

The Joseph Dilemma:
Spiritual Advisors and the Burden of Political Access

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Abstract

Christian ministers have assumed the role of spiritual advisors to Presidents since the founding of the nation. In this capacity, they have provided pastoral counsel and public policy advice to the Commander in Chief. This peculiar marriage between Church and State has not been without criticism. In the present administration, some spiritual advisors compare themselves to the biblical Joseph who found favor with Pharaoh. At issue is that critics insist their privileged access to the President comes with a moral responsibility to speak truth to power. This paper does not attempt to resolve differences between spiritual advisors and their critics. Rather, it is concerned with how presidential spiritual advisors have functioned historically as religious lobbyists, chaplains, and members of focus groups in service of the Church and the White House.

The Joseph Dilemma

The adage is true that it is lonely at the top. On May 26, 1899, President McKinley signed a personal note to himself that he later tucked into his letter book. “My belief embraces the Divinity of Christ and a recognition of Christianity as the mightiest factor in the world’s civilization.” This confession of faith, minimal as it was, was written not to estrange himself from Methodism, but to affirm that his personalized faith still resided in the Methodist communion (Leech, 462). Some presidents have found it inconvenient to maintain relationships with their respective pastors. Instead, they have relied on other clergy persons to act as their spiritual advisors. Candidates for this role are typically high-profile religious leaders whom they feel they can trust with their innermost secrets or they find a public association with them politically advantageous. Clergy have accepted these rare high-level invitations for entirely different reasons. Perhaps the noblest reason is to fulfill the role of Joseph who, apart from his famous “technicolor dream-coat,” was celebrated for his rise to a high position to advocate for his suffering people. Those who have been ushered into this covenant with the President have done so with the understanding that they have no official capacity on the Cabinet, yet equivalent fidelity is expected. Furthermore, like all appointed officials, they serve at the pleasure of the Commander in Chief.

Since the first President was inaugurated, clergy members have endeavored to present their own brand of spiritual counsel to the White House. Almost without exception, a select number of clergy persons have been granted the privilege of being the confidant of Presidents. It is important to note that Methodist bishops and pastors played an important role in nearly every administration beginning with Francis Asbury, the first Methodist bishop, who lobbied George Washington to Joshua DuBois, a cradle AME and a Pentecostal, who was ranked as the

“President’s Pastor” to Barack Obama. The Trump administration is one notable exception. The religious leaders that have enjoyed favorable access were, by and large, either political surrogates or endorsing personalities during the 2016 presidential campaign. While the formal Evangelical Advisory board ended after the campaign, “remnants” of the board continue to provide the administration with what journalist Noah Weiland calls “a constellation of religious figures to lend its platform gravitas among evangelicals,” (Weiland). Their access to the White House has enabled them to build professional rapport with the President and Vice-President. When hot-button issues arise, they serve as a convenient focus group representing Evangelical interests. In the public eye, they are expected to offer ethical and moral advice on issues of national and global importance. For those spiritual advisors who have served in more intimate and sensitive situations, they functioned as “chaplains” offering pastoral counsel and a steady hand during times of great stress.

Method

The present political climate changes daily and chaotically, so that any temptation to focus on salacious peccadillos or the Tweet of the day would be as foolish as it would be distasteful. Having decided such diversions would not serve the purpose of this paper, I resolved to focus on spiritual advisors as a historical phenomenon. It quickly became apparent that one problem is that this ministry in all its variations lacked a clear ecclesiology. However, other patterns throughout history began to emerge which I have highlighted in this study.

I started my research with the obvious choices. I scanned biographies of presidents and their pastoral associations. Unfortunately, not all the resources I desired were readily available for every subject referenced in this paper. I scoured books, historical newspapers, and public documents. As a bonus, a couple of faith leaders were kind enough to share their candid thoughts

on their roles as spiritual advisors. Two months before the passing of Billy Graham, I reached out to his eponymous visitor center in Montreat, South Carolina. While the staff librarian was unable to facilitate an interview with Dr. Graham, it was recommended that I visit the archives at Wheaton College. He also suggested I read Graham's best-selling autobiography *Just As I Am*. Lacking the resources for archive-hopping, I quickly obtained a copy of his book. Graham's book provided a helpful first-hand perspective from one of the most prominent spiritual advisors in American history. It is a treasure trove of personal asides and previously unpublished information, though the language is obviously sanitized for the sake of his evangelical readers.

There were two other exceptional books that stood out for their depth of analysis of the subject of religion and the office of the president. Paul Kengor's *God and Ronald Reagan* provides a nice close up of the faith of President Reagan. William Martin's *A Prophet with Honor* is the authorized biography of Billy Graham. Unlike *Just As I Am*, Martin includes some of the lesser known details of the evangelist's political activities. These resources helped frame my understanding of the relationships built between presidents and their spiritual advisors. When taken together, I gather that spiritual advising under Graham, though imperfect, demonstrated the truest spirit of chaplaincy to American presidents. Various print and electronic sources were also consulted, though not all were utilized. There remains enough meaty material in the libraries and archives for a serious book-length monograph.

Discussion

Chaplains and the Three Branches of Power

Presidents from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Donald J. Trump have taken their retreats at Camp David, the former Naval Support Facility Thurmont. While they are in residence, they may attend chapel services conducted by Naval Chaplains. However, presidential stays at Camp

David are so infrequent that no lasting pastoral relationship is ever possible. Even so, Navy Chaplains, unlike civilian pastors, are subject to frequent assignment rotations.

Whenever Presidents enter a public or government hall to deliver an address, they are traditionally announced as “The President of the United States” followed by a standing ovation and, where appropriate, a brass band rendition of “Hail to the Chief.” No set protocols for invocations exists for a presidential address outside of inaugural ceremonies. Typically, this involves public prayers, scripture readings, and taking the oath of office on a family Bible or two. The only exceptions to swearing on a Bible were Theodore Roosevelt, John Quincy Adams, Franklin Pierce, and Lyndon B. Johnson. It is interesting to note that Johnson swore on a Roman Catholic Missal on Air Force One. Even though clergy are frequently present at public addresses, the Executive Branch does not appoint Chaplains to read scripture, lead in prayer, or deliver sermons. In the White House, however, it is not unusual to see clergy in and out of the Oval Office. Even though they are without an official appointment, clergy persons are normally the least conspicuous actors in the White House. Only one clergy person, Billy Graham, has ever achieved the honorific designation of “Chaplain to the White House.” The fact that there was no constitutional provision made for a Presidential Chaplain has not deterred the parade of clergy up 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Seventeenth-century colonist Roger Williams may have had separation of Church and State mind when he went off to settle Rhode Island. American colonists were not keen to live under a theocracy neither were they interested in separating faith from politics. The motto of the US Army Chaplain Corps is *Pro Deo et Patria*, or “For God and Country.” It is noteworthy that the Founding Fathers gave attention to the primacy of God over the State. Thomas Jefferson’s concept of separating Church and State was possibly inspired by reading the classic Greek author

Xenophon who chronicled the political exploits of Cyrus the Great. This is significant because Cyrus is credited as the ancient champion of multiculturalism and religious tolerance, (MacGregor). The First Amendment clearly states that there would be no establishment of religion in the United States. Before World War II, this “establishment clause” was ignored by judges as irrelevant to constitutional debates. After the war, when the U.S. Supreme Court turned to it for guidance on religious issues “the justices found the words of the clause devoid of any meaning that could be found in the Framers’ intentions, historical experience, or judicial precedent,” (Wiecek, 258). What is clear is that the role of religion was not entirely removed from government proceedings. In fact, we can trace the first appearance of spiritual advisors to the Founding Fathers.

On September 7, 1774, the Continental Congress commenced with a prayer offered by Reverend Jacob Duché, a local Philadelphia Rector. This was a good start for religion to play a role in forming the character of the new nation, or so it seemed. Unfortunately, Duché displayed Tory sympathies and he eventually defected from the rebels to the British, (Moore, 56-60). Benjamin Franklin, not widely known as a person of faith, was instrumental in institutionalizing this practice. Reverend William Linn was elected the first Chaplain of the House (Office of the Chaplain United States House of Representatives 2018). The first convening of the US Senate held in New York City on April 6, 1789, included an agenda item to identify a candidate for a chaplain. The Right Reverend Samuel Provoost, the Episcopal Bishop of New York was appointed the first Senate Chaplain on April 25, 1789. (Senate Chaplain 2018).

The Supreme Court, though derived philosophically from Judeo-Christian principles of jurisprudence, has never appointed chaplains to serve the Justices. Perhaps the unfortunate episode of the Salem Witch Trials convinced the Founding Fathers not to let religion have

dominion over the court system. President Washington's qualifications for Justices was not only legal knowledge, but support for the Constitution, geographic diversity, "character, training, health, and public renown." Of highest importance was their participation in the Revolution, (Marcus, 28.) The terms "character" and "public renown" may suggest a religious background. However, religious affiliation was not a marker for a good candidate for federal service. Although chaplains were never appointed to the Supreme Court, the Crier still opens the sessions with a chant ending with an invocation that at least mentions God.

The Honorable, the Chief Justice and the Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States. Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! All persons having business before the Honorable, the Supreme Court of the United States, are admonished to draw near and give their attention, for the Court is now sitting. God save the United States and this Honorable Court! (Supreme Court, 2018).

Since the Supreme Court has the most role in setting legal precedent for the nation, it should not be surprising that candidate Trump used the selection of conservative Justices as a talking point in his campaign rallies. To the delight of his supporters, two such opportunities have come in rapid succession. The untimely death of Justice Antonin Scalia and the early retirement of Justice Anthony Kennedy were magnanimous gifts to the Trump administration whose Evangelical supporters interpreted as a much-anticipated opportunity to restore "constitutionalists" to the Supreme Court in opposition to a subjective "living, breathing" constitutional philosophy associated with liberals, (Nance, 2018).

Lobbyists, Chaplains, and Focus Groups

I have identified at least three categories of spiritual advisors to US presidents. First up are the *lobbyists*. The lobbyists seek audiences with the Presidents to discuss issues that concern their communities or national policy closely related to their faith-based worldviews. Second, there are those spiritual advisors whose primary role is a chaplain. This person is dedicated to the

spiritual well-being of the President. He or she may listen to concerns, pray, administer sacraments, and – if necessary – grant absolution. Third, there are spiritual advisors who are a type of hybrid between the first two. They may not always meet with the President, but they function more as members of *focus groups*. Typically, this category three is a board or council consisting of handpicked religious leaders by someone close to the President such as a category two advisor, the chaplain. Once appointed, members of this group assemble only when their input is needed by the White House. These categories will be easily recognizable in the following snapshots of American religious history.

George Washington

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, concerned with the growing tensions between Britain and the American colonies, sent Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke as superintendents to the Methodist diaspora. John Wigger says that Asbury had little taste for politics and Coke was a dyed in the wool Tory. Asbury sent a gift of Methodist prayer books and a collection of sermons for the Washington family to mark their initial meeting at Mount Vernon. It is remarkable that either Asbury or Coke would have had much to say to any politician let alone the new President of the former colonies. Even so, a Methodist delegation consisting of Asbury, Coke, John Dickins, and Thomas Morrell arranged a meeting with President-elect George Washington in New York. In their collective promise of intercession, they prayed God would “fill up your important station to his glory, the good of his church, the happiness and prosperity of the United States, and the welfare of mankind,” (Wigger 181). The right to petition is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution. The Methodist delegation that petitioned Washington wanted him to address the evil of slavery. Unfortunately, Washington dismissed the Methodist lobbyists without making any promises. Washington endeavored to set a precedent so that the

United States of America would be committed to free expression for all religions but no special treatment for any one religion.

In Washington's time, other religious groups also sent messages of support to the new President-elect. Washington responded with official letters to the United Baptist Churches in Virginia, the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, and the New Church in Baltimore. In this body of correspondence, he thanked them for their support and restated a national commitment to protect their religious rights and defend against threats of persecution, (Washington 738-739, 766-767, 833-834).

Abraham Lincoln

It is well-known that President Abraham Lincoln, though pious in his own way, did not claim membership in any one denominational affiliation. While in residency at the White House he attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church where Phineas D. Gurley was Pastor (Sweet 62). When his son Willie died unexpectedly, Lincoln was counseled by Gurley that his son was indeed in heaven. Lincoln reported that he experienced a process of "crystallization" though he was neither converted nor moved to join a Christian denomination. Lincoln found more comfort in the fatalistic words of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. (Donald 336, 337).

The Civil War made spiritual advisement a hazardous duty since both sides of the slavery issue were eagerly represented by visiting clergy. In the case of Abraham Lincoln, lobbyists from both sides of the slavery-abolition debate often contradicted each other so that their influence is difficult to gauge. Lincoln had little patience for their penchant for citing scripture while claiming a divine mandate to communicate God's will to him. He did believe, of course, in the words of the Bible and sought divine guidance. Addressing visitors who claimed God was on their side,

Lincoln quipped “I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say, that if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed he would reveal it directly to me. And if I can learn what it is...I will do it!” (Klingaman 2001, 179).

It is difficult to say how much influence Gurley had on Lincoln’s policies. In the Lincoln funeral sermon, Gurley remarked on Lincoln’s grasp of faith and history. The entire sermon was published in *The New York Times* April 20, 1865, gives evidence of a view of history consistent with the Calvinism of Gurley’s Presbyterianism.

He [God] gave him a calm and abiding confidence in the overruling providence of God and in the ultimate triumph of truth and righteousness through the power and the blessing of God. This confidence strengthened him in all his hours of anxiety and toil and inspired him with calm and cheering hope when others were inclining to despondency and gloom. Never shall I forget the emphasis and the deep emotion with which he said in this very room, to a company of clergyman and others, who called to pay him their respects in the darkest days of our civil conflict: “Gentlemen, my hope of success in this great and terrible struggle rests on that immutable foundation, the justice and goodness of God.” (Abraham Lincoln’s White House Funeral Sermon).

Methodist historians will be quick to add that the very influential Bishop Matthew Simpson was also a friend of President Lincoln, as well as several other presidents. Simpson was frequently summoned to the White House to discuss matters of state with the President. As editor of the *Christian Advocate*, his comprehension of the nation’s political climate was very valuable to President Lincoln, (Crooks 368, 369). In this sense, Simpson served as a representative of the Methodist focus group while also lending true Christian fellowship to the Commander in Chief. Although Gurley preached the funeral sermon, it was Simpson who gave the eulogy. His preaching eloquence had contributed much to the success of the 1864 campaign. His delivery at the burial ceremony was no disappointment. In it, Simpson extolled the fallen

leader as an exemplar and martyr whose character was consistent with “Honest Abe” mythology. The tender words were crafted to elicit patriotism, which would likely have pleased the dutiful President whom he served as friend and advisor.

Abraham Lincoln was a good man. He was known as an honest, temperate, forgiving man, a just man, a man of noble heart, in every way. Certainly, if there ever was a man who illustrated some of the principles of pure religion, that man was our departed President. His example urges the country to trust in God and do right. (Sweet 71).

William McKinley

President McKinley was well-known as a faithful Methodist throughout his life. It is a strange twist of fate that a Roman Catholic Archbishop should interrupt the sequence of Protestant spiritual advisors, especially when one considers the difficulties the Irish Catholics faced in predominantly Protestant America. However, it was just that climate that created the opening for Archbishop John Ireland. During McKinley’s campaign for the Presidency, supporters of the Christian fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan spread falsehoods that McKinley was a crypto-Catholic and that his children, who were in fact deceased at the time, were attending Catholic catechism. McKinley, known for his gentle and charitable spirit, said nothing to suppress the rumors. Rather, his campaign was able to use the opportunity to reach out to Catholic voters for a narrow margin victory. This did not escape the attention of Bishop Ireland. McKinley, finding himself in need of a confessor, established a long friendship with Ireland that extended to the President’s deathbed.

While residing at the White House, McKinley attended Metropolitan Methodist Episcopal Church. Though he enjoyed worship and Sunday School, he disliked the undue attention given him by gushing preachers and gawking church-goers. On one occasion he publicly announced his decision to no longer frequent the church. Unwilling to specify his reason

for the abrupt cessation of attendance, a local newspaper journalist suggested that it was due to his dull Methodist pastor. “Scoffers will suspect that the President stays away from church because, under the pretense of finding his pastor an indiscreet and intemperate person, he really finds him a bore,” (*New York Times* 1897). McKinley kept good relations with the Methodist pastors of Metropolitan MEC. In the first term, he worked closely with Cardinal Ireland and other Catholic leaders. He appointed a Catholic as Attorney General and later named him as a Supreme Court Justice. In the second term, he relied less on the advice of clergy, including Methodists and Catholics.

It is hard to discount the prophetic role that religious lobbyists played in speaking truth to power during McKinley’s administration. After the Spanish-American War, McKinley received a delegation of Methodist clergy who were concerned about the outcome of the seized territories. His vision of expanding the American empire into the Far East was probably influenced by the Methodist delegation, though his mind was clearly made up before they arrived. “Hold a moment longer! Not quite yet, gentlemen! Before you go I would like to say just a word about the Philippine business,” (McKinley, “Remarks to Methodist Delegation”). He openly confessed that his own fears were relieved after much time in prayer. In a bizarre testimony that combined imperialism and religious fervor, McKinley claimed the United States had a divine mandate to take control of the islands and their people.

I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way – I don’t know how it was, but it came: (1) That we could not give them back to Spain – that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France and Germany – our commercial rivals in the Orient – that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves – they were unfit for self-government – and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain’s was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the

Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died. (McKinley).

Harry S. Truman

It is a given that running for president takes more than a war chest full of big money. It also takes a high confidence of success and a personal sense of destiny. In Christian parlance, we might say that a candidate for office should feel called to service. This was certainly the case with Harry S. Truman, a devout Baptist, who interpreted his presidency as a divine calling. He was unprepared for the approach of young Billy Graham who aspired to become the confidant of the President. Despite some minor political missteps, Billy Graham would do more to define the role of a chaplain than anyone before or after him. Thanks to the promotional efforts of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, the young Billy Graham rose from relative obscurity to national prominence. In his first attempt to take on the role of a presidential spiritual advisor he was rebuffed by Truman who accused him of being a publicity seeker, (Martin 136). An avid Bible scholar and a Baptist, Truman came to believe that by taking the lead in supporting the post-WWII establishment of the State of Israel he was fulfilling the role of the biblical Persian benefactor who funded the return of exiles to Jerusalem. In November 1953, while on a visit to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, he was introduced as "the man who helped create the state of Israel." As the story goes, Truman responded by proclaiming, "I am Cyrus. I am Cyrus!" (Merkley).

John F. Kennedy / Lyndon B. Johnson

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson were so intertwined they need to be considered together. Before we can consider Kennedy, it is crucial that we discuss the religious giants Norman Vincent Peale, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Norman Vincent Peale began

his ministry as an ordained Methodist pastor. In 1932, he transferred his credentials to the Dutch Reformed Church to accept a call to the pastorate of historic Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. He held this position for fifty-two years. Blessed with a fine preaching voice and approachable to teaching, Peale rose to national prominence on his syndicated radio show “Live with Confidence.” He was best known for his best-selling inspirational book *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) which at one time was second in sales only to the Bible. In 1935, his wife Ruth Stafford Peale formed a partnership with Frank Gannett, a Unitarian, philanthropist, and newspaper magnate, and with Branch Rickey, a fellow Ohio Wesleyan alumnus, a Methodist and the General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Together they published *Guideposts* magazine. (Guideposts, 2018). Peale’s criticism of FDR’s New Deal and subsequent positive influence on President Dwight D. Eisenhower may have given him too much confidence in politics. His involvement in the Nixon-Kennedy campaign nearly ended his career. It is worth noting that Eisenhower had no church affiliation before his presidency. At the insistence of Graham, he joined a church. He was baptized as an adult and received into membership in the Presbyterian Church. During his term, Eisenhower is credited for adding the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance.

Norman Vincent Peale was an avid supporter of presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon. In the 1960 presidential campaign, Peale allied himself with Billy Graham to prevent John F. Kennedy’s election. On August 18, 1960, Graham hosted a meeting of twenty-five ministers in Montreux, Switzerland to strategize how they might block the election of John F. Kennedy. Peale was the guest of honor. On September 7, one hundred fifty Protestant ministers meeting Washington, D.C., signed a statement opposing Kennedy on the grounds of his Catholic faith. The newly-formed National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom shocked America

with an anti-Catholic rhetoric that closely resembled the smear tactics of the 1928 presidential campaign that pitted Herbert C. Hoover against Alfred E. Smith, a Roman Catholic. At the heart of their demagoguery was the question of whether a good Catholic would have a stronger allegiance to the USA or to Rome on matters of state. Peale's brief association as their spokesperson gave them clout but drew intense ire from other religious leaders. Reinhold Niebuhr, a fellow Reformed minister and professor of ethics at Union Theological Seminary, publicly chastised Peale for leading the anti-Catholic cabal. John C. Bennett, President of Union Theological Seminary, and radio host Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath, aghast at this blatant religious bigotry, rebuked him citing the constitutional rule prohibiting a religious test for office, (Steinfels, 1992). Even First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt could not keep her silence.

It is a long time since I sat in my office and read the scurrilous literature that came into the Democratic headquarters of Alfred E. Smith's campaign. Nothing quite so bad is reaching me now... To tell a man he cannot run for any office in this country because he belongs to a certain religion or is a member of another race – even though he is required to fulfill all the obligations of citizenship, including fighting and dying for his country—is completely illogical and unconstitutional, (Roosevelt 1960).

Meanwhile, Graham had quietly and shrewdly distanced himself from Peale and the anti-Catholics. Remarkably, he dodged the bullet. In the eleventh hour, when it was clear that the ballots were favoring Kennedy, Graham offered his prayerful support to President-elect Kennedy. Dr. Peale was fired by the same committee that appointed him their spokesperson. Humiliated by public outcries against his anti-Catholicism, Peale threatened to resign from Marble Collegiate Church. However, he was convinced to remain as Senior Pastor until his retirement in 1984.

On June 13, 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King arranged a meeting with Vice-President Richard Nixon to discuss racial problems in the American South. King tried persuading Nixon to

make a personal visit, but the Vice-President graciously declined, (Lewis 2013, 129). The cool reception was a foreshadowing of Nixon's later reticence to show support for his struggle for civil rights. In due course, King had been arrested and sentenced to four months of hard labor in Reidsville State Prison in Georgia for the charge of trespassing, which was ruled a violation of probation for a traffic ticket. John Kennedy, acting on the advice of Morris Abrams, an Atlanta attorney, and Harris Wofford, his minority affairs special advisor, telephoned King's wife Coretta to assure her of his support. This strategic move blindsided President Eisenhower had contemplated intervening on behalf of King but delayed at the counsel of his Vice-President and presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon. Robert Kennedy managed to get King out of bail. That gesture did not go unnoticed by the Black community. Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., his father, a Baptist minister, registered Republican and influential supporter of Nixon made a one hundred eighty degree turn to support Kennedy. "I've got a suitcase of votes," he shouted, "and I'm going to take them to Mr. Kennedy and dump them in his lap." Harris Wofford made sure of this by distributing two million copies of a pamphlet criticizing Nixon and extolling Kennedy's "heart." (Lewis 2013, 129).

Despite the definitive role African Americans played in Kennedy's victory, King himself remained at arm's length from President Kennedy. Robert Kennedy, now the Attorney-General, instructed the FBI to wire-tap King (Lewis 2013, 257). Since the new administration was disinclined to move expeditiously on Civil Rights, King was unable to find success as a lobbyist. His assassination secured elevated him to a martyred prophet, a status that far exceeded that of Billy Graham.

A discussion about spiritual advisors to Kennedy and Johnson is a study in stark politically charged contrasts. John F. Kennedy, the Roman Catholic outlier, received only the

lukewarm support of Billy Graham after winning the presidential election. Theirs was a marriage of convenience, though without evidence of consummation. Lyndon Baines Johnson, on the other hand, sought opportunities to spend time with Graham. The unfortunate trauma of tragedy in Dallas created space for the Texas-born President, a committed member of Disciples of Christ, to collaborate with a nationally recognized Evangelist with “middle of the road” conservative politics. Together, they worked for the healing the nation through the Gospel campaigns and the Great Society which included the Civil Rights Act of 1964. By supporting Johnson, Graham more than made up for his cold relationship with Kennedy.

Richard M. Nixon

In 1962, Nixon moved to New York and attended Marble Collegiate Church. His friendship with Norman Vincent Peale was genuine and it lasted beyond Watergate. But Peale had a much smaller public role to play after the Nixon-Kennedy election. Graham was another story. When Nixon first eyed the presidency, Graham had rallied behind him almost in protest to the Roman Catholic candidate John F. Kennedy. The anti-Catholic coalition’s failure to defeat Kennedy did not deter Graham from maintaining a close relationship with Nixon in the background. When Nixon finally managed to get control of the White House. Graham’s association clearly vaulted Nixon to a more favorable position with Evangelical voters. On June 8, 1969, *The New York Times* profiled Graham under the title “The Closest Thing to a White House Chaplain.” When Graham delivered the prayer at Nixon’s inauguration he became “the *de facto* Presidential chaplain,” the content of which bordered “on being a political treatise,” (Fiske).

Graham had great affection for Nixon as a fellow Christian and political leader. However, as William Martin has demonstrated, Nixon clearly used Graham to bring in the votes. The

release of the Watergate tape transcripts exposed this sad fact along with Nixon's moral turpitude. Graham recalled this painful moment in his autobiography.

I did not have to distance myself from Watergate; I wasn't close to it in the first place. The President had not confided in me about his mounting troubles, and after the full story eventually broke, he all but blocked my access to him during the rest of his presidency. As I have said, I wanted to believe the best about him for as long as I could. When the worst came out, it was nearly unbearable for me. (Graham, 458).

Tapes later emerged that suggested Graham's complicity with Nixon's antisemitism. This nearly destroyed Graham's reputation with the Jewish community. Stinging from this painful episode, the President's Chaplain resolved never to become involved with partisan politics again. Altogether, Graham befriended eleven sitting presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower; John F. Kennedy; Lyndon B. Johnson; Richard M. Nixon; Gerald R. Ford; Jimmy Carter; Ronald W. Reagan; George W. Bush; William J. Clinton; George W. Bush; and Barack H. Obama.

Ronald W. Reagan

Reagan felt a divine leading in seeking the office of president, though his humility may have caused him to doubt, (Kengor 2004, 152). Throughout his presidency, he took the threat of godless Communism very seriously. He quickly became known to the Kremlin for his strong evangelical faith. Though he was hospitable to lobbyists and grateful for Graham's friendship, he preferred to meditate and pray alone with God. Quoting Edmund Morris, Paul Kengor states that Reagan relied on "silent colloquies with God, usually at an open window," (Kengor 2007, 178).

Considering Reagan's strong personal faith, it is curious that he was plagued by spurious claims he made presidential decisions based on astrology. However, it was Nancy Reagan who fell under the spell of astrologer Joan Quigley who preyed on her fears of a Presidential assassination. The President himself sought to end the controversy when he responded to a reporter who sarcastically asked whether he would continue to let astrology guide

his daily schedule. Reagan's rejoinder was rapid and pointed. "I can't because I never did," (Kengor 2004, 192).

William "Bill" Jefferson Clinton

Philip Wogaman was Professor of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary and Senior Pastor of historic Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. While the Clinton's resided in the White House he was the family's spiritual advisor. Among the most serious of personal struggles they faced was the impeachment proceedings related to Bill's affair with intern Monica Lewinsky. In his book entitled *From the Eye of the Storm: A Pastor to the President Speaks Out* (1998), Wogaman said much about his role in providing counsel to the family. Conversely, the person closest to Hillary Clinton, Dr. Donald Jones, refrained from making any statement of record. Although Donald Jones was not publicly known as a spiritual advisor to President Bill Clinton, he played an important role from behind the scenes. Dr. Jones was a long-time friend of Hillary Rodham Clinton, having served as her youth pastor in Illinois he continued to influence her during her sojourn at Wellesley College. Correspondence between Jones and the collegiate Hillary Rodham reveal her piqued interest in politics. Jones had encouraged her exploration in the tension between faith and social action. Her crossing over from middle-of-the-road conservative Christianity was complete when she embraced the neo-orthodoxy of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Dr. Jones went on to become a popular ethics professor at United Methodist-related Drew University. A frequent guest at the White House, his reassuring presence was greatly appreciated during the impeachment proceedings. Jones protected the privacy of the Clinton family even after he passed away. The surviving family members declined to give interviews regarding interactions with Hillary Clinton. It is notable that Rev. Bill Shillady, a pastor to Secretary

Hillary Clinton, attempted to publish a book of devotions entitled *Strong for a Moment Like This: Daily Devotions of Hillary Clinton*. However, it was recalled after an investigation at Abingdon Press revealed portions of the book were plagiarized from a blog (Zauzmer).

Barack H. Obama

In his first term, President Barack H. Obama was forced to distance himself from his pastor Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. of Trinity United Church of Christ for widely publicized controversial “anti-patriotic” comments, (Grant 2013). President Obama appointed Rev. Joshua DuBois, the son of an AME pastor and self-described Pentecostal to lead the White House’s Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. *Time Magazine* called DuBois the “Pastor-in-Chief.” In this role, he assembled a multifaith and multicultural committee of pastors, rabbis, priests, and other religious leaders. President Obama’s overt efforts to support faith-based organizations did little to counteract the pervasive rumors that he was a fifth column Muslim agent. Pastors such as Bishop T.D. Jakes, Rev. Adam Hamilton, and Bishop Vashti McKenzie worked very closely with him on national strategies. in the public eye, they were criticized and forced to defend the claim that President Obama was a true believer in Jesus Christ. It is interesting to note that during the eulogy for victims of the tragic bible class shooting at an AME church in Charleston, President Obama, with Bishop Vashti McKenzie at his right hand, spontaneously led the mourners in the singing of “Amazing Grace.”

Donald J. Trump

Donald J. Trump may have had his first real encounter with a national religious influencer when, as a child, he attended Marble Collegiate Church where Dr. Norman Vincent Peale was Senior Pastor. Later, he would return to Peale’s church two more times for life-altering events. First, in 1977 to marry his first wife Ivana Marie. Second, in 1999 to bury his

father Fred Trump. Lessons learned about the power of positive thinking may have had a positive effect on Trump when about six decades later and against all odds he won the 2016 presidential election. While taking his victory lap, President-elect Donald J. Trump announced that long-time pastor-friend Rev. Paula White would transition into the role of Presidential Spiritual Advisor. White assembled her own group of advisors, Evangelical and Charismatic leaders, who also served as Trump-surrogates during the 2016 campaign. It was not long before public criticism of the White House policies challenged the optics of these unofficial spiritual advisors. Political pundits and religious leaders have questioned the silence or open support the other pastors gave regarding the President's controversial language and actions.

President Trump's spiritual advisors, operating under the leadership of Rev. Paula White, have come under fire from outsiders for their apparent reticence to speak out over his divisive manner of speech and apparent insensitivity to those most vulnerable in society. Rev. A. R. Bernard resigned in protest to President Trump's equivocation of white nationalists who clashed violently with peaceful protestors in Charlottesville, Virginia. He posted his explanation on Twitter.

In a social and political climate such as ours, it often takes a gathering of unlikely individuals to shape the future of our nation on issues of faith and inner-city initiatives. I was willing to be one of those unlikely individuals, and that is why I agreed to serve on the President's Evangelical Advisory Board. However, it became obvious that there was a deepening conflict in values between myself and the administration. I quietly stepped away from my involvement with the Board several months ago, and submitted my letter of formal resignation as of Tues, Aug. 15, 2017. I am always grateful and honored by any opportunity to serve my country. Pastor A. R. Bernard. (Bernard Twitter 2017).

Crossing over from an advisor to a prophet is not a common occurrence. Bernard's resignation was a gradual process that began as he recognized the motive behind the Evangelical Advisory Board. "There was nothing hidden. He wanted that voting bloc. He wanted their

votes...It was transactional. He wanted to do whatever he thought would get those votes,” (Weiland).

In an unrelated but telling incident, the House Chaplain Rev. Patrick J. Conroy, a Jesuit, was recently forced to resign by Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House of Representatives. “Padre, you just got to stay out of politics.” He had prayed that the legislators would “guarantee that there are not winners or losers under the new tax laws, but benefits balanced and shared by all Americans.” Shortly afterward the Chaplain was forced to resign, but other members of the House pressured Ryan to hire him back, (Marty). This is an interesting reversal of roles where the Chaplain historically has served as the prophetic conscience of government.

Apologia Pro Vitas Suae

For some unknown reason, Billy Graham was launched into the public eye by newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst who sent a telegram to his editors saying, “Puff Graham,” (Fitzgerald 175). Graham never knew the reason for his promotion to the national spotlight. However, he threw himself into the dual honorific roles as Chaplain to Presidents and America’s Pastor. His capacity to fulfill this calling faithfully with relatively little controversy earned him the right to become the *sui generis* evangelical prophet of the 20th century. He continued to work with Presidents for many years to come. However, his title as “Chaplain to Presidents” abruptly ended after Watergate when Graham, severely burned by Nixon’s duplicity, resolved to stay out of partisan politics.

In a career start paralleling that of Billy Graham, lesser-known Evangelical leader Samuel Rodriguez has risen to national prominence in a short period of time. Reminiscent of William Randolph Hearst’s “puff Graham” situation, Rodriguez caught the attention of media moguls Roma Downey and husband Mark Burnett who decided to groom him. The couple has to

their credits several movies and successful TV shows including *The Bible* miniseries, *Survivor*, *The Voice*, *Shark Tank*, and *The Apprentice*. Early in his public debut, Rodriguez described himself as a fusion of Graham and King with “salsa sauce on top,” (Rodriguez 96). On the surface, this may seem to be laced with irony since Graham refused King’s invitations to assist in the Civil Rights Movement, (Fitzgerald 205). However, Rodriguez understands this disconnect. In his book *The Lamb’s Agenda*, he explains how their distinct mission statements merged into his personal mission. “After watching a Billy Graham crusade and a subsequent special on Dr. King, I felt like my life’s mission statement could write itself: reconcile the salvation message preached by Billy Graham with the justice message of Dr. King,” (Rodriguez 67).

Samuel Rodriguez maintains that he is committed to be a nonpartisan spiritual advisor. His now familiar meme is that he represents “not the agenda of the Donkey or the Elephant, but only the agenda of the Lamb,” (Rodriguez 40). Rodriguez was identified as a surrogate during the 2016 presidential campaign when he defended Trump against charges of racist rhetoric. His loyalty was rewarded when he was invited to read scripture at the presidential inauguration. Though he faces open criticism from other Latino evangelical leaders, Rodriguez enjoys success as a megachurch pastor, bestselling author, television personality, and movie producer. From his perspective, he continues to speak truth to power. He considers his role as a presidential advisor as “an assignment from heaven” which does not include giving President Trump “a pass” for offensive language and policies such as family separations, (Sells).

It is not clear how many “chaplains” to the President have gone on record as “speaking truth to power” in public. Graham often did this privately. Jim Wallis, the Evangelical leader of the socially conscious organization Sojourners, recently Tweeted this thinly veiled barb. “We can’t control the words or actions of those in political power or those in religion who have

become their chaplains. But we can control what we do,” (Sojourners, 2018). These critiques may be too harsh and lacking in perspective. Rev. Samuel Rodriguez explained his position on a recent interview with PBS News Hour’s William Brangham. The reason for their commitment to President’s Advisory Board is to influence public policy.

Evangelicals experienced or felt that, in the past number of years, the past 10 years, issues of religious liberty, issues of advancing their Judeo-Christian value systems stood in a de facto and du jour manner, for that fact, threatened....So, all of a sudden, we have President Donald Trump, and the public policy initiatives as it pertains to faith is much more favorable to the evangelical community indeed. (PBS News Hour).

Analysis

Senator John Danforth has made a good case stating that Christians who dabble in politics choose to be either reconcilers or dividers. The problem is that reconcilers are rarely taken seriously while dividers get all the media attention. The work of reconciling, says Danforth, is boring. “Reconciliation depends on acknowledging that God’s truth is greater than our own, that we cannot reduce it to any political platform we create, no matter how committed we are to that platform, and that God’s truth is large enough to accommodate the opinions of all kinds of people, even those with whom we strongly disagree,” (Danforth, 16, 17).

The role of spiritual advisor to the President will probably never become an official position on the Cabinet. The federal government looks dimly upon anything that smacks of the establishment of religion. Yet, there is a recognition that religion plays an important role in American life inclusive of politics. This harkens back to the earliest days of the Republic where the anti-monarchy phrase “no king but Jesus” clearly places the divide between politics and religion without completely dismantling either one. The clergy in the late eighteenth century was no less interested in politics than those of the twenty-first. Consequently, they have sought to influence the leadership of the nation either directly by petition or indirectly by supporting or

panning candidates for office. Since the Kennedy-Nixon campaign, spiritual advisors have divided themselves between the neo-orthodoxy of Niebuhr and the neo-Evangelicalism of Billy Graham. It has been suggested that we might consider updating our understanding of the divide between self-described “Red Letter” Evangelicals such as Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo and the further to the right Paula White and other Evangelical supporters of President Trump. It may be more helpful to think of them as “Red” and “Blue” Evangelicals. This sober observation was recently made at a summit of Evangelicals seeking dialogue on the future of their shared tradition, (Miller).

Shrewd politicians have long understood the potential of religion or religious institutions to curry the favor of the masses. It is difficult to decipher whether politicians are genuine in their public faith or they are following a Machiavellian game plan or both. At best, we can exercise our powers of observation to determine who are the players and what are their actions. It has been a mixed bagged, with some clergy being an assuring presence for the Presidents when no one else, even Cabinet members, could provide solace. Others such as McKinley, Nixon, and Reagan who were genuinely devout according to their own testimonies truly appreciated having a prayer partner or confessor to deal with the burden of national leadership. I believe that the unofficial office of Presidential spiritual advisor will continue unless a sharp cultural turn against public religion is codified to the point of eliminating all federally employed chaplains in the House, Senate, military branches, and prisons.

The Problem with Clay Feet

The #MeToo movement has awakened the collective American consciousness to the issue of abuse of power and gender inequality. Power brokers in the entertainment industry, politicians, business executives, and – more recently – church leaders have either stepped down

as their harassment misdeeds have been made public. The striking thing is that this movement did not originate from churches or morality watchdogs. Rather, this was borne of a secular society sick of the pervasive abuse of women and other vulnerable populations.

A short list of epic failures in the White House is instructive for providing a historical perspective on the public's expectations for moral leadership. Thomas Jefferson's slaves; Andrew Jackson's Trail of Tears; Andrew Johnson's war on emancipation; McKinley's religious imperialism; FDR's internment of American citizens of German, Japanese, and Italian descent; Harry Truman's controversial decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan; JFK's secret trysts with a Hollywood starlet; Nixon's Watergate; Clinton's public tryst with an intern; and Trump's racial slurs, misogynistic conversations, porn-star payoff, and the separation of children from parents seeking asylum. Surprisingly, the only two presidents impeached by authority of the 25th Amendment were Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton. Neither was impeached for moral failure, but for violation of Federal laws. In both cases, they were not convicted by the Senate. It is commonly thought that Nixon was impeached, but this is not true. Nixon holds the distinction of being the only American President to resign from office. Partisan accusations have been leveled at George W. Bush for the invasion of Iraq, Barack Obama for the Benghazi fiasco, and Donald Trump for possible obstruction of justice. Despite these moral failing and impeachment, Bill Clinton is still held in high regard in many places. Strange as it seems, a recent Gallup poll may seem more surprising. In a poll on presidential moral leadership, only 63% of Republicans believe that moral leadership is very important. This is down from 86% under Clinton. Gallup concludes that "Americans believe the president should provide moral leadership for the country. However, Republicans' and Democrats' commitment wavers when moral leadership is a point of concern for their own party's president," (Jones May 29, 2018).

When the Access Hollywood tapes emerged, it appeared that Trump's run for office was over. However, Evangelical supporters such as Paula White and James Dobson reported that Trump had since had a conversion experience thus granting him a clean slate. The disappointing revelation about Michael Cohen's arrangement to pay hush money to adult actress Stormy Daniels did little to tarnish Trump's reputation with his Evangelical Advisors. Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council, said that the evangelical community was granting Trump a "mulligan" which is a golf term meaning a "do-over," (Hansler, 2018). Rhetoric and behavior following this seem to be the most bothersome with critics of the Evangelical advisors. Attorney Rudy Giuliani recently said that President Trump, his client, could get away with shooting James Comey, though it may risk immediate impeachment. This comment draws on Trump's brazen campaign comment, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters," (Schwab, 2018).

The reticence of the Evangelical Advisors to call out President Trump for his moral failure and divisive language has evoked the ire of other Evangelicals, liberal mainliners, and Roman Catholics – not to mention Jews and Muslims. It is important to note that the issue is not to dismiss the advisors' identities as Christian ministers but to call them to prophetic action. Foremost on my mind as a religious historian is the functional role of spiritual advisors in American history. Historian John Fea, an Evangelical, in an OpEd, he dubbed such clergy members "Court Evangelicals," (Fea). This pejorative label echoes Baptist activist Will Campbell's depiction of Billy Graham as a "false court prophet" for not confronting Nixon and the Pentagon about the war in Vietnam, (Martin, 367). In Fea's new book *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, he takes the Evangelical advisors to task for not calling out the Trump administration for policies and behavior that clash with Christian values.

Like the members of the kings' courts during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, who sought influence and worldly approval by flattering the monarch rather than prophetically speaking truth to power, Trump's court evangelicals boast about their "unprecedented access" to the White House and exalt the president for his faith-friendly policies, (Fea, *Believe Me*, loc 127).

As noted above, not all the current spiritual advisors provide cover for President Trump. Samuel Rodriguez issued his statement of solidarity with protesters who opposed the Department of Justice's policy of zero tolerance of illegal border crossers and separating of children from parents. In an interview with Jorge Ramos host of *Al Punto* of Univision, Rodriguez denounced this policy as "anti-Christian" and "anti-American," (Ramos). At the same time, he argues for maintaining his access with the Trump administration basing his decision on Dr. King's teaching that "a bridge is more powerful than a wall." This inside approach is a rare prophetic action by an Evangelical advisor. Franklin Graham and Johnnie Moore also criticized the separation policy as inhumane though they remain committed to Trump's overall leadership.

Conclusion

Evangelical spiritual advisors have told me their role in the White House is akin to biblical hero Joseph who found favor with Pharaoh (Salguero). Of course, this metaphor disregards the relevant fact that Joseph was living in captivity. He assimilated himself into Egyptian culture while preserving his moral compass and faith in the God of the Patriarchs. When his brothers apologized for selling him into slavery, Joseph interpreted their treachery as an act of divine providence meant to save their lives. Unfortunately, the price for their survival would be generations of slavery to the Pharaohs. Joseph, realizing the dire situation, ended his days clinging to hope that a liberator would come to lead them and his mummified bones back to the Promised Land. After four hundred thirty years, Moses arose to take on the role of redeemer-prophet. Even his most urgent pleas to the heard-hearted Pharaoh, though accompanied by divine

pyrotechnics, would not easily win their release from slavery. Yet, God had the last word and fulfilled Joseph's final dream.

The biblical narratives of Daniel and Esther offer alternative models of faithfulness in captivity. Unlike Joseph, they are heralded for their resistance against un-godly captors. Daniel's kosher meals and daily prayers were counter-cultural and even violated the law. Esther risked her life to influence the government to save her people from genocide. In both cases, these heroes maintained their faith and refused to compromise with the secular government. Their people prospered in captivity. In due course, God permitted the Exiles to return joyfully to Zion.

The prophetic words of Juergen Moltmann are instructive in distinguishing between service to the God of the Patriarchs and the gods of the World. "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ist [sic] not the divine Lord of the Pharaos [sic], the Caesars and the slave owners. He is the Father of the humiliated, the saviour [sic] of the opressed [sic]," (Moltmann 2018). There were many episodes in American history when Christian leaders met unjust laws with dissent and protest. In the case of African-American slavery, resistance against masters was the most Christian thing to do. "When the master's will conflicted with God's, slaves faced a choice which was simultaneously an opportunity to assert their own free will and to act virtuously, even heroically, in the context of Christianity, in which disobedience to white authority, no matter the consequence, could seem morally imperative," (Raboteau, 307). We could list other periods in American history where speaking truth to power was considered by Christian leaders as a moral mandate such as racial segregation, women's suffrage, Japanese-American internment, homelessness, poverty, gang violence, etc. Denominational and ecumenical leadership regularly publish a consensus of social principles and resolutions addressing contemporary social issues. Such instruments provide thoughtful non-binding guidance to pastors, congregations, seminaries,

and their affiliates. Non-denominational groups may have a harder time determining their theological stance on social issues, though they are not bound by bureaucracy. In either case, spiritual advisors lacking a functional ecclesiology are left to choose which values they will import into their ministries as lobbyists, chaplains, and members of focus groups. Thus, the burdens associated with their privileged political access remain problematic for their critics and supporters.

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