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POPULISTS OR INTERNATIONALISTS? EVANGELICAL TRIBES AND GLOBALIZATION

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Evangelical Populists and Their Discontents

Kevin R. den Dulk

Kevin R. den Dulk is the Paul B. Henry Chair in Christianity and Politics, Director of the Henry Institute and Professor of Political Science at Calvin College.

I grew up in a small California farming town, a world apart from the cosmopolitanism of the Bay Area just sixty miles west. My mother assimilated there after emigrating from a war-torn Europe; my father, who had a penchant for Louis L'Amour and starry-eyed songs about the American west, was a native-born son. Our town boasted a Christian school and four Reformed churches. My paternal grandparents were founding members of one of those churches, where my parents put down roots and raised their family in the faith. Two memories stand out from my childhood in that church. The first is how much I relished participating in the church's answer to the Boy Scouts, where I stood at attention with my gig line straight and my shirt laden with merit badges, answering weekly quizzes about the meaning of the Bill of Rights and the American flag. The second is that under the auspices of the church I met people my parents hosted from around the world: navy chaplains, missionaries, Hmong refugees.

I am now a social scientist who studies religion and politics. It's a high time in the field, especially as questions about the politics of white evangelicals come fast and sometimes furious. As I get older I realize how close those questions are to home. What was the impact, for example, of my exposure in that little town to conflicting strains of the nation's civil religion: the liberating potential of the rugged individual, on the one hand, and the formative power of neighborhood churches, immigrant kinships and other forms of deep community, on the other? And what about that church? Did it reinforce the value of those nationalist myths – not to mention fears that the nation was losing its way to radicalism or indifference? Or were my church's horizons larger than I realized, introducing me through those visitors to a different kind of “kingdom” citizenship that transcended American shores? And the final kicker: That church is part of a denomination that social scientists like me usually classify as “evangelical.” I'll leave alone the landmine question of whether that classification fits. But if it does, so what?

This *Public Justice Review* series raises similar questions about the tension between the national and the global within the broader evangelical tradition. Each author explores an aspect of two contrasting

narratives. The first portrays evangelicalism – and especially white evangelicalism – as adopting a vision of public life that is nationalist and increasingly populist, perhaps in ways that have disrupted theological commitments. This narrative points to evangelical embrace of the rhetoric of both “America first” and American exceptionalism, as well as evangelical worries that secular elites have unmoored the nation from its anchors in faith and family. The second narrative reminds us that evangelicals have a history of looking outside national borders. Evangelicals have indeed been a force for international engagement – for tackling religious persecution and human trafficking abroad, for bringing humanitarian relief to the poor or diseased or displaced, for preaching the gospel through evangelistic missions. While these efforts come from different places and motivations, and they are no doubt open to myriad lines of critique, in many cases they bear the signatures of a kind of internationalism that pushes against narrowly nationalist sentiments.

One prominent thread that cuts across both narratives is the role of *populism* within American evangelicalism. The concept of populism has become [the analytical flavor of the day](#). Political scientists and historians have used populism to explain recent conflicts across the globe, from Brazil to Hungary (Paul Rowe surveys some hotspots later in this series). Public intellectuals have also widely indicted populism as a challenge to vital norms of [pluralism](#), [individual rights](#) and [civic solidarity](#). If evangelicals have adopted something that consequential, it’s worth considering why and to what effect.

Populism in Evangelical Public Life

Populist movements champion “the people,” an assemblage of ordinary citizens energized by their economic, political and/or social grievances. But those grievances remain as mere complaints until they are somehow mobilized for public action. The populist’s strategy is not only to expose elites as the cause of the people’s misery, but also to show that those elites have ordered things *intentionally* to benefit themselves at the expense of the masses. The populist entrepreneur promises to disrupt that entrenched order and vindicate the people’s sovereignty (not to mention reward their loyalty). Populism is not necessarily associated with the right or left, or really any kind of specific program. It is a style of political reckoning, not of ideological ax-grinding. In the 2016 presidential election, anti-elitism was one of the most powerful predictors of support for *both* Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, despite their manifest ideological differences. Both candidates activated their supporters against leaders in government, media or business (and, in Trump’s case, the academy), whom they alleged rigged the economy or undermined the culture. Populism was a vehicle for these candidates’ ideological commitments, but it did not define those commitments.

The public’s interest in the intersection of populism and evangelicalism grew in the wake of that election. The overwhelming support of white evangelical voters for Donald Trump suggested an embrace of his populist appeal. To be sure, evangelical voting percentages for the Republican standard-bearer were no different, statistically speaking, in 2016 than the several preceding presidential elections, when the GOP put up decidedly non-populist candidates. Still, the 2016 elections seemed different, a laying bare of white evangelical anxieties in the form of right-wing populism. The populist signatures of grievance and anti-elitism were prevalent among evangelical leaders and in evangelical mass opinion. They doubled down on longstanding fears of creeping secularism, cultural fragmentation, the erosion of traditional values and institutions and the specter of Islamic extremism. Their grievances landed squarely on what they perceived as the cosmopolitan

elites who failed to defend the nation from these threats, and they found a candidate in the Republican party who articulated and re-framed these fears and targets.

This story, which, notably, many [disaffected evangelicals](#) tell, is compelling as far as it goes. But how far is that? Many evangelicals worry about secularism, sliding national status, or issues like abortion without self-identifying with “the people” and railing against corrupt elites. Conversely, at least a few evangelicals do indeed call out wayward leaders of a wide range of institutions in the name of the people, but their grievances run more to economics than matters of national pride or the dissolution of the traditional family. Commentators also chronically overlook the sizeable group of evangelicals who are neither particularly aggrieved nor politically mobilized; they are instead indifferent and apathetic. Combine all these groups – conservative non-populists, progressive populists and the disengaged, among others – and it is fair to say that most white evangelicals are not right-leaning populists.

Another caveat is more historical than categorical. The association of American religion with populism, and more specifically evangelicalism with populism, is nothing new. A quarter-century ago, for example, political scientist Allen Hertzke [chronicled the populist dimensions](#) of the candidacies of Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson in the 1988 presidential election. While each man represented a variant of evangelicalism that was starkly different than the other, they both shared the hallmarks of populist entrepreneurs. And as Hertzke explains, those campaigns were themselves “echoes of discontent,” harkening to an even longer history of evangelicalism within populist movements. It’s worth recalling that “populism” as a term was first used in the late-nineteenth century to name a movement of the largely agrarian *left*. Those progressive populists were led by that “Great Commoner” – [and firebrand evangelical](#) – William Jennings Bryan, who carried their flag to three defeats as presidential nominee for the Democratic Party yet nevertheless sparked substantial reforms of the political order.

None of these caveats imply that evangelicals have been impervious to right-wing populism in contemporary politics. But they do suggest that the story of evangelical populism is complex and historically dynamic, and that what some see as “populism” might be better described in conventional terms of ideology or partisanship.

Populism, Nationalism or Internationalism – or All of the Above?

Another thread in this series raises the questions of whether and how nationalism intersects with evangelical populism. Populism is not always nationalist and nationalism is not always populist; one can champion a nation’s virtues and interests without damning elites and glorifying the ordinary citizen, and vice versa. But populism frequently thrives when nationalism is present, i.e. when the grievances of “the people” are tied to the fate of the nation.

Globalization has been a seedbed for this linkage between populism and nationalism. Populist leaders across the world have followed a similar script. First, they articulate for ordinary citizens a set of legitimating concerns. Leaders then show the people that their loss results from the machinations of an international cabal, which convenes itself at far-flung places like [Davos](#) and uses the levers of economic and political power at the highest levels to enrich its members at the people’s expense. Finally, populists persuade the people that the only plausible response is the destruction of that “globalist” control and an unabashed re-assertion of national self-interest.

There is no question that strains of nationalism run through American evangelicalism. Sometimes it takes the form of patriotic rituals at a church-based boys club in central California. But it can be even more fervent and explicit, as when evangelicals claim that the United States is not only a Christian nation, but an exceptional one. In those cases, evangelicals have often seen profound threat from the outside: the Darwinism and higher criticism of continental Europe in the early 20th century; godless communism during the Cold War; Islamic extremism today. A common response has been to identify complicit leaders and to enlist the state to protect the homeland.

Yet here, too, the story requires a digression. Evangelicals have always been driven by complex motives that push their vision beyond national boundaries. For many evangelicals [the kingdom of God has no borders](#). So at the same time that some observers began to detect a rising populist-nationalist nexus among evangelicals, the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, after [surveying the global work of evangelicals](#) on religious freedom, trafficking, poverty alleviation and fighting HIV/AIDS, suggested a different description: “the new internationalists.” (Marc LiVecche’s intriguing contribution to this series also raises the possibility of yet another term: “Christian realist.”)

When Kristof originally used that description, he seemed puzzled that American evangelicals would develop such international bona fides. But it isn’t surprising. Nearly every evangelical denomination or large non-denominational church in the United States has an outreach abroad, which means staff and resources on the ground. As a result, churches have a stake in economic and political development in their ministry fields. This presence abroad also educates parishioners at home. The faithful hear stories of church plants, development initiatives, hospitals and seminaries and radio towers going up. The information flows directly from fellow members whom they trust, and it flows regularly as technologies have improved communication and physical movement. While all those chaplain and missionary visits to my childhood home left an impression, today Skype, email and easy air travel have made such encounters, virtual and physical, a much greater possibility.

In addition, evangelicals have been at the forefront of domestic efforts with international implications. They were a [key part of the coalition](#) in the 1990s and early 2000s to craft public policy to combat religious persecution and human trafficking. They adopt children internationally at a higher rate than most other religious groups (albeit not without [serious criticism](#)). Many evangelical faith communities have maintained a heavy commitment to refugee resettlement, and, even in this fraught political moment, pockets of evangelicals are quite supportive of generous immigration policy, as Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt discuss in this series.

These internationalist impulses are also unsurprising because they have been around for such a long time. Jessica Wright’s review of Heather Curtis’ [Holy Humanitarians](#) nicely captures the line from Wright’s own contemporary experience to the long history of evangelical activity abroad. It is, of course, a complex history, and often a deeply troubling one, with motives and approaches that range from genuine partnership and cultural sensitivity to paternalistic, cultural expropriative and downright racist. Yet it’s implausible to argue that these international efforts were driven solely by compulsions of nationalism or populism.

What's the Matter with Populism?

The real story, then, is that evangelicalism and populism have a complicated relationship. But the fact remains that evangelicals often do participate in populist movements. That fact raises a final question: so what?

We might give an evangelical embrace of populism a positive spin. Populists are generally jealous of popular sovereignty, that bedrock principle of modern democracy. Christian democrats (small “d”) can endorse jealousy of that sort – at least until they cross a point I discuss below. Populists also can be impressive at identifying structures and policies that *are* corrupt or otherwise ripe for reform. While mid-century historians such as Richard Hofstadter [were generally cold toward the reformist prospects](#) of the early populist movement, [later historians](#) have generally argued that populists of the late nineteenth-century helped translate legitimate grievances into the key reforms of the Progressive Era.

But I want to raise two primary concerns about the populist impulses of evangelicals. Here I am thinking about populism *as such*, that is, as a phenomenon separate from nationalism, authoritarianism, progressivism, conservatism or any other *ism*.

The first concern is *institutional*. Populists celebrate popular sovereignty and the majority's will, but they are far less interested in tempering their celebration with constitutional norms and the rule of law. The populist tendency to eschew or even undermine institutional boundaries is a special threat to minorities, who rely on institutional protections for belief and association against the power of the majority. But that is precisely the problem for populists: established institutions can get in the way of the “will of the people,” the only pure measure of legitimate grievance and action. It is no wonder that populist movements around the globe have resulted in constitutional crises or other disruptions that leave an institutional void. This populist anti-institutionalism is anathema to most forms of democratic pluralism, which seek to forge a life in common by recognizing the legitimate claims of a diverse range of life-purposes and communities.

The second concern relates to *identity*. Populist entrepreneurs sharpen and amplify differences, real or imagined, with the goal of presenting a defining contrast between the people and the elite. Populism thrives not only when the people know where they belong; populists also want to remind the people that they don't belong somewhere else. This in-group/out-group phenomenon drives what political scientists call *affective polarization*, which treats ideology and policy views as less important to our politics than deeper and more visceral emotional attachments to political groups. If mere ideology or policy views were the bases of inter-group attitudes, populists would simply describe elites as wrongheaded. But instead populists label their opponents as untrustworthy, immoral and dangerously threatening. To mix several metaphors, the opposition are “enemies of the people” who live in “swamps” where they have “rigged the system” to their own “parasitical” benefit.

This kind of tribalism – the translation of political identity into a marker of human worth – concerns me the most about populism. It is, I'm afraid, a form of identity that has increasingly colonized the church, which is in a nation-wide process of re-sorting along political divides. My hope is that Rob Joustra, in his accompanying piece in this series, is right that we are not yet to a point that this tribalism defines what an “evangelical” is, let alone what it means to be a citizen who is also a disciple of Christ.

To respond to the author of this article please email PJR@cpjustice.org. The articles in the *Public Justice Review* do not represent a consensus of positions on questions of public policy. We do not expect our readers will agree with all the arguments they find here, but we believe that within the broad tradition of what we call public justice we can do more by providing a forum for the debate and exchange of Christians, within those bounds, to work out public policy faithful to God and in service of our neighbors. We do not necessarily share the views expressed, but we do accept responsibility for giving them a chance to appear.