

## *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, John Fea

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The ability to synthesize is necessary for research in the field of social studies. Author John Fea shows this capacity in his work *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, in addition to displaying great ability to consistently connect issues. Generally speaking, the book refers to the citizenry's state of mind regarding religious feelings and beliefs. It is a very interesting question, since it raises several thematic approaches that do not usually resonate in journalistic analysis today.

The author uses very respectful language toward the evangelist community, using terms that are socially accepted among the great family of reformed Protestantism. For years, great controversy has existed about the pejorative use of certain terms, which the author avoids throughout the book. Similarly, a long tradition of linguistic "appropriationism" and terminological ideologization also exists when describing religious phenomena and baptizing ecclesiastical organizations.

This book was published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2018). Apart from the ideological contents, which one can approve or oppose, methodologically, the publication is an example of a job well done from the point of view of the creation of the theoretical framework, the state of the matter, and the delimitation of research objects. It consists of an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, and a compilation of documentary sources (238 pages in all). The chapter titles seem typical of a political essay or a work of popular journalism, although the book's content does not correspond to either.

The use of historical contextualization is quite widespread in all sections, promptly generating digressions attached to the formulation of

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hypotheses that facilitate understanding developments further along. The content of all the chapters is broadened out with the analysis of the mood of public opinion (regarding new Republican strategies), and the evolution of mentalities (in the face of the emergence of Trump's political figure) and of the concept of collective thinking that emerged (the conformation of individual political interpretations).

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In his introduction, Professor Fea presents a series of intentions regarding the conception of research work. He includes a summary the state of affairs on the latest political-electoral events and the manifestations of Republican political representatives. He also outlines the evolution of the evangelist community, Christian morals, and Protestant doctrines in the last decades of the past century. In the analysis of the Republican primaries, some candidates (Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz) close to baptism-evangelism opposed Trump's image of success. What follows are summaries of the book's different chapters.

The first chapter, surprisingly, begins with a fragment of the lyrics of a 2005 Bruce Springsteen song. Here, the author reflects on the evolution of white evangelicals' political perception of Trump's candidacy from when it was first announced during the Republican primaries (June 16, 2015, Trump Tower) until the presidential inauguration (January 20, 2017). Originally, to throw the support of reformed Protestantism to a candidate, the evangelist hierarchies favored those with long-standing institutional ties who had had a meritorious trajectory. However, in the end, the evangelical hierarchies, conditioned by the inertia of their social mass and their media representatives, chose to give unconditional support to the controversial candidate, Trump. The title, "The Evangelical Politics of Fear," refers to the fears, taboos, contradictions, and uncertainties that marked the deliberations of Christian conservatism in electoral cycles.

The second chapter is titled "The Playbook" in reference to the process of political assimilation of the 2016 electoral events and the consequences of executive composition by the activist movements and the governing organizations of Baptist evangelism. Unraveling the meaning of certain biblical passages, the author sketches the mood of conservative "America," arising from political change and the survival needs of its lifestyle. These pages attempt to present a descriptive and interpretive analysis of the belief system of the groups close to reformed Protestantism. This analysis also has a comparative dimension, as it presents cases of studies in time and space, that is, comparing cultural interpretations,

media discussions, electoral strategies, judicial tendencies, and legislative transformations during the key moments since the middle of the last century.

“A Short History of Evangelical Fear,” the title of the third chapter, allows the reader to intuit the thematic development of this part of the investigation. The author not only reviews the historical evolution of fear, but also presents a series of reflections on the right to doctrinal interpretation, the process of biblical exegesis, and the electoral experimentation of every generation of [U.S.] Americans. More specifically, it reflects on the individuals who adhere to the Baptist-evangelical confessional block. The chapter presents several case studies based on the regions most sensitive to political change and the most reluctant theological currents of socio-cultural transformation. The initial quotation from Neal Gabler, chosen by the author to open the chapter, condenses the main lines of argumentation: spiritual individual and collective exploration, doubts of interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, and certainties based on tradition.

The fourth chapter focuses on the internal transformations and ideological drifts of the activist movements, known in the media as the Christian Right. “The Court Evangelicals” is open thematically, but very closed in the case studies: the Moral Majority, the New Christian Right, and Independent Network Charismatic Christianity. In these pages, Fea presents a profound review of the great attempts at change among conservative Protestant activist movements in recent decades. He makes several comparative references between the 1980s and today, with special reference to the difficult times for conservative Protestant activists during the 1990s. The author makes a fairly detailed description of these groups’ position close to the Trump administration, highlighting their media networks’ support.

The book’s conclusion not only includes aspects of the investigation, but also contains a kind of argument about what the exercise of power by a good Christian political representative should look like. It makes a veiled attempt to argue that fear does not have to be stronger than hope in the election of political representatives. The author’s defense of the historical, rigorous, and serious analysis against the generalization of nostalgic feelings among the different Christian communities is very interesting. The conclusion also poses a series of rhetorical questions, intended to make the reader reflect and reconsider some cultural

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concepts and ideological elements about the nature of the U.S. government system.

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The book transversally suggests some contributions about the need to achieve the unity of criteria among the great Christian family established in the North American region and to value the cultural legacy of the Pilgrims and the Founding Fathers. The author considers it necessary to demystify political history in order to preserve Christian values and cultural identities in the face of the rise of radical policies contrary to the "American" tradition. However, the most controversial issues that have arisen since the beginning of Donald Trump's political career, issues with direct implications for religiosity and political correctness, are not mentioned.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

FEA, JOHN

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