



# African Evangelicals and President Trump

By Damaris Parsitau



Shortly after the contested November 3rd 2020 US elections, a video of Paula White, President Donald Trump's spiritual advisor, making an impassioned prayer summoning African and Latin American angels to intercede for President Trump so that he would win the election caused quite a stir throughout Africa, generating not just hilarious memes but also significant debate on social media and in other forums about African evangelicals' support for Trump. The video that was widely circulated on social media platforms came on the heels of media reports that a section of African evangelicals and Pentecostals and their leaders support Trump and have been holding prayer vigils for his re-election, ostensibly because Trump is viewed as a defender of their faith against the deep state.

The chairperson of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK), Bishop Mark Kariuki, argued that Trump's victory would be a victory for "good morals" and that Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Kenya are "thinking about values". He said that when former President Barack Obama came to Kenya in 2016, "We told him not to bring his 'democratic agenda' in Kenya, an agenda that advocates for abortion and gay relationships. It is against this background that we are praying that the right person wins the USA election."

It is not just Kenyan evangelicals who support Donald Trump. Similar trends are also evident in Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Uganda and many other parts of the African continent where Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have been proliferating since the 1970s. Scholars, social commentators,

the media and researchers are baffled by the evangelicals' support for Trump regardless of his moral and ethical lapses, his divisive, bullish, combative, crude and brash character, his disrespect for women—especially women of colour—his hate for immigrants and Muslims and his inability to condemn white supremacists.

While many people cannot make sense of African Evangelical support for Trump, many scholars and social commentators have tried to rationalise and make sense of this phenomenon. Here I try to make sense of why African and Kenyan evangelicals and Pentecostals in particular, support a man so vile, a man who lacks empathy, compassion, morals, decorum, respect and human decency, values that are at the heart of African Christianity.

But first, let us understand why Trump aligns himself with American evangelicals, particularly white evangelicals. According to a 2019 Pew Research report, 81 per cent of white evangelicals and 62 per cent of white voters without a college degree voted for Trump. While not all American evangelicals support Trump, a significant majority of white evangelicals do.

In her best-selling and influential book, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted Faith and Fractured a Nation*, Historian and Gender Professor Kristin Kobes Du Mez argues that President Donald Trump weaponised both Christianity and masculinities to win the support of American evangelicals. Trump projects himself as a strongman, a characteristic that has increasingly defined his presidency since 2016. His machismo, patriarchal ideals and aggressive brand of masculinity are interwoven not just with his politics but also with his relationship with white evangelicals who form a big part of his political base.

Trump—who has cozied up to world dictators, praising authoritarian leaders like Russia's strongman and dictator Vladimir Putin, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and North Korea's Kim Jong Un—appears to have dictatorial tendencies. According to Professor Du Mez, Christian male evangelicals exude the same machismo and masculine strength that Trump projects. His combative style is also apparently evident in evangelical literature and popular culture, mainly books and films teeming with masculine heroes that shape evangelical beliefs about men and women for millions of evangelicals. This evangelical popular culture and literature is heavily promoted in Africa and elsewhere and also shapes African evangelical conceptualisations of manhood and masculinities.

The values at the heart of American evangelicalism today are authoritarianism, patriarchy, masculinity, aggressive foreign policy, the fear of Islam and immigrants, ambivalence towards the #metoomovemnt, opposition to Black Lives Matter and abortion and LGBTIQ issues. Trump has hijacked these issues and appropriated and weaponised evangelical Christianity and its symbols and language for his own political agenda, aligning himself with social and moral issues that are at the heart of American evangelicalism such as abortion, family values and other conservative agendas.

First, he has surrounded himself with a retinue of spiritual advisors led by Paula White, Jerry Falwell Jr. and others who prop up the legend of a God-fearing man who loves God and has the interest of their faith at heart. In September 2020, Trump tear-gassed his citizens so that he could pose for a photo op outside St John's Episcopal Church in Washington DC in a way that weaponised the Bible in order to get the support of American evangelicals.

Evangelicals also believe Trump has their interests at heart because he has projected himself as the only protector of family and Christian values that are under serious threat from an increasingly liberal left. Similarly, he promised evangelicals protection and power, and brought them and their concerns to the centre of American public life.

African evangelicals align themselves with the American right because of their conservative

positions around family issues including divorce, same-sex relationships, abortion and many others. There are many parallels between American evangelicals and African evangelicals and this may explain why African evangelicals support President Trump.

### **African masculine and patriarchal evangelical Christianity**

First, African big men of the booming evangelical movement promote a masculine, authoritative and patriarchal gospel similar to that of American evangelicalism. Many male African bishops, archbishops, pastors, evangelists and self-styled prophets exhibit machismo and a masculine strength and character that mirror Trump's. At the same time, they are beholden to power, influence, and money. They see or desire to see themselves in Trump as well as in American evangelical leaders. African evangelicals also admire aggressive leaders and many are friends to African dictators. Kenyan evangelicals cozied up to the late President Daniel Arap Moi, providing his autocratic and corrupt KANU regime with legitimacy and justifying this with the tired argument that leaders are appointed by God.

Another reason why African evangelicals support Trump is a practical one. It is about money, power and religious influence. The American evangelical right supports humanitarian and non-humanitarian causes across the African continent, from healthcare to education, water and solar projects as well as agriculture and food security.

American evangelical televangelists are not only extremely popular in Africa but their literature and popular culture are also heavily consumed by the African evangelical marketplace. Their books, films, videos, church magazines and motivational books line the bookshelves of Africa's leading Pentecostal and Charismatic clergy's personal and office libraries, fill the shelves of Africa's churches and church and secular bookshops, and are to be found displayed on the second-hand bookstands in the streets.

Their televised programmes are also popular in Africa's television stations. American televangelists such as Paula White, Joyce Meyer, Jack Van Impe, Benny Hinn, John C. Maxwell, T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, the late Morris Cerrulo, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar and many others are celebrities in Kenyan and African evangelical circles. In fact, Kenyans have their favourite American televangelists and many receive daily inspirational quotes and prayers from these televangelists. Leading African televangelists in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana and many other African countries say they have been mentored by American televangelists.

American televangelists are regular guests in Africa, criss-crossing the continent to hold prayer rallies and crusades. African televangelists offer American televangelists platforms to speak in their churches while African evangelicals get invited to travel to North America on preaching holidays to raise funds for church projects. So there is a relationship that has been cultivated between American evangelical televangelists and their African counterparts. African evangelicals' support for Trump can thus be understood as support for their brethren across the Atlantic, a kind of solidarity between brethren.

### **Prosperity Gospel and the money trail**

But there is also the influence of the American prosperity gospel in Africa where leading African televangelists espouse the theology of wealth and health or the gospel of money. The gospel of prosperity—also variously and derogatorily referred to as the “health and wealth” gospel, “the faith gospel”, “the gospel of riches”, “the gospel of materialism and consumerism”, the “gospel of selective abundance”, the “name it and claim it” gospel, the “blab it and grab it” gospel, “the gospel of ‘Panda Mbegu’” or gospel of “planting seeds” — is a direct importation from North America that

has exploded in both popularity and prominence in the African continent in the last nearly three and a half decades. It has also stirred up huge debates and created controversies globally. African evangelical televangelists have increasingly been influenced by American proponents of the prosperity gospel, creating bonds with their brethren in the US and mirroring each other.

But there is also the money trail. American evangelicals support a wide range of causes in Africa, including HIV/AIDs prevention strategies in scores of African nations including Kenya and Uganda and promoting the sexual purity and abstinence theology among many others. At the same time, the American evangelical right has poured in money to promote conservative positions with respect to women's reproductive health rights including abortion and same-sex relationships.

During contestations over the promulgation of the new constitution, Kenyan Christian churches led by a group of powerful evangelical, Pentecostal and Catholic lobbies vehemently opposed the adoption of the 2010 constitution because they opposed clauses that they viewed as too liberal, in particular clauses concerning abortion and same-sex relationships.

During the Population Conference that took place in Nairobi in 2019, Christian churches held big demonstrations to oppose women's reproductive health rights and during the debates on the reproductive health bill held in May 2020, Christian churches caused a stir when they opposed the passage of the bill, labelling it the "abortion bill". Christian churches in Kenya were also instrumental in the closing of Marie Stopes clinics across the country because they claimed that they were abortion centres.

Christian churches and the clergy have also mobilised against same-sex relationships across the continent and especially in Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda. Christian opposition to these issues is linked to American dollars that have been poured in to fight liberal causes.

Thus American evangelicals have strongly influenced the rise of Africa's evangelicals, not just in the public sphere but also in their quest to influence public policy with respect to hot-button issues like abortion, gay rights, gender rights and a wide array of liberties and rights. The sexual purity culture is also directly borrowed from the script of the American right and is often preached in evangelical churches.

The fear of liberalism and democratic ideals which are considered anti-family by religious conservatives is one of the other reasons African evangelicals support Trump. He is seen as a protector of family morality through not just his alignment with American evangelicals but also through his recent and contested appointment of conservative judges to the Supreme Court, especially that of Judge Amy Coney Barrett.

### **Christian Zionism and eschatological concerns**

Among the many other reasons why American and African evangelicals support President Trump is because of his policies and support for Israel. When Trump moved the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem there were jubilant celebrations not just in the US but also across scores of African countries that have large evangelical Christian majorities. In announcing the move, Trump said he did it for evangelicals. In many parts of the world but especially in the USA and Africa, evangelicals have a special affinity to Israel.

Many Christians also view the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 as the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. The promise of the Holy Land is therefore intricately tied to evangelical beliefs. This sort of Christian Zionism has been emerging for a long time and is tied to the Christian belief that God's promise of the land to the Jews is eternal.

American and African evangelical support for Israel can be seen in light of an emerging Christian Zionism inspired by theological concerns and is connected to Christian eschatological concerns rather than to the larger politics including the Palestinian question. Interestingly, African Christians who support Israel couldn't care less about Palestinian struggles.

As one pastor said to me in an interview that, "I align myself with God's special people and Nation. When I need my prayers answered, I pray for Israel. I tell my flock that when they pray for Israel, God answers their prayers." The emergence of Christian Zionism can thus be understood through eschatological beliefs.

For many evangelical Christians, Jerusalem is the linchpin of their eschatological beliefs. Evangelical Christians, a majority of whom make a literal reading of the bible, believe that Jesus Christ will return to Jerusalem, specifically a Jerusalem controlled by the Jewish people. Israel is therefore intricately tied to evangelical Christians who see it as an important nation in God's larger plan for Christians, especially born-again Christians. Beyond eschatological beliefs, evangelicals also believe that Jerusalem will be the scene of the final battle between good and evil. It is the place where God will finally obliterate his enemies and usher in the millennial reign of Christ.

Such Christian eschatological beliefs are tied to what is generally referred to as pre-millennial dispensationalist theology or end-time eschatological beliefs. The millennial in pre-millennialism, theologians argue, refers to Jesus Christ's prophesied 1000-year reign of peace on earth. Christians believe that those who are born-again will be raptured to heaven at the end of time.

A majority of African Pentecostal and evangelical clergy are proponents of this pre-millennialism or end-time eschatological beliefs. Consequently, many align with Trump who is seen as a friend of Israel, God's own "special people and nation".

When Trump named Jerusalem the capital of Israel, he said that there was more enthusiasm and excitement amongst American evangelicals than there was in Israel itself. This is also true of Africa where there were significant celebrations in scores of African countries that view Israel as a nation with a special place in God's end-time plans.

Besides, Israel is believed by many Christians to be home to many sacred sites including the Ark of the Covenant and many other sacred objects and artefacts. There is also the prevailing belief that God's presence resided inside the temple built by King Solomon and later destroyed by the Babylonians. Evangelicals believe that God's presence still resides in Israel which will play a critical role in Christian end-time beliefs.

Similarly, Christians believe that Jesus Christ was born, lived, walked, died and rose again in Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem therefore conjures up memories of the history of Jesus Christ, a central figure in their personal lives and faith. Thus, for many evangelicals, Jerusalem is a special place and Israel is a holy land which is important in God's larger eschatological plan.

The importance of Israel for many evangelical Christians as well as for other denominations has spawned a thriving religion-inspired tourism and pilgrimage to the Holy land. Every year, thousands of African Christian pilgrims travel to the Holy Land to renew their faith and walk where Jesus walked.

### **Patriarchy, misogyny and the weaponisation of masculinities**

While Trump is viewed as an increasingly divisive and polarising figure the world over, he remains popular among evangelicals in Africa, especially in Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda. Trump's support is evident in countries with a significant evangelical and Pentecostal majority, which is pretty much

most of sub-Saharan Africa where Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity has exploded since at least the 1970s, or earlier in some countries. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches dot much of the African landscape. According to a 2019 Pew Research poll, Trump has more support in Kenya and Nigeria where supporters appear unbothered that he referred to African countries as shithole countries in 2018.

Both Nigeria and Kenya are highly religious countries with large numbers of evangelicals. Pastor Chris, a prominent Nigerian televangelist, has argued that people are angry at Trump for supporting Christians. He argues that people who hate Trump hate Christians. Bishop Mark Kariuki in Kenya said that Kenyan evangelicals are praying for President Trump's re-election because Kenyan evangelicals are thinking about values. A majority of Christian groups in Africa hold conservative views about marriage, abortion, gay rights and scores of other issues.

Trump is seen by African evangelicals as a promoter of family values unlike President Obama who has been pushing a liberal agenda in Africa, a move that drew significant anger and concern from evangelicals in Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda in particular. When President Obama came to Kenya in 2016, he publicly but civilly clashed with President Uhuru Kenyatta over the issue of gay rights. Evangelicals had held demonstrations before Obama's arrival telling him to keep off gay issues.

African and American evangelical support for Trump is not only baffling but it is also very paradoxical given that he is hardly a paragon of morality. Nigerian Pentecostal philosopher and theologian, Professor Nimi Wariboko of Boston University, argues that Pentecostals and evangelicals support Trump because they are doing God's will and because of the prevailing theology amongst evangelicals that God uses sinners to accomplish his divine purpose. According to Wariboko, for many of these groups Trump is not just their hero but he is also a sort of a messianic figure who will not only lead his followers to Godly redemption, but is also uniquely placed to do this for them and for the whole of America.

Scholars like Wariboko have tried to make sense of this both philosophically and theologically, especially given that Trump does not by any means conjure up any messianic ideals yet he is largely viewed by his evangelical supporters as a sort of a messiah, one who will protect America from liberalism and socialism.

### **Evangelicals and suspicions about science**

Trump denies science, climate change and a wide array of environmental issues. While many evangelicals are not necessarily averse to science, they are also not very enthusiastic about it. Many evangelicals are beholden to the miraculous, spawning an entire faith healing and miracle industry that is at odds with science. For many evangelical clergy, science, climate change and environmental issues are not top of their agenda. They would rather pray for healing for ailments such as cancer, COVID-19, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, asthma and many others. Belief in science and medicine could seriously threaten their booming faith healing miracle industry, rendering many jobless.

With the collapse of healthcare in Africa following the structural adjustment programmes of the 1970s and 80s, the religious industry boomed while faith healers moved into the public sphere, spawning a thriving faith healing ministry that has captured the imaginations of many African Christians leading to the emergence of thousands of faith healing charlatans that have led many people astray. Prophet David Owuor, a scientist-cum-faith healer, has claimed to heal cancers, hypertension, diabetes, HIV/AIDS and various other disabilities. Trump is admired by these types of clergy because he legitimises their trade and gives them the language to oppose science.

## **Support for dictators: Leaders are appointed by God**

Another reason why African evangelicals support Trump is that he appears to admire dictators and has dictatorial tendencies. African evangelicals have a long tradition of not just supporting populist politicians but also providing tacit approval to Africa's dictators. Kenyan evangelicals supported and provided legitimacy to the late President Daniel Arap Moi. In Nigeria, evangelicals aligned themselves with corrupt leaders who looted the country. Pentecostal clergy have also provided legitimacy to leaders in Zambia, Uganda and Tanzania.

There are also many similarities between Trump and African evangelical leaders many of whom are authoritarian and entertain no criticism from their members or from members of the public. While Trump fires his critics, some evangelical leaders threaten their critics with the famous dictum, "touch not my anointed", a biblical verse that is often used to silence critics. Others threaten their critics with death and curses. Prophet Owuor has maintained a grip on his thousands of followers using the threat of curses and deaths from cancers and road accidents against anyone who speaks ill about him. This has led to vicious infighting within a ministry that is run by fear to stifle criticism.

At the same time, many African evangelical leaders lack both the theological and philosophical tools of analysis with which to engage the state unlike their Catholic and other mainstream church clergy who have theologically-grounded and philosophical tools of analysis to engage on social and political issues. Many African evangelical clergy frown upon theological education and go into ministry by simply calling themselves to the ministry and relying on the Holy Spirit to interpret the bible.

## **Islam and evangelicals**

There is also the Muslim factor in the evangelicals' support for Trump. There is enough evidence in his rhetoric against Muslims—many of whom he has banned from entering the US—that Trump hates Muslims and regards them as terrorists who hate America. Evangelicals are suspicious of Muslims and the increase in Islamophobia in Africa, America and elsewhere is directly related to the emergence of Christian nationalism.

In Africa, especially in countries with significant numbers of Muslims, increased islamophobia and emerging and simmering tensions between Christians and Muslim is blamed on the emergence of evangelicals and Pentecostals in public life. We saw this in Kenya during contestations over the Kadhi Courts during the constitution review process. This has also been documented in Nigeria and other countries. Evangelicals feel threatened by increasing numbers of Muslims and Trump's rhetoric about Islam has emboldened African evangelicals who are suspicious of Islam. Terrorism has also complicated this relationship.

Trump is a tragic hero in African evangelicalism, where many still believe that even though polls show that he lost to Joe Biden, many are still praying for a miracle while evangelical prophets and prophetesses have cast this election between the forces of evil (democrats) and good (Trump and the evangelicals). African evangelicals have cast Trump as a less than perfect person who is being used by God to fulfil his will. In their way of understanding, God uses the weak to accomplish his purpose. Evangelicals have appropriated biblical characters such as Cyrus to save God's people from their enemies. Trump is therefore seen as a modern day Cyrus who will lead God's people to peace and prosperity.

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