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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

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If JFK Could Talk

Monte Wolverton

Sixty-three years ago, the American people elected John F. Kennedy (JFK) as their 35th president. To say that he was admired is an understatement. He is the third most popular U.S. president in history, right below Lincoln and Washington and just above Jefferson (according to the London-based research group YouGov).

Sadly, JFK was one of the shortest serving U.S. presidents. His administration was violently cut short 60 years ago, on November 22, 1963, by a 6.5 millimeter bullet fired from a war-surplus Carcano M91/38 bolt-action rifle with a 6-round magazine. Eight months earlier, the assassin had mail-ordered the firearm for a mere \$19.95, including \$7.07 for a scope.

In those days, it was also an understatement to say my devoutly Christian grandmother was

passionate about civics. Her living room was an official polling place. Before every election she crammed her furniture aside to make way for voting booths. She transformed her front porch and hallway into reception areas where local voters signed in and received their ballots.

When then-vice-president Richard Nixon came to town on September 13th, 1960, in the first week of his campaign against Kennedy for president (political campaigns were much shorter then, thankfully), my grandmother helped organize a reception for Nixon at the county courthouse. I still have a signed letter of appreciation from him. That day, as a budding photographer, I captured a photo of Pat and Dick Nixon riding up Main Street in their motorcade.

But that didn't mean I liked Nixon. I knew nothing of politics in the 7th grade, but I knew Nixon looked

frumpy with his shifty, scowling eyes, forced grin and jowelly five-o'clock shadow. By contrast, the charismatic Kennedy was young, athletic, progressive and dynamic. He had cool hair and a knockout wife. My friends were big fans, and so was I. Why wouldn't we be? He was popular, and later political observers would note that Kennedy had turned Presidential races (if not all political races) into what they are today—*popularity contests*.

Politics of Personality

Populism (related to popularity, but not the same) is a political approach that strives to appeal to *ordinary people* who feel that their concerns are disregarded by the *established elite*. This pretty much describes how my friends and I felt about the 1960 presidential race. Nixon represented the stodgy established elite, whereas it seemed Kennedy was actually in touch with our concerns (whatever we thought they were at the time). Policy, platforms and proficiency aside—my presidential preference was propelled by an almost religious *populism*—pure and plain.

Various forms of populism in the ancient past are well-documented, in fact, American populism arguably has its roots in religion, with the First Great Awakening—a succession of Christian revivalistic waves that swept England and the American colonies in the 1730s and '40s.

One of the spearheads of this movement was a young English minister named George Whitefield.

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After his education, ordination and the development of his revivalistic style in England, he travelled to the American colonies in 1740. In those times of uncertainty (and what times aren't uncertain?), Whitefield offered a solution. Unlike many established Anglican and Presbyterian pastors, his preaching was extemporaneous, dramatic and highly emotional.

George Whitefield entertained and captivated audiences, using his early theatrical experience to deliver stunning portrayals of biblical stories. True to the definition of *populism*, he appealed to ordinary people who increasingly felt that their concerns were ignored by the established religious elite. And if his audiences weren't swayed enough by his riveting shows, he hurled terrifying warnings of hellfire at complacent onlookers who had not properly received the "second birth."

As the movement advanced, Whitefield and other itinerant revivalist preachers aroused and incited congregants to revolt against institutional clergy and install their own "reborn" ministers. Not all leaders of the Awakening were happy with this unhinged turn of events, including Congregationalist theologian Jonathan Edwards, whose preaching demeanor was staid compared to that of Whitefield. Still the Awakening churned on, for better or worse.

Like countless revolutions, the outcome of the Awakening was a mixed bag. Yes, the Christian religious establishment was challenged as it needed to be on many issues. Yes, the Awakening ended segregation in many congregations, and furthered the idea of the abolition of slavery.

On the other hand, clergy education, quality theological training and careful, reasoned preaching were often laid aside in favor of bombastic rhetoric and what could only be described as

emotion-driven mobs. In fact, the more passionate adherents of the movement were derisively labeled "enthusiasts" at the time. Some historians contend that the groundwork for the American Revolution was laid in large part by the Awakening.

Now, nearly three centuries later, like George Whitefield's zealots, we are willingly inducted into the personality cults of anyone who puts on a good show.

But far more dangerously, we are transfixed and recruited by political and religious celebrities.

Why Celebrity Worship?

The reasons may be complex, but some research suggests that *the less connected people feel, the more they turn to celebrities*. We look to appealing public figures to give us the same sense of belonging that we may have lost with family, close friends and real community. A strong political or religious leader may become a father or mother figure. A younger, dynamic politician may seem like a big brother or sister to us. These personalities may offer us pat solutions to our problems and refuge from our disappointments, failures and losses—making us feel part of something great and important—restoring our sense of identity.

On top of that, we crave heroes. Joseph Campbell, in his book *Hero of a Thousand Faces* makes the case that heroic sagas are essentially the same story told over and over again across all cultures. The more chaotic our perception of the world, the more we obsess on the idea that some great champion will rise up to save us from our own evil and usher in a sparkling utopian world of peace and order.



Add to this our cultural addiction to hype, driven by advertising and media. In the intense competition for ratings and customers, every piece of information, product, news item, headline and public figure must be sensationalized. Whether it be a business enterprise, sports figure, entertainer, politician or religious figure, it must be grossly overhyped to get noticed amid the deafening 21st-century media cacophony. Anyone who wants to get noticed by the public must groom themselves to seem larger than life.

Because of all this, we are easy prey for unscrupulous political and religious leaders who know precisely how to leverage these human emotional needs for their own gain. They dumb down issues that are complex and nuanced, simplistically blaming society's problems on a single evil enemy or class of people. They paint themselves as heroic because they know that will grab the public on a subconscious and visceral level.

One such politician wrote, "Persuasion must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect" because "sober reasoning determines [people's] thoughts and actions far less than emotions and feeling...*my purpose is to arouse, to whip up, to incite.*"

That politician was Adolf Hitler, in his book *Mein Kampf*. I'm certainly not suggesting that all

populist leaders are genocidal despots. But I am contending that *following populist leaders who use emotional manipulation as a strategy to amass power is historically a perilous road*—one that responsible citizens (especially Christians) should avoid.

Christ-Style Servant Leadership

Accounts of Jesus' preaching reveal no emotional manipulation or what we would call revivalism. His messages were powerful and brilliantly crafted and his responses to adversaries were stunning. Even his silence spoke volumes. We might expect this level of skill because, after all, he was and is God. But there's no record of him arousing, whipping up or inciting crowds, trying to amass a following or acquiring power—religious or political.

Jesus reveals his mission statement in Luke 4:16-21. He quotes Isaiah 61:1-2, declaring that his Father has sent him to *"proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* In other words, he came to proclaim the gospel—and to be the Gospel by his life, death and resurrection. *There's nothing here about inciting people to do anything except believe the good news!*

What's more, the Apostle Paul urges everyone (including any kind of leader) to follow Jesus' example. *"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross"* (Philippians 2:5-8).

None of this is to say that we should write off preachers or politicians just because they are gifted

speakers. But it is to say that we should never, ever check our brains at the door of any institution, whether it be church or government.

Back to Kennedy

John F. Kennedy, populist though his campaign may have been, did not usher in the kingdom of the antichrist as some religious fanatics predicted. He turned out to be an outstanding president, and he accomplished a great deal during his short administration. He was intent on pursuing world peace. Yet, he locked horns with some of the powerful established elite in the federal government and military. Although we may never know the details, in the end, Kennedy may have paid for this with his life.

Sixty years later, we're faced with the same issues—with different players dressed up a little differently. But somehow things seem a lot worse. We desperately need functional civil government. We need coherent, informed discourse and civil debate to maintain a stable society and a stable world. We urgently need competent human leadership.

What kind of human leadership and governance? Scripture doesn't specify much. Jesus left no detailed blueprint even for church governance. After millennia of experimentation, failure and sparkling visions of the future that didn't happen, it currently seems that some form of democracy is the best we've got. On paper anyway, we have government by the consent of the governed and checks and balances of power.

But who do we elect to lead us? Here's where the system often fails. You would think that voters would evaluate candidates based on their values, education, policies and proven capacity to fulfill their responsibilities. But no. We vote for whomever we like. Candidates and their handlers know it's a popularity contest, and they strive to build a fan base. They transform themselves into saviors and heroes.

If an aspiring leader—political or religious—makes vast, sweeping, egoistic promises of freedom and justice for everyone in order to secure an office or consolidate power, we need to realize it's nothing more than pompous, empty rhetoric on which they can never fully deliver. It is foolishness to expect from mere human beings something that only Jesus Christ is capable of delivering—and which *he will deliver*.

John F. Kennedy was reputed to be a hero, and in the world's most powerful human office he may have done the best he could. But like all of us, he was human and fatally flawed. If we could hear him talk today, I believe he would tell us that the only genuine hero was and continues to be Jesus Christ. □

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