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Review of Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump

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Author Note

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In *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, John Fea, professor of history at Messiah College, has written a fine and all too necessary book that helps explain how we have reached this moment when *Christianity Today* calls for the impeachment and removal of a sitting president while the broader evangelical church embraces the same leader. A thoughtful, gentle guide for the perplexed, Fea is writing directly (though not exclusively) to fellow “white evangelicals” who share his befuddlement at the overwhelming, fervid, and ongoing support their religious compatriots offer to Donald Trump.

It is a question that the mere 19% of white evangelicals (to whom the book is dedicated) who do not support Trump are constantly asking – as are scholars, members of the mainstream media who provide countless bewildered stories about white evangelical men in diners across the rust belt, and, of course, Democratic party activists: how do these “so-called Christians” reconcile themselves to supporting such a crude, self-aggrandizing, and decidedly un-Jesus-like person as Donald J. Trump? Fea takes this question seriously and his mission is two-fold: as a historian, he wants to trace the path that leads to white evangelical support for Trump, and as a white evangelical Fea wants to invite his devout readers to a different path, a road where they might redeem themselves, their faith, and perhaps even their nation.

As the author of the widely read *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), Fea is knowledgeable and engaging, entreating his readers to follow the path from John Winthrop to Paula White. Fea demonstrates that Trump did not “come from nowhere” and capture the Republican party or white evangelical Christians; rather, Trump has tapped into and is made possible by a long arc of evangelical engagement in American politics that is not simply a matter of policy aspirations, but a tone and style of anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, anti-reason ideology. Fea builds his argument steadily and painstakingly. And he does so not as a champion of progressive causes. Indeed, Fea is critical of left politics, too, faulting progressives for their blind-spots and biases up to the point of resting on false equivalencies of responsibility for contemporary conditions.

Fea does not break any new ground here; numerous historians have explored this terrain in great detail, and Fea relies on their scholarship. But breaking new ground is not Fea’s mission. Rather he is seeking a new audience, offering to the 19% of white evangelicals – and any of the remaining 81% who might be willing to listen – an explanation of how we have reached our current moment of reckoning. How can he as a historian explain to fellow white evangelicals how they have come to be the base of Donald Trump’s Republican party, how this church of public purveyors of “family values” and personal responsibility can get into bed with the most profligate of presidents.

What Fea is describing – though he does not use this language – is the problem of white evangelical Christian identity politics. For Fea, white evangelical Christianity is too often not merely expressive of but rooted in the three strands of fear, desire for temporal power, and nostalgia. “Evangelicals,” Fea explains, “have always been very fearful people, and they have built their understanding of political engagement around the anxiety they have felt amid times of

social and cultural change” (8). Every difference seems to be experienced not as a wonder, but as a threat – and a threat over which one must seek power and from which one must be secured.

For example, in speaking about Barack Obama, Fea describes him as “the perfect foil for the evangelical purveyors of the politics of fear. Obama was an exotic figure to many white conservative Christians, and he represented nearly everything that made white evangelicals afraid: he grew up in Hawaii and spent time as a child in a predominantly Muslim country; he was the son of a white woman and a black man; he not only had a strange name, but he had the same middle name as a well-known Muslim dictator whom the United States waged war against” (18). Somehow, white evangelical Christians who espouse the importance of personal responsibility at every turn were made to fear Obama, the “poster child for demographic changes taking place in the country” (18). Here and throughout *Believe Me*, Fea offers a descriptive account of white evangelicals’ fear of Obama and the “GOP Fear-Mongers” who generated and preyed upon these fears. But this discussion of what white evangelicals feared is familiar, and it elides the more important question of *why* white evangelicals opted for fear.

Or to put the question more pointedly, Fea does not dwell on the appeal of fear – and the particular vitality white supremacist, misogynist, and heteronormative fears lend white evangelicalism in the United States. It is not simply that fear is baked into evangelical belief and practice, but that such fears are the force that gives the faith meaning. The greater the threat, the more powerful the deliverance. Fea names this addictive, misguided, and paradoxical white evangelical commitment to fear directly: “Even the most cursory reading of the Old and New Testament reveals that, ultimately, Christians have nothing to fear.” And yet, Fea suggests, most white evangelicals lack “the kind of spiritual courage necessary to overcome fear” and as a result do not simply embrace their fears but revel in the “political strongmen” who first acknowledge the legitimacy of these fears and then promise deliverance (p. 45). Donald J. Trump did not invent this formula; evangelicals have, in their lack of spiritual courage, demanded and gloried in this message for generations. Despite the literal biblical reassurance to “fear not,” white evangelicals are primed for fear, their identity is stoked by fear, and the sources of fear are around every unfamiliar turn.

Throughout *Believe Me*, Fea’s critique of the contemporary state of evangelical politics has a subtext of wistful longing. Rather than rising to the hope of the gospel promise that the belief in Jesus as savior offers a release from fears of the future, evangelicals have too often turned in terror from the future – and accordingly from the faith in the divine message – back toward a crabbed and partial fantasy of past glory days. The socio-political ideology that emerges from this fear of the future is rooted in nostalgia. Wisely, Fea writes: “In the end, the practice of nostalgia is inherently selfish because it focuses entirely on our own experience of the past and not on the experience of others...Nostalgia can give us tunnel vision. Its selective use of the past fails to recognize the complexity and breadth of human experience... Conservative evangelicals who sing the praises of America’s ‘Judeo-Christian heritage’ today, and who yearn for a Christian Golden Age, are really talking about the present rather than the past” (159-60).

Fea’s assessment of white evangelical nostalgia leads directly to what I thought was the strongest contribution of *Believe Me*: the connection between the nostalgic longing to Make America Great Again and the joint narcissism of Trump and white evangelical America. If nostalgic narcissism leads one to romanticize and celebrate only one’s imagined past, it is also illustrative of a refusal to seek to understand the experiences of another’s present and eliminates the need to imagine a pluralist future. Trumpian narcissism, in other words, is indicative of

narcissism and self-centeredness that has become the predominant feature of white evangelical Christianity. The white evangelical Christian message is one devoid of humility, and rather glories in its righteousness – the self-aggrandizing sentiments of the prosperity gospel demonstrate this phenomenon all too clearly. The President’s narcissism is welcomed by white evangelicals because it corresponds to their self-regard. Together, they represent what political theorist William Connolly calls a “resonance machine.”^[1]

That Fea is surprised and confused by the white evangelical support for Donald Trump illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of this book. Fea invites readers who share his surprise on a historical journey through, for example, the failures of white evangelicals to stand up for racial justice in the United States – and indeed through the many ways that white supremacy has depended upon the faint sheen of moral legitimacy provided by evangelical Christianity over the last 150 years. The road to Donald Trump on this reading is not filled with surprising hairpin turns, but is rather a pretty straight shot. And so, the great limitation of *Believe Me* is the presumption that contemporary white evangelical Christians are somehow acting in a manner that betrays their tradition, when in fact with few exceptions, since the era of Charles Finney and the pre-Civil War evangelical abolitionists, most white evangelical interventions into the American political culture have been in devout opposition to democratic pluralism, to equal access to power and opportunity for those outside of white evangelical communities, to a refusal to respect the equal dignity and moral standing of non-white evangelical people as anything other than threats, pity, targets for missionary zeal, or transactional dealing.

Indeed, for all that Fea is justifiably concerned with the danger of conservative nostalgia for a mythical “greater America,” Fea himself concludes *Believe Me* with liberal nostalgia for the Southern Christian Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Rather than engaging with contemporary political activists, Fea prefers to highlight lessons he learned from a 10-day “civil rights movement bus tour” (p. 181). In the absence of white evangelical efforts to promote social justice rooted in the commitment to inclusion and equality that Fea finds in the teachings of Jesus, he turns to the example 1960’s civil rights activists hoping they might help shine a little light in the terrible darkness so that white evangelicals can “take a long hard look at what we have become” (191). Perhaps Fea concluded that that turning to contemporary Black Lives Matter or LGBTQA+ activists or Christian feminists as lights in the darkness would be too much to ask of his bewildered white evangelical readers. As such, Fea is trying – desperately – to reach people where they are because there is a lot of work they need to do – but such nostalgia is illustrative of the limits of Fea’s vision and his faith in his readers.

In the end, *Believe Me* implicitly offers two basic answers to Fea’s initial question about the evangelical road to Trump that is more precise than the broad categories of Fear, Power, and Nostalgia. While Fea does not make these claims explicitly, they are the underlying subtext and logical conclusion of this book: 1) white evangelical identity politics is tribal – any idea, person, group or belief that stands outside the tribe is considered as a threat that must be dealt with aggressively with the essential end of preserving the security of the tribe. And, 2) relatedly, white evangelical politics is transactional – uncharitable and un-principled means can, and even must, be used to achieve the ultimate ends of the organization. This characteristic of white evangelicalism is of course, most clearly evident in the widespread support of Donald Trump. Even those evangelicals who are gingerly willing to offer mild criticism of the President’s failings or “uncouth language,” do so only as a means of grasping for moral legitimacy in supporting the “imperfect agent God has chosen” to achieve holy ends like the appointment of

pro-life, pro-“religious freedom” judges to courts across the land. Taken together, the result is that the vast balance of white evangelical Christianity is virtually bankrupt as a matter of principled faith. It is no more religious than a corporation, a country club, a trade union, or the Chamber of Commerce.

Fea is understandably reticent to reach this conclusion. He still holds out hope for the 19% to grow as more white evangelicals come to realize how compromised their faith has perhaps always been and has certainly become. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that white evangelicals, so beholden to their fears, so enamored of their political power, so emboldened by their nostalgia, are willing to not just challenge Donald Trump, but to destroy the well-paved road that led to him. There will be pockets of progressive evangelicals – Jim Wallis, Shane Claiborne, Rachel Held Evans, and others will find their audience – but what is more likely to happen is that recognizing the term “evangelical Christian” is too profane to bother redeeming, more people will stop calling themselves evangelicals and will either leave the faith or identify under a different category. As the Pew Research Center for Religion & Public Life reported in October 2019, “The share of U.S. adults who are white born-again or evangelical Protestants now stands at 16%, down from 19% a decade ago.”^[2] What will remain is a harder core of white evangelicals identifying themselves against what they fear, grasping for political and financial power, and justifying their actions as fulfilling a mythological destiny. In this light, Fea’s *Believe Me* is at once a guide for the perplexed and a eulogy for a dying dream of a church, and perhaps for a nation.

1. William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. [↑](#)
2. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/> [↑](#)

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