

How Trump fills a void in an increasingly secular America

Fareed Zakaria, *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2024

Reporters have been noticing something new about Donald Trump's campaign events this time around. They often resemble religious revival meetings. The *New York Times* notes that where his rallies were once "improvised and volatile," their finales now feel more planned, solemn and infused with religion. The closing 15 minutes "evokes an evangelical altar call" filled with references to God.

5 Trump is a shrewd reader of his supporters and has clearly seen what the data show. White evangelicals, who make up about 14 percent of the population, made up about one-quarter of voters in the 2020 election. And about three-quarters of them voted for Donald Trump. Even more striking, of those White voters who attend religious services once a month or more, 71 percent voted for Trump in the 2020 election. (Even similarly religious Black Americans, by contrast, voted for Joe Biden by a 9 to 1 ratio.) The key to
10 understanding Trump's coalition is the intensity of his support among White people who are and who claim to be devout Christians.

This phenomenon must be viewed against one of the most significant shifts in American life over the past two decades—the dramatic and rapid secularization of America. As I write in my book, *Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash from 1600 to the Present*, the United States was long an outlier among advanced
15 industrial countries in that it remained religious. But around the 1990s that began to change, and the numbers plunged after 2007. As the scholar Ronald Inglehart has shown, since that year, religious decline in America has been the greatest of any country of the 49 surveyed. By one measure, the United States today is the 12th-least-religious country on Earth. In 1990, according to the General Social Survey, less than 10 percent of Americans had no religious affiliation. Today it's around 30 percent.

20 Why this is happening is not easily understood, but some of it is probably that the onward march of science, reason and skepticism has fueled secularism in most rich countries. But it might also relate to certain choices that American Christianity has made over the past few decades. In his important work, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*, James Davison Hunter points out that Evangelicals grew their numbers by adapting to an America that had become much less religiously
25 observant and devout. The old Protestant Fundamentalism had been filled with warnings against sin, heresy, Catholicism, adultery, divorce, materialism and any deviation from strict Christian morality. But preachers such as Jerry Falwell made the religion more user-friendly and less doctrinally demanding. What filled the place of religious doctrine was politics.

Over the past few years, this process has been extended even further with those who consider themselves
30 devout Christians defining their faith almost entirely in political terms—by opposing abortion, same-sex marriage and transgender rights. This in turn has led to a great Democratic dechurching: According to Gallup, Democratic church membership was 46 percent in 2020, down from 71 percent two decades prior. The scholar David Campbell of the University of Notre Dame told the Associated Press, "Increasingly, Americans associate religion with the Republican Party—and if they are not Republicans themselves, they
35 turn away from religion." This phenomenon—of the right using, even weaponizing religion—is not unique to America or Christianity. You can see it in Brazil, El Salvador, Italy, Israel, Turkey and India, among other places.

Secularization may be inevitable, but it does seem to coincide with a sense of loss for many—a loss of
40 faith and community that might be at the heart of the loneliness that many people report experiencing these days, as poignantly discussed by the *Atlantic's* Derek Thompson. In my book, I quote the political commentator Walter Lippmann, who presciently identified this problem in 1929: "Men have been deprived of the sense of certainty as to why they were born, why they must work, whom they must love, what they must honor, where they may turn in sorrow and defeat."

"Into this void," I write in my book, "step populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism." These modern
45 political forces offer people a new faith, a new cause greater than themselves to which they can devote themselves. Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán expressed this articulately to Tucker Carlson in an interview last year: "There are certain things which are more important than 'me,' than my ego—family, nation, God."

This is the great political challenge of our time. Liberal democracy gives people greater liberty than ever
50 before, breaking down repression and control everywhere—in politics, religion and society. But as the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom." Modern society gives us all wealth, technology and autonomy. But for many, these things cannot fill the hole in the heart that God and faith once occupied. To fill it with politics is dangerous. But that seems to be the shape of things to come.