

# American Evangelicals, the Changing Global Religious Environment, and Contemporary Politics

■ Melani McAlister | 30 May 2019

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# American Evangelicals, the Changing Global Religious Environment, and Contemporary Politics

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■ Melani McAlister | 15 November 2018

American evangelicals are part of a global religious community. This fundamental fact is often ignored by scholars and believers alike, but it is also highlighted by evangelical media and touted by US evangelical leaders. Attending to this reality – and to the ways that reality is engaged and mobilized – can reshape how we understand US evangelicals’ global stances. When international issues are taken into account, the history of modern evangelicalism looks different from the dominant stories we have about it: it is more complex, more racially diverse, and more politically ambidextrous.

American believers operate on the global stage, as they have struggled to live within God’s kingdom, which they conceive as universal and borderless. And yet evangelicals, like everybody else, have lived in a world deeply divided by national borders, inhabited by refugees and migrants, riven by dramatically uneven distributions of wealth and power, and dominated by the United States as the most powerful state the world has ever known. The tension between what is posited as God’s kingdom and what is lived as the world’s reality is one that animates evangelical life, in the United States and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

As US evangelicals looked outward after WWII, their views were shaped by two contexts. One was the dramatic expansion of US state power during and after the Cold War. Evangelicals operated globally within a broader context shaped by the US state and the wars, hot and cold, that opened spaces for evangelizing or created anti-American sentiment that made evangelizing much more difficult.

They were never able to fully escape this reality. Often, they did not want to. The US state was a powerful protector when evangelicals went abroad. This did not mean, however, that they were puppets of the US government. They undoubtedly sometimes served as agents or background support for the United States.

Indeed, the “civilizing mission” of missionaries had laid the groundwork for expanding imperial power in the colonial era, and there were ways in which American missionaries did the same for the postwar period. Certainly evangelicals, white and black, tended to support the expansion of US influence abroad. Yet evangelicals of various stripes

also pushed for changes in US foreign policy, from Congo in the early 20th century to Sudan in the early 21st (McAlister 2018).

The second context after 1960 was the globalization of Christianity. American evangelicals worked with an awareness that the rapid expansion of Christianity in the global South was one of the structuring realities of the postwar period. In the last decades of the twentieth century, many US Christians (and others) became acutely conscious of the emergence of what Philip Jenkins calls the “next Christendom,” the numerical growth and political power of the evangelical churches of the global South (Jenkins). Millions of people in Latin America, Africa, and Asia had converted to some form of Protestantism. Evangelicals, including Pentecostals and charismatics, made up about 40 percent of the world’s Christians; the rest are other Protestants, Catholic, and Orthodox. In 2010, almost 70 percent of evangelicals lived outside the United States and Europe. By the year 2050, approximately 38 percent of the world’s Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa (Hackett and Grim 2011; Pew Research Center 2015).

American evangelicals’ activism on foreign policy issues in recent decades has developed in the context of these multifaceted changes, as well as within the changing political landscape of the post-Cold War era. This article begins with an exploration of the demographic realities that are shaping evangelicalism, both in the US and internationally. It then turns to two key issues in which US evangelicals became deeply involved in international issues: the war in Sudan and the creation of South Sudan in 2011, and the debates over immigration in the 2016 elections and since. Overall, I argue that American evangelical politics is fundamentally shaped by an awareness of the global context, and by connections with evangelical believers around the world. These connections have been sometimes a force for pushing evangelical Americans toward more liberal views on some issues, but that is not always the case. In the two examples here, we get some indication of the complexity of US evangelical stances, and the multiplicity of views in this large and diverse community.

## Demographics Shapes Destiny

Evangelicalism is a global movement, with the preponderance of Pentecostal and evangelical believers living outside the US and Europe.

Starting in the 1970s, many US Christians (and others) became acutely conscious of—and increasingly engaged with—the evangelical churches of the global South. And the members of those churches made their presence felt—attending conferences, publishing books, posting on Facebook, taking on denominational leadership roles, and sending missionaries to the rest of the world, including to the United States. At the same time, immigration transformed the religious landscape within the United States, so that American evangelicalism came to include African-born ministers, Latino congregants, Caribbean deacons, and TV preachers from across the globe. In that context, non-Western believers taught their fellow Christians much about economic realities, medical crises, and political instabilities that shaped their daily lives (McAlister, 2018).

When we look beyond US borders, we see how little of global evangelicalism is comprised of Europeans or European Americans; in other words, how very non-white it is. In Africa, evangelical churches include not only the Nigerian Baptists, who have the third largest Baptist Convention in the world, but also South Africans who gather in small African Methodist Episcopal churches in their local communities. In Latin America, especially Brazil, Pentecostalism has seen explosive growth. The same is true in some parts of Asia, particularly South Korea, the Philippines, and China.

Indeed, the center of global evangelicalism and Pentecostalism is unquestionably moving south. Nigeria, South Korea, Brazil, and other countries are now host to some of the most vibrant evangelical communities in the world. Some of the largest churches globally are in Seoul and Lagos.<sup>2</sup> Brazil and South Korea are among the largest missionary-sending countries in the world (Steffan 2013). And the leadership of global evangelical institutions, from World Evangelical Alliance to the Lausanne Movement to World Vision, is increasingly in the hands of people from the global South. Overall, the global evangelical community is racially diverse, dispersed across the planet (although not evenly so), and increasingly linked through media, travel, and interpersonal networks.

American believers, however, remain quite influential in the global context: from the wealth that American Christians bring to the table (with their ability to travel, to donate, and to shape agendas) to the outsized influence of American church leaders from T.D. Jakes to Rick Warren, there is no question that the global evangelical community has been, and continues to be, shaped

by US evangelicalism. Perhaps nothing makes this power more obvious than the ability and eagerness of American Christians to travel abroad: observers estimate that by the early 2000s about 1.6 million American Christians a year were going on some sort of short-term missionary service trip abroad. The Southern Baptist Convention alone sends 30,000 people annually. It is assumed that participants pay their own way, but some people, especially students, gather sponsors to support their trip. The average short-term mission costs between US\$2500 and US \$3000; multiplied by well over a million people a year, the total financial commitment by American Christians is staggering (see Wuthnow 2010, 170, 126; Priest et al. 2006; McAlister 2018).

And, of course, US television and other media circulate around the world in ways that few other countries can match. Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), for example, is a global media powerhouse, bringing specially curated content to every continent, and reaching (it claimed) as many as 2 billion viewers globally in 2010, including through live internet streaming. (TBN's star has fallen dramatically since a financial scandal in 2015 and a sexual abuse lawsuit in 2012; see Hamilton and Grad 2017). Books written by American evangelists are global bestsellers: In one survey of Christians in Kenya, respondents were asked to name the authors, Christian or not, that they read most frequently: Joyce Meyer was sixth and TD Jakes was eighth (Frederick 2016, 87–114).

Adding to this complex intersection of global diversity and American power is the reality that evangelicals in the US are increasingly diverse as well. The problem of defining who is an evangelical is as complex domestically as it is internationally. Pollsters have their own ways of deciding who “counts” in their surveys: the definition of “evangelical” can be either by self-identification, thus including only people who say they are evangelical, or by scholarly/ pollster attribution, with a poll drawing on, say, the National Association of Evangelicals’ list of evangelical beliefs and counting anyone who says they agree with them. Still other observers count any member of a certain denomination as evangelical.

Even with this multiplicity of possible definitions, it is clear that theologically conservative Protestants are far more racially diverse than most observers realize. In 2018, approximately 65-75% of US evangelicals were white, with rapidly increasing numbers of people of color, including black, Asian, and, most significantly, a growing Latino population. By most accounts, 15-22% of US evangelicals are Latino and between 5 and 10% are African American, depending on definitions (Jones and Cox 2017; Wong 2018; Pew, 2014),

Some of this diversity is simply a matter of racially specific churches growing more numerous or larger: churches that are largely white, African American, Arab, Asian American, or Latino remain common. Indeed, most denominations are still populated predominantly by one ethnic or racial group: African Methodist Episcopal Churches are 94% black; Southern Baptists are 85% white. (The SBC elected its first black president in 2012.) But there are increasing numbers of multi-racial churches. Joel Osteen's 52,000-member Lakewood Church in Dallas, for example, claims to have almost equal numbers of African American, Latino, and white members. The Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination, is 66% white, 25% Latino, and 8% black and Asian American (Lipka 2015).<sup>3</sup>

Even more striking is the diversity of the various parachurch organizations, such as Intersociety Christian Fellowship, Cru, and World Vision. Many of these organizations are fashioning themselves in self-consciously racially diverse ways with an expressed commitment to racial justice. (Intersociety forbade racial segregation at its events in 1945. The organization claims that one-half of the participants at its 2015 Urbana conference were students of color.) Evangelicals tend to be more conservative in their views on women's leadership and LGBTQ+ issues than the population as a whole—and this is true across racial groups.

Evangelical political activism on international affairs is carried out under a broad array of different institutions that are themselves diverse in theology, membership, and impact. There are, first of all, transnational evangelical organizations such as the Lausanne Movement, World Evangelical Alliance, and Pentecostal World Alliance. These organizations take political positions on issues of global concern, especially on issues such as persecution of Christians, global poverty, and missionary practice.

Within the US context, activism on political issues, including international issues, is often taken up by denominations. There are scores of evangelical denominations in the US, which often issue statements on policy issues, and, just as importantly, donate money to support causes that they consider crucial, whether it be HIV- AIDS or to support "persecuted Christians."<sup>4</sup> Beyond the denominations, most political activism is carried out by parachurch organizations, advocacy groups (including humanitarian organizations), and ad hoc coalitions.

These groups inhabit a range of political positions. At the broadest level, it is difficult to describe any major evangelical organization in the US as entirely liberal, since most oppose abortion and many have conservative views on gay marriage or trans rights. But there *is* a broad

spectrum of views about women's leadership, racial politics, and social inequality, and on these issues, we can demarcate evangelicals (very roughly) as inhabiting a spectrum. As with other religious groups, seminaries and religious colleges can also be forces for promoting liberal or conservative theology that also has political implications. And, starting in the 1990s, think tanks such as the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, and the Institute for Global Engagement developed research agendas that supported Christian activism, particularly on foreign policy.

On the more politically conservative end of the spectrum there are groups like The Gospel Coalition, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, Cru (formerly Campus Crusade), and Samaritan's Purse, the National Coalition of Religious Broadcasters, and the Southern Baptist Convention. (The SBC would have been considered a moderate organization before the conservative takeover of the 1980s.) On the liberal end of the spectrum we would find the staff of *Sojourners*, Evangelicals for Social Action, Red Letter Christians, World Vision, The Witness (black Reformed), Fuller Seminary, and Intersociety Christian Fellowship. More or less in the center of the evangelical spectrum stand the National Association of Evangelicals, *Christianity Today*, the Institute for Global Engagement, and Wheaton College.

Of course, the actual stances taken by any of these organizations are often complex and sometimes shifting, but it is important to note that there is a recognized diversity among evangelicals that is political as well as racial and national. And the reality on the ground is that many political issues that the churches have taken up are hard to categorize politically. In order to understand, for example, the debates over immigration in the US (including Muslim immigration), we need to see the important ways that the status of Christianity in the global South is shaping how American evangelicals see themselves.

Evangelicalism is a global movement, with the preponderance of Pentecostal and evangelical believers living outside the US and Europe. American believers, however, remain quite influential in the global context: from the wealth that American Christians bring to the table (with their ability to travel, to donate, and to shape agendas) to the outsized influence of American church leaders from TD Jakes to Rick Warren, there is no question that the global evangelical community has been, and continues to be, shaped by US evangelicalism. Perhaps nothing makes this power more obvious than the ability and eagerness of American Christians to travel abroad: observers estimate that by the early 2000s about 1.6 million American Christians a year were going on some sort of short-term missionary service trip abroad.

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And yet, the center of global evangelicalism and Pentecostalism is unquestionably moving south. Nigeria, South Korea, Brazil, and other countries are now host to some of the most vibrant evangelical communities in the world. Some of the largest churches in the world are in Seoul and Lagos.<sup>8</sup> And Brazil and South Korea are among the largest missionary-sending countries in the world.<sup>9</sup> And the leadership of global evangelical institutions, from World Evangelical Alliance to the Lausanne Movement to World Vision, is increasingly in the hands of people from the global South.

This global diversity has emerged in the context of increasing diversity in the US as well. Within the US, even more than internationally, "evangelical" is a category defined variously by different pollsters, and one not always claimed by the people who go to churches that scholars consider evangelical. (That is, the definition of "evangelical" can be either by self-identification, thus including only people who say they are evangelical, or by scholarly/pollster attribution, with a poll drawing on, say, the National Association of Evangelicals [list of evangelical beliefs](#) and counting anyone who says they agree with them. Still other observers count any member of a certain denomination as evangelical.)

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1 The largest church by membership is Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination. It has 800,000 members in 2018, with 200,000 attending the weekly service at its main site. Four churches in Lagos alone have more than 40,000 attendees

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each week, with the largest being Deeper Life Christian Ministry. The second largest in weekly attendance, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, has churches in 196 countries, including the US.

support “persecuted Christians.” Beyond the denominations, most political activism is carried out by parachurch organizations, advocacy groups (including humanitarian organizations), and ad hoc coalitions. These groups inhabit a range of political positions. At the broadest level, it is difficult to describe any major evangelical organization in the US as entirely liberal, since most oppose abortion and many have conservative views on gay marriage or trans rights. But there *is* a broad spectrum of views about women’s leadership, racial politics, and social inequality, and on these issues, we can demarcate evangelicals (very roughly) as inhabiting a spectrum. As with other religious groups, seminaries and religious colleges can also be forces for promoting liberal or conservative theology that also has political implications. And, starting in the 1990s, think tanks such as the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, and the Institute for Global Engagement developed research agendas that supported Christian activism, particularly on foreign policy.

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## The Politics of Persecution

Any understanding of evangelical life and culture today must work from an awareness of the centrality of persecution politics to US evangelical identity. In the last decades of the 20th century, a passionate concern with the persecution of

Christians united conservative, liberal, and moderate evangelicals. Christians were being martyred all over the world, they argued, prevented from spreading the gospel and targeted for their faith. Persecution was chronicled in magazines ranging from deeply conservative venues such as *World* magazine to the moderately conservative *Christianity Today* to the Left-leaning *Sojourners*, described in books and on websites, and pictured in the fundraising newsletters and DVDs sold in church basements. The issue was embraced by Catholics as well.

Pope John Paul II endorsed the issue with his apostolic letter in 1994: “At the end of the second millennium, the Church has once again become a church of martyrs ... The witness of Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Protestants.” The persecuted body—the body, or church, of Christ, and the literal bodies of believers—became an icon of faith and a potent political symbol.

In fact, after the Cold War, persecution became one of the issues on which evangelicals and Catholics made common cause. (Abortion was another issue that had linked Catholics and evangelicals in the 1980s, as the Cold War had, at times, in previous decades.)

The attention to Christian persecution was far from new. Indeed, the memory of persecution and suffering is part of the DNA of Christian culture-making. Elizabeth Castelli has traced the history of the veneration of martyrs in early Christianity. For centuries after the time of Jesus, and in ways that varied in different historical moments, believers consumed stories and images of martyrs. The actual historical reality of martyrs’ lives was far less important than the images, statues, relics, and sermons that served as sources of identification and rhetorics of self.

Simultaneously engaging fear and bravery, suffering and faith, spectacle and catechism, these early persecution stories were forms of Christian education. In the fifth century, St. Augustine told his readers that when they went to church and heard those stories, they were to engage them not in terms of their awfulness (which would, nonetheless, be recounted in great detail) but in terms of the “completeness of faith” they represented:

A splendid spectacle offered to the eyes of the mind is a spirit whole and unbroken while the body is torn to pieces. That is what you people gaze on with pleasure when the accounts of such things are read in church. After all, if you didn’t form some sort of picture of what happened, it would mean you weren’t listening at all. (Castelli, 2007, 173).

Spectacles of the violated body were central. The display of images or the vivid description of violence is never simply informational. Instead, it engaged a complex Christian imaginary about the body –its centrality, its untrustworthiness.

Martyr veneration was also part of Protestant print culture in Europe – and it was often the Catholics who were depicted as persecutors. The first English edition of Foxe’s Book of Martyrs was in 1563. The woodcut images and (in the second edition) nearly 2000 pages of text recounted the suffering of Protestants at the hands of Catholics, highlighting in particular Queen Mary’s burning at the stake of more than 250 Protestants in England. After Foxe’s death, the book was reprinted many times, trimmed and updated, eventually traveling with the Puritans to the New World.

One nearly universal aspect of US missionary martyr stories was their determinedly optimistic aspect. Perhaps for the believers in Augustine’s time it had been enough to contemplate the righteousness of those who suffered. In the nineteenth and early twentieth-century United States, the ideal story also clarified what had been gained: the number of lost who were saved, or a clear statement of what concrete lessons could be learned. The deaths were admirable, and sometimes the suffering was recounted in horrific detail, but the stories ended with victory. At the very least, they announced, the servant of the Lord had been good and faithful. Triumph was the punchline.

By the 1990s, US evangelical narratives of persecution began to focus less on American missionaries and more on converted Christians who had suffered for their faith. Again, this was not new, but now the suffering of global South Christians took on a distinctly political cast, woven into the politics of post-Cold War American images of Islam.

In 1995, Michael Horowitz galvanized the attention of evangelical elites in the United States with an editorial in the Wall Street Journal that took aim at Islamic countries for persecuting their Christian minorities. He listed atrocities committed by Muslims against Christians in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Sudan, Egypt, and Iran.

Certainly, the stories were horrific. Some were widely known incidents: three Iranian pastors killed in 1994; the routine abduction of children in South Sudan. Other examples seemed pulled from the less-documented folklore of the emerging movement: a pastor in Ethiopia whose eyes were put out by local Muslim officials; Christian students in Egypt “routinely” beaten and called “devils” by their classmates. But the overall argument was that Christians had too long stood by, while “in a growing number of other countries, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism has effectively

criminalized the practice of Christianity” (Horowitz 1995). Horowitz was not Christian but Jewish; this, however, only strengthened his credibility, since he was presumably not speaking from self-interest. Both Christians and Jews were morally obligated to respond to persecution, Horowitz said, by challenging immigration and asylum policies within the United States and calling for changes in US foreign policy toward guilty governments (Bergman 1996; Waldman 2004; Castelli 2005).

Out of the activism of Horowitz and many others, including the (Catholic) author Nina Shea (*In the Lion’s Den*), writer Paul Marshall (*Their Blood Cries Out*), as well as organizations like Freedom House, Voice of the Martyrs, Open Doors, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, and numerous others, emerged a multi-faceted movement organized to protect Christians globally. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the successes of this movement included the founding of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, crucial support for the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, and a broad mobilization of organizations and individuals around the idea that Christians around the world were suffering for their faith.

This political vision had a range of concrete instantiations, from American activism on behalf of Christians in South Sudan during Sudan’s civil war (a war that had begun in the 1970s but which received US attention starting in the 1990s), to activism on behalf of Christians in Vietnam and China, to activism on Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, and Pakistan. But one thread that wove them together was the idea that Christians elsewhere (Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant) were part of a global suffering community, one under threat by Muslims or secularist/communist governments. Significantly, the global visions that allowed American evangelicals to see themselves as part of this community – to see beyond their own traditional insularity – also constructed them as part of that “suffering church.” In the late twentieth century, “The Global War on Christians” became a common trope, and it shaped how many American evangelicals – including comfortable white believers in the US – saw themselves. They were part of a group of persecuted believers, whose story was frequently told online, in videos, at church conferences, and in fundraising materials. That framework would shape the political visions of American evangelicals in a number of ways, including the seemingly unrelated context of US immigration politics.

## Immigration

In November 2016, 81 percent of white self-identified evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in the US presidential election (Cox 2016). They did so



in the face of a candidate whose personal behavior and stated values were very different from those proclaimed by evangelicals. In fact, in the Republican primaries in the winter and spring of 2016, most US evangelical leaders—from James Dobson of Focus on the Family to Russell Moore of the SBC—had encouraged evangelicals to support someone else in the primaries: Ted Cruz, or perhaps Marco Rubio, or even, for a while, Ben Carson, all three of whom represented the non-Anglo future of evangelicalism. But people in the pews ignored that advice, as a plurality voted for Trump even with those avowedly conservative Christians in the race.

Trump soon had his team of well-known evangelical supporters, with Jerry Falwell Jr. an early endorser, and by the time he was the presumptive Republican nominee, he had an evangelical “advisory board” that included not only Falwell but also Bishop Harry Jackson, the African American author and pastor of a megachurch outside of Washington, DC; Pentecostal televangelist Paula White; James Dobson, who found his way over to Trump once Cruz was defeated; and a dozen other televangelists, authors, and megachurch pastors from New York to Dallas to California.

Many leading evangelicals of color, however, were outspoken supporters of Clinton, or at least opponents of Trump. The day after the vote, T.D. Jakes, no liberal, described African Americans as “traumatized” by Trump’s election. Others said that the election had opened a racial wound among US evangelicals that would not be easily healed. Right after the election, Jenny Yang of World Relief, the aid organization sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals told *Christianity Today*:

Many people of color are feeling incredibly vulnerable at the prospect of a Trump presidency while trying to heal from the trauma of this past year. It is not easy to overlook such barbed attacks on your identity as immigrants, minorities, or the disabled. (Lund 2016)

Immigration was an issue that evangelicals (and everyone else) knew would be front and center of the Trump presidency. First up was the so-called Muslim ban, as the administration tried, from the earliest days, to limit Muslim immigration to the United States. The first two attempts were overturned by the courts, but the third, issued by executive order, was upheld by the Supreme Court in June 2018.

This approach to Muslim immigration to the US emerged in the context of a continuing focus on the global persecution of Christians. In 2016, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity released its annual report. Which estimated that 90,000 Christians had been martyred from 2005 to 2015. The team used a broad definition, which included

any Christian who died in communal violence or genocide, whether or not they were killed specifically for their faith. That kind of capacious approach was designed to show “Christian Martyrdom as a pervasive phenomenon” (Center for Global Christianity, 2017; Johnson and Zurlo 2014). But it did little to explain the long and complex histories that placed Christians, Muslims, and others in situations of violent conflict, terrorism, and war. In fact, a number of evangelical organizations had been for years questioning the approach that counted any Christian who died in any kind of communal conflict as a “martyr,” but the number of “almost 100,000 martyrs a year” took a life of its own (Zylstra, 2013).

When Christian thinkers and activists construct Christian persecution as religiously-based discrimination rather than seeing it as part of a larger set of political and cultural issues, they give greater traction to those who want to present Muslims as a global threat. It lends implicit and sometimes explicit support to those who argue for a Muslim ban, or who agitate against a non-existent threat of Shari’a law in the US, or who try to prevent mosques from being built or Muslim candidates for winning public office (see Marzouki 2017; Shakman Hurd 2015). It is no surprise that the Trump administration made a limitation on Muslim immigration one of its top priorities: the decision played into the president’s base, evangelicals and others, who had for years been hearing narratives of Muslims-as-threat.

Then, in early September 2017, the Trump administration began to highlight immigration issues relating to Latinos, and announced it would phase out the DACA program, which had protected approximately 800,000 undocumented people who had been brought to the US as children. Trump insisted that some version of immigration reform could protect the so-called DREAMers, but the legislation would also have to fund the border wall that he had long demanded, along with other provisions (NPR 2017).

The outrage from many people in the United States, including evangelicals, was intense and immediate. Evangelicals of color, including Latinos, were especially outspoken. Gabriel Salguero, founder of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, said that he and others supported the DREAMers not only because it was the right thing to do, but because they saw many of them as fellow believers. “These are our brothers and sisters, worshipping in our churches, going to our Sunday schools,” Salguero told NPR. “They’re the playmates of our sons and daughters.”

For much of the previous two decades, Salguero and other Latino evangelical leaders had often described Latino voters as “the ultimate

swing vote,” saying that neither Democrats nor Republicans should take them for granted.

Samuel Rodriguez, founder of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, is more conservative than Salguero, but he makes a similar argument: He sees Latinos in general as the possible middle ground, as people who will, for example, embrace the war on terror as long as it is accompanied by a war on poverty. “Brown Christians,” he wrote for *Yale Reflections* magazine in 2008, “particularly Hispanic evangelicals, are poised to redraw the moral map with a commitment to reconcile both sides, working within a framework of righteousness and justice.” Rodriguez went on to criticize white evangelicals, saying that many of them “seem to adhere more to the rhetoric and philosophies of Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Lou Dobbs than to the Biblical guidance of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John” (Rodriguez 2008).

Rodriguez is typically conservative—he is part of President Trump’s evangelical advisory council—but he has argued that there was no point in being beholden to Republicans.

“If you ask the typical American citizen what an evangelical looks like, they will say white, middle class, probably from a Southern state, male. But the reality of what we have is a Mexican-born woman at a megachurch in the Bronx,” Rodriguez told the *Tribune*. That evangelical, he said, is one who “will not submit to being the extension of one political party” (Ramirez 2008).

However, not all Latino evangelicals agreed. Rodriguez was immediately called upon to support the president, and, initially, he did, saying that the president’s policy would not affect law-abiding people.

If you’re God-fearing and you’re hardworking and you’re here, even though you entered illegally ... we’re not going to separate families. That’s not who we are as a country. It’s not Christian. It’s not American. So we’re not going to deport them. (*Faithfully Magazine* 2017)

But as time went on, and as it became clear that the administration was, in fact, rounding up ordinary, “hardworking” people for deportation, Rodriguez became more critical. In January, he chastised both the White House and Congress for “playing politics” with DREAMers. “They can’t be bargaining chips in a deal. I mean, these kids lost their status. And they’re living in perpetual limbo ... It’s morally reprehensible to even have them in this current state” (Martin 2018).

Over the course of the spring of 2018, President Trump continued to dangle the possibility of a deal for DREAMers, and even some conservative white evangelicals began to insist on a deal for protecting DACA. The members of the Evangelical

Immigration Table, as well as leaders of many of the major evangelical organizations (the National Association of Evangelicals, World Vision, World Relief, etc), offered recommendations for a path to citizenship for DREAMers.

Then, in May 2018, the Trump administration began enacting its “zero tolerance” policy of separating migrant families at the US-Mexico border. The Evangelical Immigration table issued a letter of protest, asking Trump to reverse the policy. Even Franklin Graham, a staunch Trump defender, said he found the policy “disgraceful.” Attorney General Jeff Sessions quoted Romans 13 to defend the separations, saying that people were to obey the government because God has ordained it. Christians from a broad variety of backgrounds cried foul over Sessions’ mobilization of a Scripture passage that had been used to defend both slavery and apartheid. Salguero was among them, saying that a fuller reading of Scripture brought one to a different conclusion. “Overwhelmingly Scripture causes us to defend families,” Salguero told the *Washington Post*. “The Bible calls us to be pro-family, and I personally find it deeply lamentable that we are separating children from their parents at the border or anywhere” (Tam 2018).

For some evangelicals in the United States, then, the spectacles of family separation at the borders were deeply wrenching, and many evangelical leaders, including white evangelical leaders, were outspoken about the horrors of a policy that broke apart families. But white evangelicals in the pews remained supportive of the president on immigration, including on the issue of border separations (Boorstein and Zauzmer 2018). At one level, this is quite obviously a matter of racial politics and the presumed threat to white privilege that might come from Latino immigration. But any understanding of why white evangelicals continued to be supportive of this policy at higher rates than other white Republicans (even as many of their leaders opposed it) has to account for the politics of persecution and the sense of embattlement that engenders. The global context of evangelical life, and the ways that Christian persecution has been narrated in the US, had enabled a sense of being under siege even among people who seem to have enormous cultural and political power.

## Conclusion

Since the 2016 elections, evangelicals of color have been increasingly distinguishing themselves—politically but also in some ways religiously—from white evangelicals. In April of 2018, Gabriel Salguero was one of the co-chairs of a meeting held at Wheaton College that was designed to provide an alternative voice to the white pro-Trump evangelical leadership (Beaty 2018).

Attendees included A.R. Bernard, the African American pastor who was the only person to resign from Trump's evangelical advisory council over Charlottesville. According to reports from the meeting, there was something of a divide, with the largely older, white contingent stressing unity and a need to reach beyond partisanship, while the largely younger contingent of people of color were more likely to ask for repentance from white evangelicals. Some, like New York pastor Tim Keller, bemoaned the divisions, the "red evangelicalism" and "blue evangelicalism." But Salguero said that the meeting made him hopeful: He appreciated the diversity of the group, the willingness to disagree. "As evangelicals, we struggle with a whole host of issues," he told Religion News Service. "Maybe we can do better together in conversation" (Miller 2018).

It remains to be seen how the global context of evangelical life will shape the racial self-definition of American believers. As Latinos, Asians, Africans, and Middle Easterners are an ever-growing proportion of the global evangelical population, there is no question that white believers are in a global minority. Whether white evangelicals embrace or resist their minority status will shape the contours of US evangelical life over the next generation, but it will not change the demographic reality. The question is whether white American evangelicals can craft a politics made to the measure of the world's reality – and the diversity of their own community.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws from parts of my recent book, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*.

<sup>2</sup> The largest church by membership is Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination. It had 800,000 members in 2018, with 200,000 attending the weekly service at its main site. Four churches in Lagos alone have more than 40,000 attendees each week, with the largest being Deeper Life Christian Ministry. The second largest in weekly attendance, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, has churches in 196 countries, including the US. On The Redeemed Christian Church of God overall, see Ukah (2008); Marshall (2009); Obadare (2018). On RGGG in the US, see Rollin (2010) and Rice (2009). The church website is <http://rccg.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Assemblies of God claims that its membership is even more diverse, saying that in 2017 it was 56% white, 23% Latino, 10% black, and just over 10% other, including Asian, Native American, and mixed race. See <https://ag.org/About/Statistics>.

<sup>4</sup> The largest evangelical denominations are the Southern Baptist Convention, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and Church of God. The largest historical black church is the National Baptist Convention and the Church of God in Christ. See [http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/pr\\_15-05-12\\_rls\\_chapter1-03/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/pr_15-05-12_rls_chapter1-03/).

<sup>5</sup> Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*, 170, 126; Robert Priest et al., "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," *Missiology: An International Review* 34, no. 4 (October 2006): 431–50. See also McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders* (Oxford UP, 2018), 195–212.

<sup>6</sup> Matt Hamilton and Shelby Grad, "Molestation Scandal Is Latest Setback to Once-Mighty Trinity Broadcasting Network - Los Angeles Times," *latimes.com*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-tcn-history-20170606-story.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Marla Frederick, *Colored Television: American Religion Gone Global* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 87–114.

<sup>8</sup> On The Redeemed Christian Church of God overall, see

Asonzeh F. K. Ukah, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power: A Study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria* (Africa World Press, 2008); Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009); Ebenezer Obadare, *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria* (Zed Books, 2018). On RGGG in the US, see Betty Rollin, "January 8, 2010 ~ Reverse Missionaries | January 8, 2010 | Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly | PBS," *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* (blog), January 8, 2010,

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2010/01/08/january-8-2010-reverse-missionaries/5359/>; Andrew Rice, "Mission From Africa - The Redeemed Christian Church of God Comes to America," *New York Times Magazine*, April 12, 2009. The church website is <http://rccg.org/>.

<sup>9</sup> Melissa Steffan, "The Surprising Countries Most Missionaries Are Sent From and Go To," *News & Reporting*, July 25, 2013,

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2013/july/missionaries-countries-sent-received-csgc-gordon-conwell.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity: Findings from the 2016 Values Atlas*, (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2017), at <https://www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf>. See also Janelle S. Wong, *Immigrants, Evangelicals, and Politics in an Era of Demographic Change*, 1 edition (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Lipka, "The most and least racially diverse US religious groups," Pew Research Center, July 27, 2015 at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>.

Assemblies of God claims that its membership is even more diverse, saying that in 2017 it was 56% white, 23% Latino, 10% black, and just over 10% other, including Asian, Native American, and mixed race. <https://ag.org/About/Statistics>

<sup>12</sup> The largest evangelical denominations are the Southern Baptist Convention, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and Church of God. The largest historical black church is the National Baptist Convention and the Church of God in Christ.

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[http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/pr\\_15-05-12\\_rls\\_chapter1-03/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/pr_15-05-12_rls_chapter1-03/).

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