), 27.

Kopsavilkums

Mēs uzticamies Trampam! Teologa pārdomas par dažiem mūsdienu izaicinājumiem baznīcai

Donalda Trampa inaugurācija ASV četrdesmit piektā prezidenta amatā demonstrē kristietības versiju, kura pazīstama kā veselības, pārticības un labklājības kustība. Tā arī zīme, ka ietekmīgāks kļūst evaņģelikālisma novirziens, kas ir raksturā individuālistisks un izpausmēs konservatīvs. Sabiedrība pretstatā tam visā attīstītajā pasaulē piedzīvo fragmentāciju un atsvešinātību. Kā draudzes reaģē uz šiem izaicinājumiem? Kāda loma diskusiju un kritiskās domāšanas veicināšanā ir teologiem?

Šajā rakstā Oksfordas Universitātes Kristus baznīcas koledžas dekāns piedāvā kritiskas refleksijas par šo situāciju. Viņš apgalvo, ka draudžu uzmanības centrā vajadzētu būt nevis pašsaglabāšanai, bet Dieva valstības veicināšanai. Mūsdienu kritiskajām kultūras teoloģijām neizbēgami jābūt draudžu kritiķēm. Praktiskās teoloģijas uzdevums daļēji ir mijiedarboties ar politiskajiem un profētiskajiem aspektiem.