Pope takes on the cult of Trump



JOSHUA WHITFIELD

What we can learn from leaders playing God

Seaside in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, waiting for fairer winds to return him to Rome, the emperor Vespasian had an encounter with a blind man. These were the earliest days of Vespasian's reign. The army and then the Roman Senate had just declared him emperor. The bloody and chaotic days of Nero were over.

The historian Tacitus tells the story. Motivated by the god Serapis, a worker suffering some affliction of the eye threw himself prostrate at the new emperor's feet and begged him to heal him. Another man, this one with a withered hand, was there, too, and begged the same. For some reason they thought that such miraculous healing was within the Roman emperor's power.

"At first Vespasian laughed at them and refused," Tacitus writes. But still they continued to beg him even more insistently. So the emperor consulted his doctors and likely some other members of his court about what he should do.

They assured him that such miracles had been known to happen. "This might be the will of Heaven," they told him. They said that "the emperor had perhaps been chosen as the divine instrument." They suggested he give it a try. If the poor men were healed, they said, then the emperor could "gain all the credit … while, if it failed, the ridicule would fall on the unfortunate patients."

"This convinced Vespasian that there were no limits to his destiny: nothing now seemed incredible," Tacitus writes.

And so, Vespasian, smiling widely, took the blind man's head in his hands. Then the emperor, with his own spit, anointed the man's eyes; and then, so the story goes, "daylight shone once more in the blind man's eye." The emperor had performed a miracle.

It's a story strikingly Jesus-like. As I'm sure you'll recall, that's how Jesus healed the blind man from Bethsaida.

To heal the man with the withered hand, Vespasian had to step on it; not quite the same. To heal his beggar, Jesus merely had to say the word. But you get the point; the parallel is clear. Tacitus detested Christianity, but he knew a useful story when he saw one.

Now, of course, you know why I bring this story up: President Donald Trump's Truth Social post depicting himself as Jesus. It was the rage that was all the rage just a few days ago. Yet it seems there is nothing new under the sun.



@realDonaldTrump/Truth Social

President Donald Trump's Truth Social post depicting himself as Jesus was a mirror that reflected a clear image of what has become of much of Christianity in America today, writes Joshua J. Whitfield.

Blasphemy, many called it. Even many of Trump's closest supporters denounced it. Even House Speaker Mike Johnson, who rarely challenges Trump, acknowledged its existence and counseled the president to delete it. Only online grifters, it seems, held the MAGA line. Which is good, I guess, all that pushback, because maybe it means that we've not yet corrupted ourselves so much as to have become entirely Roman. Maybe we're not yet ready to call our presidents gods.

But the problem is that we're closer to that stupidity than we should be.

Now beyond speculation about Trump's narcissism and possible cognitive decline, beyond obvious lies, beyond the explanations offered by humiliated politicians and unserious pundits, beyond charges of blasphemy, beyond insulting believers — for both Christians and their Lord will be just fine — what is haunting to me, at least from a historical perspective, is that in the past when political leaders have flirted with divinity, even flippantly, such has always gone hand-in-hand with autocracy and with the absence of democracy. That is, the problem is first political, not religious.

But who are we to blame? Believe it or not, not the president, not at first. I do not honestly believe he has it in him to think that much about it. Rather, I blame more his devotees, especially those who call themselves Christians; not all of them, of course, but certainly too many.

That is, I think the president's Truth Social post was a mirror, and I think it reflected a frighteningly clear image of what has become of much of Christianity in America today.

Tacitus was clear, you see, that they were the devotees of Serapis that sought out Vespasian and not the other way around. The new emperor was simply waiting to return to Rome; he was worried about political rivals and grain supplies. But he was soon amused and then intrigued by their strange religious pleading, and he eventually visited the temple of Serapis where he claimed to have mystical visions. Yet it wasn't anything he sought on his own. Rather, there were other interlocking factors involved — bad politics and bad religion — that inspired him to act like more than a mere man.

And so, when people like Paula White compare the president to Jesus, what should we expect?

"You were betrayed and arrested and falsely accused. It's a familiar pattern," she said to the president just before Easter. When no one else in that room objects, what do you think a person like Trump is going to make of that? What do you think he likely thought he could then get away with?

No, I do not blame Donald Trump for his stupid social media posts, not at first. Rather, I blame all the Christians who should, by God, know better.

This, of course, is why Pope Leo XIV is to many so inspiring and to others, like the president and his devoted religious supporters, so irritating. This is what's behind that other foolish Truth Social post, why the president wrote that "Leo should get his act together as Pope." Because the pope is clearly not a devotee of this newly deformed American Christianity.

Rather — and perhaps this is the pope's current prophetic ministry to America — with conviction and power, he is doing his best to desacralize American political pretensions, reminding us that the City of God and the earthly city are two different things. Only a genuine spiritual leader can do that.

Which perhaps, spiritually speaking, is precisely what America needs at present: the reminder that there is a kingdom of God and that the United States isn't it. And maybe that's just what it'll take — a true spiritual leader, someone like the Successor of Peter, to teach we Americans that hard spiritual and political lesson.

Which perhaps may be just what God is calling the first American pope to do, to destroy the imperial cult of Donald Trump before that cult destroys us.

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Searching for a church without politics



RONELL SMITH

Finding a new home is harder than expected

A church sermon indelibly etched in my mind involves church-hoppers, those who move from denomination to denomination searching for the perfect one.

"What these people don't realize is that if they do find the perfect church, once they join, it won't be perfect anymore," an Atlanta pastor once said. He was pointing to the fact that no one is perfect but Christ.

With that in mind, my family has been searching for a new church home after leaving Southlake's Gateway Church a few years ago — well before its founding pastor, Robert Morris, was sent to jail for child sex abuse. He was released in late March.

The search has been harder than expected, even though my criteria are straightforward: a minister grounded in Scripture, a diverse congregation and, most importantly, no politics from the pulpit.

The last matters most because it's the hardest to find in North Texas.

My first week in Texas, in 2012, I stood in an elementary school parking lot waiting to pick up my oldest daughter. I struck up a conversation with another father whose kids were the same ages as mine. We were mid-sentence when his youngest daughter, holding his hand, said how much she hated then-President Barack Obama.

She was 5.

I learned something that day I wouldn't fully understand until years later: In Texas, politics doesn't simply reflect belief; it often functions like one. I soon saw it everywhere — in coffee shops, breweries, backyard gatherings and, yes, churches. Politics found its way into conversations with the same persistence as the Texas heat.

A close friend, a lifelong Texan, tried to explain it via geography and timing. We're in the Bible Belt, he said, and it was an election year. Then he added something he meant as reassurance: In Texas, where politics occupies a spot alongside religion, your vote is seen as a moral choice.

But if one party becomes righteousness, the other must be sin. This was foreign territory for a Mississippi native who grew up Methodist, in a tradition where the pulpit was sacred ground. I was once disciplined by a church elder for stepping behind it to retrieve a microphone after the choir's microphone went dead mid-hymn. That is how seriously my tradition guarded that space.

When I joined Gateway Church in 2014, I was shocked to find that the pulpit was open for politics. Morris never had to say a candidate's name. The message was clear: There was a righteous choice, and righteous people knew what it was. Politics and faith fused so seamlessly that the seam disappeared.

I thought of Morris days ago when I saw that President Donald Trump had posted an AI-generated image of himself as Jesus Christ. The sordid act was less provocative than it was familiar. When politics and religion are fused long enough, it becomes hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. I wondered aloud how Morris — who sat on Trump's evangelical advisory board and hosted him in 2020 — would have explained away such behavior were he still behind the pulpit at Gateway.



Staff Photo

President Donald Trump spoke during a roundtable conversation about race relations and policing at Gateway Church Dallas Campus, 2020, in Dallas.

Luckily, I'll never know.

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