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Abrahamic Religions and Climate Change: Tradition and Political (In)action[1]

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Abstract: This article examines the theological worldview of the white Evangelical Protestant demographic group in terms of its political expression in the United States of America. Specifically, the politics over granting asylum to climate refugees is examined together with a critical overview of Abrahamic history on the care of strangers and the treatment of refugees. Also examined are related questions on the epistemological reality of climate change within the academic community. This research is brought together to assess the impact and influence of white Evangelical Protestants on these controversies, and what can be done to counter the current political impasse that is blocking effective and meaningful climate change mitigation legislation and for granting asylum to climate refugees.

Keywords: President Donald J. Trump; White Evangelicals; Climate Refugees; Biblical Ethics; Abrahamic Traditions.

The plight of environmental refugees, displaced from their homelands by the tragic consequences of climate change, is both heartbreaking and, surprisingly, politically polarizing. Instead of being seen as an environmental and humanitarian crisis, certain political forces in the United States of America have seen these refugees as a threat to national security and have actively sought to prevent them from finding relief. This is not an exclusively American phenomenon, as climate change denial and xenophobic attitudes toward refugees has been a worldwide reaction. What is surprising here is that it is the Evangelical demographic – specifically, the so-called "white" Evangelical Protestants – who have most stridently supported and even praised the efforts of their respective governments to deny political asylum to these victims of climate change.

Even if one were to consider the possibility that other political priorities might outweigh religious sensibilities for any given person (we are, after all, complicated social beings), the actual numbers suggest that it is not just a matter of intrapersonal negotiations between faith and politics. As revealed by a Public Religion Research Institute "American Values" survey published in October 2018, white Evangelical Protestants are the only religious group which predominately believe that "immigrants threaten traditional Americans customs and values" (57 percent) and support banning refugees from entering the U.S.altogether (51 percent).[2] It is perhaps not surprising, given this information, that this same demographic overwhelmingly supported the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, where exit polls

1. Paper presented at the colloquium "Religion and Climate Change," September 20, 2019, at McGill University's School of Religious Studies. Organized by Professor Gerben S. Oegema and Professor David K. Goodin.

2. "Partisan Polarization Dominates Trump Era: Findings from the 2018 American Values Survey," Public Religion Research Institute, accessed March 11, 2020, https://www.prri.org/research/partisan-polarization-dominates-trump-era-findings-from-the-2018-american-values-survey/. Contrastingly, it must be highlighted that 43% of white Evangelical Protestants take the opposing view and say immigrants strengthen American society, and 49% oppose banning immigration altogether. This tension within the white Evangelical Protestant demographic reveals a possibility that the minority may, in time, be able to change the minds of the majority. Supplying the arguments to facilitate this change is one aim of this essay.

reveal that 80 percent of white Evangelicals voted for Trump.[3] It is the most single-sided response by all religions and demographic groups. Evidently, there is something about that community that is uniting them as a voting "block" that can only be explained by that evangelical identity itself.

This is the problematic to be investigated in my essay. The approach will follow in the tradition of Lynn White Jr, whose 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" sought to describe, in broad strokes, the religious rationales behind humankind's ecological malfeasance, and to do so in just five pages. So too, here, I do not have the space, or for that matter even the need, to write a full-length book manuscript for a thesis that can be established in a single article, albeit in broad strokes. And, just like White Jr, my aim will be to set a foundation for future scholars to advance the arguments I have set forth herein. To this end, the following seeks to present the "big picture" behind Evangelical opposition to both climate change science and for granting asylum to climate refuges.

And so, with all that in mind, let us begin by asking: what is it about the theology of the white Evangelicals that can account for this political obstructionism? This will require certain questions to be addressed, including the foundational one regarding the scientific linkage between climate change and the refugee crisis. This will take up quite a bit of space in this essay, but not because the science itself is ambiguous or disputable, even though it is sometimes treated this way in public discourses (more on this in a moment). After this necessary engagement on the science of climate change, the religious worldview of white Evangelicals will be contrasted with the Abrahamic traditions from which it emerged. Here an exceptionally stark divergence from tradition and scripture will be revealed. In short, one conclusion of this essay will be that it is theology – not politics, science, or even economics – which is at the heart of the climate change resistance, and that it is this divergent theology which is preventing effective collective responses to the environmental crises and human suffering now plaguing our planet. It will then be argued that only a return to traditional theology can counter the religious narratives now dominating political discourses in the United States and elsewhere.

Climate Change Reality

Only a few words will be devoted to what should be *fait accompli* given that it is a matter already settled by the scientific consensus – it is not, therefore, subject to debate or individualistic interpretation. Such a declaration will, undoubtedly, cause some readers great consternation, not only with the general public who may not know how to regard scientific findings, but even with some academics, since science (properly speaking) exists outside the social, cultural, political, historical, and perceptual biases that shape truth claims within everyday human experience, even though some philosophers of science try to argue otherwise. Perhaps a few additional remarks of this subject will be necessary, since it will undoubtedly inspire curiosity by those who are unfamiliar with the debate, and will likewise cause offense to those "social constructionists" that believe science holds no privileged status over truth. While their critique holds true for certain questions involving the practice of science – for example, what favored projects get funding and which otherwise worthy projects do not – the scientifically verified and peer reviewed findings from these projects are not themselves subject to political bias. But first a much more foundational question needs to be addressed, the same one at the center of this whole question of environmental refugees and climate change denial. Only then can the more esoteric and comparatively unimportant philosophical critiques be tackled.

3. "Exit Polls – Election2016," *CNN*, November 23, 2016, https://edition.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls/national/president.

The city of Houston, Texas, has been hit by three consecutive 500-year storms in just three years, 2015 through 2017.[4] For those who are not aware, a 500-year storm is based on statistical analyses of climate throughout recorded history for any given region, and empirically verified through historical records, flood sediment analysis in geological strata, tree-ring climatic data, and so on. These are used to construct a historical profile of flood events from hurricanes and other weather phenomena going back centuries, sometimes millennia. From those reconstructions it is possible to determine the historical probability for extraordinary floods, such as those which have only occurred once every five centuries over recorded history. This is the context in which to understand the significance of Houston having three of these extreme events, and in three consecutive years no less. This is beyond extraordinary: it is horrifying and alarming. However, and this is the focus of the climate change debate, it is not statistically impossible – just as it is theoretically possible for a person to win multimillion-dollar lotteries three weeks in a row. This is where climate change denial finds its talking points in its debate against the real science. It is, as it were, an inverted "gambler's fallacy" where a person *feels* that the odds of winning inprove the longer he or she plays, so too the denier likewise *feels* that increasing frequencies of catastrophic storms and floods will be "equaled out" sometime in an unimaginable future when the earth is plagued by unending droughts. After all, it is statistically *possible* for this all to be true if you bend the math until it breaks all credulity. Yet this unrealistic scenario is enough to give the deniers legitimacy in public discourses even when set against the scientific consensus of those who know better.

All this points to the central problematic for this essay, and to recast it in biblical terms, it is the same question asked by Pontius Pilate to Christ, "*What is truth?*" (John 18:38). Just as it was then, the question of truth has become a matter of political perspective and social power. For the High Priest Caiaphas of the Sanhedrin during the time of Jesus, it was better for one person to die than to risk a popular uprising that would provoke the Romans to destroy Jerusalem entirely (John 11:50). From that point of view, Jesus of Nazareth was seditionist and dangerous: as for the underlying truth of Christ's actual innocence for sacrilegious speech, blasphemy against God, and violation of the laws of Moses, all that could be *damned* (as it were) when measured against the political reality of Roman occupation. Truth was politics and nothing more – an adage just as astute then as it seems to be now when it comes to climate change science and its political and economic ramifications.

Well, those readers familiar with the New Testament are aware that the crucifixion of Christ made no difference to the political reality of that social world, and an unrelated military uprising did in fact take place nearly forty years later (70 CE) resulting in the destruction Caiaphas feared. The whole scandal of the trial of Christ and the presentation to Pilate for execution was merely a mockery of justice that showcased human pettiness over holding temporary political power. The Gospels reveal that the first victim was truth itself as an apolitical reality. In fact, a narrative analysis of the Gospel of John reveals that the "show trial" of Christ served as a dramatic counterpoint for the actual trial of God sitting in judgement over the sinful world.[5] This, then, is the true dramatic context in which to consider the profoundly cynical words of Pontius Pilate, "*What is truth?*" The response to his bitter question is meant to be supplied by the infuriated reader, who knows that only truth *is* truth – the tautology pointing to a higher reality of God's justice. *This* is a truth that cannot be reduced to a negotiated reality subjected to the shifting power relationships within society. That other kind of political truth is no truth at all, just social power expressed in defiance of reality,

4. Dara Lind, "The '500-year' flood, explained: why Houston was so underprepared for Hurricane Harvey," *Vox*, August 28, 2017, https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/8/28/16211392/100-500-year-flood-meaning.
5. Andrew T. Lincoln. *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Henderson, 2000).

an idolatrous belief that the sheer force of personal will can triumph over all else. This was the moral failing and ultimate tragedy of Caiaphas.

This, I suggest, is also what is happening today with climate change denial. Evangelicals, fearing a supposed secularist political agenda by those who have recognized climate science, have adopted an attitude of uncompromising defiance toward that science. They have also come to fear that climate science is being used to advocate for certain economic reforms that will disadvantage their own demographic group in favor of immigrants and other disenfranchised people. The scriptural dynamic hardening these fears into a powerful and persuasive political force is as follows: if faith is the evidence of things unseen (Hebrews 11:1), then truth itself *can be* a self-willed reality wielded to usurp the authority of secular science in the name of conservative values. Might makes right in politics as well as in war.

An example of this kind of twisted logic is found with the "flat earth" conspiracy groups that have also used these same biblical arguments for their cause.[6] So effective is this linkage between faith and truth that even when other Evangelicals have confronted this false belief using both science and scripture, it is often without success.[7] The problem is that Evangelical faith is often presented as an ultimatum: if a person is unashamed of the Holy Scriptures (as required by Romans 1:16), then he or she must embrace biblical "truths" that may seem absurd to those outside the faith. Such a person then finds the legitimacy of his or her faith confirmed when the world reviles and persecutes them for these "sincerely held" beliefs, as it is promised in Matthew 5:11-12. It is a tightly knit "logic loop" that is self-reinforcing and often impenetrable, since any challenge is taken as a test of faith. This kind of logic has even been responsible for breaking apart Christian families *because* it is taken as a challenge established by God,[8] for: "If anyone comes to Me [Christ] and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). It is a tragedy not unlike the one experienced by Caiaphas. But the stakes today with climate change denial are a lot greater than the destruction of just one city.

It is noteworthy that there has been a strong pushback against the Evangelical opposition to the plight of climate refugees and climate science denial from within the Evangelical community itself. But, so far, they too have found their efforts blocked by the same logic that keeps the flat earth conspiracy theories alive. The aptly named "Green Evangelicals" are therefore very much in the minority,[9] and largely ignored by the Trump loyalists who see such views as heretical. Frustrating their efforts has been an unexpected ally in the climate change denial movement emerging from within academia itself.

Science as a Social Construction

Adding legitimacy to climate change denial is the aforementioned philosophical critique of empirical science. Only a few words will be devoted to this subject since, for one, it cannot be dismissed

6. Josiah Hesse, "Flat Earthers keep the faith at Denver conference," *The Guardian*, November 18, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/18/flat-earthers-keep-the-faith-at-denver-conference.

7. Ken Ham, "Does the Bible Teach a Flat Earth?" *Answers in Genesis*, August 2, 2019, https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2019/08/02/does-the-bible-teach-flat-earth/.

8. PureFlix "Answering Atheists with Dr. Danny Faulkner," YouTube video, 26:54, July 18, 2019, https://youtu.be/DsJQoxEdmoM (see minutes 10 through 15). Dr. Faulkner, an Evangelical physicist, compares the Flat Earth conspiracy theories to the ancient gnostic heresy that threatened the early Church with supposed secret wisdom from God.

9. According to a recent report, only 28% of white Evangelicals said they accept climate science. However, there appears to be a growing, albeit limited, support for so-called Green Economy initiatives within this community. Kate Yoder, "Wait, 40 percent of white evangelicals support the Green New Deal?" *Grist*, July 29, 2019, https://grist.org/article/wait-40-percent-of-white-evangelicals-support-the-green-new-deal/.

by fiat, yet at the same time there is a risk of neglecting the main focus of this essay if too much space is devoted to what is very much an ancillary issue. The reader will be pointed to longer, protracted engagements with these subjects in the footnotes should his or her interest wish to explore these deconstructions further. For the purposes of this essay, the first thing for the reader to note is that there is a difference here between the so-called strict constructionists who believe in the unreality of any empirical reality outside the phenomenal world that is being continually shaped by cognitive, social, cultural, political factors and interpersonal power relationships, and those phenomenologists who either leave the status of the "real world" unresolved or see the empirical reality as comparatively less impactful on our lives than "social world" in which all empirical factors are mediated by those other shapers of our lives. The two groups should not be conflated, though the second does follow in the wake created by the arguments of the first, so the difference here can be subtle. Nevertheless, their collective impact on public discourses can be, and indeed has been, particularly unhelpful when discussing the actual reality of climate change in causing real world consequences such as climate refugees.

The critique itself has a long history, going back to Kant's engagements with Locke over empiricism, followed by Nietzsche's challenge to science in turn, then by the phenomenologist Husserl, followed by Heidegger for hermeneutical contexts, and finally to such modern commenters as Latour. What they each share, in varying degrees, is trying to defend the authority of philosophy over the empirical world in the wake of empiricism's unending triumphs in new scientific discoveries. The issue here is that, throughout western history going back to Aristotle, the sciences were subsumed under speculative and theological schema based in deductive reasoning. Science has historically been known as natural philosophy as a result. But the scientific revolution, beginning in the sixteenth century with Copernicus, and becoming inexorable in the eighteenth century through the advancements achieved through the scientific method, soon began to supplant all theological and philosophical claims to truth almost entirely. Today, few turn to philosophy or theology to discuss the natural world, outside the one domain left open to such pursuits: ethics. All other truths are purely scientific in nature, at least for the majority of people. Yet, there was one voice in the modern era that stood against this "See change" of supremacy: Martin Heidegger. His project was once again to reduce the empirical sciences to merely an expression of speculative philosophy – *his* own hermeneutical philosophy to be precise.[10] It should go without saying this is nonsense, and yet it forms the basis for the present-day epistemological debates over the truth claims of science – not that scientists pay attention to philosophers anymore. Still, it is enough legitimacy to help sway the public discourses over climate change with the seeming authority of an academic critique coming from such

10. In brief, his arguments run thusly. Scientific theorems can be expressed mathematically. Mathematics, however, can be known entirely *a priori*. Empirical science is therefore subsequent to and dependent upon *a priori* operations taking place within the mind alone, and thus philosophy is the only true authority. Heidegger takes as his "proof" of this astounding claim Galileo's famous experiment to drop two objects of unequal mass from the Tower of Pisa to show that they fall at the same rate of speed, despite the popular conviction that heavier objects fall faster than lighter ones. The gathered people marveled because Galileo was actually correct, and in the process, he completely shattered the common wisdom of the day. But that is not what happened, according to Heidegger. "Both Galileo and his opponents [the gathered people] saw the same [empirical] 'fact.' But they interpreted it differently and made the same happening visible to themselves in different ways" (Martin Heidegger, "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell [New York: HarperOne, 1993], 290). Stated plainly, Heidegger claimed that the perception of the event was entirely dependent on cognitive processes within the viewer's mind, and because of this, he further claimed: "Insofar as every science and cognition is expressed in propositions, the cognition that is taken and posited in the mathematical project is of such a kind as to set things upon their foundation in advance" ("Modern Science," 291). This means that to change one's perception of experimental data, all a person has to do is have better convictions based on his or her mathematical preconceptions. But Heidegger is not finished yet. He then goes further to deny the empirical world entirely, and proudly proclaims that, "There

figures as Bruno Latour, who sees science as a new form of antidemocratic authoritarianism. And so, when present day activists such as Greta Thunberg demand that we, as a society, should "let science speak!" and end the debate over the politics of climate change, Latour instead seeks to put an end to the "*incontestable form of authority that would stem from things themselves*" manifested by those "militant" ecologists who claim to speak for the mute world.[11] Latour instead calls for a "political epistemology" that holds all truth claims, even those of the natural sciences, to be on equal terms for democratic debate.[12] Latour and those who follow in this Heideggerian tradition have unwittingly given legitimacy to climate change deniers, since truth is now – just as it was for Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate – merely an expression of political power.

Evangelical Response

With all this in mind, the science – which is to say, the actual truth – of climate change and the refugee crisis can be approached. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees in their 2014 Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action Report identified new challenges posed by climate change across Latin America and the Caribbean.[13] It is estimated that 20 million people have been displaced due to rapid-onset natural hazards over the past ten years; in this, climate change was identified as a "threat multiplier" that both increased the frequency and worsened these disasters. Some refugees were displaced internally, others have sought refuge in other nations, most notably, in the United States. Worse still, it is estimated that an additional 9.4 to 17.1 million persons in Latin America will be displaced by climate change in the coming decades. Climate migration is now a crisis facing both Latin America and the Global North, and this crisis will only grow more urgent as the cumulative effects of climate change increasingly impact the domestic economies throughout these regions, particularly with respect to subsistence agriculture.

The United States, a self-professed Christian nation, has responded to this refugee crisis in ways that can only be described as needlessly punitive toward asylum seekers, most especially the policies of family separation and child detention,[14] and just this past September, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed a new Trump administration rule that will prevent most Central American immigrants from seeking asylum in the United States at all.[15] The Evangelical response has been beyond enthusiastic in support of the Trump administration. The President, in turn, launched an "Evangelicals for Trump" reelection tour across the United States to capitalize on his policy successes. The inaugural rally was held at the King Jesus International Ministry, a largely Hispanic megachurch in Miami, this past January. The church Pastor, Guillermo Maldonado (a self-declared "Apostle" of Christ), introduced the President as a new King Cyrus

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is no such [empirical] body" for scientists to study, and he further claims "there is also no [scientific] experiment that could ever bring such a body to direct perception" ("Modern Science," 289). There is only philosophy, and moreover, his own hermeneutical philosophy – all else is necessarily contingent upon that overseeing authority. For further discussion, see chapter 8 of David K. Goodin, *An Agnostic in the Fellowship of Christ: The Ethical Mysticism of Albert Schweitzer* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Press, 2019).

11. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 14, 20. Emphasis in original.

12. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 13.

13. "The Brazil Declaration," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed March 12, 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/brazil-declaration.html.

14. Jonathan Blitzer, "A New Report on Family Separations Shows the Depths of Trump's Negligence," *The New Yorker*, December 6, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-new-report-on-family-separations-shows-the-depths-of-trumps-negligence.

15. Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Says Trump Can Bar Asylum Seekers While Legal Fight Continues," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/11/us/politics/supreme-court-trump-asylum.html.

sent by God to free the people from its Babylonian Captivity[16] – by which is meant, the so-called slavery of modern socialism. Pastor Maldonado preaches the so-called Prosperity Gospel, a doctrine that conflates Free Market Capitalism with God's plenitude in rewarding virtue and punishing vice economically.[17] This evangelical theology sees any interference with Free Market Capitalism as definitionally *satanic*.[18] This last point was highlighted by another speaker at this rally, Pastor Jentezen Franklin, who, in a prayer circle with the President, announced to the gathered crowd that Trump has freed the people from the tyranny of government issued food stamps to "the dignity of work," among his other praises for Trump's policies that are supported by conservative Christians.[19] Paula White concluded the collective prayer with a petition to protect Trump from the demonic forces now attacking him, a veiled reference to socialist-leaning Democrats.[20] Trump went on to give a speech where he proudly touted his border wall and stances against "open borders" and "sanctuary cities" before the adoring crowd of thousands – a situation made all the more remarkable since *Ministerio Internacional El Rey Jesús* is the largest Hispanic church in the United States, and largely populated by an immigrant community, many of whom fled hardship in Cuba as undocumented refugees themselves.

Politics and theology have been conflated to become indistinguishable in Evangelical thought such that religious conservatives are predominately Republicans in the United States, and Republican policies now reflect the social agenda of religious conservatives including in such areas as reproductive rights, gun control, and immigration. This has led to more than a little confusion, with some pastors even claiming the Bible supports constitutional Second Amendment gun rights.[21] It is in this context that the climate refugee issue must be considered, and where it has to be asked: what exactly is the theology of the Evangelical Christians who support the Trump administration? I begin with a review of the Abrahamic Faiths and the theology that substantiates and informs each of their positions on climate refugees. Only then can a contrast be made.

16. Miami Herald, "Guillermo Maldonado prays for President Donald Trump during Evangelical rally in Miami," YouTube video, 2:13, January 3, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=He7y6XTU52k.
17. David K. Goodin, "The God of the Market Place: John Stuart Mill and Maximos Confessor on Economic Virtue," *World in the World: Concordia University Graduate Journal of Theological Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 15–35.
18. Global News, "President Trump attends 'Evangelicals for Trump' rally in Florida," YouTube video, 1:22:16, January 3, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XhVtSRR7aI. Here, Trump claimed that "democrats are trying to replace God with socialism" (Trump's comments at 33 minutes).
19. NewsNOW from Fox, "'One GLORIOUS nation under God' - FULL President Trump speech at Evangelical event," YouTube video, 1:24:34, January 3, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44AiTIFRgfw. Curiously, Pastor Jentezen makes an oblique reference to President Trump's less-than-moral behavior during his prayer: "… he [Trump] does not claim to be perfect." The comment could be illuminative of the comparison to King Cyrus from the Hebrew Bible. While Protestants consider the Septuagint's longer version of the Book of Daniel as apocryphal, these chapters present King Cyrus as buffoonishly stupid, at one point believing a bronze idol was capable of eating sacrificial food (ch.14). Daniel, however, tells the King that the pagan priests take the sacrificial food at night when no one is watching. To prove it, he asks the King to close all the doors and spread a thin layer of ash over the temple floor. The next morning, the doors are opened, and the King sees the footprints of the priests in the ash. Knowing he has been tricked, he orders the Priests killed and the idol destroyed. The comparison to King Cyrus could be an extremely wry and subtle acknowledgement that President Trump is no more than a useful buffoon in God's plans.
20. For a contrasting view, see John Fea, "'Evangelicals for Trump' was an awful display by supposed citizens of the Kingdom of God," *USA Today* (Opinion Column), January 11, 2020, https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/01/11. That noted, a survey of YouTube comments reveal that some Evangelicals do indeed see democrats as demonic forces. See the comment section of "President Trump attends "Evangelicals for Trump" rally in Florida," Global News, accessed March 12, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XhVtSRR7aI.
21. See Shane Idleman, "Guns - What Does the Bible Say?" *OnePlace*, accessed March 12, 2020, https://www.oneplace.com/ministries/regaining-lost-ground/read/articles/guns-what-does-the-bible-say-14904.html.

Hospitality in Abrahamic Traditions

The story of salvation from the Abrahamic perspective begins after the exile from Eden, and after the tragedy of Noah's flood when God was grieved to his heart for having made humankind. The biblical narrative of Genesis then focuses on Abram, the Patriarch of the Abrahamic Faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Through him, the covenantal history of humanity and God would begin anew, being progressively carried forward by the Hebrew patriarchs, and elaborated upon in Christian and Islamic traditions, each in their own ways.

It all begins with Abram (later Abraham), where this new beginning is forged; only through him a new way is found to begin healing the wounds of Eden, and to start repairing the relationship between the Creator and humanity. And it all starts with this extraordinary person, Abraham, who at the heart of the story, does something quite remarkable. God visits him at the oak of Mamre. Not since Eden is it said that God walked upon the earth and greeted humanity, as it were, face-to-face. It is not clear whether Abraham recognized God as such. The text of Genesis instead reports that Yahweh became "manifest" to him (וַיֵּרָא "to be seen," or in the Septuagint, ὤφθη "to be seen") and yet Abraham beheld three men. It is a curious antinomy, and the Abrahamic traditions each interpret the event differently.

In Judaism, we have the interpretation of the first century historian Josephus, who indicates that Abraham "saw three angels, and thinking them to be strangers," offered hospitality.[22] We also have the view of the famous Talmudic scholar of the twelfth century, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi), writing that God had sent him "angels in the form of men" who Abraham welcomed though they were strangers.[23] It was an act of kindness, graciousness, magnanimity given freely to outsiders, and this in turn would begin to build the bonds of covenant between God and His chosen people thereafter. Because of this, rabbinic tradition now regards hospitality more highly than even would be given to the reception of the *Shekinah*, the Divine Presence itself,[24] since it was kindness to strangers that enabled salvation history to happen at all.

Showing hospitality to outsiders in Judaism is thus considered a *mitzvah* – that is, a good and meritorious deed expressed out of religious reverence. And it is not just hospitality, for when one knows of those who are hungry or in need, it becomes a legal obligation to care for them, as required by Deuteronomy 16:14, and further that one must even protect them from oppression, as stipulated in Exodus 23:9. The same applies to the care and protection of climate change refugees today. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom (House of Lords), wrote of the refugee crisis impacting Europe in 2015. These refugees were victims of war from the Middle East and Northern Africa, a crisis fueled by climate change.[25] This is what is meant when climate change is cited as a "threat multiplier" in political contexts. In response to this unfolding humanitarian crisis, Rabbi Sacks invoked the Hebrew Bible in a call for compassion for these displaced people:

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22. Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 1, Chapter 11, Section 2 (available online at http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2848).

23. "Commentary on the Tanakh," (Genesis 18:1), in *The Complete Tanakh: The Jewish Bible with a Modern English Translation and Rashi's Commentary*, ed. Rabbi A. J. Rosenburg, Available online at https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm.

24. Emil G. Hirsch, Julius H. Greenstone, and Solomon Schechter, "Hospitality," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, Isidore Singer et al. ed. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1906). Available online at http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7905-hospitality.

25. The United Nations has found that, while the 2010 Arab Spring uprising is sometimes claimed as leading to the Syrian conflict, there was a five-year drought in Syria that preceded the war, resulting in the internal displacement of some 1.5

> I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was "Love your neighbour as yourself". Then I realised that it is easy to love your neighbour because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose colour, culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command, "Love the stranger because you were once strangers", resonates so often throughout the Bible. It is summoning us now. A bold act of collective generosity will show that the world, particularly Europe, has learned the lesson of its own dark past and is willing to take a global lead in building a more hopeful future. Wars that cannot be won by weapons can sometimes be won by the sheer power of acts of humanitarian generosity to inspire the young to choose the way of peace instead of holy war.[26]

It is indeed possible to "wage peace" and win the hearts of minds of those who might oppose you. Yet it is but one lesson to be learned today from Abraham's hospitality.

Hospitality in Islam

The Qur'an recounts the story of Abraham (Ibrahim) not once but twice, and each time emphasizes that the angelic messengers were his "honored guests" who received his hospitality (51:24; 2:177). Yet it is not just the Qur'an, for hospitality to strangers is also central to the birth of Islam itself. In the year 615, the prophet Muhammad asked a group of eighty-three Muslims to flee to Abyssinia for their protection, since its Christian king, Negus, would grant them sanctuary. This was the first case of asylum for refugees fleeing persecution in Islamic history, an event is known as the first *hijrah* since it occurred before Muhammad's own flight to Medina in 622.[27]

These are the precedents and Qur'anic foundations where expressing religious piety through all forms of hospitality is established. From almsgiving to the poor, to welcoming the wayfarer and stranger, this all serves to prove one's own honor and chivalry in performing Allah's will. This is, in part, the legal reasoning behind the creation of the Convention Regulating Status of Refugees in Arab Countries, which was ratified by League of Arab States in 1994. Implementation of this convention, however, has been problematic. For one, several Muslim majority nations are currently at war with each other, making the refugee problem worse and problematic to redress. Because of this, conflicts in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East have seen the displacement of many Muslims, so much so that most of the world's estimated 22.5 million refugees are Muslim.[28] Rather than being in a position to help, outside providing moral guidance, Muslims have been the ones most in need of assistance. Nevertheless, it is most noteworthy that with the refugee crisis in the United States, mosques have been giving sanctuary and other forms of assistance to undocumented migrants, and doing this at great risk to themselves legally, and with the added potential for Islamophobic attacks that such a public stance might elicit.[29]

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million people. See Cara Tobin et al., *Climate Change Adaptation in the Arab States: Best Practices and Lessons Learned*, United Nations Development Programme (July, 2018). See also Sarah Johnstone and Jeffrey Mazo, "Global Warming and the Arab Spring," *The Arab Spring and Climate Change: A Climate and Security Correlations Series*, ed. Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2013), 15–21.

26. Jonathan Sacks, "Refugee crisis: 'Love the stranger because you were once strangers' calls us now," *The Guardian* (Opinion), September 6, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/06/refugee-crisis-jonathan-sacks-humanitarian-generosity.

27. Shahnaze Safieddine, "Migration to Abyssinia," *Al-Islam.org*, accessed March 12, 2020, https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-12-no-2-summer-2011/migration-abyssinia-shahnaze-safieddine/migration.

28. A further complication here is that there is no centralized authority for the Convention implementation, and in its absence, legal reasoning by jurists in particular jurisdictions often asserted that it should be the citizen who gives asylum, and not the state, and in this context, hospitality is only obligated for three days.

29. Renee Montagne, "Mosques Consider Sanctuary for Immigrants," *National Public Radio (NPR)*, 4:20, March 4, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/03/04/590670163/mosques-consider-sanctuary-for-immigrants.

Hospitality in Christianity

Turning now to the Christian tradition, the three messengers who appeared to Abraham are understood as a theophany of the Trinity. Yet the message of hospitality remains, as does the essential angelic ambiguity of the visitation, for as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews advises: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2). It is made even more clear in Matthew 25, where Christ himself directs His followers to care for the poor and needy as if they were caring for the person of God himself, and if they do not, to be condemned to hell. The Gospel according to Mathew also tells that Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus had to flee Herod's persecution and received sanctuary in Africa. In Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox traditions, the Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt is celebrated with a special feast on June 1st every year. It is seen as the Lord blessing the land, just as Abraham and his descendants were blessed for his hospitality to the Lord. Because of this, hospitality to the stranger is still honored today as a religious act of reverence.

But if we look beyond biblical narratives, Christian hospitality in a political context becomes a much more complex and thorny issue.[30] Emperor Constantine in 313 AD empowered Christian churches to become sanctuaries for fugitives. However, this practice would be restricted by a later emperor, Theodosius the Great in 392 AD, who excluded debtors to the treasury, heretics, apostates, and most regrettably, also Jews, from the right to asylum. Justinian in the sixth century further excluded certain criminals, including murderers, adulterers, and rapists. Charlemagne made further efforts in restricting asylum in 803 AD, ordering that sanctuary-seekers must be surrendered by the church to civil authority, or face severe penalties. This was not a revocation of asylum, however, but an assertion of the divine right of Kings.[31] All this reveals a political restriction imposed over the biblical mandates, but not a fundamental change at its core. However, a sharp change in the right of asylum does emerge with Henry VIII (1491–1547), who began to require claimants seeking to escape debt to be branded on the thumb and, later, when this failed to prove to be a deterrent, for claimants to be imprisoned for life as their so-called sanctuary.[32] But Henry VIII, as many are aware, is hardly a paragon of compassion and sound-headed rule.[33] Later, James I would abolish asylum altogether in 1623.[34] These are the historical precedents for the weakening of Christian responsibility in the name of politics.

In the modern period, many recall the fate of the refugees aboard the ocean liner MS (*Motorschiff*) St. Louis in 1939. Most of the 937 passengers were Jews who were escaping persecution in Nazi Germany. But they were turned away by Cuba, and then by the United States, and finally rejected by Canada as well. The ship was forced to return to Nazi occupied Europe. It was a death sentence for nearly half of refugees,

30. Maria Fotou, *Ethics of Hospitality: Envisaging the Stranger in the Contemporary World* (Phd diss., The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2016), http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3403/1/Fotou_Ethics_of_Hospitality.pdf.
31. Rutger Kramer, "The Exemption that Proves the Rule: Autonomy and Authority between Alcuin, Theodulf and Charlemagne (802)" *Medieval Worlds* 6 (2007): 231–261.
32. Samuel Pegge, "A Sketch of the History of the Asylum, or Sanctuary, from Its Origin to the Final Abolition of It in the Reign of James I. By the Rev. Samuel Pegge" *Archaeologia* 8 (1787): 1–44, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261340900021111. See page 35.
33. For example, Henry VIII, being ignorant or merely unconcerned with the true causes of unemployment, required that what was termed "Able bodied vagrants ('sturdy beggars') were to be tied to the end of a cart naked, and beaten with whips through the town 'til their bodies were bloody.'" See Milton Briggs and Percy Jordan eds., *The Economic History of England*, 7th Edition (London: University Tutorial Press, 1957), 127.
34. Azadeh Dastyari, "Let the Asylum Seekers Stay: Strengths and Weaknesses of Church Sanctuary as a Strategy for Law Reform," *Monash University Law Review* 44, no. 2 (2019): 341–359.

many of whom were sent to concentration camps for execution.[35] In response to this incident and the countless other similar horrors for civilians in World War II, the newly formed United Nations ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Of the many protections, it reasserted the right of every person to seek and to be granted asylum in other countries, excepting only in cases where that person is seeking to escape from non-political crimes (Article 14). In accord with this charter, the United States changed its immigration policy toward refugees and began accepting more refugees than any other country in the world. Yet it was only in 2012 that the United States Department of State under the Obama administration formally apologized to the survivors of the MS St. Louis who were turned away.

These are the same provisions that President Trump is seeking to circumvent in the case of climate refugees. What he is doing is not unprecedented. It was attempted before by former Republican President, Ronald Reagan – who was also a darling of the Evangelicals, earning two-thirds of their vote in 1980 thanks in part to televangelist Jerry Falwell. For comparison, Trump earned 80% of their vote in 2016, thanks in part to the endorsement of Falwell's son, Jerry Falwell Jr. This is a marked change, since in the 1970s the Evangelical identity was largely apolitical. But since then, televangelism, and its modern new media counterparts, have successfully made religion (or at least a certain form of it) into a powerful political movement.[36]

One item of the Evangelical agenda in the 1980s was restricting immigration, which President Reagan dutifully obliged. But in response to his anti-immigration policies, the Sanctuary Movement was born as a form of political resistance.[37] Fleeing violence in their home countries, refugees from Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, sought sanctuary in the United States, only to be turned away by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service which refused to hear their claims. In defiance of this policy, churches, synagogues, and other religious groups declared their places of worship as sanctuaries.[38] In retaliation, the Reagan administration passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which made harboring a refugee a criminal act, punishable by up to five years in prison. Some sanctuary leaders were arrested, a move condemned by the National Council of Churches. In defiance, the city of Los Angeles and twenty-three other cities together with the entire State of New Mexico declared themselves sanctuaries. President Reagan was forced to acquiesce, and in 1986, granted amnesty to approximately three million undocumented immigrants.

Today the Sanctuary Movement is being revived in the face of increasingly repressive Trump policies around immigration, and this time the Evangelical Lutheran Church has broken ranks and joined the sanctuary movement.[39] Mark Galli, an Evangelical minister and editor-in-chief for *Christianity Today*, has also issued an open letter calling for President Trump to be removed from office for his "gross immorality and ethical incompetence."[40] But they are in the minority. The majority of Evangelicals still support Trump unreservedly – two hundred Evangelical leaders have even arisen to condemn the

35. Erin Blakemore, "A Ship of Jewish Refugees Was Refused U.S. Landing in 1939: This Was Their Fate," *History*, June 4, 2019, https://www.history.com/news/wwii-jewish-refugee-ship-st-louis-1939.
36. Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books 2016).
37. Jayme R. Reaves, *Safeguarding the Stranger: An Abrahamic Theology and Ethic of Protective Hospitality* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 7f.
38. Renny Golden and Michael McConnell, *Sanctuary: The New Underground Railroad* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 52f.
39. "Sanctuary Denomination," *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, accessed March 12, 2020, https://www.elca.org/sanctuarychurch.
40. Mark Galli, "Trump Should Be Removed from Office," *Christianity Today*, December 19, 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/december-web-only/trump-should-be-removed-from-office.html.

Christianity Today editorial.[41] President Trump has therefore not backed down, and has further toughened his policies against the climate refugees, including by signing a series of executive orders aimed at cracking down on the "sanctuary cities." But he has so far refrained from moving against sanctuary churches, synagogues, and mosques – not being eager to repeat Ronald Reagan's mistake in the 1980s. So again, what President Trump is doing is not unprecedented, historically speaking, but a severe intensification of anti-immigration policies born of a white Evangelical political awakening beginning in the 1970s.[42]

The Way Forward

What my essay has sought to show is how divorced the white Evangelical worldview is from Abrahamic tradition, and how politics has influenced Evangelical theology such that even biblical admonitions are now being ignored. Here, it should be recalled that Matthew 25 stipulates that those who fail to care for the poor and needy are condemned to hell. It cannot therefore be credibly claimed that the white Evangelical movement is an expression of Judeo-Christian theology. While it maintains certain precepts, it ignores others because of their political implications – a situation not unlike that faced by Caiaphas and Pilate when considering the fate of Christ. So too Evangelicals are told, explicitly, in Matthew 25, that care for the stranger is the very criterion on which they will be considered during the Final Judgement, where Christ will say, "I was a stranger and you did not take Me in" (verse 43, NKJV), but have chosen to ignore these mandates for the sake of politics. The white Evangelical movement must therefore be considered something new and foreign to Scripture, something which exists primarily as a political force currently holding sway over the White House, influencing not only immigration policy, but also aggressively promoting climate science denial and opposing green policy initiatives.

The first step to countering this threat is to reveal this movement for what it truly is. No longer can the excuse be made that it is merely an expression of sincerely held religious beliefs. This movement is not Abrahamic, nor is it Christian. It is not even theology, properly speaking. It is an ideology not unlike the closely associated libertarian and free market fundamentalist ideologies. As such, there should be no obligation here to respect this movement under an "ethic of toleration" that holds sway over other religious matters of discourse in civil society – as with libertarianism, it is entirely appropriate to challenge its claims to truth and their ethical ramifications, and, further, to expose shortcomings where found – lest the general public be deceived otherwise.

So, what then can be said about this religiously imbued political ideology? It actually has a long history originating outside the United States, emerging as a reaction to the Speenhamland Welfare Law of 1795 in England.[43] But for the purposes of this present study on the Trump Administration, it is only necessary to go back to the coordinated public relations campaign launched by certain wealthy elites against the socialist programs of President Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s.[44] These government programs were designed to redress the Great Depression, which itself had resulted from the excesses of unfettered capitalism. The wealthy elites, however, greatly feared the rise of socialist sensibilities among the voting populace, and funded a new, radical form of public relations campaign to convince the common people

41. "200 Evangelical Leaders Have Signed an Open Letter Slamming That 'Christianity Today' Piece," *Relevant*, December 23, 2019, https://relevantmagazine.com/current/200-evangelical-leaders-have-signed-an-open-letter-slamming-that-christianity-today-piece/.
42. Nicole Narea, "One surprisingly simple reason evangelicals love Trump," *Vox*, December 27, 2019, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/12/27/21038031/white-evangelicals-trump-immigration-election-2020.
43. Goodin, "The God of the Market Place."
44. The following research summarizes Kruse, *One Nation Under God*.

about the merits of the Free Market. The campaign proved ineffective until it targeted Evangelical church leaders and offered them financial incentives to begin preaching a new message of God and capitalism. With this financial backing, the preachers who were convinced to alter the messages of the Bible in this way now had access to radio stations and sponsored programs to carry the new agenda nationwide. Over time, the campaign grew to include televangelism, and today "new media" is carrying this message about the supposed evils of socialism forward using the internet for worldwide broadcast.

While this is the origin of the movement, its evolution over the last few decades has been growing *sui generis* at least in part, being driven by the sensibilities and biases emerging from its own working-class congregations. This is what candidate Donald Trump was able to harness with a campaign heralding such xenophobic anti-immigrant slogans as, "Build that Wall!" White Evangelicals thereby morphed from just an antisocialist and conservative "family values" movement, to one that now embraces what should be a very discordant xenophobic ideology. Somehow, all these strands of thought wove together seamlessly in a unified front that now both opposes climate science (a threat to the fossil fuel economy and its wealthy stakeholders) and asylum for climate refugees (a xenophobic concern for working class Evangelicals). It is a powerful coalition, and one that has proven exceptionally hard to counter due its self-reinforcing logic where opposition only proves one's worthiness before God, or so it is believed.

Whether it is climate science or flat earth conspiracy theories, white Evangelicals appear to be almost entirely immune from critical engagements with either scientific facts or on their own theology. What instead takes place is that all truth claims within Evangelical circles are confirmed by personal relationship and time-tested familiarity with the person making such claims – are they someone to be trusted, and are they good Christians with respect to that faith tradition? Outsiders and those opposing the theological dictates for that tradition are not to be trusted, even if they are within one's own family. Challenging white Evangelical ideology, whether it be flat earth conspiracy theories or climate science denial, is therefore exceedingly difficult. Difficult, yes, but it is still a necessary undertaking for all of us in order to safeguard these refugees and the biosphere itself from the threat of climate change.

To the extent that truth can penetrate the insular theology of the white Evangelicals, it must be tried. The only arguments they are likely to accept are scriptural. Evangelicals must be called upon to declare their allegiance, once and for all, whether it is to the politics of Pontius Pilate, or to the literal commands of Christ in Matthew 25 on the care of strangers who come to us as climate refugees. To state it more clearly still: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24, NIV). Regardless, the ideology of the white Evangelicals, while it freely borrows from scriptures when politically convenient, cannot be allowed to hide behind xenophobic and anti-science policies under the claim of religious freedom since in no way does it resemble Abrahamic tradition or actual Christian theology. The words of Christ make this all too clear (Matthew 7:15–23):

> Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn-bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

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