

Many evangelicals excuse anything Trump does — because he's the Chosen One



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by Sasha Abramsky, Truthout

Energy Secretary Rick Perry is the latest Trump official or acolyte to prostrate himself, using cult-like terms, before the president. Trump is, in Perry's worldview, a man tagged by God to occupy his leadership role. In this, the energy secretary is echoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – who has averred Trump may have been chosen by God to defend Israel against Iran – and Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Trump's erstwhile press secretary, who also argued that God had played a role in Trump's election. Perry is also mimicking ex-Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, who has argued that Trump is the most “godly, Biblical president” in her lifetime. He is following in the footsteps of Jerry Falwell Jr.'s Liberty University, which produced a movie in 2018 titled *The Trump Prophecy* that likewise argued President Trump had been chosen by God.

And, of course, Perry is also echoing Trump himself, who earlier this year embraced the notion that he was indeed The Chosen One, and subsequently tweeted about his own “great and unmatched wisdom.”

There is something utterly baffling about this notion, that, in the year 2019, in a country that prides itself on its democratic culture and its intellectual institutions, and that has a constitutionally mandated separation of church and state, medieval visions of governance are being touted by much of the U.S. leadership. The country has had its fair share of fundamentalist and fanatic political leaders, but at no previous point in its history has the divine right to rule been seriously proposed as a governing principle by those in positions of power. After all, presidents are supposed to be elected; the divine right to rule of kings is something that was (or so we thought) put to bed centuries ago.

And yet, opinion polls of evangelicals show that by massive margins they support Trump. A large number of them truly believe that the hand of God is at work in his ascendancy; and they aren't about to withdraw their support for such a vehicle of God's will just because he is covered head to toe in the stench of scandal and is on the verge of becoming only the third president in American history to be impeached by the House of Representatives. Polling conducted in late October, a month into the impeachment hearings, showed Trump's evangelical base remained rock-solid in its support for him.

Some evangelists aver that Donald J. Trump is a modern-day version of the ancient Persian king Cyrus, the autocratic nonbeliever who is used by God to fulfill his design – conquering Babylon and freeing the Jews from bondage. Cyrus, as king, is a man who exists outside of, above, ordinary moral law; a daring emperor constrained by nothing and no one. In many ways, Cyrus is a Nietzschean figure 2,500 years before Friedrich Nietzsche. Secretary of State Pompeo, an evangelical Christian with a taste for “End Times” philosophy, frequently references Cyrus's story.

Trump himself, who has left a trail of sexual assault allegations in his wake over the decades, has shown scant religious sensibilities throughout his life. When it proved politically expedient during the presidential campaign, he claimed to belong to a church in Manhattan, but the church itself put out a statement that he was not an active member.

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As president, however, Trump has demonstrated a feral talent for wooing the religious right and keeping them on his side through one scandal after another after another. He has done so by appointing dozens of extremist judges who will, over the coming decades, work to restrict or end access to abortion, break down the walls that separate church from state, limit LGBTQ rights, allow for an increasing number of carve-outs so that religious groups and individuals don't have to adhere to anti-discrimination laws, dilute science teaching in schools, and so on.

At the start of this month, Trump hired the Florida-based prosperity gospel televangelist Paula White onto his White House staff. It was an illuminating moment. White, who has a grand talent for self-promotion and an instinct for what Trump would term “the art of the deal,” believes that far from siding with the meek and the downtrodden, God rewards believers monetarily. More shockingly, prosperity gospel advocates also argue that God particularly likes those who already enjoy financial success.

The prosperity gospel is an extreme version of what the German sociologist Max Weber wrote about in his 1905 classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber theorized that Calvin's theory of predestination, in which believers could not know for sure whether they were lucky enough to be assigned to heaven or unlucky enough to be heading to hell, created an extreme state of angst. Unsure of their place in eternity, Calvin's followers looked for any and every earthly hint as to whether they were among God's favored ones. Monetary success, in this anxious milieu, soon became seen as a sign of divine favor.

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But whereas Calvin's puritan followers accumulated wealth without ostentatious spending – thus, Weber argued, providing a surplus of money that could be invested and that would eventually sow the seeds of early capitalism – the prosperity gospel is about bling and kitsch. It is about showing off and strutting one's financial stuff.

Nearly 100 years ago, the Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson was alleged to have made a pact with the devil at the crossroads outside of the little town of Clarksdale – a pact that traded Johnson's soul in exchange for the ability to create soul-shatteringly good music. Trump's own such crossroads pact, signed at his tower where Central Park south meets Central Park west, is with religious preachers such as White. He doesn't necessarily believe what he's signed onto here, but since it comes with tremendous political benefits, he's perfectly happy to indulge in this marriage of convenience. And, truth be told, White's peculiar version of Christianity suits him to a tee. For the real estate tycoon with a fetish for all things gold, the prosperity gospel is the perfect religious expression: It's hucksterism gussied up as religion. And it lends itself to cultist hero-worship.

Those who thrive financially — in this rendition of the gospel, regardless of the methods by which they attain wealth — deserve praise and adulation. Perry saying that Trump has been chosen by God is really no more or less sycophantic than the parade of cabinet members early in Trump's presidency who lavished the sorts of praise on him that one might expect to hear in a fully ripe dictatorship.

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In an article on the Christian Broadcasting Network's site about whether Trump is a modern-day Cyrus, I find this comment: "I love this president as he navigates through the anti-christ DEMONcrats. As Christian's [sic], we better stand by this man placed by our GOD.THINK ABOUT IT, WE'RE ON THE VERGE OF KILLING ROE VS WADE AND THE SLAUGHTER OF BABY HUMAN BEINGS!!!!!"

If that's the calculus, Trump's myriad moral failings mean nothing. To those that adhere to this worldview, they don't care if the president mocks a disabled journalist or the Gold Star family of a veteran killed in action. Trump swears in public, boasts of sexual assault and even says that he could shoot someone dead in broad view without losing the support of his base. Yet, to such believers, all of these are simply the imperfections of a man ordained by God to rid the U.S. of abortion and secularism and the other great sins of the modern age.

Which brings me back to Rick Perry. Perry's up to his eyeballs in the Ukraine scandal. But instead of coming clean, he has, like so many other high officials, unquestioningly followed Trump's orders and refused to comply with congressional subpoenas to testify.

The rule of law and the constitutional order are under direct, sustained assault from the executive branch. And so long as senior figures such as Perry look at Trump and see something akin to a biblical prophecy adapted for the modern age, they will continue to side with a lawless president over the constitutionally guaranteed authority of the U.S. Congress.

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