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Democracy Dies in Darkness



The apocalyptic myth that helps explain evangelical support for Trump

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“God’s used imperfect people all through history. King David wasn’t perfect. Saul wasn’t perfect. Solomon wasn’t perfect,” outgoing Energy Secretary Rick Perry said in an interview on “Fox & Friends” before going on to claim that he had given the president “a little one-pager on those Old Testament kings about a month ago. And I shared with him, I said, ‘Mr. President, I know there are people who say, you know, *you are the chosen one*,’ and I said, ‘You were.’”

Perry’s statement — especially that “chosen one” bit — would be more surprising in a different administration. At this point, though, it could almost disappear into the background chatter of the administration and its allies. Presidential adviser Paula White, for example, uses the description of a demonic struggle to paint contemporary politics as a holy war. In a sermon about Trump in June, she proclaimed, “I declare President Trump will overcome every strategy from hell and every strategy of the enemy, every strategy, and he will fulfill his calling and his destiny.”

Perry's and White's praise may seem outlandish or extreme, but it is entirely in keeping with the way many of the president's advocates speak of him. Indeed, the tenor of these public pronouncements help explain why he is supported by some 65 percent of white evangelical voters, despite his many improprieties and failings. As Perry's and White's remarks remind us, "modern" Christianity has not cast off old ideas. One of its oldest is evident in the "calling and destiny" that White evokes: Implicit in her bombast is a vision of the president as a triumphantly apocalyptic figure, one who evokes the medieval legend of the Last World Emperor.

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The Last World Emperor originates in the apocalyptic sermon known as “Pseudo-Methodius,” written in Syriac between 685 and 690 after the Arab conquest of the Middle East. The prophecy speaks of a Byzantine or Roman king who would lead a successful war against the forces of Islam and establish a new era of peace. That calm would hold for a decade, at which point the forces of “Gog and Magog” would attack. Instead of resisting them, the king would travel to Mount Golgotha to lay down his crown, fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel and setting the stage for the Second Coming and a final apocalyptic battle between good and evil. The Last World Emperor and Daniel differ most notably in that the former demands a flawed secular hero as the champion. It therefore offers a model that allows the religious to cast secular political leaders as apocalyptic heroes, regardless of their personal failings.

This quality likely contributed to the story’s long afterlife. In Western Europe, the Last World Emperor became a Frankish king, who would unite Christendom before retiring to Jerusalem at the arrival of the Antichrist, the Second Coming and a final apocalyptic battle. Charlemagne was cast as a Last World Emperor model for centuries, despite rumors that he slept with his daughters or sister. It also inspired Otto III in the year 1000, members of the First Crusade in 1096 and later figures such as Charles V of Spain. It even informed the thinking of Christopher Columbus, who wrote a “Book of Prophecies” after his fourth voyage in which he depicted King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in the dual role of Last World Emperor.

A theology for times of crisis, real or imagined, the Last World Emperor narrative actually requires a flawed lay hero in the model of the biblical King David — proud, combative and sexually impure but beloved by God not just despite his transgressions but because of them. The prophesied leader must also be militant, prepared to cleanse the West of the impure (which includes not only dissidents and unbelievers but also, as in many Christian religious myths, Jews), reunite “Western Civilization” and violently destroy the power of both the Antichrist and Islam. In the process, he will bring about the second coming. It is, in other words, an ideology built on anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim and anti-heretic persecution.

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Perry's and White's implicit allusions to this tradition would just be rhetoric if others in the administration weren't actively bolstering similar notions. Within the government, Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and others bolster the connection between Trump's presidency and the promise of a Christian Empire. None of them are speaking explicitly about the Last World Emperor, of course, and it's entirely possible that none of them has even heard of the story, but that's not how powerful prophecies work. Even when they're not an explicit part of the conversation, they provide a framework to guide and justify actions, or to give hope for the future. In this case, the framework of apocalypticism is a framework of hope: A dominant power group, feeling their power threatened, applies a prophecy from a time of similar power collapse to justify actions that range from immoral to unconstitutional via religious doctrine.

Though such apocalypticism is sometimes treated as a fringe belief — a series of “wild claims” — it forms the heart of certain brands of evangelical Christianity. “Apocalypse” tends to be synonymous with catastrophe, but the heart of Christian apocalypticism is hope: a desire for the new heaven and the new Earth, the coming of the Kingdom of God. And if the kingdom is the goal and a desirable outcome, is it any surprise that there are those who want to usher it in faster? The problem is that any attempt to usher it in requires radical change — and often radical violence to bring it about.

We've seen this mentality in practice when apocalyptic evangelicals praised Trump's decision to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Contemporary Christian apocalyptic thought focuses on Israel and especially Jerusalem, and the response shows how that sector received the announcement. Republican state Sen. Doug Broxson of Florida said at a rally: “Now, I don't know about you, but when I heard about Jerusalem — where the king of kings, where our soon coming king is coming back to Jerusalem — it is because President Trump declared Jerusalem to be [the] capital of Israel.”

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There's also the Christian nationalism showcased by Pompeo and Attorney General William P. Barr in October, mixing the administration with Christian nationalist doctrine. Pompeo's "Being a Christian Leader" speech in Nashville emphasized his role as a Christian leader in government service and was advertised on the State Department's official website. Barr's speech at the University of Notre Dame was even more extreme, claiming to describe "the force, fervor and comprehensiveness of the assault on religion we are experiencing today" and offering an image of a war between Christians and "militant secularists" who "take delight in compelling people to violate their conscience." Barr reaffirmed this sentiment in his Nov. 15 speech to the Federalist Society, saying that "the so-called progressive treat politics as their religion."

"Their holy mission is to use the coercive power of the state to remake man and society in their own image, according to an abstract ideal of perfection," he said while also arguing for increased executive power to respond to great challenges that include "most recently, the fight against Islamist fascism."

We may laugh when President Trump calls *himself* “the chosen one” or likens himself to the “King of Israel” or like “the second coming of God,” and it’s even possible that he’s joking when he borrows this religious vocabulary. But there are people who take him and this ideology seriously. Trump does not have to think of himself as the Messiah for others to take it up. In the end, all that really matters is that “God’s used imperfect people all through history.” For Trump’s devotees, then, his failings are actually reason to be hopeful, if only because they suggest he’ll lead us into the world to come.

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