

When Character No Longer Counts

Alan Jacobs

ONE OF THE MOST surprising developments of the 2016 presidential campaign was the wholesale abandonment by many conservative Christians, including many Catholics and most evangelicals, of a position that they had once held almost unanimously: In politics, character counts. It is not difficult to understand how this happened, though people who share many fundamental religious convictions will be debating for a long time the wisdom of replacing the familiar standards for evaluating political candidates.

All this has received a good deal of attention in the press. But one very important element of this change of emphasis has been neglected: If character no longer counts, or at least is no longer definitive, then what *does* count? What criteria *should* determine a Christian's attitude toward a political candidate? There is no uniform answer to this question, but the most common answer given by Christian leaders supporting Donald Trump is a troubling one. It replaces the public assessment of virtue with the private judgments of pastors. And it has consequences not only for Christianity in America, but also, thanks to the sheer number of Christians in America, for the whole social order and political culture of our country.

RIGHT TO JUDGE

In his 1999 book, *The Death of Outrage*, William Bennett considered the famous passage from the Gospels in which Jesus says, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." The passage is easy to misinterpret, said Bennett. It is

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certainly “a warning to Christians not to judge self-righteously, uncharitably, hypocritically, hypercritically, in a spirit of harsh condemnation.” However, he warned, “this passage is not—it *cannot* be—a call to withhold all judgment or never to express a critical opinion of another.”

At the end of the passage in Matthew, after all, Christ instructs us not to “give dogs what is sacred” and not to “throw your pearls to pigs.” This must mean that one has to make discriminating judgments about others. The implied conclusion by Bill Clinton apologists that Christ-like forgiveness should render a person incapable of moral criticism collapses under the sheer weight of biblical evidence. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are called upon to judge false teaching, bad doctrine, idolatry, immorality, and more.

Bennett’s position was commonplace at that time, among socially conservative Catholics like Bennett and evangelical Protestants alike. As Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, recently wrote, “In the 1990s, evangelicals largely spoke with solidarity on the centrality of character in leadership, and of character as something essential to the credibility required of one who would hold a major position of leadership, in particular, one who would be elected President of the United States.”

But the logic that Bennett laid out, and that was so widely accepted by Christians in the Clinton era, was clearly rejected by the Christians who voted in such large numbers for Trump. To be sure, some held to their earlier principles: Mohler, for instance, noted that, “If I were to support, much less endorse, Donald Trump for president, I would actually have to go back and apologize to former President Bill Clinton.” But since he did not believe that his earlier critique of Clinton *was* wrong, he couldn’t in good conscience support Trump, whose moral flaws are at least as bad.

But not every American Christian leader achieved, or even sought, Mohler’s consistency of principle. Bennett himself vigorously supported Trump, and declared that those who refused to do so “suffer from a terrible case of moral superiority and put their own vanity and taste above the interest of the country”—which amounts to something very like a reversal of the argument he made in 1999.

Whether one accepts or deplors such a change of course, it’s easy to understand why it happened. In the years since Clinton, culturally conservative Christians have seen increasing, and increasingly intense,

assaults on religious freedoms that had never before been seriously endangered. Christian florists and bakers fined or ostracized for declining to participate in same-sex weddings, the Little Sisters of the Poor ordered to provide contraceptives for their employees, “Dear Colleague” letters from the Department of Education pressuring Christian colleges to accommodate transgender students — the list of conflicts between the Obama administration and Christians was long, and a Hillary Clinton administration would surely have perpetuated those tactics. Though Bill Clinton enthusiastically signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993, Hillary Clinton in 2016 said that “the concerted effort underway in a number of states to discriminate against LGBT people under the guise of protecting religious freedom is . . . insincere and insidious. And we shouldn’t let it stand.” Moreover, the 2016 Democratic Party platform’s determination to repeal the Hyde Amendment, and its removal of earlier platforms’ emphasis on the need to “respect the individual conscience of each American” concerning abortion, suggested a hardening of opposition to any pro-life views.

Very few Christian political leaders believe that Trump shares their deep concerns about these trends, but many of them believe (quite reasonably) that a Trump administration is highly unlikely to pursue any of the culture-changing initiatives that the Obama administration was dedicated to and that a Hillary Clinton administration would surely have continued. They therefore wanted and want to look favorably on Donald Trump — but the old “character counts” stance, given Trump’s history as a businessman and as a person, stands awkwardly in the way of warm support for him.

This is a classic case of what psychologists and cognitive scientists call “motivated reasoning”: The incentive to abandon a commitment to “the centrality of character in leadership” was so strong that Christian leaders, by and large, yielded to it. Suddenly moral uprightness was not significant after all; perhaps it was even a red herring that could distract believers from more vital concerns.

But if character doesn’t count, what *does*?

THE PRAGMATIC VIRTUES

Some Christian leaders who supported Trump’s presidential ambitions didn’t think any theological or specifically Christian justifications were required at all. R. R. Reno, the editor of *First Things* — published by the

Institute on Religion and Public Life, which seeks to “promote religiously informed analysis of culture, society, theology, and politics” — supported Trump for purely pragmatic reasons, saying that his concern is “that we’re moving toward a post-national, globalist future where there are no borders.” To the question “How do you merge your viewpoints as a citizen of the United States and a Christian public thinker?” Reno merely replied, “It’s a mistake to expect the laws of the country to reflect the imperatives of the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount.” It is not obvious that Christians must choose simply between the imposition of biblical law on the one hand and sheer pragmatism on the other, between theonomy and *Realpolitik*, but Reno was at that point reticent to inquire further.

Similarly, Reno’s colleague at *First Things*, Mark Bauerlein, when pressed by a different interviewer, sighed and said, “There are some things in politics that you say, ‘This runs against what I believe.’ . . . You have to suck it up.” Bauerlein’s primary concerns seem rather different than Reno’s: He has, to my knowledge, rarely mentioned the question of borders, but has often decried the illiberal policing of dissident speech by those who claim to be liberals—a worthy cause, in my judgment, but one that likewise might benefit from some theological engagement and reflection.

(It is noteworthy that, as far as I have been able to discover, neither Reno nor Bauerlein has cited Trump’s claim to be pro-life as a reason for supporting him. Reno and Bauerlein are Roman Catholics, and, while far fewer Catholics than evangelicals voted for Trump, those who did often cited his opposition to the abortion regime, and the likelihood that he would appoint pro-life Supreme Court justices, as a major justification.)

There are, to be sure, religious thinkers who don’t believe that religious arguments should be deployed in the political arena of a pluralistic society like that of the United States. The philosopher Robert Audi, for instance, has long argued that even if religious believers have religious reasons for holding a particular view, when they come onto the public stage they need to make their case by employing “adequate secular reasons.” And this is a defensible position—but it is not the position historically taken by *First Things*, whose founding editor, the late Richard John Neuhaus, deplored the existence of a “naked public square” from which religious positions are excluded. For Neuhaus, “[i]n a democratic society, presumably, the public business is carried on in conversation with the actual values of people who *are* the society,” and therefore the religiosity of Americans. “The popular

intuition is that this fact [that the American people are a pretty religious people] ought, somehow, to make a difference. It is not an embarrassment to be denied or disguised. It is an inescapable part of what [Alexander] Bickel calls the ‘tradition of our society and of kindred societies that have gone before.’” Moreover, Neuhaus argued, this religious inheritance “is demonstrably the present source of moral vitalities by which we measure our virtues and hypocrisies.”

And in this way the religious point of view offers the valuable public service of *decentering* political disputes, revealing their dependence on values that might not be generated by politics itself. Neuhaus addressed this too: “Because government cannot help but make moral judgments of an ultimate nature, it must, if it has in principle excluded identifiable religion, make those judgments by ‘secular’ reasoning that is given the force of religion.” And this is a tendency to be resisted, not merely for the good of religion but for the good of the state itself. The secular state has an interest in hosting people whose ultimate commitments transcend the secular state, if only because it has a healthily humbling effect, as a fool does upon a great king. There may, then, be adequate secular reasons, in a pluralistic and institutionally secular society, for religious believers to refuse to give merely secular reasons for their beliefs.

In any event, although we cannot know what he would have thought of Trump, Neuhaus’s argument in *The Naked Public Square* offers an alternative to the political pragmatism of the current editors of *First Things*. That pragmatism has certain virtues, but in refraining from offering theological reflection on practical politics, Reno and Bauerlein are declining a role which Neuhaus thought essential for the health of religious communities in America—and also for the moral health of the nation as a whole.

GOD’S FINGERPRINT

A similar separation of the religious and the political appeared in other unexpected places during the 2016 election. Jerry Falwell, Jr.—in dramatic contrast to his father—argued that we must clearly distinguish between moral character, which is a religious matter, and the leadership qualities a politician needs:

You have to choose the leader that would make the best king or president and not necessarily someone who would be a good pastor. We’re not voting for pastor-in-chief. It means sometimes we have to choose

a person who has the qualities to lead and who can protect our country and bring us back to economic vitality, and it might not be the person we call when we need somebody to give us spiritual counsel.

This too is a pragmatic argument, and one in which what matters for a nation is not any sort of moral excellence but rather security and wealth. But Falwell did not remain consistently within this ambit, and at other points during the campaign offered more specifically Christian reasons for supporting Donald Trump. For Falwell and for many other Christian leaders, especially in the evangelical world, pragmatism is available but not sovereign: Other and more specifically religious considerations tend to intrude. For American evangelicals tend to believe in an activist God, a God more directly involved in political and social history, and so they require a more thoroughly theological account of politics. And from this point of view, it turns out, the very unlikelihood of Trump could be a sign of divine activity.

David Barton, the controversial evangelical historian, takes this view:

One thing I know for sure is that in the race of primaries, we had a lot of really good God guys in there. And we had a huge turnout of professing Christians and evangelicals and others, so there is nothing to complain about that we didn't get a voice, we didn't get a candidate. We had great candidates to choose from and this is who the people chose, and this is who the people chose with a really high turnout of evangelicals. So I kind of look back and say, "Hmmm, I wonder where God's fingerprint is in this?" because this is not necessarily a failure of the church.

For Barton, the fact that Christian voters did not vote for the "really good God guys" but instead chose Trump is certainly surprising—but perhaps the surprise should lead Christians to suspect that the Holy Spirit was at work in those voters, that "God's fingerprint" could be discerned in the unexpected outcome.

Frank Amedia, the founder of Touch Heaven Ministries and a fervent Trump admirer, takes this logic a step further, suggesting that Trump's moral flaws are a paradoxical sign of God's favor: Trump's success is "not because Donald Trump has heralded his faith or the name of God, but the Lord has put His favor upon him, and how amazing it is that

the favor of God can overcome so many mistakes, so many bumbles, so many things that otherwise we would think would destroy somebody in business, destroy them in politics, destroy them in relationships.” Note that unlike many of Trump’s Christian supporters, Amedia doesn’t here claim that Trump is a Christian—even a “baby Christian,” as James Dobson of Focus on the Family called him. That Trump could be so indifferent to God, so inept, and so unethical, *and nevertheless succeed* should tell us that “it was the will of the Lord to do this.” And so, Amedia concludes, “here we sit now.”

Jerry Falwell, Jr., has compared Trump to King David—“God called King David a man after God’s own heart even though he was an adulterer and a murderer”—though, since this statement overlooks the rather significant fact that David profoundly, passionately repented of his sins while Trump has said that he does not ask God for forgiveness, the comparison is perhaps not wholly apt. Recognizing this, some pastors have looked for other biblical analogues for “the favor of the Lord” being shown to Donald Trump. The analogue deployed most frequently in the course of the campaign was Cyrus the Great, the ancient king of Persia who, through his conquest of Babylon, liberated the people of Israel from their captivity.

The invocation of Cyrus is helpful for those who want to see “God’s fingerprint” on the rise of Trump but who can’t quite convince themselves that Trump is much of a Christian, for Cyrus was *used* by God without *knowing* God. Thus Jeremiah Johnson, a pastor and leader of Behold the Man Ministries, wrote in July 2015 that God had spoken to him and said, “Just as I raised up Cyrus to fulfill My purposes and plans, so have I raised up Trump to fulfill my purposes and plans prior to the 2016 election.”

Again, the unlikelihood of Donald Trump as God’s “trumpet”—Johnson does not hesitate to employ this image—is, paradoxically, a reason for taking the possibility seriously. After all, Christians believe in the God who, as Jesus says in Luke 10:21, has “hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to infants.”

But Johnson goes further than this, and indeed returns us to the question of character through, as it were, the back door. For Johnson says that God in speaking to him revealed certain virtues possessed by Trump: “Though many see the outward pride and arrogance, I have given him the tender heart of a father that wants to lend a helping hand to the poor and the needy, to the foreigner and the stranger.” The rest

of us have to go by what we see, the “outward pride and arrogance,” but to Johnson God has revealed the hidden depths—and we may see those depths too, if we but seek them.

Trump’s bad behavior and rough language are a kind of test of our commitment, our willingness to persevere in finding hidden truth: “[Y]ou must listen through the bantering to discover the truth that I will speak through him.” Johnson is effectively saying to Christians skeptical of Trump’s character, “Who you gonna believe, me or your lying eyes?”

THE CULT OF AUTHORITY

The joke in that last sentence reveals, I think, a major difference between the now widely discarded “character counts” model and the one that has, among many Christians, replaced it. When William Bennett wrote that “[t]hroughout the New Testament, Christians are called upon to judge false teaching; bad doctrine; idolatry; immorality; and more,” he was assuming, and implying that the New Testament also assumes, that all of those sins and errors are clearly discernible. Judgments of character in politicians are therefore *public* judgments, potentially available to all.

Of course, people will disagree about whether any given act is immoral, or any given statement doctrinally or morally incorrect, but such matters are subject to shared canons of evidence and argument. It would be possible for a Christian, even though his moral standards derive ultimately from the Bible, to persuade an unbeliever that a particular political figure had proven himself untrustworthy and unfit for office, without converting (or even at that moment trying to convert) that person to Christianity. His reasoning might not be *wholly* secular, but it overlaps considerably with standards that non-Christians also hold.

But in the political world of Frank Amedia and Jeremiah Johnson, public reason is useless and indeed likely to draw people away from the truth. That God has made Donald Trump his trumpet—“You must listen to the trumpet very closely for he will sound the alarm and many will be blessed because of his compassion and mercy”—is not a proposition that can be evaluated by any standards that unbelievers can understand. It cannot even be evaluated by Christians skeptical that God has spoken in a unique way to Jeremiah Johnson. It is a private revelation that depends on a prior belief that Johnson is a faithful channel of the Holy Spirit. And insofar as it can be validated at all, it can

be validated only by Trump's electoral victory—a standard which also requires a new logic, since it could not possibly have been applied to the eight years of the Obama presidency, or of Bill Clinton's.

This is enough to make one long for the pragmatism of Reno and Bauerlein, which, while short on theological or religious content, is at least something that one could debate (not least by arguing, as I did briefly above, for the political insufficiency of pragmatism). The positions taken by Barton, Amedia, and Johnson merely worship success, and then retroactively explain that success by reference to a providential logic accessible only to the True Believers.

These leaders have replaced a rhetoric of persuasion with a rhetoric of pure authority—very like the authority that Trump claims for himself. (“Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it.”) Consequently, their whole house of cards may well collapse if the Trump presidency is anything other than a glorious success, and will leave those who have accepted that rhetoric bereft of explanations as well as arguments. Presumably the most fervent supporters of Trump will argue (as Trump himself will argue) that his failures have occurred because others have betrayed him, have rejected the man that God raised up to rescue America, but this will require the replacement of the Cyrus analogy with another one yet to be determined. We can only hope that no one compares a failed Trump to an American Jesus betrayed by American Judases.

If all this sounds like a strange fantasyland of narrative, an imaginative world of what members of the Trump administration have taken to calling “alternative facts,” that's because it is just that. The larger, and longer-term, effect of accounts like this is to encourage Christians to abandon the world of shared evidence, shared convictions, and shared possibilities, and such abandonment is very bad news for Christians and for America.

What is required of serious religious believers in a pluralistic society is the ability to code-switch: never to forget or neglect their own native religious tongue, but also never to forget that they live in a society of people for whom that language is gibberish. To speak only in the language of pragmatism is to bring nothing distinctive to the table; to speak only a private language of revelation and self-proclaimed authority is to leave the table altogether. For their own good, but also for the common good, religious believers need to be always bilingually present.