

If God Chose Trump, Did God Choose Obama?

Democracy may be based on the principle of “one person, one vote,” but some people who supported Donald Trump believe the Master of the universe cast the master ballot.

“God raised up, I believe, Donald Trump,” said former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann after he won the GOP nomination. “God showed up,” the Rev. Franklin Graham said to cheers at a post-election rally.

For those who share this view, Trump’s victory was nothing short of miraculous, especially given that he beat out 16 other in the Republican primaries—some of them evangelical Christians with long political resumes.

“For me, that has to be providence. That has to be the hand of God,” said Paula White, an evangelical pastor Trump has tapped to pray at his inauguration.

While it is unclear how many people accept this version of events—polling organizations contacted by RNS didn’t have statistics on it—conservative Christians appear most likely to embrace it.

But taken to its logical conclusion, the belief that God is in control of earthly events leads to noxious moral positions and bad public policy, warns William Schweiker, an ordained Methodist minister and professor of theological ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

“It means it’s OK with you and it’s God’s will that millions of people starve to death because of our actions,” he says.

“We don’t need to worry about the nations going under water because of climate change.”

For those who see Trump's inauguration on Friday (Jan. 20) as disastrous, the idea that God endorsed him is easy to dismiss as wishful thinking on the part of conservative Christians who came out for the winner in such overwhelming numbers.

But theologians across faith traditions have taken the question of God's role in human affairs quite seriously for millennia.

Among those who study religion and politics—even among those who don't believe in God or reject the notion that he puts his thumbs on the electoral scales—the belief remains relevant if only because so many people hold it.

And while many scholars of divinity deem it theologically problematic, they still invite study of the issue. It's an unsettled question in many minds, and complicated: Not everyone who believes God intercedes in human affairs believes so in the same way. Not everyone who believes God put Trump in office likes Trump.

The question of God and the election begs bigger questions—about the nature of God, and if and how God becomes involved in earthly affairs. It is also a question of comfort. For some believers, a God who picks the president is a God close at hand.

“At bottom, it is connected to the belief that God cares about our lives, which is a great thing,” says Wheaton College theologian Vincent Bacote, who nevertheless subjects to close scrutiny any claim that God intercedes in American elections.

The divine ballot

Popular evangelical speaker Ken Ham, founder of the Creation Museum, blogged about Trump during the campaign: “I doubt he truly understands what real Christianity is.”

Yet Ham does not doubt that God gave Trump the presidency.

“God is in total control,” Ham says. “He makes that very clear in the Bible where he tells us that he raises up kings and destroys kingdoms. He even calls a pagan king, Cyrus, his anointed, or his servant to do the things that he wants him to do.”

It’s an idea that sits well with many evangelicals who voted for Trump. The bragging and often crass president-elect, like the Persian King Cyrus in the book of Isaiah, may not behave as a God-fearing man should. But isn’t that just like God to use a far-from-perfect person to fulfill God’s grand plan?

Still, belief in God’s sovereignty and the Bible’s flawed prophets does not make the case for God choosing Trump for many mainline Protestant and Catholic theologians.

It’s a problem of theodicy– the tension between an all-powerful God and the fact of evil in the world–says Schweiker, who teaches that theology subjects religious belief to debate and rational argument.

“If you say God’s in control of everything then you’ve got to say that God is a really (obscenity) he says.

A God in total control is not a problem for Ham in light of any tragedy, from the Holocaust to a tsunami. “People single out particular events and say, ‘Where was your God?’” says Ham, who is not disclosing his choice in the presidential election.

“But we’ve got to stand back and look at the big picture,” Ham continues. “That was their turn to die. You’re going to die. The important thing is to look at yourself and ask, ‘Am I ready to face death, am I reconciled with my Savior so when I die I’ll spend eternity with him?’”

This perspective riles Schweiker, who did not vote for Trump and asks of Ham: “He thinks there is no moral difference between natural death and murder?”

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On the first day of this year's spring semester at evangelical Wheaton College, Bacote asked his students about the role of God in the recent election. One said his relatives believe God works through imperfect individuals.

Assuming the student's relatives had voted for Trump, Bacote asked him: "Did your relatives say that about Barack Obama?"

Bacote himself doesn't rule out God's involvement in politics.

But the professor questions how anyone could be so sure about God favoring any particular candidate, how anyone could be "so dialed into how providence operates." He points to the Bible.

"If one is taking Scripture seriously you have to ask, 'Where do you find the United States in the Bible?' Well, you don't."

And, Bacote continues, if God had a hand in one contest, then did he have a hand in them all?

"Was God involved in gubernatorial races? Mayoral races?"

Ham, by contrast, believes Trump, even before he takes the oath of office, is already working in harmony with God.

Trump has appointed Christians to important positions in the new administration.

And around his Kentucky home this year, Ham says, more people said "Merry Christmas," as opposed to the "Happy Holidays" they had offered in previous years.

Ham's certitude might draw challenges from theologians like Bacote. But he might get points for consistency.

"If Hillary Clinton would have won," Ham adds, "we would need to accept that God had put her there for whatever reasons."

God's to-do list

Talking about God and the 2016 election, the discussion often turns to parking.

Schweiker, the Methodist theologian, arguing against those who see God's hand in even mundane human affairs, offers the example of the "little old man who prays for parking places and then gets a parking place and says it's God's act for him."

But in attributing a prime parking spot or cash found on the sidewalk to God, people tend to point to their own specific experiences without considering the negative effects on others, Schweiker says.

"That little old man may have kept a very sick person from getting a parking place and getting to the hospital on time," he says. "Since Christians are supposed to love their neighbors, that's a bit of a problem."

Carmen Fowler LaBerge, who hosts "The Reconnect," a Christian radio show, also offers the parking space example—not necessarily to challenge claims that God intervenes in everyday human affairs but to show the various ways Christians can approach the issue.

"The fun part about this conversation," says LaBerge, "is that it ranges from 'What is God's will for all of known history?' and then there's like, 'God's will that I get a particular parking space.'"

Many Christians believe God intercedes in mortal lives in grand terms: his plan that the human story have a particular ending, for example, as described in the New Testament.

LaBerge, a board member of the National Association of Evangelicals, says she knows God's will because she has "read to the end of the book."

When it comes down to the way a sovereign God works on a smaller scale, as she and all human beings go about their days, LaBerge sees it this way: "God made me a free person ... in the way I live my life, the choices I make, the words I use."

She applies this view to her thinking on God and whoever wins an election.

"If God's hand is on the scales, what I can tell you is the way it is happening is through human agency. It's the way the Holy Spirit is leading individuals to discern and then to act," LaBerge says.

She says "if" God's hand is on the scales. What about Christians who are sure about God choosing Trump?

Even those who share Schweiker's objections to the idea of God steering humans to parking may understand this year's election as a sharp turn in the course of history, with the stakes high enough to explain God's direct intervention.

The belief may be tempting, but the Rev. James Bretzke counsels against it. He does not imagine the Holy Spirit could have had anything to do with Trump's election.

The Jesuit and Boston College professor of moral theology also invokes the concept of free will and agrees that God has chosen flawed people to work his will in the past ... but not Trump in 2016.

Those God chose in the Bible were flawed because they were unassuming and unexpected, he says. Gideon was an ordinary shepherd. David was the last of his brothers. And David was a flawed leader. "But ultimately what sets him apart is when confronted with his sins he acknowledged them" and repented.

"I don't think that's the Donald J. Trump life story," Bretzke

says. "I don't think that's where I would put the smart biblical money." {eo}

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