Theology and the Church in a Populist Era:
A Lutheran Critique of the Collusion between Evangelicals and Right-Wing Populism

Guillermo Hansen

Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The evangelical upsurge

A few years ago, the world was shocked by the election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S. Years later, as Trump secures a third Republican nomination for the presidency, we are still grappling with the relatively new phenomenon of conservative populism and its wide support amongst the "evangelical" camp.[1] As Michael Gerson, a renowned evangelical author, remarks, "the most extraordinary development of recent political history [is] the loyal adherence of religious conservatives to Donald Trump."[2] What confuses many observers is how (white)S evangelicals, one of the most vocal groups who have bemoaned for decades the cultural and moral decay of the nation, have systematically dismissed any moral scruples about Trump's egregious behaviors and policies. As Gerson summarizes, never in the history of the U.S. has a president expounded a distinctively "non-Christian substance" as Donald Trump. The contradictions shown before, during, and after his presidency, mounted: an unapologetic materialism equating financial and economic success with human worth, a tribalism and hatred of the "aliens," a contempt for "losers" and his admiration of "strongmen." Standing in direct opposition to Jesus' message, Trump's "beatitudes" could be summarized thus: "Blessed are the proud; blessed are the ruthless; blessed are the shameless; blessed are those who hunger and thirst after fame."[3]

The alliance between conservative populism and evangelicals

> "The most extraordinary development of recent political history [is] the loyal adherence of religious conservatives to Donald Trump." What confuses many observers is how (white)S evangelicals, one of the most vocal groups who have bemoaned for decades the cultural and moral decay of the nation, have systematically dismissed any moral scruples about Trump's egregious behaviors and policies.

may look puzzling without some historical and theological insights. Even though the evangelical movement after the Second Awakening was accompanied by a postmillennial understanding of gradual social improvements, by the turn of the twentieth century it was coopted by the hyper-conservative fundamentalist and premillennialist reaction to liberalism, socialism, and modernism. Tracing this development and its socio-political impact, Gerson makes an astute observation: "modern evangelicalism has an important intellectual piece missing. It lacks a model or ideal of political engagement—an organizing theory of social action."[4] This lack of a reflective public and political theology is one of the factors that make evangelicals vulnerable to the contours of a political movement that champions ultra-conservative values.

Evangelicals are also trapped in a siege mentality that sees recent developments in civil society and mores as a calamity for the nation and "true" believers. This mentality, fond of conspiracy theories, dovetails with Trump's discourse of an America in decline and headed toward destruction, which could be returned to great-

1. See the latest Pew Research from March 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/15/5-facts-about-religion-and-americans-views-of-donald-trump/. See also Samuel Perry, "Why Evangelicals Went All In On Trump, Again," *Time Magazine,* January 24, 2024, accessed electronically at https://time.com/6588138/evangelicals-support-donald-trump-2024/. I will use a broad definition of "evangelicals" as referring to an interdenominational movement which arose within North American Protestantism characterized by a rather literalist understanding of Scriptures, emphasis on being "born again," premillennialist view of history, piety centered in Jesus and/or the Holy Spirit, evangelistic orientation and missional activism, and alignment with political, cultural, and social conservative views.

2. Michael Gerson, "The Last Temptation," *The Atlantic Magazine* (April 1, 2018), 47.

3. Gerson, "The Last Temptation," 47.

4. Gerson, "The Last Temptation," 48.

ness by recovering the certainties of the past. His populist logic and rhetoric also have an affinity with key religious tropes, especially those of a premillennialist sort rampant among evangelicals. For example, the themes of looming doom (America is losing), the need to curb off evil others (Immigrants and Muslims), the purging of corrupting influences on the people (Liberal media, LGBTQ+, feminism), the portrayal of the world as dangerous, and the moving of the American embassy to Jerusalem. All this can be seen as premillennial themes translated into populist rhetoric and practice. This Manichean imaginary, constructed around the friend/enemy dyad, casts the "people" as the bulwark against socio-cultural corruption and whose will is rightly interpreted by the strong leader.[5] Thus, white evangelicals' characterization of themselves as an oppressed and silenced "minority" not only plays right into the idea of the need for a strongman to protect them and guide them, but also serves as the linchpin for the very definition of what (and who) constitutes the true "people."

Two aspects stand out in the alliance between evangelicals and conservative populism. On the one hand, the lack in the evangelical movement of an adequate theoretical framework for engaging constructively society and politics. On the other, the evangelical perception of themselves as a minoritized group under siege which fosters an "evangelical anxiety" populated by conspiracy theories. These aspects would explain why white evangelicals would first fully support Trump's presidency, and even more so after his latest bid for office, despite the open contradiction with evangelical "family values." Every revelation of a former scandal, [6] even his latest conviction as a felon in the court of law, has further galvanized evangelical support for Trump.[7] In the cunning expression of a prominent church leader, evangelicals recurrently have given Trump a "mulligan."[8]

It would be tempting to just focus on the apparent hypocrisy of evangelicals, or in a moralization of Trump's behaviors. But this would miss the main point, for we must concentrate on the *political* movement represented by the *collusion* between evangelicals and right-wing populism—the movement called MAGA (Make America Great Again). Regardless of what may be the result of the next elections, it is not the person of Trump that matters, but the political revolution which MAGA represents in the American political scene, which as a movement transcends the figure of

What must be analyzed is the basic *cognitive* coincidence existing at the level of paradigms and root metaphors between Trump's populism and evangelicals. In effect, the majority of evangelicals support Trump not because they directly condone his behavior, but because they share something deeper: a similar cognitive structure for framing their political and religious views.

Trump, the Republican party, and the eventuality of his election to a second term. Hence, I will refrain from analyzing just *moral* values, or the dissonance between avowed values and actual personal behaviors, as Gerson does. Instead, what must be analyzed is the basic *cognitive* coincidence existing at the level of paradigms and root metaphors between Trump's populism and evangelicals. In effect, the majority of evangelicals support Trump not because they directly condone his behavior, but because they share something deeper: a similar cognitive structure for framing their political and religious views. It is this cognitive structure, within which values are embedded, that explains not just the alliance, but the collusion between white evangelicalism and Trump's right-wing populism. Evangelicals need Trump for reversing the "liberal" trends of the last decades. But most importantly, Trump's populism needs even more the evangelicals as the providers of a "thicker" ideology for the thin nature of his conservativism. In the collusion between the two, a new right-wing populism is spawn: the MAGA movement.[9]

Thick and thin

Before moving into the cognitive and axiological correspondence between evangelicals and right-wing populism, we need to briefly understand the phenomenon of populism in general, and right-wing populism in particular. While a common quip among social scientists is that populism is a phenomenon difficult to define, certain markers distinguishing it from other political expressions can be easily identified. Populism is a phenomenon that can appear only in modern societies which somehow have been touched by the democratic tradition following Rousseau's principle of the general will and sovereignty of the people. In principle, the dissolution

5. See Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, "Civil Society, Populism and Religion," in *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory,* 24/3 (September 2017), 291.

6. See Alec Tyson, "Disagreements about Trump widely seen as reflecting divides over 'other values and goals'," accessed at http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/15/disagreements-about-trump-widely-seen-as-reflecting-divides-over-other-values-and-goals/

7. See Curtis Chang, "Why evangelicals won't abandon Trump after his conviction," *The Hill,* 06/12/2024, accessed at https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/4717933-why-evangelicals-wont-abandon-trump-after-his-conviction/

8. Edward-Isaac Dovere, "Tony Perkins: Trump gets a Mulligan on Life, Stormy Daniels," *Politico Magazine* (January 23, 2018), accessed at https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/23/tony-perkins-evangelicals-donald-trump-stormy-daniels-216498/

9. See Aaron Blake, "7 Ways Maga Republicans Differ from other Republicans," *The Washington Post* (08/22/2023), accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/08/22/maga-republicans-analysis/

of old corporate models that had the monarchy presiding over a body, left the symbolic factor of unity empty, fluid, or indeterminate. This change situated the notion of popular sovereignty as an empty signifier which all political parties sought to represent. Today, right-wing populism is an attempt to close the gap between the symbolic and the real, and an effort to bring stability to the pluralistic and fluid nature of late modern civil societies.

Political scientists Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen convincingly argue that what makes a movement, a party or a leader "populist" is not a thick, substantive ideology or program. Rather, populism is characterized by "a discourse, a style, and a thin ideology." As a *discourse* populism celebrates an antagonism existing between the people and the elites by invoking a cornerstone of the democratic credo, people's sovereignty, centered on recapturing it from "the establishment." As a *style*, populist politics is a *mise en scene* involving the performative embodiment by leaders of the perceived habits (speech, gestures, dress) of ordinary, middle class or working-class people, claiming to stand for and re-present them. Rallies, speeches, and unmediated interventions through social media showcase simple clothing, exaggerated gestures, and vulgar speech, to facilitate identification with the "common folks." And finally, as a *thin ideology*, populism claims "to restore the good people to their rightful (sovereign) place and enable their unified and previously silenced and excluded but ultimately general will, to rule once more."[10]

Because it is a thin ideology, populism is indeterminate enough that it can link up with previous, thicker, "host ideologies" (nationalism, racism, fascism, socialism), taking its substance and color from local traditions. But most importantly, host ideologies provide a content to the "empty signifier" represented by the concept of "the people." As Ernesto Laclau has claimed, populism's modern-democratic referent is a unitary conception of "the people," a hollow signifier that "has to be constructed, identified, mobilized, moralized and unified, out of an empirical multiplicity of groups and individuals, to form a bounded subject to whom action and authority can be imputed."[11] In sum, in the words of Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, populism is an ideology that "only speaks to a very small part of a political agenda."[12] It therefore desperately needs a "thicker" ideology involving a holistic view of how politics, the economy, and society should be ordered.

In principle, the main ideological template for Trump's populism has been a form of conservativism known as "paleo-conservatism." Three themes characterize this current of political thought which has replaced the former hegemony of the neoconservatives within the Republican party: hesitancy and even refusal to participate in foreign conflicts (isolationism), a stricter control of borders

> As a *style*, populist politics is a *mise en scene* involving the performative embodiment by leaders of the perceived habits (speech, gestures, dress) of ordinary, middle class or working-class people, claiming to stand for and re-present them … the "common folks." … As a *thin ideology*, populism claims "to restore the good people to their rightful (sovereign) place.

(nativism, anti-immigration, anti-Islam), and the questioning of international economic agreements affecting the American "working class" (protectionism and anti-globalization).[13] The loose connections of paleo-conservativism with the Republican Party has also allowed Trump to present himself as an outsider. But while paleo-conservatism may have provided the general ideological framing for Trump's political agenda, it lacked historically a wide social base and, furthermore, was unable to provide the moral and emotional traction which, in the case of the conservative base in the U.S., only religion can provide.

In short, paleo-conservatism can and does provide one dimension that is essential for a thin populist ideology, namely, to fill up the empty signifier of "the people" by identifying the enemies over against which the people acquire the semblance of a profile: the national and global elites, the liberal press, the immigrants, the Muslims and, in some cases, the Jews. But while paleo-conservative constructs can provide the elements for a *definition* that is essential for the populist agenda, it is not enough to *mobilize* the people in support for a political movement. As Arato and Cohen write,

> Populist politics also needs a convincing moral claim to trigger the self-righteous indignation necessary to construct, define and mobilize the authentic "good" people against the alien other. In short populism has to vindicate its moralism and adopt an ethical content to motivate, justify, and render its thin ideology thick. It has done so in the past by pairing up with powerful mobilizing host ideologies. But today previously available host ideologies able to serve that purpose are no

---

10. Arato and Cohen, "Civil Society, Populism and Religion," 286.

11. Quoted in Arato and Cohen, "Civil Society, Populism and Religion," 287.

12. See Uri Friedman, "What is a Populist?," in *The Atlantic Magazine* (February 27, 2017) https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/

13. See Michael Dougherty, "Interactions of the Factions," in *National Review* LXIX/22 (November 27, 2017), accessed at https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2017/11/27/conservatism-donald-trump-paleoconservatives/; David Greenberg, "An Intellectual History of Trumpism," *Politico Magazine* (December 11, 2016), accessed at politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/trumpism-intellectual-history-populism-paleoconservatives-214518/.

longer up to the task …[14]

In effect, nothing better for gaining traction than to appeal opportunistically to a reservoir of moral indignation that has been cultivated for decades by the most conservative religious expression: the evangelicals. Due mostly to its premillennialist bent, evangelicals provide

> …a unifying content for the chain of equivalents in populist logic, helps moralize the friend and demonize the enemy, and to frame the elites and "others" as immoral and corrupt, and thus part of a deeper threat to "our" traditions that must be warded off, while providing a needed moral aura for populist politics.[15]

In this manner, the availability of evangelical tropes in civil society, in addition to the previous forays of the Tea Party and its alliance with the religious right, allowed an entrepreneur and TV showman such as Donald Trump to thematize and render it politically salient, in turn meeting the needs of his populist "thin" ideology to gain sufficient moral and emotional pull.

But how can the evangelical movement provide the moral aura, the mobilizing traction so needed by populism? How can such disparate moral universes—the sybarite and the pharisaical--collude with such an ease? The eruption of right-wing populism has been so fast and even surreal, that answers may not be found in the classical categories of political philosophy or sociological studies. I concur with Slavoj Žižek when he states that the raise of populism and fascism signals two underlying causes: a chronic crisis of (neoliberal) capitalism, and the failure of the Left to find an adequate response to it.[16] But this does not fully explain why, for example, the Left has not been able to exploit the general crisis in late capitalism. We must dig deeper into the realm of the human mind, and particularly, into the ways in which values are structured around root metaphors and framing models, in order to understand our present socio-political moment. Values never exist in abstraction but are embedded in larger cognitive structures that guide the apperception of reality—either profane or sacred. And evangelicalism, through its mythical-premillennial narrative, provides a script that serves to evoke powerful unconscious cognitive and emotional contents. How it can collude with paleoconservative populist programs is what needs explanation.

A cognitive approach

It is well known that religion has been one of the main areas of research for cognitive studies, but seldom is it noted that the political field also came under its scrutiny. What human beings believe (religiously or secularly) is directly related to how they feel, think,

Most of our knowledge and beliefs are framed in terms of conceptual systems that are lodged mostly in the cognitive unconscious. This is what shapes all aspects of our experience and can be initially understood by approaching the mind as an embodied phenomenon.

and process information through their embodied and relational minds—operations which remain largely unconscious. Both the political and the religious mentality draw on the same basic cognitive structure that underlies the symbolic and metaphorical operation of the human mind. This intersectionality does not mean that these two domains are the same (here the Lutheran doctrine of the two regiments is a healthy reminder of two different modes of the mind's operation), but that they significantly overlap. One result of this overlapping is, precisely, the phenomenon that I have been analyzing: the collusion between Evangelicalism and Trumpism.

Linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson have been pioneers in the exploration of the cognitive metaphors operating in political and religious constructs. The basic presupposition guiding their theses is that mind (with its emotions, concepts, language, metaphors, etc.) is a thoroughly embodied process only understood in the larger framework of evolutionary theory and social life. [17] In their view, most of our knowledge and beliefs are framed in terms of conceptual systems that are lodged mostly in the cognitive unconscious. This is what shapes all aspects of our experience and can be initially understood by approaching the mind as an embodied phenomenon. Human reason is a form of animal reason, closely tied to our bodies and, particularly, to our central nervous system. Furthermore, our bodies, brains, and interactions with our environment (natural and social) provides the mostly unconscious basis for our everyday metaphysics, our sense of what is real.[18]

Categorization of the environment, an evolutionary algorithm, is present in every living being. And it is characterized by the grouping of patterns whereby indiscriminate information in the environment is constrained by sensory-motor operations and neuronal synapsis. This is done automatically, unconsciously, due to bodies embeddedness in the world. Thus, the peculiar nature of bodies and their relationships shapes the very possibilities for

---

14. Arato and Cohen, "Civil Society, Populism, and Religion," 291.

15. Arato and Cohen, "Civil Society, Populism, and Religion," 291.

16. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), Kindle Edition, loc. 6333: "Every rise of fascism (populism) is a sign of a failed revolution."

17. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 5ff.

18. See Daniel Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), Kindle Edition, loc. 1389.

categorization and conceptualization, to such an extent that "the formation and use of categories is not done after experience, it is the stuff of experience."[19] In this view a category or concept is a neuronal structure that is part, or closely linked, with the sensorimotor system of our brains. Much of our conceptual inference is in fact sensorimotor inference; they are not just reflections of an external reality but are percepts constrained and shaped by our bodies and brains. Conceptual inference, therefore, is neither objective nor just socially constructed: it is rather a function of the world and our biology *interacting*.[20] It can even be called an *emergent* quality.

A central concern in Lakoff and Johnson's approach is the raise of metaphor and symbolic thinking. They understand metaphor as a bridging operation that allows conventional mental imagery stemming from sensorimotor domains to be applied to domains pertaining to subjective experience—where judgement and valuation take place. Metaphors are cross-domain mappings mediated by neuronal connections between a source and a target domain, further distinguishing between primary/conventional and complex metaphors. Primary metaphors emerge in childhood, where subjective experiences, emotions and judgements are undifferentiated from sensorimotor experience. An example is the association between warmth (being held, caressed, wrapped with a cover) and affection (cared for, affirmed, wanted). This is not a conscious construction or a process of explicit interpretation, but rather an immediate conceptual mapping via neuronal connections learned by coactivation. Through their recurrent neuronal firing, increased synaptic networks are established, until permanent connections are forged. Thus, unconscious associations are established, since our brains are structured to project activation patterns from sensorimotor areas to higher cortical domains. Complex metaphors build on that, enhancing the referential domain of the human symbolic mind.

As a linguist, Lakoff gives conceptual language a critical role, but he sees it as an *emergent* phenomenon. Language as such cannot explain why the brain operates the way it does, yet it is a powerful activator and organizer of largely unconscious emotions, metaphors, and framings. He states,

> Language gets its power because it is defined relative to frames, prototypes, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions. Part of its power comes from its unconscious aspects: we are not consciously aware of all that it evokes in us, but it is there, hidden, always at work. If we hear the same language over and over, we will think more and more in terms of the frames and metaphors activated by that language. And it doesn't matter if you are negating words or questioning them, the same frames and metaphors will be activated and hence strengthened.[21]

There are two main models based on the *ideal of family* life that frame a series of metaphors leading to distinctive moral systems which largely characterizes the "conservative" and "liberal" mind: the *strict-father* model and the *nurturing parent* model.

This approach is reminiscent of the Jungian understanding of the unconscious and the role of symbols as constellatory of hidden archetypes. Narratives thus have a powerful evocatory mode. So, in Lakoff's view, it is not so much that language has the power to structure our minds from scratch, but it has the capacity to rearrange previous unconscious contents, even creating new metaphorical bridges and conceptual spaces. In this vein, language did not simply emerge as a tool for communication, but as neuroanthropologist Terrence Deacon asserts, "it is also the outward expression of an unusual mode of thought: symbolic representation."[22]

Based on these premises Lakoff has analyzed not just the conceptual values that inform the "framing" of political and religious discourse, but the framing of these narratives through models that order moral metaphors and valuations, thus orienting action. There are two main models based on the *ideal of family* life that frame a series of metaphors leading to distinctive moral systems which largely characterizes the "conservative" and "liberal" mind: the *strict-father* model and the *nurturing parent* model. The use of family as a guiding metaphor for political and religious life is because it is the first space in which, as children, we experience "governance" and power. They conform narratives with dramatic structure (with archetypal roles like hero, villain, victims, helper, etc.) linked to positive and negative emotional circuitries.[23] Narratives are brain structures deeply lodged in the bodily and social experiences of human beings which serve as templates or mental models for idealized national-political life, as well as religious life.

In the case of the strict-father model the main character is the male figure as the hero who confronts the perils and dangers of the world. He is the moral leader of the family, who in exchange for protection and support, demands obedience and discipline. The model assumes that life is a struggle for survival, so winning in the world becomes the main goal. Only a disciplined life can achieve that, therefore punishment is necessary for equipping (children) to become self-reliant and prosperous in a very treacherous world. When this model is mapped into politics, "the strict-father model

19. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh,* 19.
20. See Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh,* 24.
21. George Lakoff, *The Political Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 15.
22. Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 22.
23. See Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, 93.

explains why conservatism is concerned with authority, with obedience, with discipline, and with punishment. It makes sense in a patriarchal family where male strength dominates unquestionably."[24]

This model and narrative by which we live by—both as an experience as well as a projection—also has a correlate in the religious world exemplified by a "strict Father Christianity," a cornerstone of evangelical imagery. Here too God (and/or *his* deputies) is imagined as the central hero of a plot that demands unquestionable obedience, in exchange for which either earthly prosperity or heavenly rewards are promised. The construct of authority, obedience, discipline, and punishment also allows for a second chance, the opportunity to be "born again" and thus join God's family of the elect. For in effect, contrary to Calvinistic ideas of predestination, the more "Arminian" bent of American Protestantism makes room for individual decision: it is up to you to be saved.[25]

The nurturing parent model of the family, on the other hand, emphasizes the equal responsibility of the caregivers, without much gender constraints. The job of the parental figures is to protect and empower children by nurturing them, so they in turn may become nurturers of others. Nurturance is based on empathy, and discipline results not from punishment, but from the child's growing sense of care and responsibility: toward themselves, toward others, toward the world. Restitution is preferred over punishment; mistakes and wrongness can be corrected by doing something right and making up for it. When this model is mapped into the nation, the result is the progressive politics of protection, empowerment and community.[26] In the Christian religious field the hero is either a suffering God or the triune community, God's nurturance is given freely and unconditionally, and what we receive (grace) empowers the nurturing of others in family, communities, society, politics, and the environment.

In view of this, one can reach the partial conclusion that the version of Christianity embraced by white evangelicals is natural for those with strict-father morality. As Lakoff asserts, "Evangelical Christians join the church because they are conservative; they are not conservative because they happen to be in an evangelical church, though they may grow up with both together."[27] What results is an overlapping between the religious and the political, forging a metaphorical link between a religious system of moral accounting, economics, and immigration policies based on the fear of instability, and a strict-father morality that seeks to discipline civil society by reversing rights that have transgressed this morality (abortion, LGBTQIA+ rights, equal pay, etc.).

By modeling the world through a strict-father view, authority

> Nurturance is based on empathy, and discipline results not from punishment, but from the child's growing sense of care and responsibility: toward themselves, toward others, toward the world. Restitution is preferred over punishment; mistakes and wrongness can be corrected by doing something right and making up for it.

is justified in that a well-ordered world must have a moral hierarchy in which those who have traditionally dominated should govern. Hierarchy is what constrains and protects from the infiltration and contamination of harming elements such as Muslims, gays, immigrants, etc. Lakoff writes:

> The hierarchy is: God above Man, Man above Nature, The Disciplined (Strong) above the Undisciplined (Weak), The Rich above the Poor, Employers above Employees, Adults above Children, Western culture above other cultures, Our Country above other countries. The hierarchy extends to: Men above Women, Whites above Nonwhites, Christians above non-Christians, Straights above Gays.[28]

But what about the moral scandals surrounding Trump before, during, and after his presidency? Do they not disqualify him as the leader of the Great American Family? Evidently not, as the most recent evangelical support after his conviction in 2024 indicates.[29] While it is true that Evangelical Christianity is centered around family life and "family values," we must remember that these must be understood through the strict-father model. What ultimately matters in a strict-father morality, is that the father ultimately controls sexuality and reproduction. Trump's "sybarite" behaviors are troublesome for evangelicals, certainly. But Trump's pre-political moral lapses do not disqualify him now as a politician who is committed to carry on policy along the lines of a strict-father model. From a cognitive point of view, this is what "saves," because these policies (and the narratives legitimizing them) are what ultimately activates and validates the (religious) template of evangelicals through an emotional and somatic identification with populist rhetoric. In other words, Trumpism and white evangelicalism operate along similar—if not identical—cognitive paradigms.

---

24. Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, 78.
25. See Lakoff, *The Political Mind,* 80. On the Arminian bent of U.S. religious thought, see the work of another cognitivist, Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe what they Shouldn't* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), Kindle Edition, location 1671ff.
26. See Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, 81.
27. Lakoff, "Understanding Trump," accessed at https://george-lakoff.com/2016/07/23/understanding-trump-2/

28. Lakoff, "Understanding Trump."
29. See footnote #1.

Trump, as an individual, can be given a "mulligan," even waiting for him to be "born again." But the nation cannot wait. This is an emergency, and God has sent a new "Cyrus."

In summary, the evangelical metaphorical construct around the strict-father model serves, with its mythical and emotional appeal, to *thicken* the thin nature of Trumpism. It allows the framing of the paleoconservative tropes along key binary categorizations which, through complex metaphors, allows the expression of self-righteous indignation against the perils besieging the American nation. This mobilizes the "good" people thus giving a contour to an empty signifier and lionizes the friend by demonizing the foe. That the whole of Christian tradition can be framed through this constellation is, to say the least, one of the most calamitous developments in the recent history of Christianity in this country.

Theology and the church in populist times: God's left fist and the caress of her right hand

Gerson's analysis of the causes of the infatuation between Trumpism and white evangelicals concluded that modern evangelicalism lacks "a model or ideal of political engagement—an organizing theory of social action." This is certainly true, but partially so. It may be true that evangelicalism, due to its protean nature, may not possess a consistent political and/or public theology which may serve to analytically interpret the political times and guide social action. Theology, as a critical and constructive endeavor, is seen with suspicion or regarded as unnecessary by most evangelicals. Scriptures (as a source of authority) and subjective experience (as a legitimizing factor) suffice. However, we must also recall Lakoff and Johnson's insight that deep, ingrained metaphors are linked to ways in which (infant) bodies have been taken care of, thus giving rise to patterns of behavior and conceptual framings of a more authoritarian or nurturing sort. Consequently, it would be an idealistic pitfall to suppose that the lack of "an organizing theory of social action" is what explains the collusion between Trumpism and evangelicals. However, cognitive models are indeed reinforced, encouraged, and even evoked, by first order religious discourse, and legitimized by the second order theological speech—or lack thereof! In effect, an implicit and uncontested patriarchal model does indeed guide the evangelicals' biblical hermeneutic and biographical narratives, which are more imagistic than doctrinal. The lack of an articulated and constructive public theology in the evangelical camp can only serve as an ideological cover-up of fundamental "decisions" taken at an unconscious level. Doctrines not only frame but serve to make explicit the implicit.

I venture to say that it is the very nature of evangelicalism, and one of the reasons for its success, to serve as one of the late-modern vectors of an authoritarian reaction, thus *de facto* colluding with highly conservative, populist, proto-fascist, and illiberal socio-political arrangements. Devoid of any critical theological inflection for reframing spontaneous emotions and valuations through categories such as the Law-Gospel hermeneutics, the two-regiments distinction, the *simul justus et peccator* theological

> The power of conservative narrative to harness deep seated values and emotions is something to be admired. Liberals, on the other hand, seem entangled in a conception of reason and human beings stemming from the Enlightenment, missing how religious imagination is fired up and social and political values expressed in tandem with deep, unconscious archetypes, metaphors and symbols.

anthropology, coupled with the total disavowal of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, leave primal cognitive framings unconstrained by the arduous work of a theological imagination outlined by a critical yet constructive confessing tradition centered on the cross—the nurturing core of the Christian message. Thus Manichean, legalistic and moralistic instincts are left running amok in the socio-political field. This is the face, to echo Bonhoeffer's apt expression, of a "Protestantism without Reformation."

But the whole truth must be told as well, for the liberal-Protestant camp should receive many recriminations as well. While theologically sophisticated, it often remains unanchored from the deeper cognitive structures of ordinary believers, thus rendering it ineffective. If a single important teaching can be gleaned from Lakoff's analysis of the mind, it is that conservatives (at least in the U.S.) seem to have a better intuitive sense of how brains and minds work.[30] The power of conservative narrative to harness deep seated values and emotions is something to be admired. Liberals, on the other hand, seem entangled in a conception of reason and human beings stemming from the Enlightenment, missing how religious imagination is fired up and social and political values expressed in tandem with deep, unconscious archetypes, metaphors and symbols. After all, human cognition and valuation will always be dependent on evoking mythical-symbolic dimensions which fuel and energize the task of living.

But times of crisis are when new cognitive vistas may arise. This entails to be placed not beyond the common binary oppositional forces (conservatives vs. liberals), but in the interstice between them. As it was the case of Luther and his circle (scholasticism vs. humanism), Dialectical theology (confessionalism vs. liberalism), or Latin American liberation theology (traditionalism vs. modernism), novelty appears in the gaps and discontinuities between two hegemonic opposing forces. In other words, we are facing today

---

30. See Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, 12.

the opportunity for a reframing of symbols and metaphors in a nurturing, constructive, and *progressive* way. For me, the theological tradition of Lutheranism is the best vehicle for this, and thus one of the launching pads for a frontal critique of the evangelical mind and its politics.

I implied before that evangelicals lack a theoretical frame thoroughly embedded in the grammar of the Reformation. The corollary is that most evangelicals are unable to unmask their implicit patriarchal and authoritarian assumptions, and to engage politics and society in a charitable and egalitarian way. Here I will offer a brief comment on the key theological dimension which directly impinges on the political field: Luther's framing of God's twofold governance. This framing was Luther's attempt to offer a wholistic view of God's involvement in history by paradoxically yet realistically articulating the relation between the ultimate and the penultimate. It was a proposal for constructively correlating the ends of God, the *eschatos*, with the messiness of history, the *skatos*, the eschatological with the scatological, the flourishing of life amid the excretions of worldly powers. Hence the intrinsic allergy of Lutheranism toward any kind of millennialism, and especially with legalistic premillennialism—which evangelicals are so fond of.

Yet it is also true that Luther's original formulation carried the ambiguity proper of a time of transition. This can be seen in Luther's often sliding into an unstable bi-conceptuality that loses its grip on the paradoxical tension that should always keep the distinction yet relation between the providential and the excremental through the reality of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. For instance, while Luther remarkably depatriarchalizes God's "right hand" (spiritual realm) by describing its domain in nurturing terms (gift, grace, forgiveness), the action of God's "left hand" (secular realm) is oftentimes still framed through a strict-father metaphorical construct (sword, punishment, law).[31] It is as though God were caressing with her right hand yet punching with the left—God manifesting "Dr. Strangelove syndrome"![32] During the twentieth century, the *schizoid* instabilities in the model have been corrected through Bonhoeffer's *christologization* of Luther's doctrine of the two regiments, and by liberation theologians through their articulation of the cry of the sufferers with the cross.[33] Through these contributions a more coherent model has emerged around a dominant nurturing pole. Thus, it is no longer possible to have in good faith a nurturing model of God as grace and seek patriarchal and hierarchical arrangements in society. Hence, the model still holds as an expression of the uniqueness of the gospel which

> We are facing today the opportunity for a reframing of symbols and metaphors in a nurturing, constructive, and *progressive* way. For me, the theological tradition of Lutheranism is the best vehicle for this, and thus one of the launching pads for a frontal critique of the evangelical mind and its politics.

must be lived amid the uncertainties, ambiguities, and turmoil of history, insofar as the core metaphor guiding the interpretation of God's left hand in creation and history is also understood through the prism of nurturing metaphors.

In effect, Christian theology is primarily grounded in the *nurturing* affirmation that in Jesus Christ God has taken human form. This is gospel. As Bonhoeffer asserts, "from now on it is no longer possible to conceive and understand humanity other than in Jesus Christ, nor God other than in the human form of Jesus Christ."[34] Theology is thus an intrinsic dimension in the conformation of minds and bodies to God's true form, Jesus Christ, and thus it is church-forming: the church "is nothing but that piece of humanity where Christ really has taken form…the human being who has become human, has been judged, and has been awakened to new life in Christ."[35] Consequently through every practice, every gesture, every sermon, every sacramental moment, the church is not just giving expression to a set of propositional beliefs, but rather becomes the embodiment of the Christ who evokes and buttresses an idiosyncratic cognitive circuitry among its members. This is what the apostle Paul referred to as having the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5), and Bonhoeffer echoed with his central category of "con-formation [*Gleichgestaltung*] with the form of the new human being, Christ."[36]

The embodiment of a cognition, a pattern of evocations that the church names "Christ," is what Luther referred to as the "spiritual" realm, God's nurturing, *caressing* right hand. It forms personhood and does not seek to impose or demand anything. The very caressing gesture precludes a *direct* formation of the world by programs or platforms along so-called Christian principles,[37] for these demand a different mediation able to deal with the

31. See Guillermo Hansen, "El uso político de la cruz: poder y contra-poder en la *theologia crucis* de Lutero," in *En las Fisuras: Esbozos luteranos para nuestros tiempos* (Buenos Aires: VELKD/IELU/ISEDET, 2011), 82ff.

32. Cfr. Bruce Hood, *The Self Illusion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 131.

33. See Hansen, "La crítica cristológica de Bonhoeffer a la hermenéutica 'pseudoluterana' de las dos esferas, in Ibid., 112f. Also, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente: Una reflexión sobre el libro de Job* (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1984).

34. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "History and Good (2)," in *Ethics,* Clifford Green, ed., *Dieterich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 253.

35. Id., "Ethics as Formation," in Ibid., 97.

36. Id., "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World," in Ibid., 322.

37. See Bonhoeffer, "Ethics as Formation," 93.

roughness of intersecting and contradictory interests. Rather, the spiritual is the drawing of bodies and minds to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified and is risen. It seeks to evoke faith. And faith, from the perspective I am presenting, is the rerouting of neuronal connections between a source sensorimotor domain (hearing, tasting, partaking) to a target domain that induces a new sense of personhood and agency in history. The spiritual is thus the conformation of our persons in relation to a transcendental horizon that the church calls Christ, who also transcends toward us through the life and faces of the neighbor.

The role of theology is thus cognitively relevant, for it provides a grammar—a sort of algorithmic device—for a narrative and framing which can explicitly engage the excesses of authoritarian models by evoking a nurturing personality through the gospel. Yet it does so by tending also to the socio-political dimension of personhood, and thus is not oblivious to the challenges and difficulties of creating and maintaining social, political, and ecological spaces for the flourishing of life. This requires justice, viable institutions, containment of evil, as God's left hand is raised in a *clenching fist*—an historical symbol of the struggle for justice and the rights of the downtrodden. Always grounded in the God that takes form in Jesus of Nazareth (justification by grace through faith), this is a theology that acquires a socio-political density through the law-gospel distinction, and the acknowledgement of human brokenness as we are simultaneously called to wholeness. In short, a theology that understands the proper relation between *eschatos* and *skatos*, savvy enough to identify the "'nicely calculated less and more' of the relatively good and the relatively evil"[38] that social and political expediency requires.

This type of theology and its "doctrines" is what frames nurturing root metaphors linking and underpinning sensorimotor connections, giving rise to a new sense of self and a renewed com-

---

38. Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1935), 37.

> The role of theology is thus cognitively relevant, for it provides a grammar—a sort of algorithmic device—for a narrative and framing which can explicitly engage the excesses of authoritarian models by evoking a nurturing personality through the gospel.

mitment with the wellbeing of the world. By underscoring biblical narratives which serve to recall the nurturing experiences of our bodies and minds, it also calls for a decisive engagement with the public and common spaces through the most egalitarian and just socio-political structures and processes. As God caresses with the right hand, God's "left" hand is not an emulation of populist and right-wing conceptions of (total) power, but a deconstruction of the networks of oppression and exclusion: a "fist" that empowers. Evangelicals want only a patriarchal and authoritarian fist, both in church and the world. And liberal Protestants may be enamored of the therapeutic qualities of God's caresses, forgetting that there is also a powerful fist. Hopefully Lutheran theology can serve as a reminder that a therapeutic caressing without a fist constraining evil and injustice is bland, and a fist without the ultimate caressing goal unleashes an authoritarian nightmare. In short, what looms before us is not only a political battle, but a theological one as well: for the law to be anchored to the gospel through love, and the gospel to be bound to the law through justice.