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## Putting people over politics

by [Michael Gerson](#)

Among the disappointments of the 2016 election, the close identification of many Christian evangelicals with a right-wing populism has been the most personally difficult. On Election Day, it was disturbing to see so many of my tribe in Donald Trump's war paint.

The most enthusiastic Trump evangelicals have taken the excesses of the Religious Right in the 1980s not as a warning but as a playbook. In this political season, they often acted more like an interest group seeking protection and favor than a voice of conscience. They blessed an agenda that targeted minorities and refugees. They employed apocalyptic rhetoric as a get-out-the-vote technique. And they hitched the reputation of their religious tradition to a skittish horse near a precipice.

As a citizen, I hope that the faith many evangelicals have placed in the [Trump administration](#) is justified. As a commentator, I expect a tunnel at the end of the light.

It is part of my job to have strong opinions on public matters. But lately I have been conscious of a certain, unwelcome symmetry. When it comes to Trump evangelicals, I have found myself angry at how they have endorsed the politics of anger; bitter about the bitter political spirit they have encouraged; feeling a bit hypocritical in my zeal to point out their hypocrisy. A dark mood has led to anxiousness and harshness.

This is the mortal risk of politics: to become what you condemn. It is not limited to one side of our cultural and political divide. Religious conservatives, for example, are typically attacked by liberals for being preachy and sanctimonious. But televangelists have nothing to teach [the cast of "Hamilton."](#)

In my case, I know — in calmer and clearer moments — that an attitude of fuming, prickly anxiety is foreign to my faith, for a couple of reasons.

First, Christian belief relativizes politics. The pursuit of social justice and the maintenance of public order are vital work. But these tasks are temporary, and, in an ultimate sense, secondary. If Christianity is true, [C.S. Lewis](#) noted, then "the individual person will outlive the universe."

All our anger and worry about politics should not blind us to the priority and value of the human beings placed in our lives, whatever their background or beliefs.

Christianity teaches that everyone broken, sick, and lonely — everyone beneath our notice or beneath our contempt — is, somehow, Christ among us. “He is disguised under every type of humanity that treads the earth,” [said Dorothy Day](#). I suspect this also applies to Trump supporters — or never-Trumpers, depending on your political proclivity. “Those people” are also “our people.” We show civility and respect, not because the men and women who share our path always deserve it or return it, but because they bear a divine image that can never be completely erased. No change of president or shift in the composition of the Supreme Court can result in the repeal of the Golden Rule.

Second, Christians are instructed not to be anxious — “take no thought for tomorrow” — because they can trust in a benevolent purpose behind events. This may, of course, be a delusion, though it would be a mass delusion affecting most of humanity through most of history. If the atheists are correct, the universe is vast, cold and silent, indifferent to the lives and dreams of jumped-up primates crawling on an unremarkable blue ball, destined for destruction by a dying sun — a prospect that may be even worse than a Trump administration.

If Christians are correct, that blue ball was touched by God in a manner and form that Homo sapiens might understand. And the vast, cold universe is really a sheltering sky.

Days away from the start of Advent, many Christians are beginning their spiritual preparation for God’s implausible intervention. Advent is a season, wrote [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#) from his prison cell, “in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside.” For believers, Christmas culminates the remarkable story of a God who searches for us. The only adequate responses are stillness, gratitude and trust.

After a dismal and divisive campaign season, many of us need the timely reminders of the Advent season: That people matter more than all our political certainties. That God is in control, despite our best efforts. And that some conflicts can’t be won by force or votes — only by grace.

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