

I find most of the discussions speculating on the motivations of Trump supporters insufferable. Are they irredeemable bigots or frantic anti-abortion advocates, blinded to Trump's incompetencies? They certainly don't think so, and if we're talking about conscious motivations of an electorate, then their opinions on the matter do need accounting for. Are they naive blue-collar workers, economically marginalized to the point of accepting a strongman or a radically 'anti-establishment' political presence? Neither extreme is ideal, especially since both positions dangerously and foolishly discards the critical thinking skills of large portions of the electorate.

There isn't one trump voter and one set of motivations. I see each motivation as a separate thread, and the entanglement of these many anxieties, popularism, social conservatives, has created a fearsome cord. "a threefold cord is not quickly broken", after all. Herein, I will focus on the one of these histories which I know intimately. Essentially, it is the story of how evangelicals went from being an apolitical group with varying opinions on birth control and abortion to one of the most powerful and popularist political agendas.

From eleven years in Christian homeschooling, I am intimately acquainted with the rhetoric of evangelicalism, and also with its sincerity, its moral certainty, and its harms. I will take for granted that Evangelical school systems teach socially harmful beliefs, although that 'harm' is obviously deeply contested. But for the rest of this paper, *I'm going to go ahead and assume that a population taught climate change denial, skepticism of mainstream science, misinformation about contraception and abortion, and a cocktail of Christian nationalism becomes a problem for everyone.* If you need a quick benchmark for how bad this gets, Bob Jones [lost its tax-exempt status over a ban on interracial dating](#), which was an actual supreme court case, and only gave up the ban in 2000. That's only 4 years before I started using their homeschool curriculum, which had moral and theological trivia in every class from history, literature, to mathematics.

The critical answer to 'how we got here' is depressingly American. In the 1960's, resistance to school and university desegregation measures lead to an increased interest in non-public schooling options – homeschooling and private schools and colleges. These systems had near complete control over curricula and student population, and when successful, they could keep students engaged from grades K-university. Bob Jones University and Abeka are private universities which, along with the Heritage foundation, also publish popular homeschool curricula. All of this makes these systems amazing incubators for social conservatism – students will almost never interact with anyone outside the bubble, and secular music, books, and art are all widely discouraged. The hope is that one stays in this system for life – in fact, you can get a PhD from the university that publishes Abeka curriculum.

So, anti-black racism is largely responsible for the formation of these very good incubators of conservatism, but why does conservatism look the way it does? Well, rage is profitable and as evangelicals lost the school segregation battle in mainstream American life, they needed a new rallying cry. Against the emerging feminist movement of the 1970's and 1980's, [abortion bans and resistance to women's liberation became the new fight](#). This was both wildly profitable for evangelical thought leaders and a strong way to unify different evangelical doctrines and positions. *And the advantage of selecting ideologies to fight against by convenience rather than because the ideology causes you genuine harm? You can easily pick a new fight whenever you lose the old one.*

To recap, we have racism and high-level cynical plots to curry favor and popularity, leading to the creation of organized educational and cultural institutions. Evangelicalism became not just a religious movement, but a social one, with its own literature, music, and eventually movies and television. Some secular art is considered okay for evangelicals to consume, and of course there is a whole lot of minor rule slippage, but in general evangelicals became a more extreme and more isolated group. Because a lot of anti-government sentiment is necessary for sustain Evangelicalism's political agendas, a fair number of government unfriendly movements like climate and vaccine conspiracies can and have slipped into Evangelical communities.

That this movement has religious grounding only makes in more potent. When Christianity was a new and not very popular movement in tension with the empirical Roman state, a lot of persecution rhetoric slipped into Christian texts, and this makes Christian persecution complexes easy to justify. The more isolated and unpopular the movement gets, the more likely it is that Satan is working against them, and this makes them righteous before God. And unpopular they became - the 1990's through the early 2000's brought a series of blows to the movement, and ideological pivots. Educational freedoms, feminism, abortion rights, gay rights, climate change measures, transgender rights, these are all battles in a war that, in the mid 2000's, Evangelicals seemed to be losing. Except of course, for those of us where were raised into it.

These movements are so efficient that you don't even have to be personally conservative to wind up stuck within a socially conservative agenda. My parents were decently moderate but hesitant to push back against conservatism in our social groups, so I grew up in a stew of young earth creationism, stark (and barely concealed racist) hostility towards Obama, the moral equivalence between gay people and murderers, and the evils of public school. That's why I was reformatting arguments against television, public healthcare, and abortion into Aristotelian syllogisms in my logic courses as a pre-teen. Even for adult converts drawn in by the open generosity and friendliness and yes, even the structures and

clear rules of evangelicalism, it is not easy to resist social conservatism. *If you have your whole life, your family and friends and beliefs, invested in a system, knowing it is built from resentment and reactionary politics does not make you less attached to it.*

Worldviews are only ever flimsy and irrational from the outside (and trust me, many Evangelicals think your worldview is equally flimsy, whatever it may be). Internally, every worldview needs central grounding concepts – thinks like righteousness and a hyper-literal interpretation of the bible. Worldviews also need accepted sources of reliable information, for example, Christian non-profits and preachers, and sources they automatically distrust, for example government agencies. Once you have those, you can build up almost anything with formal logic. In other words, Aristotle won't save you from Trumpism, and in fact he may help you reinforce your Trumpism in a cohesive and sensible sounding way.

The point of all of this is, basically, what the hell do we do with the evangelicals in my generation, and the generations preceding and following me, who didn't flunk out of evangelical worldviews because they were gay? Curious, caring kids become indoctrinated and passionate teenagers, who eventually become adults with toxic beliefs and a mile high persecution complex. In my more patient moments, this question is “at what point does an individual was epistemically harmed during their childhood begin to start to bear responsibility in reinforcing those ideas for the next generation?”

In my less patient moments, the question is “*what in the holy fuck do we do with people whose society abandoned them to an inadequate education, dysfunctional socialization, and the mockery of being stupid religious hicks, who are now threatening everyone's healthcare?*” Evangelical kids have been raised to be strong and defensive, literally willing to die for their beliefs, since they were toddlers. [Project Joshua](#) is the organized effort to recruit smart, passionate, and socially acute young conservatives into politics, and it has succeeded depressingly well.

Often, this quandary reminds me of Exodus, the [‘iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation’](#). Not as a punitive prescriptive statement, which is probably the intended meaning, but a descriptive claim how harmful beliefs are perpetuated through family teachings.

The shock over Trump supporters, from both Americans and non-Americans alike, just indicates we all still have work to do. Specifically, we need to grapple with the fact that the very skills which make for charismatic and competent public servants are insufficient to avoid hard right ideology. If you want abortion bans, a reduction of government services for the average American, and regressive policies around sex and gender, then Trump is a good candidate.

None of this actually requires you to be a consciously amoral or uncaring person - most evangelicals will have an answer for how to help people access healthcare or jobs or raise a child you didn't plan on having. They are also (sometimes) not consciously aware of racism in their policies, and the hyper selective histories they were raised in shelter them from ever observing the stark racist inequalities that many Americans have to grapple with daily. Dangerous and dysfunctional politics doesn't require conscious malice - one only must be living inside a dysfunctional intellectual system, inflicting the sins of their fathers against everyone.