**How is it that American conservative evangelical Christians support Trump?**

1. **Introduction**

As I write this, news has come in of Donald Trump’s spectacular success in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primaries, cementing the expectation that he will become the Republican candidate for the U.S. Presidency. One important feature of this process – as was manifest in the predominantly rural state of Iowa – was the strong support that Trump received from conservative evangelical Christians.

This has come to be something that we take for granted, but it is worth stopping to reflect on just how this has occurred. For Donald Trump – with a brash New York real estate background, and no hint of compliance with the values of conservative evangelical Christians – might seem an unlikely person for them to support.

Trump’s popularity, and the way in which he has taken over the Republican Party, has been a source of some puzzlement to those who do not like him, whether ‘liberal’ in the American sense, or even conservative in more traditional senses. Reports from people who were inside, or able to report in detail on, his first presidency, have disclosed a story of utter chaos and impulsive decisions on Trump’s part. While his style in addresses resembles the kind of hucksterism that grew up round American professional wrestling, in which humorous but hard-hitting abuse of one’s opponents, and the telling of tall stories, are standard. (Indeed, Trump was, himself, involved at one point with the antics of the ‘World Wrestling Federation’, which was particularly adept at this.[[1]](#endnote-1))

However, it has been interesting to see that in the **New York Times** – which has taken on a decidedly ‘liberal’ character – there have recently been opinion pieces by people who do not support Trump, arguing that he has at least spoken to the concerns of many ordinary Americans. Issues that have been referred to include problems of the post-industrial economy, and of immigration across the Mexican border. This can be matched with problems facing the Democrats of a candidate – President Biden – who is widely judged to be too old for the job, and from the enthusiasms of radicals whose concerns disquiet many other Americans. It is also worth noting that Trump has been reported to have benefitted significantly from younger people taking their news from social media, such as Tik Tok, from which they have obtained an unduly pessimistic view of the state of the American economy under Biden. It is also interesting to discover reports that Trump supporters views as to what has been taking place in the economy seem to relate more to their political affiliation than to the realities of the situation. All that being said, there is a distinctive issue relating to American evangelical Christians, which bears examination.[[2]](#endnote-2)

1. **Evangelicals in America**

America was initially settled by conservative-minded Protestants, who did not like the Church of England. It adopted political measures which allowed for religious freedom. Since that time, its predominant character was shaped by protestants from Britain and Northern Europe. It also experienced a succession of conservative Christian religious revivals. These were typically of an emotional character, and left in their wake populations who were fiercely individualistic, conservative in their Christianity, and stressed the importance of family rather than state support.

During the course of the Nineteenth Century, developments took place which led to changes on the part of what one might call the intellectual elite in the United States. Ideas in geology, and subsequently the impact of Darwin’s work, led to doubt about a literal interpretation of Genesis. While tendencies in Biblical criticism – both textual, and the re-interpretation of religious history in terms of Hegel’s ideas about the development of how things were understood in different periods – also posed issues. Over time, the initial broadly conservative religious approach of universities changed in a liberal and eventually more secular direction. While into the Twentieth Century, liberal ideas about the interpretation of Christianity became increasingly dominant.[[3]](#endnote-3) Issues were not completely straightforward, and there was a powerful intellectual tradition of highly conservative thought at Princeton Theological Seminary.

However, over time, ordinary evangelical Christians started to feel threatened by developments in the politics and culture around them. America itself became more pluralistic in its religious views, with the immigration of larger numbers of Catholics and Jews. The culture of the cities, and of major universities, became more and more out of step with the older, conservative Christianity of the smaller towns and more rural areas. A spokesman for conservative religion, William Jennings Bryan, who had been a Democrat Presidential candidate, was humiliated in the Scopes ‘monkey’ trial about the teaching of Darwinism in schools. Decisions made by the Supreme Court – e.g. over the legitimacy of prayer and the reading of the Bible in public schools – called into question customary practises which had served to re-enforce the culture of conservative Protestantism. In addition, there was a gradual development of a commercial culture, which was at odds with conservative Christian values. (I mean this in the sense that it offered temptations for conduct and purchases, and pictures of a style of life, which were problematic from a conservative Christian perspective.)

Over time, three further things took place. First, there was a reaction on the part of conservative Protestants against involvement in the wider culture. Second, there was a reaction to this – e.g. with the foundation by Jerry Fulwell of the ‘moral majority’ in 1979 – an attempt to fight back and assert political influence. Third, a tendency developed to produce, internally, a commercial culture which offered conservative Christians an alternative to the commercial culture that they found threatening.

It is important to note that, for conservative evangelical Christians, human nature is fallen, and that various tendencies which we may feel as ‘natural’ are, in fact, to be resisted. Accordingly, a commercial culture which responds to those tendencies may be experienced by them as highly problematic. Also, U.S. public culture has developed in ways that pose problems for the expression and respect of religious belief. It is striking, in this context, that while a considerable proportion of the U.S. population engages in prayer,[[4]](#endnote-4) this is not something that is to be found in, for example, U.S. television programmes, unless they are dealing with specifically religious themes. There is, more generally, a problem of what is to be done with explicitly religious arguments being expressed in the public sphere. This has been re-enforced by how Supreme Court jurisprudence has developed in the U.S. All this has come to a head specifically with regard to the teaching of evolutionary theory in public schools, where a good number of conservative Protestants see there as being a tension between this, and their religious beliefs. In my view, the case for the conservatives has not been helped by the fact that they have tended to press for parity in school teaching between evolutionary theory and ‘young earth’ creationism, or for ‘intelligent design’.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, Supreme Court jurisprudence has developed in such a way, that it would seem to rule out the teaching of any scientific theory, however successful, if it was understood to have religious content. But given the interplay between religious and scientific ideas in the development of modern science, this would seem strange. Indeed, there seems to me no reason whatever why in principle a scientific theory should not now be introduced which was explicitly religious in its content, and which, in fact, turned out to be more successful (e.g. in terms of its predictions, and the ability of its defenders to meet criticism of its key theoretical ideas) than were alternatives. Some philosophers of science have tried to argue that the enterprise of science presupposes that only ‘naturalistic’ explanations should be introduced. But this seems problematic in terms of the history of science, and given that scientific approaches are often developed within a framework of metaphysical ideas, the idea that a successful theory should not be taught just because its background is theological, seems to me simply untenable.

The nub of all of this, is that conservative evangelical Christians found themselves under various sorts of cultural threats, not least the recognition of gay marriage, and the failure of Obamacare to respect religious sensibilities about abortion and contraception. They were impinged upon by a highly successful commercial culture which spoke to aspects of human culture and appetites which they found problematic. The main seats of higher education, despite their roots in conservative Christian approaches, were hostile to them. And the broad tendency of the American legal system, and often Federal policy, posed problems in terms of its treatment of religion, and imposition of ideas about equality upon their educational institutions, which are problematic in terms of their religious views.[[6]](#endnote-6)

1. **Meanwhile, in Switzerland**

There had been, in the United States, fierce battles among evangelical Christians about issues such as the inerrancy of the Bible. There was a split at Princeton Theological Seminary, with some strongly conservative faculty leaving, and founding the Westminster Theological Seminary as a conservative alternative.[[7]](#endnote-7) One person who studied at Westminster was a clever man from a working-class background, Francis Schaeffer.[[8]](#endnote-8) After spending time as a pastor, he was eventually involved in missionary activity in Switzerland, and came to specialise in discussing intellectual and cultural issues with university students. While he did not have academic qualifications in the field of philosophy or cultural studies, he gained a lot of knowledge about these fields, and started to deliver lectures on these topics. In these, he argued that romantic and nihilistic tendencies in contemporary culture could be understood as a culmination of tendencies that developed, if the kind of understanding of man, God and the human situation set out in the Bible, were departed from. Material given as lectures was subsequently adapted as books, which made an impression on conservative Christians. While the books were of a popular character, and critics took issue with many aspects of his analysis, his work was important for two reasons.

The first, was that it was the first engagement with popular culture on an intellectual basis, by a conservative Christian. Schaeffer, as a consequence of his personal interest in the history of art and his discussions with many, many students about philosophy and popular culture, was able to address issues of contemporary concern. He also argued that, in broad terms, conservative Christianity offered a diagnosis of, and a better alternative to, what was going on in contemporary culture. Second, many conservative evangelicals were finding that their children were from their perspective being lost to a culture which they did not understand. Schaeffer stood out as someone who shared their views, but was well-informed about, and could engage with, this material. It is worth noting, however, that he understood these matters in terms of competing broad frameworks of assumptions,[[9]](#endnote-9) of which, in his view, only a conservative Christian approach could make sense of the world.

The fellowship which Schaeffer started, with his wife – who wrote several books about the missionary activity itself and its ethos – welcomed people who wished to study with them, and they started also to attract a wide range of visitors. All this was something of a niche activity. But Schaeffer’s son, Franky – who as a young man, had been a nuisance – became interested in film making, and was important in encouraging his father into film production; more specifically, to offer his own perspective as an alternative to the sort of account of Western culture that had been offered by Kenneth Clarke and Jacob Bronowski. This, in a way, was striking enough. But Franky persuaded Schaeffer that he should include the issue of abortion, and the Supreme Court’s decision in Roe vs Wade, as an illustration of just how far current culture had moved from traditional Christian ideas.

Schaeffer himself had been reluctant to do this, as abortion was seen as a ‘Catholic’ cause. But the issue – which Schaeffer followed up with a second film, in which he was joined by C. Everett Koop, a distinguished specialist in child medicine, whom Ronald Reagan was later to appoint Surgeon General – started to make impact on various evangelical entrepreneurs, such as Jerry Falwell, who, with his ‘moral majority’ movement, were seeking to influence the wider public culture. These people, in turn, developed sophisticated methods of fund-raising from ordinary people, and started to become a significant influence on their voting. Schaeffer returned to the United States, spoke extensively at universities, and was lionised by well-known politicians. Abortion became a key cultural issue for conservative Christians.

All this, in turn, meant that Republican politicians started to be interested in these people’s votes and support. But at the same time – and in some ways understandably because of the pluralistic character of the United States, and because of opposition towards any such ideas by feminists[[10]](#endnote-10) – this, and other cultural concerns on the part of Conservative evangelical Christians, were not delivered on by those whom they had helped to elect. Conservative Christians, however, were influenced by emotional presentations of the case against abortion, e.g. by Franky Schaeffer.[[11]](#endnote-11) It was seen as an important issue in itself, but also as linked to the way in which America was seen by them as having moved away from what they understood to be its original Christian foundation.

This view, which some of Schaeffer’s later work fostered, was particularly fuelled by ‘scholars’ in the alternative Christian culture, which had been developed to shelter conservative Christians from the wider and hostile culture in which they were living. The ideas of these people, e.g. about the supposedly Christian character of the American founding fathers - were influential upon ordinary evangelical Christians, despite the fact that several conservative Christian historians who were also very able academics took them to task.[[12]](#endnote-12)

1. **Enter Trump**

This was, I would suggest, the setting in which one should appreciate how it was that conservative evangelical Christians came to support Donald Trump. Initially – as one could see from debates about him in the pages of the broadly conservative **Christianity Today** – there were misgivings. Trump was not someone whom they would recognise as a Christian. Aspects of his life and conduct are far removed from Christian ideals, and it has been widely commented in the conservative Christian press that he does not consider that he needs to repent or ask for forgiveness.[[13]](#endnote-13) What initially seems to have played a key role, is that he was understood to offer genuine opposition to Rowe v. Wade (the Supreme Court decision which liberalised access to abortion), and to be willing to make Supreme Court appointments of people who would take a similar view.

And, indeed, this is what happened. Trump – by contrast with Reagan or either of the Bushes – actually delivered on an issue which had become important for its own sake to conservative evangelicals, but which had also become symbolic of their wish to fight to reclaim America to what they took to be its originally Christian character. Other Republican candidates who stood against him, in the primaries relating to his first presidency, discussed similar themes. But Trump stood out as a ‘strong man’, who evangelical Christians thought might actually deliver.[[14]](#endnote-14)

What might have initially been seen as a transactional approach – we give this person votes in return for him delivering on things which we care about – started to be understood in somewhat different terms.

First, parallels started to be drawn with the Persian King Cyrus who was responsible for Jewish people in exile being able to return to Israel and re-build the Temple there. He was not himself sympathetic to Jewish religious concerns, but was understood by them to have acted in ways which in their consequences furthered God’s wishes.[[15]](#endnote-15) If such a view is accepted, it would provide a rationale for the support of ungodly people, because of what the consequences of their actions are expected to be.

Second, David Barton – who developed his talents as an amateur historian, stressing the Christian character of the American foundation on the internal evangelical network[[16]](#endnote-16) - became, along with others, an important figure in the shaping of conservative evangelicals’ understanding of history and politics.[[17]](#endnote-17) Barton became one of a number of overlapping figures who offered popular, ‘Christian’ approaches to different aspects of life. Just because they were offered within the Christian circuit, the fact that their views were criticized by scholars with strong academic reputations who were themselves theologically orthodox, made no impression on how they were received. Indeed, their critics’ more careful approaches, when they were noted, tended to be represented as half-heartedness in the faith, or as indicating theological backsliding.[[18]](#endnote-18)

From all this developed tendencies, which became increasingly influential among American conservative evangelicals,[[19]](#endnote-19) to re-interpret conservative Christian ideas in a manner which integrates them with a distinctive form of American nationalism. Those who espouse such ideas have grown to expect Trump-style politics to be served up to them as part of their religious services. While there has also been a tendency for them to be open to some ideas which are not just problematic, but lunatic, such as Qanon conspiracy theories.

1. **What is to be done?**

In my view, there are three kinds of issues.

First, there is the need to recognise that in the United States and increasingly in other Western democracies, there is genuine diversity – not just in terms of race, but also of traditions and beliefs. In the United States, there is a sense in which conservative Protestant dominance has, over time, become replaced by a kind of liberal triumphalism. In a pluralistic polity, there need to be shared rules of the game. But these, it seems to me, should be as limited and uncontentious as possible. There should be freedom for minority groups and practises of all kinds, including freedom from harassment (provided that what is being protected does not involve attempts to coerce others).

Second, there is the problem of public provision to meet diverse needs. One approach, here, would be to privatise governmental services, and to allow individuals and families to choose their own forms of provision, for example – as the economist Milton Freidman advocated with regard to education – with government-supplied vouchers. An alternative – which seems to be favoured by a number of conservative evangelical scholars – would be for governmental services to be provided through different departments, which themselves reflect major religious or ideological divisions. Arrangements of this kind were favoured by the Dutch Calvinist journalist, politician and scholar, Abraham Kuyper, who was also, at one point, Prime Minister of The Netherlands. He, as a consequence of a strategic alliance with Catholics, was able to put such ideas into practice, and it gave rise to a distinctive system referred to as ‘pillars’. In this system, there was a combination of separate provision – in areas such as political parties, broadcasting, newspapers, schools and universities, hospitals and sports clubs, for different groups[[20]](#endnote-20) - together with association across the ‘pillars’ for the purposes of policy formation. An obvious enough problem, in all this, is that of quality control. Clearly, there is a risk that poor quality services, paid for through taxation, may be supplied to the vulnerable, who are not in a position to evaluate what they are getting and might well find that any criticism that they might voice is represented as disloyalty to their group. On the other side, there is a risk that governmental monitoring of the quality of what is supplied might well turn into a form of censorship, in which substantive and contentious judgements might be included within what is supposed to be a ‘neutral’ quality assessment exercise.[[21]](#endnote-21) Those attracted to Kuyper’s approach might also usefully bear in mind that, in the Netherlands, such a system did eventually break down. It would seem to me well worth their while to look at the history and also the critical academic literature.

A third issue seems to me to emerge from Schaeffer’s own approach. He stressed the idea that one might assess different competing approaches in terms of their ability to make good sense of the world, of human life, and so on. What is not clear, however, is whether he fully faced the problem that, if one proceeds in this way, all approaches must be taken as in some way tentative, and as things which can be assessed in terms of inter-subjectively accepted standards. Even a pluralism which did not make explicit arrangements for institutions which played such a role, would need to develop ‘rules of the game’ under which the different systems co-exist and interact. And this, in turn, calls for some kind of legal or quasi-legal system to offer interpretations of and adjudications about, the rules.

Beyond this, however, to the degree to which one is dealing not just with different ways of passing the time, but with intellectual systems for which claims are being made that they are true, or at least, as things stand, intellectually preferable to alternatives, then there is a need for a forum within which criticisms can be raised, and in which we can learn from one another. Karl Popper’s ideas about what he called ‘metaphysical research programmes’ look to me useful here as a way of understanding what is involved, as do his ideas about the way in which objectivity might best be seen as a tentative product of critical interactions between people from different traditions who treat one another wish respect, and as people from whom we might hope to learn.

All this, should it be accepted, would lead to some interesting problems about the construction of institutions. It would also face the difficulty that while there are plenty of people who are convinced that their (various) approaches are to be preferred to those of others, they are seldom willing to accept their own fallibility and the need to learn from others. There are also interesting issues about the need, initially, for people to operate within sheltered environments, in order that they learn about what is specifically involved in an approach that they find attractive, and the disciplines that it includes. At this level, pluralism is not necessarily helpful (although knowledge of the existence of different approaches, and what they involve, may be helpful in assisting us to understand that our approach is in part conventional, and in part fallible as it competes with others). But at the same time, what is involved in the practise of a religion, or indeed of many secular ways of life, is much more than being involved in discussion about its merits as an intellectual approach, in competition with other views. All this involves yet more problems of institutional design.

But what of our concrete situation and of the influence of conservative evangelical Christians on the selection of Donald Trump? Here, it seems to me that a key issue is not whether he will be the Republican candidate, which at the time of writing looks a pretty safe (if not very rewarding) bet.[[22]](#endnote-22) Rather, the problem is the re-building of a culture among evangelical Christians which is better-informed about the world, and by contemporary scholarship. The construction of this, however, seems to me to require the moderation of liberal triumphalism. This would involve the recognition by liberals that different approaches to values and to the understanding of the world are legitimate, if not necessarily on a par. Above all, it would seem to me to require serious attention to be given to the rebuilding of a public sphere, and institutions within which different approaches are accorded respect, all views are seen as fallible, and it is recognised that we have something to learn from one another.

1. See for example https://www.wrestlinginc.com/1193431/donald-trumps-history-with-the-wwe-explained/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. An interesting book, written by an evangelical Christian historian, which tells a much fuller story than is possible for me here, is John Fea, **Believe me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump**, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I will not, here, discuss the complexities of all this – either in respect of divisions about slavery and its aftermath, or the rise and development of criticism of theological liberalism by ‘neoorthodoxy’. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, on this, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-prayer/>, and for wider discussion Stephen L. Carter, **The Culture of Disbelief**, New York: Basic Books, 1993. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See for discussion of this my ‘Why the “Hopeless War”?: Approaching Intelligent Design, **Sophia** 49 (4), 2010, pp. 475-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. E.g. in terms of the recognition of organizations for homosexuals among their student bodies; if this was not done, they could be in danger of their students not being able to receive Federal funding. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is interesting to note that this swiftly suffered further splits, concerning doctrinal issues. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See, for an interesting overview, Barry Hankins, **Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America**, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Schaeffer represented people’s ideas in terms of competing, systematic worldviews; an approach which, on the face of it, misrepresents how things operate in terms of ordinary people’s understanding. See, on this theme, Ronald Hutton’s **Queens of the Wild**, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022, which considers aspects of the history of European folk-law, and David B. Hall, **Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England,** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990. This, however, does not mean that an attempt to assess systematic views in terms of their explanatory adequacy should be shunned. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. To say nothing of many other people concerned by the fate of poor or other young and vulnerable women facing an unwanted pregnancy, victims of rape or incest, or women who discovered that they were likely to give birth to a severely disabled child. In broad terms, public opinion in the United States seemed to be hostile to ideas about abortion on demand, or very late-term abortions, but critical of proposals for outright bans. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, **Bad News for Modern Man**, Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Mark A Noll, George M. Marsden and Nathan O. Hatch, **Search for Christian America**, Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, for example, https://www.christianpost.com/news/trump-why-do-i-have-to-repent-or-ask-for-forgiveness-if-i-am-not-making-mistakes-video.html [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See, on this, Fea’s **Believe Me**. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See, for an interesting academic treatment of this, Hanne Amanda Trangerud, ‘Voter Mobilization’, **Religions** 12(5), 2021. pp. 354ff. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/5/354>. See also the discussion in Fea’s **Believe me.** [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See on this Tim Alberta, **The Kingdom, The Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in the Age of Extremism**, London: Harper, 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See for some interesting discussion, Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, **The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age**, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See, in this context, Frances Schaeffer’s views as reported by Hankins, and Franky Schaeffer’s, **Bad News for Modern Man**, written while he was part of this ‘circuit’. It is worth noting that in his autobiography, **Crazy for God**, Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2008, written later on in his life when he had moved away from his earlier evangelical views, he noted just how lucrative writing for this evangelical market was. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Alberta, **The Kingdom**… Alberta documents this in some detail. His perspective is an interesting one, in that he, while being an accomplished political journalist, is, himself a conservative evangelical, who is opposed to these tendencies. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See for a useful brief overview, the Wikipedia entry on ‘Pillarisation’: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillarisation>. There is a considerable academic literature, in which issues are discussed under the heading ‘consociational democracy’ (on which, see the Wikipedia entry ‘Consociationalism’: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consociationalism>). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. One issue, here, was the negative reaction by the governmental assessment organisation Ofsted to schools influenced by the ideas of Rudolf Steiner. See, for example, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/ofsted-steiner-schools-inspection-letter-amanda-spielman-education-experts-a8976466.html [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See, in this context, Richard Bailey’s discussion of Multiculturalism in his **Education in the Open Society - Karl Popper and Schooling**, Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)