

Reflection on the Presidential Election of 2016

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I wanted to reflect on the election from a pastoral standpoint. In the course of loving my neighbors, I find it helpful to reflect, to the best of my ability, on how my neighbors are doing at loving their neighbors. Jesus certainly kept a pulse on it, like when he pointedly told his Jewish countrymen about a good Samaritan (Luke 10:25 - 37). It's an important sign of what kind of evangelism and discipleship we'll need to do.

In the Middle Ages, European Christians believed in the myth of Prester John.¹ He was supposedly a powerful Christian king in the East. He was said to rule over an ancient Nestorian Christian kingdom which would come to the aid of European Christians against the *Muslims*.

I think something similar is happening now. Many white American evangelical Christians have felt besieged by Muslims, secular liberals, and their own loss of cultural power. Meanwhile in Russia, Vladimir Putin has shaped Russian national identity by cultivating an alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church.² Attendance in the Russian church is soaring. Russian Christians – including evangelicals – thank God for Putin.³ American Christians like Franklin Graham, Bryan Fischer, Matt Barber, etc. praised Putin for his anti-gay policies and his version of a “Christian civilization.”⁴ Are some American Christians unwittingly casting Putin into the role of a new Prester John?

Consider: Both Christianity and ethnic-nationalism in Europe are in resurgence. But what type of Christianity? Since Brexit, journalists have noted how people are reacting to neoliberal globalization by asserting cultural and religious identity. Tied not to the “traditional conservative right” platform of constitutionalism, limited government, and personal liberty, but to an “alternative right” platform of race, blood, soil, and culture. These are not just economic protests, but include the hard right movements of Marine Le Pen in France, and Neo-Nazis in Germany. Consider the case of Matthew Heimbach.⁵

I encourage you to watch African-American newsman Roland Martin interview white nationalist (Neo-Nazi) Richard Spencer,⁶ head of the “alt-right” National Policy Institute, after their national conference in Washington DC. I think it's significant that Spencer says that he is a “cultural Christian.” Roland Martin asked him pointedly, “Is Jesus your Lord and Savior?” Spencer wavered, admitted that he wasn't sure, but nevertheless wanted to identify as a “cultural Christian.” A cultural Christian? Some already speak wistfully of the decline of the religious right and the rise of the non-religious right. The mistake I fear they are making is that the alt-right has strong Christian elements. This is a new type of religious right. So the theological debates are still foundational. I don't know the readership of *Katehon* (“katechon” is the Greek word that means “that which withholds” from 2 Thessalonians 2:6 - 7), but it promotes this view in its articles “President Trump and the Global Religious Right”⁷ and “After Trump, Global Liberalism Will Seek Revenge.”⁸

¹ “Prester John” (*Wikipedia*), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prester_John

² Sergei Chapnin, “A Church of Empire: Why the Russian Church Chose to Bless Empire,” *First Things*, November 2015, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/11/a-church-of-empire>

³ Mark R. Elliot, “Why Russia’s Evangelicals Thank God for Putin,” *Christianity Today*, January 7, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/january-web-only/russia-evangelical-god-putin-crimea-ukraine.html>

⁴ Brian Tashman, “Religious Right Hero Vladimir Putin Okays Polygamy, Sharia Law,” *Right Wing Watch*, July 28, 2015, <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/religious-right-hero-vladimir-putin-okays-polygamy-sharia-law/>

⁵ Katherine Kelaidis, “How Orthodox Christianity Became the Spiritual Home of White Nationalism,” *Rewire News*, November 30, 2016, <http://religiondispatches.org/how-orthodox-christianity-became-the-spiritual-home-of-white-nationalism/>

⁶ Roland S. Martin, “‘We’re Not Going Anywhere’: Watch Roland Martin Challenge White Nationalist Richard Spencer,” *News One Now*, November 22, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr5BQS79H7g&t=948s>

⁷ Steve Turley, “President Trump and the Global Religious Right,” *Katehon*, December 2, 2016, <http://katehon.com/article/president-trump-and-global-religious-right>

⁸ *Katehon*, “After Trump, Global Liberalism Will Seek Revenge,” *Katehon*, November 28, 2016, <http://katehon.com/article/after-trump-global-liberalism-will-seek-revenge>

Perhaps “Christian mono-culturalism” would be a generous label for this new phenomenon. If so, then the danger is more real because it is more subtle. Christian *multi-culturalism*, not mono-culturalism, is taught and embodied in the New Testament. Paul, for instance, defended Gentile Christians from Jewish Christians who wanted to impose Jewish culture on them (Galatians). And on the flip side, he defended Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians who wanted them to give up Jewish culture (Romans). If Pentecost is real, as I firmly believe, and if diversity of languages is the key marker of Jesus' claim on people from every tribe and tongue (Rev.5:7), then what does that mean? Language is one of the basic aspects of culture. Languages activate different parts of the brain. Languages influence human psychology, perceptions, and relationships. That's why learning new languages is emotionally hard. It's one reason we find it hard to befriend, know, and love those different from us.

If American Christianity has the potential for anything, it is a meaningful *Christian multi-culturalism*. Not the *secular* multi-culturalism of the anchorless secular left, but a *Christian* one. The Dakota Access Pipeline protest, for example, is an important case in point. I have not read an explanation for why the Sioux tribe delayed negotiations, which cost the construction company.⁹ However, their point about lacking a full environmental audit seems appropriate to me. The protests have nurtured spiritual revivals¹⁰ of various traditions, including Native American Christianity. Many other Christians have joined.¹¹ Navajo Christian Mark Charles has written helpfully¹² about the protests. Native American Christians tend to question the Western European-American Christian reduction of creation into mere private property (which can be traced to John Locke). So they are less willing to risk losing water, land, and air to pollution. Given that gas pipelines leak with surprising frequency,¹³ and that drinking water is going to be a very precious global resource and human rights issue¹⁴ in a matter of years, I think they are right. If Christians can appreciate how culture is not just reducible to food and language, but perceptions about the relationships between people and people, and people and nature, we might play a more constructive role in our politics.

So I'm taking this seriously as a teacher of Scripture. I still think that European ethnic histories and cultures need to be an *honored* part of the conversation. But to challenge the white nationalist “cultural Christian,” I'm altering my talk on *The Impact of Jesus*,¹⁵ which honors European ethnic history in light of church history, and I'm turning it into *Why Christianity Made Europeans Great, and Why Europeans Made Christianity Suck* [note added January 17, 2019: a preliminary presentation is called *White American Evangelical Political Attitudes and Behavior: Explanation and Correctives*¹⁶ – please do check it out]. I think that “race” needs to be dismantled because “whiteness” was always a malleable construct defending interests of power and money; and that “ethnicity” is the appropriate, biblical category.¹⁷ Meanwhile, against the many voices claiming Judaism as an ethnicity, I must insist

⁹ William Yeatman, “The Real Dakota Access Pipeline Victim Is the Construction Company,” *Foundation for Economic Education*, November 23, 2016, <https://fee.org/articles/the-real-dakota-access-pipeline-victim-is-the-construction-company/>

¹⁰ Henry Gass, “Behind Dakota Pipeline Protest: Native American Religious Revival,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 1, 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/Inhabit/2016/1101/Behind-Dakota-pipeline-protest-Native-American-religious-revival>

¹¹ “Christian Communities Support Standing Rock Sioux Protection of Land and Water from Dakota Access Pipeline,” *Christian Justice Ministries*, September 6, 2016, <http://www.creationjustice.org/blog/christian-communities-support-standing-rock-sioux-protest-of-dakota-access-pipeline>

¹² Mark Charles, “The Problem with the Dakota Access Pipeline,” *WirelessHogan*, *Reflections from the Hogan*, September 15, 2016, <http://wirelesshogan.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-problem-with-dakota-access-pipeline.html>

¹³ “List of Pipeline Accidents in the United States,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_pipeline_accidents_in_the_United_States

¹⁴ Robert Glennon, *Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What To Do About It* (Washington DC: Island Press, 2009)

¹⁵ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Impact of Jesus*, <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-impact-of-jesus.pdf>

¹⁶ Mako A. Nagasawa, *White American Evangelical Political Attitudes and Behavior: Explanation and Correctives*, <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-christian-restorative-justice-white-american-evangelical-politics.pdf>, audio file here: <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-christian-restorative-justice-white-american-evangelical-politics-2018-april.m4a> (will download)

¹⁷ Mako A. Nagasawa, *Racism, Wealth, and Power: An Exposition of Luke 19:1 – 10*, <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/luke.19.01-10.part2.pdf>

that biblical Israel, at least, was not an ethnicity, but a multi-ethnic faith,¹⁸ anticipating the claim of Jesus to represent all humanity, as well as the Spirit's work in Pentecost to proclaim it as such. I also believe that Jesus' teaching already laid the foundation for a cosmopolitan Christian political pluralism, not a Christian theocracy or a Christian mono-culturalism,¹⁹ and that Paul concretely called for the Jewish and Gentile church to enact it, especially in Romans 9 - 11.²⁰

¹⁸ Mako A. Nagasawa, *Why Choose a Chosen People? What Was God Doing with Israel? Why Not Just Jump Right to Jesus?* <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/resources.who.is.god.israel.why.htm> in particular *Part 1: Chosen to Be a Non-Racial, Non-Ethnic People*

¹⁹ Mako A. Nagasawa, *Christian Faith, Not Secularism, as the Basis for Political Pluralism and Economic Progressivism*, <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-christian-ethics-political-pluralism.pdf>

²⁰ Mako A. Nagasawa, *Romans 9 - 11, Predestination and Free Will, Hardening of Hearts, and Outreach to the Jewish Community*, http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/paul_romans.09-11.hardening.ppts.pdf