

How US evangelicals could affect the entire world

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HOW US EVANGELICALS COULD AFFECT THE ENTIRE WORLD

So, 'Super Tuesday' has happened – and Donald Trump looks on track for the Republican Party nomination in the US presidential elections.

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photo: Stock

A lot could happen between now and the actual vote, of course – but currently polls show Trump leading Biden, and so we could well be facing a second presidency from the businessman and former TV host. The role that US evangelicals play could affect the entire globe – and should be viewed, as I will explain below, with some concern.

The US election comes in a year that will be perhaps the most significant year of our generation. This is for a number of reasons...

It is likely to be the deciding year in the Russia-Ukraine war, that will set the scene for 'Cold War 2.0,' which will define the next decade in European relations.

Even if a wider regional conflict is avoided in the ***Middle East***, it looks like the horrific events of October 7, 2023, and the extreme violence of the Israeli military response at the expense of Gazan civilians, will set a bitter and violent tone for 2024 and for years to come.

Recent data suggests that global temperatures during 2023 exceeded those of any period in the last 100,000 years. The impact of climate change is all around us.

There is an increasingly ***apocalyptic tone*** to much of the news nowadays and almost a normalisation of crisis and turbulence.

The battle at the ballots

However, the area that stands out to me as we look ahead over the next few months – and which has the potential to impact on all of the above areas, and many more – is what will occur at the ballot box. This is particularly striking because this is an area where individual people will make decisions that will decide the future of the global community.

This year, ***countries with a combined population of about four billion*** (about half the world's population) are ***holding elections***. Combined, these make up fifty percent of global GDP. Expect 'political fireworks' well before New Year's Eve 2024; and lasting for long after its fireworks have gone out.

Of these elections the most decisive will be in the USA and this is the one which gives me the greatest concern. It is also one in which evangelical Christians will play a decisive part; and in a way that should cause concern for the global evangelical community.

While the current polarization of US politics can be traced back to the bitter disputes of the battles for Civil Rights, and then over Vietnam, in the 1960s and 1970s, its current intensity is undeniably exacerbated by **21st-century culture wars** and the toxic effects of a weaponised internet and social media. 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man,' is an old adage and, without doubt, **Donald Trump both represents an outcome of these bitter and turbulent factors, and an accelerator of them too.** But let's be clear, if we think it's been turbulent in the USA since 2016, 'You ain't seen nothing yet!'

The threat posed by Donald Trump

Whatever one thinks about Donald Trump and his policies, **he is undoubtedly a 'chaos candidate,' the 'disruptor in chief.'** The Trump phenomenon is, in many ways, the embodiment of conflicted modernity, deep anxiety and resentment, battles for the 'soul' of a nation, disregard for truth, the normalisation of violent rhetoric (with real-world violence all too close behind), that now defines much of social and political conversation.

Having studied US politics since my university days, and latterly written extensively about its current fractured state – and the contemporary conflicted appeals there to the 'deep story' of what constitutes its fundamental character – I feel that 2024 will be a defining point in US history. But I think it is bigger even than that.

I think that a Trump victory will pose a severe threat to US society, its political institutions, and (consequently) to the

peace and stability of the global community. That is an extreme thing to say, but I have reasons for making such a statement.

There is mounting evidence that Trump is preparing for a massive assault on – what I would call – the legal and constitutional framework of the USA and the role of the USA in the world, or – what he would call – the ‘deep state,’ foreign entanglements, and restrictions on US behaviour. We cannot both be correct. I think I am, for the following reasons...

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, ***Trump still does not accept the result of the November 2020 presidential election and has consistently worked to undermine trust in the US electoral process.*** If he wins in 2024, we can expect to see active efforts designed to translate this narrative into policies which will entrench the power of the ***MAGA-dominated Republican party*** at the expense of the political system. There are reports of plans within the Trump camp of replacing huge swathes of people in key positions within the federal justice system, law enforcement, security service and FBI with Trump loyalists. To the MAGA-base this will be the deployment of ‘true American patriots’ in those roles. To many others (myself included) they will include many with the same cavalier attitude towards truth, legality, and constitutional niceties, that characterize Trump and his inner circle. ***That the USA might become an ‘illiberal democracy,’ of a kind now seen in Hungary (and latterly in Poland) would once have been unthinkable. However, it is time to think the unthinkable.***

After all, this is the man who put pressure on (Republican) **officials in Georgia** to overturn the 2020 result there: 'I need 11,000 votes. Give me a break' (January 2, 2021, in a phone call from then-President Trump to Georgia Secretary of State Raffensperger). In preparation for his 2024 bid for the presidency he has promised his base: **'I am your retribution,'** a phrase he then repeated (March 4, 2023, at the Conservative Political Action Conference). Since then, he has promised: 'We will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live **like vermin** within the confines of our country' (November 11, 2023, at a rally in New Hampshire).

If anyone thinks this is just 'talk,' remember the 'Trump talk' that preceded the events of January 6, 2021. Many commentators (myself included) would assert that Trump is once again employing 'dog-whistle' tactics, so that his base will hear the message but he can deny responsibility for the outcomes. As recently as January 9, 2024 – when referring to the possibility that the criminal charges against him might damage his presidential chances – he ominously opined: ***'It'll be bedlam in the country. It's a very bad thing. It's a very bad precedent. As we said, it's the opening of a Pandora's box.'*** Many would argue – with January 6, 2021 in mind – that Trump has form when it comes to opening Pandora's Boxes! Careless talk costs lives. It can also undermine systems.

'25% of Americans say it is 'probably' true that the FBI instigated the January 6 attack on the US Capitol'

The Trump narrative plays well with huge numbers of US voters who accept unsubstantiated conspiracy theories promulgated by right-wing media. This resonates with those who will accept any explanation for their defeat in 2020, other than the simple one that Biden legitimately won. The cumulative effects of this Trump-led narrative are highly corrosive. As recently as January 2024, a Washington Post-University of Maryland poll revealed that twenty-five percent of Americans say it is 'probably' or 'definitely' true that the FBI instigated the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. Among Republicans, thirty-four percent say the FBI organized and encouraged the insurrection.

A US commentator memorable summed the danger up, when considering what Trump had learned from his first time in office. It was, the commentator mused, rather like in the Jurassic Park movie where the velociraptors figured out how to open doors. Trump now knows which doors to open. And how.

However, *the threat posed by Trump and the MAGA-base goes beyond the future of US democracy.*

On the environmental front, Trump is committed to *'drill, drill, drill,'* (December 5, 2023, to Fox News Channel host Sean Hannity) – so expect the USA under Trump to undermine global action on climate change. Given that *climate change* poses an existential threat to life on the planet this should alarm anyone who takes the scientific evidence seriously. But, of course, huge numbers in the MAGA-base don't.

Many commentators on Russia believe that *Putin is holding out for a Trump victory* because he believes that Trump and the current MAGA-Republican Party will cut aid to Ukraine, undermine NATO, and cause

so much chaos in the USA that it will cease to have an appetite for foreign activities. Putin is waiting for Trump.

An ***abandonment of Ukraine*** and the attendant US isolationism (withdrawing from international commitments generally) will be watched very carefully by China, as the regime there weighs up its chances of getting away with aggression directed at Taiwan.

In the Middle East it is difficult to imagine a Trump presidency handling the explosive mixture of this troubled region with dexterity or consistency.

That is before one gets to the impact on the world economy of the kind of 'America-First' protectionism espoused by Trump. Plus, a Trump victory will give encouragement to authoritarian nationalist regimes globally, whether these regimes work with, or conflict with, the USA. The discordant mood music that will affect a generation is being orchestrated as you read this. The question is: Will Trump be the conductor of the contribution that the USA makes to this cacophony? Or will the USA choose a different tune? 2024 will decide. The striking thing is that vast numbers of US evangelicals will vote for Trump, despite the above (even because of it). Why?

White US evangelical support for Trump

In 2016, eighty-one percent of White US evangelicals voted for Trump. The proportion voting for him in 2020 was comparable. The support of White evangelicals (and it is necessary to add that racial clarifier) for the Republican Party (aka the GOP) has become one of the norms of US politics. While we await the latest polling data, there is every sign that their support remains very high and that 2024 will be comparable with previous patterns of voting. In the

January Iowa Caucuses fifty-three percent of White evangelical Christians backed Trump, twenty-seven percent **DeSantis**, and a mere thirteen percent the more moderate Haley. Given that DeSantis has tried to pitch his appeal to the Trump Base, ***this means that eighty percent of White evangelicals voted for Trump or 'Trump 2.0.'*** The exit poll for South Carolina's Republican presidential primary in February revealed that Trump won about three-quarters of the vote among White evangelicals. In contrast, other voters in the state were more closely divided between Trump and Haley. The ideological voting pattern, so clear in 2016 and 2020, rolls on.

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The question is: Why the extreme levels of evangelical support for Trump and his, increasingly radicalised, GOP? This is not the same as asking: Why don't they vote Democrat instead? There are many reasons why (in contrast to many UK evangelicals) they do not vote for a party of the centre, let alone the Left. ***The USA is very different to the UK in its religious as well as its political culture.*** Things like Brexit rather mask how 'European' the UK is in practice, with its high-level of support for ***state-run health care, acceptance of government intervention in society, strong antipathy towards guns***, etc. The USA is different. But enthusiastic support for Trump? And that, despite all that has occurred since 2016? That is a phenomenon that requires some answers and I think the following go a long way towards doing that.

In addition to being a historian, commentator, and columnist, I am also a preacher and church leader within a UK church that would be described as 'evangelical.' Most of my Christian experience has been within the evangelical community. Consequently, I can recognise what is going on in the USA, even while noting significant differences to my UK experience. And, while I can spot things that are peculiar to the USA, I can also see things that aren't – and some of these should ring alarm bells among evangelicals outside the USA. Indeed, they should ring alarm bells among Christians of all persuasions.

It is probably right to start with the sense of ***God-approved national exceptionalism***. This has a very American flavour, as it is rooted in the 17th-century Puritan settlement of New England in which those arriving there saw themselves as a '***New Israel, conquering a 'New Canaan,***' and establishing a 'city on a hill' as a beacon of righteousness. By the 19th century this had morphed into a more secular belief in '***Manifest Destiny,***' as the USA opened the Western Frontier, but it retained its old assumptions of White Protestant cultural superiority – at the expense of Native Americans, African-American slaves and, in time, southern and eastern Europeans, Jews, Chinese, etc. The fact that it is *white* evangelicals who constitute such a committed Trump constituency needs a frank appraisal. Whether we like it or not, race is in the mix.

'...for anyone to assume a new "Chosen People" status for any particular country collides head-on

with the international, non-ethnic, concept of the radical new community of Christ'

While God may work through the actions of a particular nation, for anyone to assume a new and ongoing 'Chosen People' status for any particular country collides head-on with the international, non-ethnic, **concept of the radical new community** (the ecclesia) of Christ: **the Church**. But it is an attitude and assumption that is not confined to the USA. I sometimes hear similar (rather self-congratulatory) sentiments expressed at times among Christians in the UK.

The idea of national exceptionalism frequently shades into 'Christian Nationalism,' and we certainly see this among US evangelicals. This perceived elite status of a country is frequently constructed at the expense of other communities (existing both internally and externally). As well as being self-serving and divisive, this is usually fuelled by framing other communities as the 'alien other.' Trump is highly skilled at doing this, but he pushes on an open door; he did not create the door, or unlock it! The slogan '**America First,**' so beloved of MAGA-Republicans, is a direct outcome of this. I heard similar comments (though lacking the loud amplification) among some UK Christians during the **Brexit Referendum**. Christian nationalism is not just a US phenomenon.

Within this lies an unconscious hankering after theocracy. Let's be quite clear about this: **there is no blueprint, or mandate, for the theocracy in the New Testament**. This is why, from the 17th century onwards, Christians who wish to impose a 'godly' agenda on others appeal (often quite

explicitly) to Old Testament models. In this, ***they often seem more comfortable with 'slaughtering the Amalekites' than implementing the principles of the Sermon on the Mount.*** This tendency is often exacerbated when Christians feel that they are losing influence. The USA is a striking example of this. In July 2021 the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) published new data, as part of its '2020 Census of American Religion,' and concluded: ***'Since 2006, white evangelical Protestants have experienced the most precipitous drop in affiliation, shrinking from 23% of Americans in 2006 to 14% in 2020.'*** This has accelerated a digging-in and a desire to impose 'godliness' (as perceived by some) on a recalcitrant society. In contrast, ***the New Testament principle (rooted in a marginalised community) is servant-hearted witness; and the acceptance that others (within agreed legal boundaries) must decide for themselves.***

Which is why democracy itself is in peril. When US evangelicals were politically influential, they were often found among the staunchest defenders of democracy. Just think of the outlook of US Christians during the Cold War. After all, for all its flaws, democracy protects personal freedoms (including religious ones), defends the rights of minorities, and encourages respect for the rule of law – and it is better than the alternatives. I do hope we don't have to learn that lesson again, from scratch. ***However, the USA shows that, when evangelicals start to lose influence, some of them exhibit such a hankering after the defence of their position, and their right to impose themselves on others, that restricting things like voting in elections, the role of courts, and due process, can become regarded as acceptable collateral damage in order to achieve certain 'higher goals.'*** And these are usually reflective of issues related to personal morality, and personal sexual behaviour, since commitment to confront institutional and

corporate sin has not been as strong within the evangelical community as it should be. The collateral damage to democracy can be dismissed as necessary to implement God's kingdom; as simply overthrowing human rules in order to implement God's laws. Except, of course, that Christians should be more interested in grace than law.

Which is why, as well as hankering for a theocracy, there can be a hankering after a king. Given the republican nature of US society this assertion may sound odd. But for 'king' read 'strong man' (and it's always a man!). Or to quote many US evangelicals, a '**Cyrus**.' This is rooted in a claimed Old Testament principle, but in this case it refers not to a king of Israel but a king of Persia. The idea is that someone who is not of the household of faith (like Cyrus of Persia) can be an instrument in the hands of God to implement a godly programme. Today's 'godly programme,' of course, being that devised by those who think they have the right to impose it. ***And today's Cyrus, we are told, is Trump.*** In the USA, this 'godly programme' includes vehement defence of the ***right to purchase semi-automatic weapons*** and ***visceral opposition to state health care***, alongside moral positions that would be recognised by other global evangelical communities and many traditional Christians. Life is complex and the mixing of the two muddies the waters considerably. Support for traditional moral and sexual values and practices gets muddled with extreme right-wing politics (and a desire to impose rather than persuade) and becomes hard to disentangle. But disentangled it must be!

Finally, and appropriately, that brings us to ***The End of the World.***

Despite a two-thousand-year-old history of failed interpretation and erroneous speculation, that can only be described as a 'train wreck,' many US

evangelicals (as in the global evangelical community) have a **focus on eschatology that can only be described as obsessional. Convinced that these are the 'end times,' climate change is of little concern, guns are necessary for the impending conflict with antichrist, international treaties and transnational bodies are dismissed as the preparation for the one-world-government of antichrist.** This goes a long way to explaining why so many evangelicals in the USA have gone down the '**rabbit hole**' of **conspiracy theories**. Such outlooks hold deep appeal to many who feel they are at odds with modernity, are anxious at their declining influence, and want simple answers to complex problems. And for those with a binary world view, the kinds of 'deep state' claims of the conspiracy-theory community can seem to offer a key to unlocking an understanding of contemporary society. **This is why so many US evangelicals will be found among those who think the 2020 election was stolen, the FBI set up January 6, and the international order is underpinned by powerful paedophiles** (who always belong to the opposite political party). That these outlooks coincide with the outlooks of the fossil fuel lobby, modern nationalism, racial anxiety, White supremacy, wealthy right-wing media and online 'news' platforms, and unrestricted capitalism, goes a long way towards explaining why a lot of unholy money flows into this, allegedly holy, stream of convictions.

I strongly feel that this explains much of the support for Trump among White US evangelicals. He promises a conflict with many aspects of modernity that they fear and oppose. He will promote their – highly selective – moral causes, while dismissing other moral issues. He will not be restricted by norms of behaviour, or by constitutional and legal restraints. A

quick fix for implementing their 'godly agenda' is offered them. He provides them with a narrative that, while rooted in amorality and lies, explains the world to their satisfaction and in a way that absolves them from responsibility for it. It also explains their electoral failures by blaming it on a 'stolen election' and a 'deep state.' They hanker for theocracy by the back-door and the arrival of a 'strong man' (their 'Cyrus') who will impose a programme that reflects their agenda (which, of course, in their view is the same as God's will). Confident in their purified national community, they can abandon the world outside the USA and prepare for the Second Coming. Climate change is either a hoax or part of the eschatological plan for the end of the world.

As 2024 unfolds, the future of the world will be deeply impacted on by the situation in the USA. That situation will be influenced by the very particular and peculiar outlook of US evangelicals. It is my view that the global evangelical community needs to face up to, and confront, this situation. This will be particularly difficult for many of us who have been heavily influenced by US brothers and sisters. This situation does not mean that all which emanates from the US evangelical community is wrong. Far from it. But much of it is, in my view, now being distorted and corrupted by the present lurch of that community ***to the extreme-right and to devoted support for Donald Trump.*** If some of what I have written sounds familiar here, we need to confront it here too.

Christian outlook is rooted in radical transformational love expressed in Christ, as recorded in the New Testament. It is seen in service not imposition. It is international and multi-ethnic. ***It promotes honesty, justice, compassion, and self-control. We must not let Christian faith, or the term 'evangelical,' be hijacked by the way that many current US***

evangelicals are behaving and expressing themselves. 2024 looks set to be quite a year. 'Lord, have mercy... Christ, have mercy.'

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