27 White American Evangelicals and a Populist Ethic

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Introduction

Through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the political ethics of many white evangelicals were what we would today call progressive, anti-monarchist, anti-Federalist, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, opposing bankers, and landlords. Many supported the revolution against the British monarchy on the ethics of the gospel. "Republican forms of government," the Presbyterian Benjamin Rush wrote to the Baptist minister Elhanan Winchester in 1791, "are the best repositories of the Gospel" (Butterfield 1951, pp. 611–612). Though Southern evangelicals supported the slave system and racial segregation, many others were active in universal public education, in the temperance movement, and in overseas liberation movements (Hatch 1989). Evangelical socialism was strong into the 1930s.

Yet starting at the turn of the twentieth century, white evangelicals have increasingly found their home on the political right, embracing the Republican party and right-wing populism. In the 2016 presidential election, 81% voted for Donald Trump (Pew Research Center 2016); in 2020, 84% (Igielnik, Keeter, and Hartig 2021).

This chapter explores the development from evangelical history to present religio-political ethics, focusing on the following:

(i) White American evangelicals face the same challenges that other Americans face and rely on the same cultural resources to grapple with those challenges. They are drawn to the political right for economic and cultural reasons similar to those of other Americans. Their politics is as multifactorial as any group's, emerging in part from religious concerns and in part, from other reasons. In both 2016 and 2020, the factor most important in the evangelical vote was the economy (twice as important as abortion and many times more decisive than LGBTQ issues) In 2016, the next most important factor was national security; in 2020, it was the Covid-19 pandemic. The point to be noticed is the multifaceted nature of evangelical political motivation. (LifeWay Research 2018; LifeWay Research 2020);

(ii) Evangelicals, important since the seventeenth century in the development of American political culture, contributed to the politico-cultural resources available to all Americans;

(iii) In contributing to these resources, the forebears of today's evangelicals brought (a) the heritage of religious persecution by European states and state churches, which prodded wariness of authorities and outsiders, and (b) the theological principles of Reformed Covenantal Political Theory and of individual conscience (rather than

adhering to priestly authority), which encouraged individual reckoning with God and Scripture, and, again, wariness of authorities and outsiders.

These tenets and history worked in synergy with traditions and experience that were robust in the colonies for those evangelical and not, including British liberalism, Aristotelian republicanism, immigration, and the rough conditions of settlement.

(iv) Suspicion of government and outsiders are linchpins of American right-wing populism. Evangelicals contributed to the undergirding culture from which these suspicions are drawn, as did the experience of immigration, the frontier, liberalism, and localism shared by many Americans. Neither white evangelical beliefs nor the history and beliefs of other Americans lead, in and of themselves, to populist us-them binaries, as evinced by the progressive evangelicalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and by the 20 or so percent of white evangelicals not in the ranks of the right (Pally 2011).

(v) However, under economic or way-of-life duresses, America's cultural resources may turn to these suspicions. Explaining how this has occurred for Americans and specifically for white evangelicals over the last forty years is the task of this chapter.

In a longer study, attention would be given also to evangelicalism among people of color and to white evangelicals, not on the political right. As this chapter is limited in space, readers are directed to other studies.[1]

Defining Evangelicalism, Briefly

This chapter relies on the standard Bebbington Quadrilateral (Bebbington 1989, pp. 2–17): biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. Evangelicalism is an approach to Protestantism that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from the "free thinking" and pietist churches of Europe. It sought a personal relationship to Jesus and to the Bible (biblicism) with emphasis on the cross as a symbol of salvation and service (crucicentrism), the mission to bring others to that relationship (conversionism), individual Bible reading by ordinary men and women, and the importance of individual conscience (rather than on adhering to authority).

With this brief definition in hand, we can turn to a rubic that will help us identify a social or political entity as populist.

A Rubric for Populism

While the many debates about defining populism exceed the scope of this chapter, I'll make three introductory remarks and suggest a short-form rubic to identify populism. First, while populism is often held to be inimical to democracy (Lee 2020), this assessment is not universally a good fit—not for instance, for Spain's Podemos party, France's Yellow Vest movement, or the presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders. A rubric for populism must be able to identify it across the political spectrum, stronger and softer cases, and cases where populisms are productive responses to societal problems—what Chantal Mouffe calls "agonism," difficult but productive struggles in democratic societies.

Second, to clearly identify populism in these varied settings, a "minimal definition" may be useful, as proposed in various ways by Urbinati (2019, pp. 115–118), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), and Pappas (2016). A "minimal definition," Pappas writes, "is one

that includes only the core, or defining, characteristics of the concept's referents while excluding the variable (or accompanying, secondary, or contingent) ones."

Third, for the purposes of this chapter, populist "right" marks the belief that society is changing unproductively but can be fixed by protectionist trade and immigration policies and by limiting (domestic) minority access to resources and opportunities. In the U.S., right-wing populism is often accompanied by wariness of national government and thus of "small government-ism," limiting the government's role in society through market deregulation, tax cuts, and the reduction of social services. The populist "left" marks the belief that society is also changing unproductively but can be fixed by civil society *and* government efforts to broaden access to resources and opportunity.

As populism is a response to unwanted change, our first criterion is:

Populism is a way of understanding way-of-life, status loss, and/or economic duress and of developing and presenting solutions to them. It is an understanding of the world through which solutions to problems are developed and presented. This definition allows for populism as ideational (ideas about the world, about solutions to problems) and as the discourses and communicative styles used to express those ideas. In a minimal definition, the salient point is solutions to duress. Analyzing 800 elections in 20 advanced democracies from the 1870s to the present, Funke et al. found that "financial crises put a strain on democracies…far-right parties see strong political gains" (Funke, Schularick and Trebesch 2016, pp. 227–260). Left-populism also gains, as Adam Tooze notes, "the financial and economic crisis of 2007–2012 morphed between 2013 and 2017 into a comprehensive political and geopolitical crisis…Europe witnessed a dramatic mobilization of both Left and Right" (Tooze 2018).

Economic duress includes current un- or under-employment but also the sense that familiar paths to self-betterment are disappearing. Way-of-life and status-loss duresses refer to a sense of threat to the "way things should go," to knowing what's fair, and to what's due to you and others (Stenner 2010). They may be prompted by shifts in demographics, technology, gender roles, etc. All three duresses may be present or anticipatory, fear of future hardship. Noam Gidron and Peter Hall note, "support for radical parties is likely to be especially high among people who feel they have been socially marginalized, i.e. deprived of the roles and respect normally accorded members of mainstream society" (Gidron and Hall 2020, pp. 1027–1057).

Populist solutions aim at answering: who is under unfair duress—"we"; by whom— "them"; and thus whom we are right to constrain or combat. "We" does not mark any school, work, or religious group but the binary of my group in struggle against those who are doing "us" harm. It may be understood as an economic class, as a group with a common history or culture, or as a political group comprising, for instance, the "proper" nation. "Them," equally mobile a term, may mark "elites" (government officials, experts, the wealthy) or societally marginalized groups.

Amira, Wright, and Goya-Tocchetto find that under duress, the usual focus on the flourishing of one's own group shifts self-protectively to constraining or attacking the "other." They write, "while the tendency to help the in-group appears to be primary, under situations of symbolic threat to partisan identity, respondents shift gears and opt for harming the out-group" (2019). Moreover, feelings that "we" have been wronged are wounds that persist. Jeanne Knutson, founder of the International Society of Political

Psychology, notes the belief that, "only continued activity in defense of oneself (one's group) adequately serves to reduce the threat of further aggression against oneself" (cited in Volkan 1997, pp. 160–161).

As "them" may be identified as both elites and the marginalized, populisms propose two sorts of societal divisions: Mudde and Kaltwasser's "vertical" division between elites on top and "the people" on the bottom (2017) and a horizontal division between "we, the people" and "outsider" groups (Rensmann 2017). For our minimal definition, the binarized us-them construction is key and takes different forms in differing circumstances.

Degree of binarity locates a movement along a continuum from soft to strong populism, from productive for democracy to a threat.

Place on the continuum is informed by: (i) the possibilities for understanding "them" as a legitimate part of the *vox populi*; (ii) how inclusive "we" are of a variety of societal groups; (iii) the ability to work with what Else Frenkel-Brunswick called "ambiguity tolerance." Can those who are opponents on one issue be allies on another? (Adorno et al. 1950, p. 463); and (iv) the perceived permanence of the us-them "struggle."

Softer forms of populism may serve as productive features of democratic politics—Mouffe's "agonism"–and may prod needed change.

In order to "feel right" and be thought effective, populist solutions must be understandable. While new ideas are not precluded from understandability, the most easily grasped solutions to duress are often familiar, drawn from society's historico-cultural background and from the ways that background may turn to us-them frameworks. This background includes political, socio-economic, demographic, and religious values, norms, and symbols. It contributes to what Graham Ward calls the cultural imagination, "the subconscious within which we move and from out of which we try to make sense, even cope, with all of our collective experience" (Ward 2018, p. 10).

In its reliance on this background, populism has been called a "thin" phenomenon, drawing worldview and positions from "an established host ideology" (De La Torre 2017). But the view of populism as "thin" has been contested in part because of populism's force worldwide and in part because of the link between populism and society's historico-cultural background, making it a "thicker" phenomenon requiring investigation into layered, historic-cultural specifics.

The historico-cultural background informs the pool of ideas about society (who's in and out) and government (its size and responsibilities) from which vertical and horizontal "us-them" formations are drawn. Not everything in the historico-cultural background finds expression in populist thought, but populism draws from this pool of ideas, and being rooted in them helps makes populism seem reasonable, even "natural." Ideas about who's in and out of society form a cultural background for populist notions of "us" and non-elite "them"s while ideas about the role of government (and associated elites) serve as background for populist notions of "us" against the elite "them."

In sum, populism is a way of understanding and responding to economic, status loss, and way-of-life duresses that relies on us-them binaries, strong or soft, that draw from the historico-cultural background of the society where the populism is situated. To understand the affinity between many white evangelicals and right-wing populism, we will look at the historico-cultural background from which American notions of society and government are drawn.

The Liberal Covenanted Republic

Government: Its Proper Size and Role

American political history begins in the liberal covenanted republic, its ideals, realizations, and failures.[2] Rooted in Reformed Covenantal Political Theory come to America through the Puritans and other dissenters (Gorski 2017), it understood the polity as a reciprocal covenant between person and God and among persons, where each contributes to the common good (Bullinger 1991, p. 119). "The entire covenantal argument for right order," David Henreckson writes, "depends on the fact that theological and political commitments were integral to one another" (Henreckson 2019, p. 108). Political sovereignty is thus grounded on reciprocal covenant between ruler and ruled. Should a ruler violate covenant, he may be removed from office.

Through the European immigration, the principles of Reformed Covenantal Political Theory found their way to America. The Mayflower Compact (1620) declares, "We … *covenant* and combine ourselves together into a *civil* Body Politick" (emphasis mine) and sought not only to establish a covenantal government in the new colony but to constrain non-Puritan "outsiders." John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630) held that community hangs together by "mutual consent" in bond with God and among persons (1630). To avoid uncovenantal self-interest, Massachusetts enacted the Body of Liberties (1641) to protect the common good against the rich and politically ambitious.

The U.S. Declaration of Independence relies on covenantal and Lockian criteria for deposing sovereigns for covenant violations. Protecting the covenanted community— the states and "We, the People"—from exploitative power was among the chief aims of the Constitution, the checks and balances of tri-partite government, and the U.S. federal system. Anthony Smith concludes that America's

> union was based on national ideologies with significant covenantal and civic components… the earlier covenantal example of English parliamentarian revolt and the Puritan commonwealth, and adapting it to a civic tradition of public culture, modelling their republic on that of republican Rome.
>
> (Smith 2009, p. 36)

As the second and third sources of the liberal, covenanted republic are standard in tellings of American history, I'll mention them only briefly. The Aristotelian republic also sees humanity as social, living in networks of networks. Persons achieve their fullest development through participation in the *polis* (Honohan 2003, p. 51), and the unjust person is one who shirks responsibilities to the commons and grabs undue benefits. The third component, liberalism, sees the individual not so much embedded in covenant or republic as free to separate from them to pursue opportunity. Alexander Hamilton spoke for this position, defining liberty as "natural rights" that must be shielded from government interference (Hamilton 2001, pp. 30, 100). He considered freedom a means to private ambition and a check on government overreach.

The idea of the separable person free from government supervision was persuasive in America as many had emigrated in flight from oppressive governments. "The settlers departed England," T.H. Breen writes, "determined to maintain their local attachments against outside interference… to preserve in America what had been threatened in the mother country" (Breen 1975, p. 4). Once in America, the harsh frontier further

advised self-reliance, trust in one's local community, and wariness of far-away authority. Said another way, *the covenanted, republican community was not abandoned but drawn closely and more locally* to foster an ethos of self-responsibility, localism, and contempt for government elites and freeloaders (Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997). The Shays (1786–1787) and Whiskey (1791–1794) rebellions against federal regulation and taxation began almost as soon as the country did.

The most tragic fruition of localism came with the Civil War, fought over both slavery and Washington's role in state governance. Post-Reconstruction, the Confederacy was imagined into a "lost cause" of noble, Christian resistance against the interloper "Yankee vandals" interfering with local ways (Janney 2013, p. 147; Wilson 2009). Building on earlier liberalism and localism, the "lost cause" yielded an ethos of self-reliance and suspicion of Washington (Richardson 2020) grafted onto Christianized racism. The meld of a Christianized white supremacy and resistance to federal government became a marker of white pride with enduring impact on America's socio-political culture.

Though federal government grew along with the nation, wariness of Washington retains a vaunted place in the American worldview, fostering both suspicion of Washington and "outsiders" but also robust civil society and democratic critique of authority (Gorski 2017, p. 47). It has been the ground for policies across the political spectrum, for strong and weak local environmental protections and lax and tighter state gun control.

The Liberal Covenanted Republic: Society—Who's In, Who's Not

If wariness of federal government is one pillar of America's socio-political culture, wariness of "outsiders" (immigrants, minorities) is a second. In addition to the foundational role of the slave system, where blacks were conceptualized as radically "other," the 1798 anti-immigrant Alien and Sedition Acts began almost as soon as the country did, much like the anti-Washington Shays and Whiskey rebellions. The anti-immigrant Know Nothing Party was a significant force pre-Civil War, garnering 22% of the House of Representatives in 1854/1855—a significant win in a five-way race. Discriminatory immigration laws were enacted in 1875 in response to the 1873 economic recession and to demographic change (immigration from southern and eastern Europe). They were reinforced in 1882 and in 1924 during the post-Russian evolution "Red Scare." The imprisonment of Japanese-Americans during World War II follows in this lineage as do the ironically titled "covenants," legal agreements that until 1948 barred blacks and Jews from purchasing property in white Christian areas.

To those holding such covenants, their invalidation by the Supreme Court (*Shelley v. Kraemer*) was an act of interference by Washington in local covenant.

The American and Evangelical Duress

If populism is an understanding of duress and presentation of solutions, what are the duresses? As the challenges currently facing Americans, including evangelicals, have been widely discussed, I'll review them only briefly, including un- and underemployment, prodded somewhat by globalized trade and substantially by automation, productivity gains, and global competition (Irwin 2016, pp. 84–95) accounting for 88% of job loss (Hicks and Devaraj 2015).

Attendant to economic duress is fear of status-loss and increases in morbidity and mortality. Those most attracted to the political right and Republican party between 2010 and 2018 were whites without college degrees but with middle-class incomes ($77,522–$130,000 annually) concerned that in a "knowledge based" economy, their horizons were dimming and their "respectable" status was under threat (Kitschelt and Rehm 2019). Along with this, in 2018, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported a decline in life expectancy for three years in a row (Devitt 2018). "Deaths of despair" have sharply increased as has social isolation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2018; Case and Deaton 2017). Add to this the ongoing changes in gender roles, technology, and demographics: non-Hispanic whites will comprise less than 50% of the population by 2044 and in 2020, comprised less than 50% of American children.

In 2020, Jeff Madrick wrote, "Voters wanted badly to blame it all on the swamp Trump promised to clean up" (2020).

In addition to these stresses, evangelicals have felt a sense of cultural and political marginalization in an increasingly secular and socially liberal nation. In 1968, prayer was removed from public schools (*Epperson v. Arkansas*). The 1960s counterculture, President Lyndon Johnson's "big government" Civil Rights and Great Society programs, the anti-(Vietnam) war protests, and the feminist and gay rights movements furthered the sense of marginalization. In 1973, abortion became legal (*Roe v. Wade* 1973). Through the 1970s, the government threatened to end the tax-exempt status of racially segregated religious schools. In 2015, same-sex marriage was legalized by the Supreme Court (*Obergefell v. Hodges*).

In 2019, 65% of American adults identified as Christians, down 12 points from 2009 (Pew Research Center 2019 a Oct. 17). In 2020, 66% of white evangelicals held that Christians face "a lot" of discrimination in America (Public Religion Research Institute 2020).

The Right-wing Populist Solution: Hunting Where the Ducks Are

As white evangelicals are subject to the same range of duresses and partake of similar historico-cultural resources as the rest of the nation, this section turns to the "heirs" of those resources in present beliefs that make right-wing populism seem productive to many Americans, evangelical and not. Understanding how these resources inform American political positions overall will help explain those aspects of white evangelical politics not arising specifically from religious concerns. The specifically religious experience of white evangelicals is discussed below.

Under economic and way-of-life duress, localist understandings of society and government--as they draw the covenanted community more closely—may turn towards the us-them iterations that Knutson and Amira et al. describe. Under duress:

i   commitment to community may become my-community-in-struggle-against-"them" (new immigrants, minorities)
ii wariness of *tyrannical* government may become suspicion of government *per se*, whose activities should be limited—except to implement the constraints on outsiders required by (i). In such a shift, evaluating specific government policies, levels of effectiveness or corruption, etc. is made difficult as government itself is presumed to be harmful.

There is stronger us–them binarity when the "other" is identified on essentialist criteria such as race, religion, or the *non-locality* of national government.

As binarized iterations of the liberal, covenanted republic are longstanding in American history, available to be drawn upon and enlivened especially under duress, Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, call populism's appeal to them "hunting where the ducks are" (2018)—that is, tapping into traditional understandings of society and government for their more us–them possibilities in the present.

Present Wariness of Government

Though Democrats seek more government involvement in addressing societal needs than Republicans do, Frank Newport notes that "the only times over the past quarter-century when Americans didn't side with the view that government should do less were in the early 1990s after the 1990–1991 recession and in October 2001 just after 9/11" (2018). Drawing on this wariness, Republican Senator Tim Scott's criticized President Joe Biden's 2021 infrastructure plan as a way to "put Washington even more in the middle of your life" (2021). Eighty-three percent of Americans say they do not trust Washington (Pew Research Center 2019b); 75% hold that the "free market" and not government should be responsible for technical innovation; 62% say the same for "wealth distribution," "the economy overall," and wages (Younis 2019). Eighty-eight percent of Trump supporters are concerned that a secret "deep state" is threatening their freedom (Blum and Parker 2021).

Recent Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy is in part fueled by suspicion of government and associated (medical) elites, and resistance to vaccine and mask-wearing *mandates* imposed by official agencies, even more so. (Latkin et al. 2021; Arvanitis et al. 2021). Pro-gun activism is also among the areas where government wariness is robust. "An assault-weapon ban…" David French explains in the *National Review*, "would gut the concept of an armed citizenry as a final, emergency bulwark against tyranny" (French 2018). Resistance to social services is yet another area, even among beneficiaries. Those who would have lost $5,000 in government subsidies had Trump succeeded in dismantling the Affordable Care Act, Barack Obama's health insurance program, nonetheless voted for Trump by 59–36 percentage points (Cooperative Congressional Election Study and the Kaiser Family Foundation 2017). Binyamin Applebaum and Robert Gebeloff write, "They are frustrated that they need help, feel guilty for taking it and resent the government for providing it" (2012).

Present Wariness of "Outsiders"

Resentment of government social services brings together suspicion of government with suspicion of "outsiders." Even as more Americans benefit from governmental services, animus against them has risen on the perception that "other people" (immigrants, minorities) are taking "our" tax dollars with the help of big government (Mettler 2018). Fifty-five percent of white Americans believe government "is treating them unfairly compared with other racial groups" (Perez 2017). This perception holds though, of the 40 million people who qualify for the largest benefits in Biden's America Rescue Plan, 17.3 million are white, 8.2 million, Black, and 10.1 million, Hispanic (Kaiser Family Foundation 2019).

Moving from white Americans to Republicans, 64% hold that immigrants compete with Americans for jobs; 72%, that immigrants use more than their fair share of social

services; and 63%, that immigrants increase crime (Public Religion Research Institute 2020). These perceptions hold even when economic and law-enforcement records do not support them, suggesting something of the power of us-them frameworks. Immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-borns (Bernat 2017). High immigration levels negatively impact the income of teenagers without a high school degree but not of other workers. Blau and Mackie conclude, "immigrants' children—the second generation—are among the strongest economic and fiscal contributors in the population" (2017).

In their study specifically of Trump voters, Oliver and Rahn find scores "above average on all of the attitudes that are related to populism…They also record high levels of mistrust and anger at the federal government. And they score highest on the nativism scale" (2016). Animus against outsiders was voiced in the white supremacist cry, "you [new immigrants, Jews (Rosenberg 2017)] will not replace us"; in the popularity of Trump's border wall to stanch immigration; in the Confederacy as a symbol of white pride; in belief that Covid-19 was caused by China; and in the "Latino threat narrative" of hardworking (white) neighborhoods overrun by "lawless and lazy" foreigners (Longazel 2016).

"We Have One of Us in That White House" (Norris 2018): Trump, Hunting Where the Ducks Are

While America's wariness of government and "outsiders" was not developed by recent right-wing populism or Trump, it was enlivened by his populist rhetoric in a synergistic, "tapping into," relationship with beliefs longstanding in American culture. "Giving voice to such sentiments," Frances Lee writes, "allowed him to forge a unique bond of trust and 'authenticity' with important elements in the Republican base and create favorable contrasts with establishment Republican leaders and officeholders" (2020).

Suspicion of "outsiders" was animated by Trump's description of his trade wars and import tariffs as control not over Americans but over foreigners; by his lambastes against "Mexican rapists" (Wolf 2018); by his claim that there were "very fine people on both sides" in the Charlottesville clash between white supremacists and their opponents (Krieg 2017); by his border wall to stanch immigration; by his ban against entry from several Muslim-majority countries; and by his dubbing the coronavirus the "Chinese virus" (Somvichian-Clausen 2020).

Suspicion of government was animated early on by Trump's frequent salvo in the 2016 campaign that he would "drain the swamp" of "government insiders" (Hughes 2016). At the end of that campaign, 60% of white working-class and lower-middle-class Americans believed the country needs a leader who'll "break the rules" of the regnant elites (Davis and Piacenza 2017), echoing traditional animus and the Trump campaign. Other examples include the demonization of government programs as "welfare" (Badger 2018); his description of Covd-19 mask-wearing as government infringement on "freedom" (McCaskill 2020); his explanation of business deregulation as freedom from Washington; and his claim that the "deep state" had stolen the 2020 election from him though Republican election officials, 60 courts, and the Supreme Court validated election results. His economic policies resonate with the 62% of Americans who hold that the "free market" and not government should be responsible for the economy (Younis 2019).

In sum, embrace of Trump's double "them"--the "deep state" and "outsiders"--was robust not because he brought a new element to American culture but because of his persistence plumbing us–them frameworks long vibrant in it and ready-to-hand under conditions of duress, as Amira et al. note.

Evangelical Contributions to the Liberal Covenanted Republic: Views of Society and Government, and Populism

Evangelicalism in Early America

Just as the foundational components of American political culture are the background pool of ideas for present political views, evangelical and not, early evangelical tenets and history find their "heirs" in present evangelical politics. The forebears of today's evangelicals left Europe with the heritage of covenantal community responsibility, the dissenter's wariness of government and outsiders, and the importance of individual conscience. As they helped to settle the frontier, itself a prod to wariness of government and outsiders, evangelicals became prime builders of America's self-reliant ethos and republic (Bebbington 2005; Hatch 1989). The First Great Awakening (1730s–1740s) was a festival of iconoclastic, anti-authoritarian religious ideas and practices; ministers advised trusting not even one's own church but rather in "self-examination" (Wood 2006, p. 61). Through the antebellum period, evangelicalism grew into America's predominant approach to faith. The largest U.S. government office was the postal service, but by 1850 evangelical churches had double the employees, twice as many facilities, and raised three times as much money for religious and social projects (Noll 2002, pp. 200–201).

Evangelicals argued on both sides of the slavery issue, with northerners often outspoken abolitionists and southerners, defenders of slavery in Christian voice. The tireless efforts of the Baptist Rev. Dr. Basil Manly yielded what Robert Jones calls an "unapologetic theology of white supremacy, arguing that slavery was not an unfortunate necessity but rather part of the divinely ordained hierarchical order of Christian society" (2020). Manly was also a secessionist, writing the document that declared Alabama's exit from the Union (Fuller 2000, p. 291). Postbellum a Christianized white supremacy and resistance to Washington were melded into Graham Ward's "cultural imagination"—*the two together becoming markers of white pride* celebrated in children's books, statues, and church windows (Cox 2003, p. 138).

Elsewhere in post-bellum America, evangelicals were active in aiding the new immigrant and urban poor. The popular preacher Dwight L. Moody lambasted businesses for paying starvation wages and set up schools for young women and men (in that order). At the turn of the twentieth century, many evangelicals supported the left-wing populist William Jennings Bryan, three-time candidate president on a pro-worker, pro-farmer platform (1896, 1900, 1908). Under the leadership of Walter Rauschenbusch (1992) and Washington Gladden, others joined the Social Gospel, which both ran programs for the poor and provided America's first critique of laissez-faire capitalism.

Evangelical Turns to Conservatism

Yet still others opposed the Social Gospel and its focus on worldly matters. This period was also one of growing conservatism, spurred by a series of duresses: (i) anxieties about

the sudden changes and "immorality" of urbanization and the Jazz Age; (ii) similar anxieties about increasing secularization and multiculturalism as Protestantism lost its place as the default religion of America; (iii) fears of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and the socialist ideas—and non-Protestant faiths—they brought; (iv) the popularity of a pessimistic, pre-millennial eschatology, which grew with the alarm about disruptions brought by industrialization. The pre-millenarian belief in a time of unavoidable destruction before Christ's millennium of peace rendered efforts to improve living conditions on earth a distraction from saving souls; and (v) worries about the German Historical Critical Method of Bible criticism. With its requirements in sophisticated exegetical tools, it appeared to threaten the anti-elitist, grassroots faith that had been adventurous and democratic throughout American history.

While evangelicalism had been at the forefront of much American culture through the nineteenth century, in an increasingly urbanized, socially progressive twentieth, it found itself in a rear-guar action. From 1910 to 1915, the oil magnates Lyman and Milton Stewart subsidized free distribution of the pamphlet series *The Fundamentals* to shore up evangelical basics. It was widely popular and inaugurated the term "fundamentalism."

In the 1925 *Scopes* Supreme Court Case, evangelicals were humiliated as benighted parochials for their opposition to teaching evolution in public schools. The experience reinforced suspicion of authorities and "outsiders" and reliance on local community. After a generation of withdrawal from the public sphere, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was founded in 1942. By 1960, membership was at 1.5 million, drawn from 32 denominations (Association of Religion Data Archives). Youth for Christ selected one of its young ministers, Billy Graham, as its first full-time employee to bring evangelicalism back to the mainstream.

Conservative evangelicals had opposed turn-of-the-century, Progressive Era government programs on behalf of labor and farmers. Consistent with an ethos of local pride and wariness of government, a broader range opposed the New Deal during the Depression (1929–1939), Social Security (1935), and after WWII, the United Nations (1945), Medicare, Medicaid, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society anti-poverty programs (1965) (Sutton 2014). These along with the 1960s counterculture were seen as self-indulgent dependence on big government and undermining self-reliant local life. Johnson's 1965 Civil Rights program—a *federal* mandate to racial integration—further provoked the conflated ethos of resistance to government, white supremacy, and wariness of outsiders. While the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) had supported the Supreme Court decision striking down segregation in public schools (*Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* 1954), much of the membership resisted integration on both small-government and racist grounds. In 1960, the segregationist Ross Barnett won the governorship of Mississippi on the slogan, "God was the original segregationist" (Pearson 1987).

Through the 1968 "Southern Strategy," designed to woo evangelicals and southerners to the Republican party, evangelicals forged political coalition with the Republicans in what became the "New Right": small-government economics, anti-(big government) communism, and "moral" conservativism. In 1980, two-thirds of evangelicals voted for the first "New Right" presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan, though he was divorced, an irregular churchgoer, and had a (morally questionable) "Hollywood background." Reagan's top domestic priorities were tax cuts and business deregulation, which earned substantial white evangelical support. During Reagan's tenure, Grover Norquist founded the anti-tax Americans for Tax Reform (1985), which gained white evangelical support that year and each year since (Confessore 2005, pp. 36–39).

From Reagan To Trump: Big Military, Small Government, Grappling with Racism

As white evangelical wariness of government became associated with anti-communism, support for the military became a priority. Jerry Falwell, co-founder of the Moral Majority, the pre-eminent conservative movement of the 1970s–1980s, called the American soldier in Vietnam a "champion for Christ" (Loveland 1997, p. 161–162). Organizations such as the Christian Military Fellowship recruited evangelicals for the armed forces. Billy Graham and Falwell along with rank-and-file evangelicals supported anti-communist military interventions throughout the 1950s, the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s, and in the 1980s, the anti-communist, right-wing Contras in Nicaragua, though they employed terrorist tactics and committed human rights violations in their fight against the socialist Sandinistas. Evangelical support continued for the 1990 invasion of Iraq and George W. Bush's 2003 invasion of the same country (a more detailed overview is found in Du Mez 2020, pp. 113–117).

Since the end of the Cold War, evangelicals have given strong majorities to the Republican party, from a low of 62% in the 1996 presidential election (Hout and Greeley 2004, p. A 17) to a high of 84% in 2020 (Igielnik, Keeter, and Hartig 2021). In 2004, 79% voted for G.W. Bush, whose major domestic achievements were again business deregulation and the tax cuts of 2001 and 2003. The legislative priority of The Christian Coalition, the largest evangelical organization at the time, was to make these cuts permanent (McKibben 2005, p. 36). Evangelical support for Bush rose ten points between 2000 and 2004 though no national legislation limiting abortion was put forth even when the Republicans controlled the presidency and both congressional houses. This does not suggest that evangelicals were pleased with the lack of such legislation but that they were sufficiently satisfied with Bush's small-government, foreign, and military policies to increase their support.

While Republican economic positions seemed to many evangelicals consistent with long-held small-government-ism, the 1990s began to see critique of Christianized racism and xenophobia. In 1995, the SBC issued an apology "to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism" (SBC 1995). In 2006, it passed a resolution calling for Christians to aid the needy "regardless of their racial or ethnic background, country of origin, or legal status" (SBC 2006). In response to Trump's candidacy, Russell Moore, president of the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, wrote in *The New York Times,* "This election has cast light on the darkness of pent-up nativism and bigotry all over the country" (Moore 2016).

In the uneven process of grappling with racism, these important efforts proceeded alongside rising islamophobia. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, called Islam a "very evil and wicked religion" (CNN 2003). The influential Baptist minister and televangelist Pat Robertson called it worse than Nazism (2002). While the NAE ran a full-page, *New York Times* ad protesting Trump's "Muslim ban" (against travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries), "those leaders," Amy Sullivan writes, "didn't speak for most white evangelicals, three-quarters of whom told Pew pollsters they supported the refugee and travel bans" (Sullivan 2017).

In 2020, 67% of white evangelicals held that new arrivals "are a threat to American traditions" compared to 51% of white mainline Protestants and 31% of those of non-Christian faiths; 66% of white evangelicals thought of newcomers as "invaders"; 66% favored a border wall to prevent immigration, 10 points higher than other white Christians and forty points higher than religiously unaffiliated whites. Sixty-five percent of white evangelicals favored tighter restrictions on legal immigration (Jones, 2020, p. 161, pp. 163–164; Public Religion Research Institute 2021; see Jones for a detailed discussion white evangelical racism and xenophobia).

Evangelicals and Trump

In 2016, on the understanding that God works through flawed human beings (Hamilton 2019), many evangelicals bracketed discomfort with Trump's behavior (from consorting with porn stars and grabbing women's genitals to not paying workers; Markela 2016 and Feuer 2018) in order to support him on economic and nativist policies. For some, however, owing to a strong us–them, militarized ethos, Trump's abusive, "alpha male" comments were not unfortunate blemishes on small-government-ism but appealing on their own. Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, explained that evangelicals were "tired of being kicked around by Barack Obama and his leftists," and were "finally glad that there's somebody on the playground that is willing to punch the bully" (Dovere 2018).

In sum, white evangelicals who believe, with traditional wariness of government, that well-being hangs on constraining the state, saw Trump's sweeping 2017 tax cuts and consistent reductions in government regulatory programs. Evangelicals who—on the long association of small-government-ism, localism, and white supremacy—hold that well-being hangs on limiting government and other "interlopers," saw his tax cuts and deregulation plus, protectionist immigration and trade policies, and encouragement of racist and xenophobic animus. While these policies are supported across the political right, Trump took measures to appeal additionally to evangelical religious concerns. He sought to overturn the ban on political activity by tax-exempt, faith-based organizations (Vogel and Goodstein 2017). He placed onto the Supreme Court three conservative, small-government justices, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett, who disapprove of not only abortion but government spending on social services. In 2018, he moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and in 2019, recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, pleasing Christian Zionists more than America's Jewish communities (Smith 2019), which, among faith groups, show him the least support (Smith and Martínez 2016).

White evangelicals, like other Americans, triage religious concerns with economic and socio-political ones, cautioning against unifactorial understandings of evangelical politics. It is to this triage that we now turn.

Populism and American Evangelicals: Not Unifactorial and Not a Faustian Bargain

In the 2016 election, the factor most important in determining choice of candidate for 62% of "evangelicals by belief" and 59% of "self-identified evangelicals," was the economy. Only 36% and 31%, respectively, were motivated by abortion, 17% and 16% by LGBTQ issues (LifeWay Research 2018). This is consistent with the priorities of Americans overall (Fiorina 2017). Similarly in 2020, the factors most important in determining choice of candidate for those with evangelical beliefs/regular churchgoers (at least once per month) were the economy (22/24%) and the Covid-19 pandemic (16/19%) while abortion, religious freedom, and national security were selected by half as many evangelicals. All other concerns, including immigration and Supreme Court nominees, were selected by 8% or less by both groups (LifeWay Research 2020).

The evangelical focus on the economy suggests affinity with Trump's small-government economic policies. This is consistent with the wariness of government longstanding in American political culture overall and that has had traction among evangelicals since the seventeenth century. In a somewhat schematic summary:

– The immigrant experiences of flight from oppressive governments and of harsh frontier living were essential to the localist aspect of American socio-political culture,

with its wariness of government and outsiders. Under economic and way-of-life duresses, this wariness may turn to the us–them iterations that Knutson and Amira et al. point to, where "outsiders" and government itself are suspect.

– The evangelical experience began in flight from not only oppressive governments but persecutory ones. That plus harsh frontier living *and* the doctrinal emphasis on the covenanted community and individual conscience (rather than on adhering to authority) also contributed to localist aspects of American socio-culture.

– The evangelical experience of duress, as with other Americans, emerges from economic and way-of-life factors but also from a sense of marginalization and the concern that values, communities, and ways of living will be trounced by a secular government and society. As with other Americans, under duress, traditional warinesses may turn to us–them iterations.

Evangelical support for right-wing populism is thus not a Faustian bargain where evangelicals provide *political* backing in exchange for right-wing backing on *religious* matters. It is rather *political* support for *political* policies that evangelicals believe address a range of current challenges, from economic to religious ones.

Concluding Thoughts

In considering the role of white evangelicals in American politics, the notion of stronger-to-softer populisms might be useful. In the Rubric above, softer populisms are identified as potentially productive responses to duress, on a continuum with other democratic efforts to prod difficult but fruitful political debate. They may serve "to transform democracy by generating more egalitarian, pluralistic relationships among the people" (Grattan 2014). Harry Boyte persuasively presents the Civil Rights movement as just such a productive populism (2020).

Several aspects of white evangelical populism might prod needed debate about way-of-life and economic duresses and about the role of family, community, and religion in personal well-being and societal flourishing. Yet strongly binarized right-wing populism—as it essentializes opponents by race, religion, or the non-locality of government and associated elites—is inconsistent with covenantal and republican principles, with democratic government by and for all the people, and with Christian ethics. White evangelical attempts to grapple with racism and xenophobia build on this distinction between productive and exclusionary populism.

The white evangelical affinity for right-wing populism is thus an invitation to evangelicals and others to attend to present way-of-life and economic duresses and to distinguish between solutions that address them and those that create essentialized, us–them binaries. Such binaries neither address the sources of duress nor comport with Christian values regarding the worth of each person in the image of God and love of the needy and stranger. As for not relieving duress, it's perhaps worth recalling for instance that, *contra* right-wing populism, immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-borns (Bernat 2017). High immigration levels negatively impact the income of teenagers without a high school degree but not of other workers; immigrants are disproportionately entrepreneurial job creators (Blau and Mackie 2017).

John McCormick writes that populism is first of all a "cry of pain" (2017). Addressing that cry is the Christian ethic. And perhaps with less pain will come fewer us–them views of the world.

Notes

1 Regarding white evangelicals, see the works of Randall Balmer, Tony Campolo, Shane Clai-borne, the Evangelical Manifesto Steering Committee, David Gushee, Joel Hunter, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, Russell Moore, The National Association of Evangelicals (2004/updated 2018) *For the Health of the Nation*, Brian McLaren, Brandon Robertson, and Jim Wallis.

   Among scholars of color who have influenced evangelical thought and politics, see: Katie Cannon, J. Kameron Carter, James Cone, Kelly Brown Douglas, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Horace Griffin, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, William Pannell, John M. Perkins, Eboni Marshall Turman, Raphael Warnock, Renita Weems, Ida. B. Wells, Traci West, Carol Wayne White, among others.

2 The most notable was the failure to extend its ideals to the indigenous population, people of color, and women—even as these ideals were extended to other groups not originally given Constitutional rights, such as unpropertied white men.

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