

White Evangelicals for Donald Trump

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How have Evangelicals come to put their faith in Trump? Interviewing the inhabitants of a small Midwest town, Jessamin Birdsall shows that their support for the Republican nominee is the product of an ideological compromise that has its roots in their fear of two different groups: Muslims and LGBT activists.

“Ted Cruz and I are basically the same person,” Christy tells me. “But he can’t win.” The presidential primary is just a few days away, and Christy and her husband Richard and I are talking in their living room after returning from a Trump rally earlier that afternoon. Christy and Richard are active members of their local evangelical church, successful business owners, and strong supporters of Donald Trump over Ted Cruz. I ask Christy to elaborate. “I mean, Ted Cruz and I basically have the same values, you know – Christian, conservative, pro-life, pro-traditional marriage, second amendment, all that – but I don’t think he can beat Hillary, and we need a Republican in the White House, or we’ll never recover.”

In the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, numerous political pundits and researchers have endeavored to understand how evangelical “values voters,” who for the last four decades have promoted biblical morality and traditional marriage, could support a thrice-married casino-owner who cannot quote a Bible verse and has previously supported Planned Parenthood and LGBT-friendly policies. One out of three Republican voters is a white evangelical Christian, and 65% of white evangelicals say they plan to vote for Donald Trump¹.

Life in a small Midwestern town

¹ Pew Research Center 2016

I spent three months living and working in Pleasant Fields², a small, majority white, historically conservative Christian community in the Midwest where agriculture and manufacturing remain the backbone of the economy. In some ways, I am an insider in this community. I come from a white evangelical family and am just one generation removed from a long line of Midwestern preachers and farmers. But in other ways, I am very much an outsider. Born in Japan, I have spent much of my life abroad in Tokyo, Delhi, and London. My education comes from the “secular, elite, East Coast establishment,” and my politics have nothing in common with Donald Trump. I wanted to understand two things in Pleasant Fields. First: how do evangelicals in this community articulate and justify their decision to vote for Donald Trump? And second: what are the local social, cultural, and economic conditions that create an environment in which support for Trump is possible?

I interviewed fifty members of the community and immersed myself in the life of the town as much as possible. I worked part-time as a diner waitress; participated in church services, Sunday School classes, and Bible studies; volunteered at a Vacation Bible School and retirement home; road alongside farmers as they planted corn and harvested winter wheat; drank Bud Light at the town bar; joined the morning coffee drinkers at McDonald’s and a Main Street cafe several times a week; and attended as many community gatherings and events as I could.

Driving south on the highway in my white Ford pick up truck, I pass through freshly planted fields of corn and soybeans, young children playing on the front porches of their white farmhouses, and lines of laundry flapping in the breeze. Out my right-hand window, a cheerful painted sign welcomes me to Pleasant Fields: “A friendly community,” and straight ahead a cluster of church steeples rises above the fields to mark the center of town. After a quick spin through McDonald’s for a cup of coffee, I pull into the front parking lot of the largest church in town, established by the early settlers who had fled religious persecution in Europe. The religious narrative of the settlers bravely fleeing oppression and working tirelessly to establish a community of freedom, prosperity, and upright living is actively celebrated by community leaders. The town of less than 5000 people is 97% white, majority conservative, and home to nearly twenty churches within the city limits. Today, families who trace their heritage back to the original European settlers retain prominent positions in city government, local businesses, community organizations, and churches.

² All names of towns and individuals are pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of individuals.

Below the steeples, there exists a diversifying community. Economic initiatives to grow the manufacturing sector and construct subsidized housing units in Pleasant Fields have attracted families from surrounding counties, contributing diversity of socioeconomic status, religion, and lifestyle. A number of the Mexican migrant workers who for many years have worked in the factories south of town have taken up permanent residence. A few years ago, a Muslim family moved to the community and bought the local diner where I worked for the summer, triggering unease among some residents who had never encountered a Muslim outside of Fox News broadcasts. While a subset of churches remains vibrant and active in the community, many are in decline. Membership and attendance rates are falling, the average age of congregants is rising, and issues of drug addiction, domestic violence, and teenage pregnancy are affecting the wider community. Such dynamics are not unfamiliar to small towns across Middle America.

Twin enemies: Islam and the LGBT movement

The evangelicals I met in Pleasant Fields are not all “a basket of deplorables,” in the words of Hillary Clinton. Many of them are kind and generous people who graciously welcomed me into their homes. They work hard, are committed to their families, volunteer in their communities, and give away a significant portion of their income to their churches and to families in need.

Nor are these evangelical Trump supporters all angry working class men. The image of the Trump supporter typically held by East Coast journalists and academics is that of an uneducated, unsophisticated, white male who has lost his job and feels personally victimized by globalization. While it is true that a number of Midwestern towns have suffered losses due to factories moving overseas, and that people are concerned about the American economy, it is not the case that all of Trump’s supporters are unemployed, lower class men. In the context of Pleasant Fields, for example, the manufacturing sector has actually expanded over the last twenty years, seeing new factories open and new jobs created. Many of the evangelical Trump supporters I interviewed are comfortably middle or even upper middle class.

Nor have they completely discarded all moral teachings or biblical ideals in their approach to political engagement, as some commentators have argued. The individuals and families and I spent time with are deeply committed to Christian ideals and continue to see a link

between their faith and their decision-making in the polling booth, though this link may appear contradictory to outsiders.

So if they aren't deplorable, angrily unemployed, or hypocritical, why are these white evangelicals supporting Donald Trump? It is important to bear in mind that while some evangelicals (like Christy and Richard, introduced earlier) have been gung ho Trump supporters since the beginning of the race, others have more reluctantly decided to vote for him as "the lesser of two evils." For Pleasant Fields evangelicals planning to vote for Trump, "evil" is most powerfully represented by two things: Islam and the LGBT movement.

Islam and the LGBT movement are both seen by voters in Pleasant Fields as antithetical to America's Judeo-Christian heritage, enemies that actively undermine the religious freedom and security of American Christians. Sitting in his backyard one evening, a fourth-generation Pleasant Fields farmer commented to me: "I would accept a Muslim if they would act like us Christians do and follow the laws, but they don't. They're above the law. They don't want to follow our laws. If they want to go rape a woman, they go rape a woman and they're thinking that 'we can do that in our country, we're going to do it over here.'" The implication is that Muslims are fundamentally at odds with American laws and Christian values. During a Wednesday afternoon conversation in the church office, Pastor Mark explained: "If you read the Qur'an, the ultimate goal is for the world to become Muslim and to be ruled by Muslim law – *sharia* [sic] law... And the Qur'an says while you are the minority you make those in power think you are with them. You can lie to them to deceive them. And then when you become the majority, it is convert or die. There's no middle ground." This idea of Muslims moving into America and seeking to impose sharia law was raised frequently, both in formal interviews and informal settings. During one of my first visits to McDonald's, one of the daily breakfast clubs was circulating a printout of an email forward containing the number of Syrian refugees resettled in American towns, listed in alphabetical order. "Right now in America they look peaceful, because they're trying to influence, woo, and tell everybody they're a very peaceful religion," said Dave, a builder and part-time Baptist preacher. "But that's what the Qur'an teaches they should do, until they get to a certain part of influence, where they set up their own laws and own courts. You'll see in England, right now they have courts that are – I don't pronounce this word right – *sheera*?" He went on to state that the progress of Islamic courts in England, a foreshadowing of what will come in the United States, "is a testament to the unbelief of the

English people. They have strayed away from their Christian moorings.” The narrative from Dave and others is that Islam is incompatible with the Christian principles on which the United States was founded, and that the gradual advancement of Islamic law in the West is both a symptom and a cause of the weakening influence of the Church in society. Objectively, the likelihood of sharia law having any influence in the town of Pleasant Fields is very remote, but the consumption of right-wing media coupled with the unexpected arrival of a Muslim family in a once homogenous Christian community create anxiety about the possibility.

Like Muslims, the LGBT community is constructed as a threat to the religious freedom of Christians and, more broadly, to the identity of America as a Christian nation. In reference to Christian bakers who refused to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex wedding, a young café manager noted: “Well, there’s very little coverage on the LGBT community that was threatening their lives and sending them death threats and vandalizing their building. What’s being done with that? Who’s arresting them? Who’s taking them to court? No one, because it gets pushed under the rug because why, it doesn’t fit the agenda. What fits the agenda is ‘let’s attack Christians and destroy this little subculture so we don’t have to deal with these haters.’” This bakery story, mentioned numerous times in interviews, illustrates the viewpoint that LGBT individuals increasingly have the law on their side, while Christians are being marginalized and discriminated against for their religious convictions. This issue is of particular salience in the Midwest given the recent controversy over Indiana Governor Pence’s handling of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a law designed to protect the rights of individuals and companies to exercise their faith-based convictions in their business dealings, which was widely criticized by LGBT activists. In a related vein, Christian public school teachers and administrators in Pleasant Fields expressed concern about President Obama’s guidance regarding transgender students and bathroom access. It is celebrated within the Pleasant Fields community that their public school teachers continue to pray in classrooms, post the Ten Commandments behind their desks, and cultivate a “Christian environment” in the school. Schoolteachers express gratitude that they have this freedom and see it as evidence of “God’s blessing.” With the roll out of new guidance and legislation, however, teachers and staff worry that their freedoms will be curtailed, and the transgender bathroom issue is interpreted as emblematic of a wider effort to undermine Christian freedoms and the Christian identity of the country. In the words of Pastor Mark: “They’re trying

to destroy the Christian fabric of the nation, at its core. Every progressive liberal has that as a goal.”

While from one side Muslims are seen as pushing for moral absolutism in accordance with sharia law, from the other side gays and lesbians are seen pushing for moral relativism and special protections for LGBT individuals, both of which represent stark opposition to the vision of a Judeo-Christian America that Pleasant Fields evangelicals claim. Consequently, these evangelicals are looking for a political leader who will preserve their religious freedoms and thwart legal demands from these two groups that lie outside their vision of a Christian America.

Gender norms and sexuality at stake

While the perceived threats of Islam and the LGBT community function as symbols of the weakening influence of Christianity in America, the discourse around these enemies also functions to reinforce a long-standing boundary for the evangelical Christian community: gender relations and sexual morality. Muslims represent oppression and abuse on the one hand, while gays and lesbians represent permissiveness and promiscuity on the other. In a conversation about Syrian refugees, Tina made the following statement about Muslims: “The mentality of those people – they do not value life as we value life. The husbands do not value their wives and their children as we value ours... And then you think of all those Christian women and children they took last year in the Middle East – being raped constantly. And this is their mentality. And so, these are the people we’re letting in.” The image of Muslim men as misogynist at best and rapist as worst surfaced in a number of conversations, often in reference to news people had heard about the refugee crisis in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. As people in town got to know me and interacted with me in my role as diner waitress, I started getting the question, “What’s it like working for a Muslim?” “Boss man,” as he was called at our diner, had a reputation of being demanding and insensitive towards his female staff, often eliciting the response, “well that’s how they treat women where he’s from.” It is interesting that my fellow waitresses attributed Boss man’s behavior towards women to his particular ethno-religious background, despite the fact that white American men (including Trump!) perpetrate equally bad or much worse gender-based discrimination and violence.

LGBT gender norms and sexuality, like Muslim gender norms and sexuality, are perceived as a serious challenge to conservative Christian values and cultural authority in

America. This concern has been a prominent feature of American religious and political debates for several decades. Although the Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage was interpreted as a major defeat by many evangelicals in the “culture wars,” it was by no means the final battle on issues of gender and sexuality. Pleasant Fields’ evangelical parents worry about how to raise their children with a traditional Christian sexual ethic when cultural norms around gender and sexuality are changing so rapidly. They wonder whether it’s best to take their children out of public schools, where the curriculum increasingly normalizes alternative sexualities and family structures. With deep concern about this transition in American culture, a young mother expressed a common sentiment: “This [LGBT issue] should be causing all of us to really figure out – what does God mean by hating homosexuality, and yet loving the sinner?” Community members shared that non-hetero sexual identities are one of those things that have been “not talked about” for a number of years, but which have recently become more evident and difficult to ignore. Youth pastors in particular express the reality that a number of young people under their charge are experiencing periods of “confusion” and need to be loved and counseled through their questions about sexual identity. Evangelicals also articulate the concern that political correctness prevents them from having open conversations about sin without being accused of hate or discrimination. This may be one reason why Donald Trump’s campaign against political correctness resonates with evangelicals on a certain level.

Apocalyptic visions

Constructed as threats to the freedom, faith, and moral authority of American Christians, the dual enemies of Islam and the LGBT movement take on added gravity when they are placed in a narrative of the clash of civilizations and the approach of the End Times. Islam was described to me as an “evil,” “Satan-led” religion, and the Qur’an as a “wicked book” and direct attack on gospel truth. After church in the fellowship hall one evening, Bill informed me that “there’s a huge spiritual warfare taking place, and Islam has a lot to do with that.” Islam is feared not merely as a “terrorist threat” – limited to concerns about personal physical safety or even national security – but rather as a spiritual enemy on a cosmic scale. Perhaps influenced by a reading of Samuel Huntington, a young professional suggested, “the next world war’s coming between – it won’t be between Europe and the United States – it’s a clash of civilizations. This was theorized back when I was in school, there was stuff coming out about the Islamist

extremists. Yeah, it'll be Muslim against Christian.” Describing an incident of Muslims from Michigan slaughtering animals on a neighboring Amish farm, a prosperous Pleasant Fields farmer told me: “It’s a gruesome death. It’s a sacrifice. That’s what a sacrifice is, and it’s like when they kill the Christians on the beaches – that’s part of their whole thing of they think they’re doing justice to their god. It goes deep.” In this description, he draws a striking parallel between a halal slaughter on Midwestern farmland and the beheading of Christians by Muslim enemies in the Middle East, suggesting that both are acts of sacrifice to Allah. These comments (and many more similar to them) point to an understanding of Islam as not simply a national security concern, but a powerful spiritual force waging violent war against God and God’s people. In this context of warfare and uncertainty, evangelicals look for a strong leader to provide security and stem the advancement of evil.

While Islam evokes End Times imagery of war and bloodshed, the advancement of LGBT rights evokes themes of persecution, sexual perversion, and rejection of God’s rule. Describing a pride parade in which he saw individuals dressed in nun and priest outfits, John said, “I think God looks on the parade stuff and says ‘that’s evil in my sight’ because that’s a finger in the eye of God... And I look at that and think, to me, that’s evil because it’s an intentional slap in the face of God.” Some Pleasant Fields evangelicals articulate the worry that America, for many years blessed by God, will soon face God’s judgment for its acceptance of same-sex marriage and permissive attitudes towards sex more generally. They see the LGBT movement as an attack on God himself, and a means of insulting and marginalizing God’s people in a historically Christian country.

“God has a history of using inadequate leaders.”

Within the theologically-framed narrative of spiritual peril and global uncertainty, the New Testament injunction to be “shrewd as serpents³” legitimates pragmatic political choices that may appear to be at odds with personal ethical commitments. Donald Trump is perceived as a strong figure with the capacity to stem the progress of societal evils and protect the freedoms of white evangelicals living in Pleasant Fields, despite his non-alignment with Christian ethics at the individual level. Pleasant Fields evangelicals are not ignorant of Trump’s moral failings, nor

³ This is a quotation from Matthew 10:16, in which Jesus tells his disciples: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.”

have they completely cast aside their own ethical commitments. Rather, they acknowledge that in light of their dwindling numbers and the failure of the Moral Majority in American politics, they can no longer expect to elect a president who personally shares their moral convictions or exemplifies their family values. They need a leader who will protect their rights to live out their own convictions in safety. This is why Christy, introduced at the beginning of this essay, insisted (and was right) that Ted Cruz could not win – he is actually *too similar* to her in her evangelical convictions and lifestyle, “sounds too much like a tele-evangelist” and “doesn’t know how to compromise,” whereas Trump knows how to “make deals” and, most importantly, to win. Pleasant Fields evangelicals have hope that Trump will stand strong against the perceived threat of Islam on Christian civilization, both in the United States and abroad. Christy put it this way: “ISIS is beheading Christians over there in the Middle East. No one is talking about that. Trump is the only one who has stood up for them, and would stand up for them.” Evangelicals also express hope that Trump will limit the further advancement of the LGBT agenda through his Supreme Court nominations. In the words of Bill: “If you go for Hillary, you’re going for the end of society as we know it because she’s gonna be able to put in at least two to three to four justices – liberal justices – and there goes all our rights, because they’ll completely strip the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and it’ll be gone. So, just for that reason alone I would go for Trump, because he at least says that he’s gonna put in conservative justices.”

Interestingly, after accepting (excitedly or reluctantly) Donald Trump as their potential leader, his evangelical supporters are also willing to extend grace towards his personal evils. Near the end of each interview, I would always ask questions along the lines of: How do you respond to Trump’s treatment of immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, disabled people, and people who disagree with him? What do you make of his claim that that he doesn’t need God’s forgiveness? How do you feel about the fact that he’s had multiple wives and lots of affairs?

“Well, we’re all sinners.”

“Those are reasons for us to pray for him.”

“God has a history of using inadequate leaders.”

“I have this great hope that Donald Trump will become a Christian. I mean I know there are Christians reaching out to him, left and right... so I do have hope for him to come to know the Lord.”

For him who offers them protection from evil, all can be forgiven. Though Trump neither shares their faith nor exemplifies their espoused family values, these evangelical supporters have hope that he can grow in his faith and become more like them. For Hillary, on the other hand, there is no hope of redemption. She is an ally of Islam and of the LGBT movement (amongst other things that don't align with their values). Trump supporters are absolutely certain that Hillary is "crooked," "evil," and "just like Obama," – a man they are convinced prefers Muslims to Christians and might be a Muslim himself.

The election is now only a few days away, and the likelihood of a Trump triumph appears low. However, in the event of a Clinton victory, the millions of Americans who are supporting Trump will not simply vanish. Nor will their concerns and fears just evaporate. The American people stand deeply divided – along political, economic, religious, racial, and regional lines. While white evangelical Christians are decreasing in their proportion of the United States population, their sense of rootedness in and commitment to the nation remains very strong, and they will continue to fight for their beliefs and values regardless of the election outcome. Being treated with condescension and derision by cosmopolitan liberals, as conservative Christians often are, only serves to deepen divides and intensify the battles. The next president of the United States faces the daunting task of unifying a divided and disillusioned electorate after a long and ugly campaign.

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