



Author points to persistent ‘slaveholder religion’ among evangelicals for Trump

By Jana Riess

March 22, 2018

[Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove](#) is a Christian activist in North Carolina working with youth, prisoners, and neighborhoods. Much of his work these days is part of [The Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival](#).

He’s also an author, most recently of [Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion](#), just released from InterVarsity Press. In it, Jonathan draws a strong distinction between true evangelical Christianity and what he calls “slaveholder religion,” to which he fears many American evangelicals have fallen captive. — JKR

RNS: What is slaveholder religion?

JWH: Frederick Douglass made this distinction in the 19th century between the Christianity of the slaveholder and the Christianity of Christ. Douglass knew that the slavemaster called himself Christian and had a whole way of reading the Bible and understanding God that went along with that. Douglass also knew Jesus for himself, and knew that *he* was a Christian. And that these two ways of living out the faith that go by the name of Christianity were diametrically opposed.

RNS: You argue that this conflict with slaveholder religion is playing out right now. How?

JWH: I feel like almost every week, there’s something in this administration that leads the media to ask, “Will Trump’s faith advisors still stand by him in the face of this allegation, or this reality?” And we have seen that the answer is yes. There is no moral failing or questionable activity that is going to cause people who call themselves evangelical Christians and who are backing him to turn away.

That’s confounding to some people, but if what is driving them is the slaveholder religion that drove the “redemption movement” of the 19th century – the preachers and politicians who understood Reconstruction after the Civil War to be an immoral imposition by white northerners that God called them to overthrow — then it fits. It fits with the historical pattern of being that kind of Christian in the American story.

For the Trumpvangelicals, this is a redemption presidency. In their imagination, they have deracialized a faith formed by the justification of race-based slavery. No one wants to think of themselves as racist. So they say the problem was not that Obama was black but that he was liberal, which to them equals immoral and ungodly in the same way that Reconstruction equaled

immoral and ungodly in the minds of the redemptionists. But of course in both cases it had everything to do with race.

RNS: Were you surprised by Trump’s election?

JWH: No. I had witnessed the backlash of the Tea Party in North Carolina and in other southern states in 2012. Obama won North Carolina in 2008 and lost it in 2012.

So it was not surprising, but it was to me deeply saddening precisely because the younger evangelicals in the South and in other parts of the country are not represented. I don’t think that the Trumpvangelicals are an authentic representation of where that demographic is.

[RNS note: [See here for Pew’s latest findings](#), released this week, that only 23% of Millennial women now identify as or lean Republican.]

But what *was* somewhat surprising was the ease with which the Trump campaign manipulated the machinery of the southern strategy, and how little capacity the Christian community had to resist that. It took a year for *Christianity Today*, which fashions itself as a moderate evangelical publication, to say something critical about Donald Trump. I remember that [the editorial that Andy Crouch wrote](#), which was a basic moral argument against the extremism Trump represented, didn’t come out until October, right before the election.

But I had talked to some of the folks there in the spring [of 2016], when Trump was one of many candidates, about why they couldn’t say clearly that that sort of racist nativism was not acceptable, and they said it was because he could become the Republican candidate. To which I responded, “That’s exactly why you have to say something! We *all* have to say something!”

RNS: Will young Christians give up on evangelicalism because they’re so disgusted with the Trumpvangelicals, or will they work to change things from within?

JWH: I think the “empty the pews” movement has a lot more energy right now. When I talk to high school and college students today, I hear people who are ready to move on rather than ready to reform Christianity.

Of course that doesn’t mean that Christian institutions will go away, but evangelical schools and magazines and such have to take seriously that there is a generation of people for whom these institutions have very little credibility. My 13 year-old son didn’t know an America without Barack Obama as president. I mean, he was born when Bush was president, but he wasn’t aware then. And this violent backlash against Obama right now is just wildly disorienting for him and for his generation. It’s like the kids in Florida protesting the school shooting.

JWH: I’m writing to evangelical Christians, fellow evangelicals, in this book. And I think it’s incredibly important for people to understand that I’m not just saying, “You’re racist.” As I’ve said before, I know from personal experience that people who have inherited this particular heritage of reading the Bible don’t see themselves that way. In the book I tell the story of Easter dinner at my parents’ house. I watched as my African American son was sitting next to my white

southern grandfather, when he realized that his grandfather might vote for Trump. “But he’s extreme,” my son said. And they both just stared at one another, unable to imagine how they other person felt.

For my son, with his experience of living in a black body, the idea of Trump as God’s man made absolutely no sense. Yet I could see that my grandfather, who had been told for generations that liberalism is immorality, and that immortality is what the Bible is against, was trying to reconcile that even if Trump was not a perfect candidate, he represented a way of winning that could defeat what my grandfather saw as liberal immorality.

That’s what I mean by slaveholder religion; this is how Christians in the South learned how to read the Bible in the 19th century. My son and my grandfather embody very different ways of sharing the faith that we have in common. So I close the book with a letter to both of them, after trying to sort out this history. I really wanted to try to speak with one voice to both of them.

RNS: Your book was so powerful, and also very hard to read. How will it be received, do you think?

JWH: I think some people who probably won’t even read it won’t like it, because it could be misunderstood as a white evangelical saying that a lot of other white evangelicals are racist. When, as a matter of fact, what I’m trying to do is confess. And this is what Christians do during Lent, isn’t it? We turn away from sin and turn to grace.

So I’m hoping that people who don’t consider themselves inheritors of racism might grapple with this and consider how the patterns of our churches and of our politics reflect a broken history that we need to repent of. I know that is possible because I’ve seen it. So I share the book in hope that new patterns and coalitions in public life are possible.