Opinion
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The New York Times published "The Church of Trump: How He's Infusing Christianity Into His Movement." by Michael Bender on April 1. (NCR screenshot/nytimes.com)



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April 5, 2024

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Religions always look strange from the outside, a wise friend once observed. Still, if you are writing about religion for The New York Times, expecting a bit of perspective and historical awareness is not too much to ask, is it?

Apparently, it is, if you look at Michael Bender's article "The Church of Trump: How He's Infusing Christianity Into His Movement."

"Mr. Trump's tone turns reverent and somber, prompting some supporters to bow their heads or close their eyes," he writes. "Others raise open palms in the air or murmur as if in prayer." Later he calls this "reverent and somber" closing of a rally a "meditative ritual."

The scene "evokes an evangelical altar call, the emotional tradition that concludes some Christian services in which attendees come forward to commit to their savior."

"His success at portraying those prosecutions as persecutions — and warning, without merit, that his followers could be targeted next — has fueled enthusiasm for his candidacy and placed him, once again, in a position to capture the White House," Bender explains breathlessly.

> The problem with Trump's religiously inflected rallies is that they are fascistic and idolatrous, not that they are religious.
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Bosh. People bow their heads and close their eyes when they can't look to see if the basketball player makes the foul shot or if the goalie stops the penalty kick. Most, not all religions, do have rituals, but the Olympics have rituals too and they are not religious. (The gods worshiped at the original Olympics have been unworshiped for a few millennia.) Lots of people claim to be persecuted. The famous 1984 Apple shareholders meeting felt like a revival with Steve Jobs as the savior.

The article correctly portrays a kind of cultlike aspect to Donald Trump's campaign, something that has been evident for some time. Fine. But it suggests that the kind of swooning, uncritical adoration that the Trump cult produces can best be understood as a religion. On behalf of believers everywhere, I wish to inform Mr. Bender and his editors at The Times that our faith is intellectually sophisticated and profound, that the Catholic intellectual tradition has always thrived on the interplay of faith and reason — often in ways that prove more enduring that any fideism or scientism — and that the Christian faith is no more (or less) capable of ignorance than the rest of the human race.

Bender also seems ignorant of the long and complicated role religion has played in U.S. politics, from the opposition in colonial Virginia to the sending of an Anglican bishop and the anti-Catholic rants from the First Continental Congress — Catholicism was "fraught with sanguinary and impious tenets" the Founding Fathers stated — to Williams Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech and President Dwight Eisenhower's famous comment, "our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is."

Has Bender never been to a Black evangelical church at election time? President Joe Biden campaigned at St. John Baptist Church in Columbia, South Carolina, just before that state's primary and the rally was overladen with religious symbolism. Did that cross a line?

The problem with Trump's religiously inflected rallies is that they are fascistic and idolatrous, not that they are religious. The Times' piece made it seem like religion is the problem, but Trump is the problem. It would be expecting too much to think an average person should be familiar with Eastern Illinois University professor Ryan Burge's important article "The Rise of the non-Christian Evangelical," which demonstrates that some Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists now identify as "evangelical," meaning it is now a political designation for many people. A reporter at The New York Times trying to explain politics in terms of religion should never miss one of Burge's substack postings. They are the best in the business.

The problem extends beyond The Times. At Politico, University of San Francisco adjunct professor Bradley Onishi opined that Christians should abandon the idea that life begins at conception. Along the way he makes some dubious distinctions about what St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas taught: True, they argued that abortion was not murder until the moment of ensoulment and that, following Aristotle, such

ensoulment happened not at conception but later in pregnancy. But that did not mean they thought it was A-OK before that point; it was always a sin "against nature." It goes without saying that in the 5th and 13th centuries they had a relatively primitive understanding of fetal development.

Moreover, it is odd that Onishi, like so many who take issue with the idea that life begins at conception, never stops to ask: If not then, when does a human life begin?

There are some problems with Onishi's history of the emergence of the religious right in the late 1970s and 1980s, but the really egregious claim was this:

> It's not Protestants, but Catholics in the United States who, as a religious community, have opposed abortion forcefully going back to the 19th century, and it is in Catholicism that we find the view that life begins at conception. Starting with an 1869 document called *Apostolicae Sedis*, Pope Pius IX declared the penalty of excommunication for abortions at any stage of pregnancy.

Catholic opposition to abortion predates *Apostolicae Sedis*. The Didache, written in the late first or early second century, condemned abortion.

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Through the centuries, the church has affirmed core, essential beliefs in a variety of ways, not always with a specific papal text or church canon. Onishi might be surprised to know that the first bishop in the United States, Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, in the early 19th century, chose to dedicate his cathedral to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The dogma of Mary's assumption into heaven was not officially proclaimed until 1950 by Pope Pius XII.

There is no reason to believe these articles were driven by anti-religious animus. Still, mainstream reporters who want to write about religion need to do better than traffic in these ill-informed caricatures. No editor would assign a reporter who didn't know the difference between a linebacker and a running back to cover a football game, nor send a reporter to a foreign country if the reporter knew nothing of the culture and language of that country. On religion reporting, sadly, all bets are off.

One thing should be transcendently clear: Reporters and professors who look down on religiously motivated voters, who do not take their concerns seriously or who ignore the complexities and richness of religious traditions, such reporters and professors are the very people who may end up getting Trump elected. Trump's path to the White House is built on working-class resentment of condescending elites and these two articles are precisely what give credence to the resentment.