The Trump Prophecies and the Mobilization of Evangelical Voters

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Abstract: The Evangelical vote played a major role when Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election. Although various factors may explain this result, we should not overlook the influence of the alliance that emerged between Trump and leading Evangelicals during the campaign. In this article, I present four books written before and after the election that illustrate how Trump prophecies and the portrayal of Trump as a national savior were used deliberately to convince conservative Christians that voting for him was their religious duty. With the help of framing theory, I analyze this rhetorical strategy of Trump's allies, and show how it not only has influenced Christian voters, but also the president himself

Résumé : Le vote évangélique a joué un rôle majeur lorsque Donald Trump a remporté l'élection présidentielle de 2016. Bien que divers facteurs puissent expliquer ce résultat, nous ne devrions pas négliger l'influence de l'alliance qui a émergé entre Trump et les évangéliques de premier plan pendant la campagne. Dans cet article, je présente quatre livres écrits avant et après l'élection qui illustrent la façon dont les prophéties de Trump et sa représentation comme sauveur national ont été utilisés délibérément pour convaincre les chrétiens conservateurs que voter pour lui était leur devoir religieux. Avec l'aide de la théorie du cadrage, j'analyse cette stratégie rhétorique des alliés de Trump et montre comment elle a non seulement influencé les électeurs chrétiens, mais aussi le président lui-même.

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Introduction

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election would not have happened without the support of Evangelicals: eighty-one percent of white Evangelicals voted for Trump, amounting to more than one third of his total number of votes (Pew Research Center, 2018: 9, 15). Commentators and scholars have pointed to various factors to explain this endorsement, such as Trump's strategic use of conservative causes, his supposedly being the lesser evil compared to Hillary Clinton, theological dispositions, fear, Christian nationalism, and masculine ideals (Gorski, 2017; Smidt, 2017; Joffe, 2017; Fea, 2018; Gerson, 2018; Wong, 2018; Whitehead et al., 2018; du Mez, 2020). In addition, the use of religious arguments—such as the promotion of Trump as God's instrument—inserted him into the Evangelical narrative as their champion and a solution to their problems (Barrett-Fox, 2018; Durbin, 2020).

It is the aim of this article to broaden the understanding of the role that Evangelical leaders and influencers played in the election and, more specifically, their use of prophecies and representations of Trump as God's chosen tool to mobilize fellow believers to vote for him. This was particularly important due to his questionable moral character, which caused many conservative Christians to consider abstaining from voting. The somewhat surprising alliance between Trump and leading Evangelicals during the campaign sought to exploit the potential of the Evangelical constituency. Framing Trump as part of their religious narrative was an effective way of communicating endorsement, creating a more sympathetic picture of the candidate, and disputing the accusations from mainstream journalists and other critics.

In the following, I will present four books written before and after the 2016 election that illustrate how Trump prophecies and the portrayal of Trump as a national savior were used deliberately to convince conservative Christians that voting for him was their religious duty. Such prophecies began to spread already in 2015 (Beverley, 2020). Their impact and utility are underscored by the fact that they have continued to circulate even after Trump's inauguration, merging with other narratives and creating a more coherent story. To the Evangelicals involved in this process, Trump's victory in 2016 was just the beginning; the next goal was Republican majority in the midterm election of 2018, and then reelection of Trump in 2020. The ultimate aim of these Evangelicals is to establish God's kingdom on earth, something that includes turning the United States of America into the Christian nation they believe it was founded to be.

Before I proceed, I will clarify what is meant by "Evangelical" in this context. The term normally refers to a rather heterogeneous group when it comes to denominational

affiliation and specific doctrines. It usually implies Protestant, although others—like Catholics—may also self-identify as Evangelical (see e.g. Fournier, 1990; Hackett and Lindsay, 2008; Lewis and de Bernardo, 2010). Evangelicals share a belief in Jesus as a personal savior, a regard for the authority of the Bible, an eagerness for evangelization, and a born-again experience (Bebbington, 1989: 2–17). This last element indicates that they have left their old life behind and started a new life with God. While a discussion of theology falls outside the scope of this article, it is appropriate to highlight some key points regarding Trump's closest Evangelical supporters. Strang, whose book is presented below, distinguishes between Charismatic, Pentecostal and traditional Evangelicals (2017: 62). This distinction is useful for clarifying differences in doctrine and practice: Pentecostals and Charismatics put more weight on spiritual gifts, like speaking in tongues, and Charismatics often add other spiritual phenomena, like healing, prosperity prayers, laughter, and "falling in the spirit". When it comes to understanding the alliance with Trump, however, it is more fruitful to focus on the so-called *New Apostolic Reformation* (NAR). While the term itself is currently not widely used, neither among believers nor among scholars, it is somewhat broader than "Charismatics", and it highlights some key features that are useful in order to understand the role of the major actors and the aim of their political engagement.

The term was coined by C. Peter Wagner in 1994 to describe a movement that crossed traditional denominational lines, with roots in the early twentieth-century Pentecostal movement and the later Charismatic Protestant movements. The NAR has no official doctrine, membership lists, or legal ties (Wagner, 2011). Still, it is possible to recognize NAR churches and adherents based on certain characteristics, which in turn will help explain their engagement for Trump, as well as the appeal of the Trump prophecies. This is not to state that all Evangelical Trump supporters or all of his leading Evangelical proponents are NAR adherents, only that the NAR offers a useful framework to better understand the rationale behind the alliance.

NAR churches typically emphasize the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in signs and wonders, like healing, prophecies, deliverance from demons, and falling in the spirit (Wagner, 1998: 25). Prophecies about Trump, like those presented below, are hence commonplace—though it should be added that "testing the spirit" is also practiced to distinguish truth from falsehood. Another hallmark of the NAR movement is its acknowledgement of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers as leaders of the church. The belief is that authority is given by the Holy Spirit to individuals rather than to bureaucratic institutions (Wagner, 1998: 15, 20). Strang (2017) points to several Trump supporters in these various roles. We may also recognize them if we pay attention to the titles of those who pray for Trump in public (e.g., *Apostle* Maldonado who prayed at the launching of the *Evangelicals for Trump* coalition in January 2020).

A sense of spiritual warfare permeates the whole perceived reality of NAR Christians, and the believers' engagement in conflict is central. This is reflected by the war rhetoric in some of the prophecies presented during the 2016 election (e.g., Taylor's prophecy quoted below). NAR Christians do not only aim at "conquering" the hearts of men, but also nations. In an article defending the NAR movement, published by *Charisma Magazine*, Wagner refers to this as *dominionism* and explains that he and his NAR friends are working to establish the kingdom of God on earth by overcoming the kingdom of Satan.

They do this by placing "kingdom-minded people" in "every one of the Seven Mountains: Religion, Family, Education, Government, Media, Arts & Entertainment, and Business"; from there they can shape society so that it will be blessed and prosper (Wagner, 2011). In this light, it should not be a surprise that many NAR Christians favored Trump. Not only did he address some of their key causes, he also surrounded himself with "godly people" (Green, 2016), thus signaling that he would listen to them as well as offer them a gateway to the White House.

The four books presented here should all be understood in light of the NAR movement, with its emphasis on spiritual manifestations and its political ambitions. Although they appeal most strongly to Charismatic Evangelicals, their influence extends further, into the realm of other Evangelicals, as illustrated by the fact that Liberty University—then headed by Jerry Falwell Jr., himself a prominent Trump supporter—turned one of the prophecies in question into a movie which was released just weeks before the 2018 midterm election. To analyze the major prophetic arguments that were put into circulation to make conservative Christians vote for Trump, I will utilize framing theory and contextualization. I will outline this approach below before presenting the following books: (1) *The Trump Prophecies* by Mark Taylor and Mary Colbert (2017); (2) *God's Chaos Candidate* by Lance Wallnau (2016a); (3) *God and Donald Trump* by Stephen E. Strang (2017); and (4) *The Oracle* by Jonathan Cahn (2019a). The Taylor and Colbert book serves as a starting point because Taylor claims he received his prophecy already in 2011. All the books were influential in conservative Christian circles, not least thanks to publicity from well-known televangelists and other established Evangelical media channels (like Charisma Media). Together the books illustrate the development from what started as somewhat cautious proclamations about the man chosen by God to save the nation to what became more outspoken claims and the theme of a story shared by a larger part of the Evangelical community.

Understanding the Trump Prophecies through Framing Theory

This analysis is based on Robert M. Entman's description of Framing Theory:

> Framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (Entman, 1993: 52, emphasis in original)

According to Entman, the concept of framing "offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text" (1993: 51). It is this power that we want to recognize when we seek to understand the role of the Trump prophecies in mobilizing Evangelical voters. The boundaries created between what is included in the text and what has been left out direct the attention of the audience to certain elements and (if successful) influence their opinion and actions (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984: 343–344; Hallahan, 1999: 207).

Entman's description points to the selection of aspects of "a perceived reality". In the study of religions, this underscores an important feature: Religious frames are only meaningful in their own particular religious context. Although an audience may live

in a secular or multicultural society and participate in a secular event—e.g., a presidential election—they may also be members of a more exclusive religious group. The perceived universe of a member of one religious group can be very different from the perceived universe of the member of another group. Hence, a frame used to emphasize a certain message to the former may not make sense to the latter. It may even communicate something different or have the opposite effect of what was intended. Contextualization is important for understanding any frame, but especially when it comes to religious frames since the worldview of the group may involve actors (e.g., supernatural beings), acts (e.g., rituals), communication (e.g., prophecies), and other elements that are not part of the shared human experience.

Some major keys to understanding the Trump prophecies can be found in biblical narratives and in the history of Evangelical Christianity in the United States. It is outside the scope of this article to describe this background in detail. We should keep in mind, however, that Evangelicals' connection to conservative politics has deep historical roots and has only become increasingly visible, widespread, and cemented from the latter part of the twentieth century (Sutton, 2014; Ericksen, 2019). Especially since the 1980s, the political activism of conservative Christians has become largely associated with the Republican Party (Bernstein and Jakobsen, 2010, 1028; Gorski, 2020: 82–97). This political affiliation shines through all the books presented here as the authors define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies that both emerge from and appeal to the views and values of their own religious universe. With regard to their appeal, we should remember that people seem to favor frames that are consistent with their existing values (Sniderman and Theriault, 2004: 149).

While the concept of *frame* refers to the arrangement of contextual cues in a communicating text in order to influence a targeted audience, it may also apply to the schemata or mental ideas "that guide individuals' processing of information" (Entman, 1993: 53). This also includes ideas about a particular religious universe. For clarity, I will continue to use *schemata* when I refer to the mental ideas of individuals. Schemata are important for determining "what an audience member believes to be the most salient aspect of an issue" (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 101). To illustrate this point, someone who values religious freedom and defines it as the free display of Christian expressions in the public sphere may consider a president who prays as a positive cue and ignore the voices that suggest this behavior is discriminatory towards other religions. When it comes to political campaigns, which typically involve competing frames, it is clearly an advantage to have sufficient resources to be able to identify what frames will appeal the most to the targeted audience, as well as to repeat the message a sufficient number of times and involve people of credibility to deliver it (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 102). This was indeed the case when Trump, through an alliance with Evangelical influencers, targeted conservative Christian voters in 2016.

Frames that focus on losses usually increase people's willingness to take risks (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984: 342–344). In all four books, we find negative frames that point to a catastrophic future for America—*should Trump not win*. Facing the prospect of losing liberties, prosperity, and God's favor, some conservative Christians might have chosen to vote for Trump, a risk they would otherwise not have taken. However, religious commitments can be very strong, and believers may be willing to face both losses

and suffering in order to stay faithful to God. Positive frames that present Trump in a favorable light, or the act of voting for him as the morally right thing, may then be necessary to convince them. The authors in question use several such positive frames, which, in various ways, appeal to the schemata of the target audience. On the one hand, we have the character frames, which largely portray Trump as a good person according to Christian norms (e.g., generous, a good father, trustworthy, antiracist). On the other hand, we have frames that link the presidential election to both biblical authority and the perceived spiritual reality of the targeted audience. I call these prophecy frames (divine revelations describing Trump as part of God's will and guidance); the Cyrus frame (justification based on an Old Testament template); and the "born-again" frame (allusions to the Evangelical idea of a new life, leaving past sins behind). With regard to this last frame, I do not mean that Trump is portrayed as a born-again Christian, only that a distinction is made between "Trump in the past" and "Trump today" which parallels the Evangelical conversion experience and may remind us that we all are sinners and should not be judgmental (of him).

The Trump prophecies differ from the traditional prophecies of the Bible, which for generations have influenced how conservative Christians across denominations have made sense of major world events, like wars and other calamities, as well as the moral state of society. While the interpretations of these biblical prophecies have been multiple, they have typically recognized such events as signs of the end times, announcing that the second coming of Christ is near. The various prophetic interpretations have, in turn, helped shape Evangelicals' views on politics, both national and international, as well as guide their political activism to save America from destruction (Boyer, 1992; Sutton, 2014). In contrast, the Trump prophecies examined here are not new interpretations of ancient texts but rather extra-biblical prophetic revelations. They are thus related to the Pentecostal traditions of modern-day divinely inspired prophecies and speaking in tongues with translation (see Holm, 1991: 140, 145; Sánchez Walsh, 2018: 2–6). The Trump prophecies, however, were not received during an ecstatic event or a religious gathering. Rather, they appeared as personal impressions in informal surroundings, speaking straight to the point with no further need for interpretation. Unlike most other extra-biblical prophecies, the Trump prophecies presented here have had a significant impact on US history and politics—largely thanks to the alliance between Trump and his Evangelical supporters.

The Trump Prophecies: The Astonishing True Story of The Man who Saw Tomorrow . . . And What he Says is Coming Next *(Taylor and Colbert, 2017)*

Written shortly after Trump's inauguration, *The Trump Prophecies* tells the story of a retired fireman, Mark Taylor, who received several revelations from God regarding America's future. The book is thus presented as a personal story and is divided into three sections. The first and the final sections are written by Taylor himself and include his autobiography. The second section is authored by Mary Colbert, the wife of the man who eventually became Taylor's physician, Don Colbert. It is worth mentioning that the Colberts, through their work in natural health, associate with several influential ministers

nationwide and are also known from the shows of televangelists like Jim Bakker, Sid Roth, and Kenneth Copeland.

Taylor explains that he retired from his job as a firefighter in 2006 after suffering from mental and physical distress. A few weeks later, he received his first vision. Several more followed, some involving terrifying experiences, like fighting with demons, others involving meetings with angels or even Jesus himself. Taylor's health deteriorated until he was diagnosed with hormone disturbances. Soon after he started treatment, he received his first Trump prophecy, which declared that the well-known businessman would become president of the United States.

Sitting by the television on April 28, 2011, not paying much attention to Trump speaking on Fox News, Taylor began to experience a strange sensation. All of a sudden, he reports, the Lord revealed to him, "You are hearing the voice of a president." Taylor then went into another room and started writing down what he claims were the words of the Holy Spirit. The result was the "Commander-in-Chief Prophecy." In its opening words, the prophecy frames Trump as a "chosen" man for this very time, the tool God will use as a remedy to make America great again:

> For I will use this man to bring honor, respect and restoration to America. America will be respected once again as the most powerful and prosperous nation on earth (other than Israel). (Taylor and Colbert, 2017: 58–59)

The prophecy describes Trump as "anointed," "fearless," and "a man of his word." In addition to a golden future for the United States, the focus in this prophecy is on Israel and the establishment of stronger ties between the two nations. Taylor received one more Trump prophecy in 2011, and then another in 2013. He allegedly put them away until a sign from God informed him that it was "time to release" them on June 6, 2015 (Taylor and Colbert, 2017: 107). Ten days later, Trump announced his run for presidency.

Between the time he shared the initial prophecies and Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2017, Taylor received at least 12 new prophecies, all of which are included in his book (Taylor, 2020). The messages are framed in a way that depicts God as deeply engaged in US politics, and clearly Republican. The main problem defined in the book is that American society has deteriorated, but the prophecies do not pronounce judgement. Rather, they announce that it is time for a change: God will rescue America and bring material prosperity and spiritual revival. The prophecies touch on several issues that traditionally have been important to Evangelical voters: Israel, the Johnson Amendment, conservative Supreme Court Justices, abortion, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and the right to own guns. The prophecies are clearly hostile towards Democrats and the political establishment, which are portrayed as the cause of this national deterioration. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are described as hateful, liars, criminal, and corrupt. The God of the prophecies even calls Obama a "louse":

> My Army, continue to war, pray and fight with a shout, and I will remove this President that has become a louse! Then you will see the man I have chosen, Donald Trump, when he takes

back MY WHITE HOUSE! ("Don't be deceived, get in the fight!" October 13, 2015, in Taylor and Colbert, 2017: 171)

War rhetoric is a hallmark of these prophecies. It reinforces the framing of America as a battlefield with God leading his army of "true Christians" to victory. A handful of prophecies are even signed by "Your Supreme Commander, God." This illustrates an important point regarding the perceived reality of the targeted audience: To many conservative Christians, the 2016 election was seen as part of a cosmic or spiritual battle between God and the forces of darkness. Although God is on their side, the prophecies order God's army to humble themselves, pray, and conquer ground—for example by putting the right people, like Trump, in governing positions.

Mary Colbert's role in the story is related to publicity and mobilization. In 2013, Taylor gave a copy of the "Commander-in-Chief Prophecy" to his doctor at the time, Don Colbert. The timeline is somewhat unclear, but later Mary got to read it. In the book, she explains that she immediately recognized the prophecy as God's word (i.e., true) due to its rhythm. While some of its phrases may resemble biblical writings, most biblical scholars would probably find both the language and content unrecognizable:

> The Spirit says: HA! No one shall stop this that I have started! (. . .) in this next election they will spend billions to keep this president in; it will be like flushing their money down the toilet. Let them waist [sic] their money, for it comes from and it is being used by evil forces at work, but they will not succeed, for this next election will be a clean sweep for the man I have chosen. ("Commander-in-Chief Prophecy," in Taylor and Colbert, 2017: 59)

However, the prophecies often include rhyme, albeit irregularly, as can be seen in this excerpt from a 2015 prophecy:

> The Spirit of God says, The Supreme Court shall lose *three*, and My President shall pick new ones directly from MY *TREE*. Are you still not convinced that he's My *anointed*, and that he's the only I have *appointed*? (. . .) Those who attack him, their numbers go *low*, even to the point of a big, fat *zero*. ("America, America." October 7, 2015, in Taylor and Colbert, 2017: 154, emphasis added)

By her own account, Colbert distributed hundreds of copies of the prophecy, utilizing the network that had already been established through her husband's medical practice. In addition to posting on social media, she also initiated a national prayer chain telephone hotline. This activity, framed as a spiritual exercise (prayer), thus spread the word and increased both leadership and grassroots engagement. Starting on September 5, 2016, thousands allegedly joined the hotline as several prominent pastors prayed for Trump and against the Democrats. On Colbert's list of involved leaders we find, among others, Jim and Lori Bakker, Kenneth Copeland, and Stephen E. Strang (Taylor and Colbert, 2017: 76–78).

Taylor's prophecies did indeed circulate prior to the election. On April 18, 2016, he presented them to TruNews radio host Rick Wiles, who had learned about them from Mary Colbert when his wife visited Dr. Don Colbert. Then, on June 9, 2016, Mary and Don

Colbert appeared on *The Jim Bakker Show* to talk about the prophecies and God's apparent preference for a Trump presidency. Taylor participated by telephone, reading from the "Commander-in-Chief Prophecy" (Jim Bakker Show, 2016a). After Trump's victory, however, Taylor began appearing on shows in person, speaking openly about his revelations (e.g. Sid Roth, 2017). In 2018, his story was made into a movie by Liberty University and shown in 1,200 theaters nationwide one month before the midterm election (Smith, 2018). An updated and expanded version of the book was published in 2019, this time without Mary Colbert.

God's Chaos Candidate: Donald J. Trump and the American Unraveling (*Wallnau, 2016a*)

On October 27, 2016, Lance Wallnau appeared on *The Jim Bakker Show*, talking about his book on God's chosen candidate. Only a few weeks old, the book was already a best seller, Wallnau told the audience (Jim Bakker Show, 2016b). At that time, Hillary Clinton was leading by 14 points in the polls, and the negative publicity about Trump's character following the publication of the Access Hollywood tapes seemed to make his prospects even bleaker. Hence, the timing of Wallnau's book could probably not have been better. It is an apologetic project, discussing and defending Trump's person and strongly encouraging conservative Christians to vote for him.

In it, Wallnau frames the 2016 election as critical. The political left has long been destroying the nation, he claims, but he points to the laziness and self-absorption of Christians as the root cause of what he sees as the country's decline. The remedy is similar to that described by Taylor:

> We, the people of God, have let the nation drift. Because we have not engaged our primary assignment of discipling our own nation, God is doing something that none of us expected. (. . .) By choosing a man that has not know [sic] Him, to meet Him, and shape him in the crucible it is likely the nation will be shaped in the same manner also. (Wallnau, 2016a: 33)

Trump is presented as God's solution to save America from its accelerating deterioration—he is "God's chaos candidate." Wallnau's framing of the United States as a spiritual battleground must be understood in light of the so-called *Seven Mountains Mandate*, of which he has long been a leading proponent. According to this strategy, true Christians should strive to establish God's kingdom by taking control of the "seven mountains of culture" (or "gates of influence") that shape a nation: religion, family, education, government, news media, entertainment, and business/economics. Wallnau and other Seven Mountains adherents (like Wagner, mentioned above) see it as their calling to conquer and control these areas in order to bring the nation back to God (Wallnau, 2016a: 12, 142).

Wallnau, himself a Pentecostal and a teacher at Wagner University, places great emphasis on the responsibility of Christians to make sure that God's plan to save America will work; they do so by praying, by conquering the mountains of culture, and by voting for Trump. There are 100 million potential Evangelical voters, Wallnau explains. Half of these are registered to vote and only a quarter shows up at the polls. The strategic motivation behind Wallnau's book is clear: "Christians can be the decisive

vote if they push past media mind control and hear what people like me are saying, or prophesying" (Wallnau, 2016a: 32).

In order to convince his Christian audience, Wallnau addresses a number of issues that have put Trump in a negative light, such as accusations of racism and certain character weaknesses. The book is filled with frames that highlight Trump's positive traits and create a sympathetic picture of the candidate. Wallnau portrays Trump as a friend of the Evangelicals, one who will not forget them after the election. In addition, he makes a clever distinction between "Trump in the past" and "Trump in the present": the candidate has made mistakes in his life but has already started to change. "Never judge an entire book by a single chapter," Wallnau writes (2016a: 38). This is a frame that usually strikes a chord with born-again Christians, who strongly believe in second chances; there is no longer any reason to reject Trump because of his past.

Wallnau too uses prophecy frames to portray Trump as God's chosen candidate. His first prophecy came in 2015, when God told him that "Donald Trump is a wrecking ball to the spirit of political correctness!" (Wallnau, 2016a: 21). While this prophecy certainly worked as a justification for Trump's unconventional behavior and harsh tweets, the second was of even greater importance. Wallnau explains that he saw a picture of Trump in the Oval Office with text referring to him as the 45th President of the United States. Not long after, God allegedly told him, "Read Isaiah 45." The prophecy frame is thus linked directly to the Bible and its authority. In the 45th chapter of the Book of Isaiah, we read about King Cyrus of Persia, who freed the Jews from their Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BCE. Despite being a pagan king, Cyrus is referred to by God as "My anointed"—just as Trump was in Taylor's prophecies. To be anointed, Wallnau explains, means that someone is "specifically chosen and set apart for a specific task" (2016a: 25). He then argues that Trump, like Cyrus, is a remedy for spiritual deterioration, this time in America. However, Trump is not the only Cyrus figure in modern times. According to Wallnau, "Cyrus" is the *archetype* of a secular leader who is used by God to conduct an important task. In his book, he mentions several such leaders, including Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Wallnau's point is that in the "battle for the survival of Christian civilization," Evangelical voters should not search for the candidate that appears to be the most conservative Christian; rather they should look for "evidence of who is anointed to get results" (Wallnau, 2016a: 127). The bottom line is that while Trump may not be perfect, he is nevertheless the *right* candidate.

God and Donald Trump *(Strang, 2017)*

Stephen E. Strang, founder and CEO of Charisma Media, played a central role in promoting the framing of Trump as God's chosen president. Prior to the election, *Charisma Magazine*, and its affiliated website, *Charisma News*, boosted several articles supporting Trump's candidacy, including "Why I Believe Trump Is the Prophesied President" by Lance Wallnau (October 5, 2016b) and a presentation of Taylor's "Commander-in-Chief Prophecy" (Eschliman, 2016). In addition to Strang's own books about God and Trump, Charisma Media's Front Line has also published several best-sellers by Jonathan Cahn (e.g., *The Oracle*) and Don Colbert. In *God and Donald Trump*,

published one year after the election, Strang sets out to explain what really happened when Trump won, constructing his report like a journalist. While pointing to divine intervention, miracles, and the effect of prayers, Strang also provides useful information about the alliance between Trump and his Evangelical supporters. The book clearly demonstrates why Evangelicals are important to Trump, just as he is important to them.

Like Wallnau, but retrospectively, Strang points to the significance of Evangelical voters in the election. According to Strang, it was no coincidence that one third of Trump's votes came from this constituency:

> From the beginning, Donald Trump understood the importance of the Christian vote. He courted evangelical support, spoke openly about his faith, accepted invitations to speak to the Christian media, and promised to stand strong for the issues that would bring Christians to the polls. It proved to be a winning strategy. (Strang, 2017: 26–27)

As I will demonstrate, both Trump and his Evangelical allies deliberately utilized a framing strategy that targeted the schemata of conservative Christian voters, typically dressed as prayers, prophecies, and other more subtle yet highly salient cues.

Strang uses a frame similar to that used by Taylor, Colbert and Wallnau to depict American society: Everything was at stake in the 2016 election, and Trump was the only candidate who could save the nation and prevent a disastrous future. Like the others, Strang portrays Trump in a way that makes him more acceptable to a conservative Christian audience. "I discovered that Donald Trump is not the overwhelming personality we've seen on the evening news," Strang explains (2017: 131), clearly aware of what impression most people might have of Trump from the mainstream media. His book frames Trump as so much more: A good listener; someone who sticks by his word; a man of faith; and—most importantly—a defender of religious liberties (Strang, 2017: 134, 170).

Most of Strang's pro-Trump arguments are presented through the statements of others; Strang is just the reporter. This way his book becomes a compilation of key arguments from faith leaders most likely well known (and trusted) by the targeted audience. Strang even includes two stories that "may not be true": One "urban legend" about Trump's generosity, and a prophecy from the 1980s by a Catholic holy man about Trump leading America back to God (2017: 164, 179). Despite the uncertainty surrounding these anecdotes, the stories still circulate and contribute to the framing of Trump as noble and chosen by God.

Strang points out that many of the Christian leaders who publicly supported Trump at an early stage were Charismatics. Already in 2003, Trump contacted Pastor Paula White-Cain—a fact that is typically used to underline Trump's long-standing interest in Christianity. White-Cain was, as Strang shows, instrumental in connecting Trump with other Christian leaders, who in turn played an important role in legitimizing him as the right candidate for Evangelical voters. Strang further demonstrates why this alliance was crucial: These Evangelical influencers know how born-again Christians think (Strang, 2017: 55, 61). Hence, Trump would receive first-hand information about which issues to bring up, and how he could send subtle yet strong cues to match their schemata.

Strang's book reminds us that in addition to church leaders, Trump's supporters included influential televangelists like Jim Bakker, Pat Robertson, and Sid Roth, as well as politicians, like Tea Party candidate Michele Bachmann, and former Arkansas governor and Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee. Huckabee's name is even on the front cover of the book, as author of the foreword, thus giving Strang more credibility and his frames more power.

Strang mentions several prophecies about the 2016 election, among them Taylor's 2011 prophecy and Wallnau's Cyrus revelation. Although his style is more neutral and nuanced, the frames are still passed on to the target audience. Strang admits, however, that he did "whatever [he] could to help elect this most unlikely candidate" (2017: xv). Here his media business was essential—including for spreading the frame of Trump as a new king Cyrus chosen by God:

> (. . .) I did what I could to put the prophecies of Frank Amedia and many others online and on the record through our magazine and podcasts. Earlier I had recorded a podcast with Lance Wallnau, who said God was raising up Donald Trump as He did the Persian king Cyrus the Great. If God could use a pagan king to rescue His people and restore the nation of Israel, why couldn't He do it again here in America? (Strang, 2017: 72–73)

Although Strang's book was not published until 2017, the author himself was actively engaged in spreading the same frames as Taylor, Colbert, and Wallnau before the 2016 election. While they all point to a supernatural element in the election process, Strang's book clearly shows the earthly efforts and calculations behind the work to make more Evangelicals vote for Trump.

The Oracle: The Jubilean Mysteries Unveiled *(Cahn, 2019a)*

The production of books that frame Trump as God's chosen president, predicted by prophetic patterns, dreams, and revelations, did not cease with the 2016 election. One of the more recent books on this topic is *The Oracle* by Jonathan Cahn. A Messianic rabbi and bestselling author of several books published by Front Line (Charisma Media), Cahn has great credibility among many Evangelicals. Immediately after its release in September 2019, *The Oracle* entered the New York Times bestseller list. The book was promoted by televangelists like Jim Bakker and Sid Roth, and it was also featured in the September issue of *Charisma Magazine* (Cahn 2019b).

On *The Jim Bakker Show* of September 5, 2019, *The Oracle* is described as the result of divine guidance, as three thousand "downloads from God" put together in a book (Jim Bakker Show, 2019). However, many of the stories, frames, and ideas presented therein have been published before—including the notion of Trump being a new king Cyrus. Trump, though, is not the first "American Cyrus" presented in *The Oracle*. That would be Harry Truman. While the ancient King Cyrus let the Jews return from their Babylonian exile to rebuild their nation, Truman played a part in the rebirth of modern Israel. That was in 1948 as the United States became the first nation to recognize the newly formed state. The story goes that an Israeli rabbi in 1949 told President Truman that he already before his birth had been called to be the Lord's instrument to help the Jews return to the Promised Land, just like the Persian King Cyrus. Years later Truman

allegedly said, "I am Cyrus" (Cahn, 2019a: 117–123). While Cahn here refers to Michael T. Benson's book *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel* from 1997, the story seems to have had its own rebirth in April 2019 with Craig von Busech's book *I Am Cyrus: Harry S. Truman and the Rebirth of Israel*. This illustrates how the Cyrus frame has advanced in the Evangelical sphere since Wallnau promoted it in October 2016.

The main theme in *The Oracle* is the reestablishment of Israel as a nation with Jerusalem as its capital and the return of the Jewish people to their ancestral land. These are events that many Evangelicals view as signs of the end times (Ariel, 2006: 80–83; Sutton, 2014: 302–303, 345–346; Engberg, 2020: 46–47). Christians who hold these views are often referred to as Christian Zionists, and they typically believe that what was written about ancient Israel in the Bible has been or will be fulfilled literally today. This is also the message in *The Oracle*. Apparently leaning on biblical authority, thus increasing his credibility, Cahn sets out to show that several events related to the reestablishment of Israel were prophesied thousands of years ago. A key message is that nothing in world history has happened by chance; God is weaving all events together in a masterly way. According to Cahn, everything is related to Israel, including the destiny of nations. A central frame in the book is that nations rise to greatness when they support the Jews and Israel, while they deteriorate when hostile them. This idea is based on a literal interpretation of Genesis 12:3, where God says to Abraham, "I will bless them that bless you, and curse him that curses you." In Cahn's view, the destiny of the United States is determined by this Bible verse: If Americans want the blessings of God they must bless (i.e., support) Israel. This goes for both individuals and the nation as a whole. Such a perspective is common among Christian Zionists (Spector, 2009: 23–25; Durbin, 2013).

The content of the book is presented as a dialogue between the narrator and a mysterious person called the Oracle. Although it looks like fiction, the message is allegedly true. Not surprisingly, the United States plays a leading role in the story. Even Mark Twain is said to have fulfilled biblical prophecy by visiting Palestine in 1867. While Truman did his part by recognizing Israel in 1948, there is a second "American Cyrus," namely Donald Trump, who through divine providence was born during Truman's presidency. Like Wallnau, Cahn builds up his frame with references to the biblical message to ancient King Cyrus that "you have not known Me" in order to justify that God can use a man like Trump to fulfill an important task. With regard to Israel, this task was recognizing Jerusalem as the Jewish capital, which Trump did in December 2017. Cahn further establishes the framing of Trump as God's chosen president when he refers to the prophecies of the 2016 election as a historical fact:

> "The prophet Isaiah," I said, "declared that Cyrus was called by God to do what he did. And the chief rabbi of Israel told Truman that he too was called, as Cyrus was to do what he did. What about Trump? Was he ever told of the calling of Cyrus?"
>
> "Yes," said the Oracle, "more so than all his predecessors. It was spoken *before* he fulfilled it, by people of faith, Christian leaders. And it was spoken before he even became president." (Cahn, 2019a: 207)

Cahn does not mention names, but he nevertheless continues to reinforce and spread the frame that Trump was chosen by God to become president in a miraculous way and

that this decision was revealed beforehand by various prophets—including Taylor and Wallnau.

The greatest contribution of Cahn's book is that it compiles various stories, ideas, and beliefs that in recent years have been circulating in the Evangelical sphere into a single, coherent narrative. His book is a good illustration of how the various Trump frames that were spread prior to the 2016 election have, in subsequent years, continued to be propagated, developed and elaborated by many of the same actors.

Discussion

By targeting the Evangelical constituency, Trump followed the strategy of successful Republican candidates before him. Richard Nixon consulted with Evangelical leaders, appealed to voters by quoting the Bible and attending church, and arranged Christian meetings to achieve his political goals (Martin, 1996: 99, 145–147; Lindsay, 2007: 54). While biblical prophecies had limited influence on their politics, both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush referred to such prophecies as part of their rhetorical strategy to mobilize Evangelical support (Sutton, 2014: 355, 370). In light of this tradition, Trump's choice to align with Evangelical leaders was no surprise. He faced different challenges, however, as many perceived his character as morally at odds with basic principles of Christianity (Fea, 2018: 3–5). The four books presented above illustrate how a religiously sensitive framing strategy was essential to overcome this problem and help convince conservative Christians to vote for him.

Though different in style, the books present a similar message: The *problem* is defined as moral decline and a possible judgement as the United States has drifted away from God. The *cause* is not just the secular, liberal left, but also the lazy Christians who have not engaged sufficiently in politics and other cultural spheres. The books contain several *moral judgements* (e.g., "abortion is murder", or "supporting Israel is a solemn obligation"), as well as various solutions to distinct challenges. The overall *remedy*, however, is Trump—the man chosen by God to save the nation from deterioration and destruction. The 2016 election was thus interwoven with the idea of spiritual warfare and Christians' duty to establish the kingdom of God on earth. All four books promote several frames, highlighting the issues from multiple angles, which nevertheless point in the same direction: Christians should not just pray, but act! To save the nation, they must register, show up at the ballot box, and vote for Trump! The different frames may match a whole variety of schemata, thus increasing the chance of success by influencing a greater number of voters. The extra-biblical prophecy revealing God's preferred candidate is just one of these frames, but since 2015 it has become increasingly important as a political strategy. Part of its power lies in its placement of the responsibility for fulfilling the prophecy on believers. As illustrated by the following quote from Wallnau, this move also safeguards the prophets against accusations of falsehood:

> God never told me Trump would win. He told me Trump is a Cyrus for our nation if we have eyes to see. My burden is to get the church to see! (...) The future of America is quite literally in our hands. History will happen in a matter of days. Will we show up or will we miss this moment? I believe the church in America will decide this vote. (2016: 32–33)

The authors of the four books belong to the group of Evangelicals that have been most closely allied with Trump, namely Charismatics, whose goal and rationale can be best understood within the NAR framework. This alliance did not emerge by coincidence during the 2016 election. As we saw from Strang's book, Trump had already connected with Charismatic pastor Paula White-Cain in 2003. The story goes that Trump called her after watching her television program, and eventually she became his close friend and "spiritual adviser." Their relationship also involved politics (Strang, 2017, 61). In the spring of 2011, Trump publicly considered running for president (Montopoli, 2011a). It was during this time that Taylor received his "Commander-in-chief prophecy" (April 28). However, only a few weeks later, Trump decided not to run (Montopoli, 2011b). According to his Evangelical supporters, this decision was made after counseling with White-Cain and other ministers, concluding that it was not the right time (Strang, 2017: 79; Brody and Lamb, 2018: 216). Another illustration of the Evangelical awareness of Trump's presidential ambitions, as well as their appreciation of it, is found in Falwell Jr.'s remark after Trump was awarded an honorary doctorate at Liberty University in 2012: "It is not too late to get back in the presidential race, is it?" (LU, 2012). These examples show that the alliance had long been established when Trump announced his run in 2015, and that the parties dealt strategically with the question of presidency together. The coordination of actions, words, and frames in the 2016 election was not accidental. That the alliance was already at work is further demonstrated by the fact that Trump had considerable support among white Evangelicals already in the primary. As it was still possible to elect other Republican candidates with conservative Christian values this indicates real approval, not just party identification or opposition to Hillary Clinton (Barrett-Fox, 2018: 504).

Commenting on her current involvement in the White House, White-Cain referred to her long friendship with Trump: "God put an assignment before me 18 years ago, and it led to this position" (KCM, 2018). White-Cain's influence can be illustrated by her leading role in Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board during the campaign, her prayer at his inauguration, and her role on Trump's White House staff as Special Advisor to the Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiative (since November 2019). Although it ultimately rewarded Trump, it was nevertheless White-Cain who gathered the Christian leaders who met with him early in his campaign. Most of these were Charismatics, but there were also some traditional Evangelicals, like Falwell Jr. (Strang, 2017: 41–42). Several of these leaders became members of Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board. In 2016, Don and Mary Colbert were invited to join the board after Trump found out about Mary's prayer chain hotline (Taylor and Colbert, 2017: 83). Wallnau, for his part, met the candidate in 2015 together with other Evangelical leaders in Trump Tower. Later, during a similar meeting, he shared the prophetic words about Cyrus with Trump, explaining that he believed they applied to him—a notion for which Trump expressed gratitude (Wallnau, 2016a: 78). Strang, whose book includes a personal interview with Trump, mentions still others who shared their prophetic words about Trump with him prior to election day (2017: 127–128). In other words, many of those who received or promoted prophetic messages about Trump as God's chosen president were either connected with him during the election, giving him advice on issues and showing public support, or associated with others who were.

Although Trump did not promote himself as "the elect," he was well aware of the religious frames that circulated. Through his Evangelical advisors, he received guidance on how to pick issues, words, and phrases that matched these frames. On the one hand, this coordination strengthened the idea of Trump as someone who is open and listens to people of faith. Strang quotes megachurch Pastor Jack Graham—who joined Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board in June 2016—saying, "it's apparent he wants to know what conservative, Bible-believing Christians think" (2017, 20). This desire should, however, be seen as strategic: Trump had been preparing for the presidential race for years, and he targeted the Evangelical constituency in particular. As we saw from Wallnau and Strang, there was a high number of potential Evangelical voters. The challenge in 2016 was to get them to vote.

On the other hand, the coordination of Trump's words and actions with these frames contributed to making the prophecies self-fulfilling. To understand what really took place in the 2016 election, including the massive support of conservative Christians for this unlikely candidate, we must understand the dynamics in play between Trump and his Evangelical allies. Regardless of what their original intention may have been, the prophecy frames seem to have had an effect not only on Evangelical voters but also on Trump himself. When Trump sent out cues that matched the schemata of the target audience—for example appealing promises, phrases like "Christianity is under siege," or pictures of him praying—it created the impression that he was indeed the man who was prophesied. But by the very act of aligning himself with the prophecy frames (and the advice from his Evangelical allies), Trump caused the prophecies to be fulfilled. As a side effect, he may also have attracted other Christian voters who themselves may not have believed in the prophecies or even known about them but shared the same basic values.

The Evangelical vote played a major role in Trump's win in 2016. He, in turn, was instrumental to the agenda of NAR Christians. Through their frames, the alliance shaped him to become the "Cyrus" of their prophecies, taking the measures *they* considered necessary to make America great (i.e., Christian) again. The prophecies mentioned Israel, conservative Supreme Court justices, immigration, abortion, and expressions of Christian faith in the public sphere. Trump has addressed everything—and thus more enemy territory has been "conquered." Trump has drawn benefits from believers' conviction, and he has nurtured it. However, it is his Evangelical allies who control the narratives, thus turning Trump into their man.

Before the 2020 presidential election, the same framing strategies were employed with increased vigor. One month before the election, Liberty University's movie about Taylor's Trump revelation was once again shown on theaters nationwide (PRNewswire, 2020), and there was even more publicity on new prophecies predicting that Trump would have a second term (see Beverly, 2020). Despite the efforts to mobilize Christian voters, Trump lost the election. Some of his Evangelical supporters never accepted the result, though, and like Trump, they claimed it was a fraud (see e.g. Fea 2020a, 2020b; KCM, 2020). According to one survey, there seems to have been a drop of about four percent in Trump's support among white Evangelicals (Newport, 2020). While this is based on estimates, it is in line with the trend of opinion polls conducted prior to the election (Lipka and Smith, 2020; Smith, 2020). However, the election turnout was higher than in 2016 (Desilver, 2021). It is thus difficult to tell the exact impact on the number of Evangelical voters, as well as on the various states. When it comes to individual motives, on the other hand, there are indications

that there may have been a shift in the attitude towards Trump: In 2016, only thirty percent of white Evangelical Trump supporters said they voted "for Trump", while forty-five percent explained their vote as "against Clinton". In 2020, fifty-seven percent voted "for Trump", and only twenty percent "against Biden" (Shellnutt, 2020). While the mobilization efforts were not sufficient for Trump to win the 2020 election, they may nevertheless have influenced the way white Evangelicals perceived him. For some, the influence unquestionably came as a direct impact of cue matching schemata. For others, it came indirectly, through endorsement of a policy shaped as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented four books to illustrate how supportive Evangelicals framed Donald Trump before and after the 2016 presidential election in order to galvanize and motivate conservative Christians to vote for him. To help these voters overcome the barrier of Trump's unchristian character and past, Evangelical leaders and influencers utilized frames that made Trump's positive traits highly salient, thus creating a sympathetic picture of the candidate and disputing the accusations of mainstream journalists and other critics (i.e., competing frames). In addition, several frames were tailored to appeal exclusively to the schemata of the target audience—some of the most powerful being the prophecy frame, the Cyrus frame, and the "born-again" frame.

The longstanding friendship between Trump and leading Evangelicals helped establish the alliance we saw emerge during the election campaign. Thanks to this alliance, Trump received firsthand information about "how conservative, Bible-believing Christians think." This enabled him not only to address the causes that were most important to them but also to coordinate his words and actions with the circulating frames. While some of the cues were too subtle to be noticed by a secular audience, they appealed directly to the perceived reality of the target audience. This process not only matched cues and schemata but also contributed to the self-fulfillment of the prophecies. While Trump has clearly benefited from the conviction of believers, it is nevertheless the Evangelical influencers who control the narratives, thereby making Trump a champion for their key causes. In other words, the frames promoted by these Evangelicals have not only influenced the conservative Christian constituency but also the president himself.

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