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Can We Be Pragmatic and Prophetic in the Age of Trump?

Abstract

"I would urge Christians in America to maintain a pragmatic optimism while taking great care to preserve a prophetic presence in the social order."

Posting about moving forward after the recent presidential election from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/can-we-be-pragmatic-and-prophetic-in-the-age-of-trump/>

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Comments

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January 23, 2017

Donald Roth

“I have never been less enthused by what looks like my team sweeping the board.” This was my initial reaction to news of the 2016 election, and it still fairly sums up where I find myself now that the last piece of that victory has been sworn in to office with Donald Trump’s recent inauguration. Of course, I [didn’t vote for Trump](#), but I’ve openly admitted that I’m at least center-right, if not more conservative, and I typically vote Republican, even if party affiliation doesn’t run terribly deep for me. So, as their token *de facto* Republican, when iAt asked me to reflect on what it’s like to be on the “winning” side in the wake of the Trump election, I felt compelled to make my best attempt.

I must confess, I haven’t really sorted through all of my feelings, but in these early days of the new administration, I would urge Christians in America to maintain a pragmatic optimism while taking great care to preserve a prophetic presence in the social order.

Not all indicators are bad

Depending on your social circles, it might be hard to find anyone who says anything even remotely good about the prospect of the next four years. Rhetorical efforts to equate Donald Trump to Adolf Hitler [are still going strong](#), and there is a real climate of fear that has only crescendoed since November. At times, it’s hard to remember that Trump really hasn’t done much of anything yet. Sure, the bluster has kept rolling full steam (will Trump’s staff ever take away his Twitter access?), and some of Trump’s cabinet picks are concerning, but, given how much our President changed his mind on the campaign trail, I think it’s a little early to be so sure that the sky is actually falling.

In fact, if we look at some of the things that *have* already occurred, I think there’s reason for hope. For one, the perhaps Faustian bargain Congressional Republicans struck with Trump seems to have left them in more of a policy-setting footing that Congress has been in quite some time. Regardless of the president, our government benefits if Congress can regain some ground from the advance of the [imperial presidency](#) that we’ve seen in the last several decades. Congressional Republicans already broke with Trump in [calling for probes](#) into Russia’s attempts to influence the U.S. election. It’s not set in stone yet, but several Republicans have mentioned the need for [bipartisan buy-in](#) to whatever modifications or replacements are made to the Affordable Care Act. For all of Trump’s brashness, Congressional Republicans seem to be taking a more measured approach.

Further, even within Trump’s administration, the factor that has most people concerned, the total lack of governmental experience among many of his cabinet picks, may actually play out differently than expected. For instance, Rick Perry, Trump’s pick to head up the Department of Energy, famously called for the elimination of that agency (even if he [couldn’t remember its name](#)). People should rightly be concerned that Perry would be seeking to dismantle the agency [charged with maintaining our nuclear stockpile, researching the human genome, and cleaning up radioactive waste](#). However, once he actually learned a bit more about the agency, Perry now [regrets his earlier statements](#).

This may be instructive. Where so many nominees will be coming in to agencies and jobs they don’t understand well, the high learning curve and strong institutional inertia may cause them to seriously reconsider their views. This could even happen with Trump himself. After all, if there’s one thing we know this group can do, it’s change their mind.

If we can get past fear, we can move in the same direction

At its heart, though, I think the greatest reason I encourage a pragmatic optimism is that it seems like, for once, activists on both sides might be calling for the same thing. When asked how to respond to Trump’s election, one

influential millennial-oriented media outlet [urged readers](#) to engage in their local political structures and communities, including putting an emphasis on our families. I've seen similar calls from a number of celebrities and progressive organizations as well.

This rallying call, if heeded, is very positive news for the direction of this country. As I've [written before](#), overcoming modern distaste for deep engagement with society's [mediating institutions](#) is one of the best steps we can take as a nation, whether we sit on the right or left. If losing power in the federal government will kick-start more community involvement for traditionally left-leaning [millennials](#), that's a good thing. Of course, conservatives need to make sure they're doing the same, but even if there is a mix of political messages out there, a renewal of the vibrancy of the public square would be a massive step forward for the country.

Christians on all sides must be vigilant about politics coopting our faith

Overall, however, even if there is reason for some pragmatic optimism, and even if we have important opportunities for renewed civic engagement, this is an especially dangerous climate for maintaining the distinctive and prophetic voice of our faith.

For conservative-leaning Christians, it is important not to be swept up by the God and country rhetoric that permeated the Trump campaign. As pointed out by [the Washington Post](#), among [others](#), Trump's "Christianity" is, instead, the ascendancy of the prosperity gospel. Inasmuch as the current government can be expected to be friendly to pro-life causes, Christian education, and religious free expression, this does not mean that "we" are in power. Conservatives need to nurture a healthy skepticism of the motives of demagogues like Trump, and, should things turn dark, Christians must be ready to speak truth to power, even if it seems to cut against our own political interests.

At the same time, the God and country narrative has long been a focus of concern in many Christian circles, and I think the danger for progressive Christians might be even more insidious. Rhetoric along the lines of comparing Trump to Hitler signals a certain absolute moral alignment that welcomes progressives to becoming undiscerning advocates of the "good guys," and the clearer that the morality of opposition to Republican policies becomes, the easier it will be to think of the progressive agenda in religious terms. As soon as "speaking truth to power" becomes synonymous with protesting the government and "protecting the orphan and widow" becomes voting for democrats, progressive Christians may unwittingly walk right into their own version of the God and country motif that they mock conservatives for.

As Christians, we are called to be in the world, but not of it, and the temptations to compromise that principle assail us from all sides. We live in a challenging, transitional age, but we know that the fires of trial can be refining. My prayer is that God will build up and renew His church through whatever may come in the next four years.