

Trump & the Last Stand of the American Christians

by GWYNNE DYER

The past week has been a roller-coaster ride for Donald Trump.

First, he's the target of an assassination attempt. However, that makes him God's Chosen One because he survived, and it looks like the presidency is in the bag because Joe Biden can't even finish his sentences. But then Biden quits, and suddenly Trump is the old white guy, up against an opponent who's twenty years younger.

Religion has played a big part in Trump's rise, although he is not religious himself. That's why he told the crowd at the Republican National Convention that "I stand before you only by the grace of Almighty God."

Trump was claiming that God is on his side because he must win the "Christian" vote. The Republican Party used to be a fairly broad church, but these days its core support comes from a particular brand of American Christians who are very visible but not as numerous as they seem.

These Protestant "evangelical" Christians have taken to calling themselves Christian Nationalists, and they can be counted on to vote Republican no matter what. However, there are only enough of them to put Trump back in the White House if a lot of other Americans don't vote at all.

In effect the Republicans have now become the local version of the Party of God. The numbers tell the tale: 87% of Americans who identified as Republicans in a survey last year said they believe in God. Only 66% of Democratic voters did.

There's no grounds for complaint about Trump pretending to pray and his audience pretending to believe that he really means it. It's no shabbier than a lot of other political deals. But it probably won't be enough now that Trump doesn't have a tragically diminished opponent like Joe Biden, because American Christianity is in retreat.

Almost every country or region used to have its own version of religious belief, and if that's where you were born that was what you believed. After all, everybody else around you seemed to believe it, so it must be true.

But then came mass education and mass media, and people became aware of the wider world around them. There are half a dozen big religions and lots of smaller ones. At best only one of them can be right. Maybe none of them are. And why should it be the one my grandparents believed?

For most of the West, and also for most of East Asia, the old beliefs are no longer "normal".

There are still many believers, and most people are happy to continue the traditional religious rites of passage like marriages and funerals. Likewise the ancient seasonal festivals like Christmas and Chinese New Year. But the religious core has evaporated.

In Britain, Sweden and Australia, only around 30% of the population see themselves as religious. In Japan, South Korea and China, only about 15% do. Moreover, the trend line is downward in every case.

In the midst of this, the United States has seemed the great exception: a developed country in which religion still dominates in public life. But it's really more of a grand illusion, because the rot (if that's what it is) set in quite a while ago.

In 2001, a Gallup poll reported that 90% of Americans believed in God. In another poll taken last year, only 74% did. That's a drop of almost exactly one percent per year, which is what you might call an inexorable trend.

It's inexorable because it is driven almost entirely by generational turnover. Older Americans are not 'losing their faith'; their children are just not buying into it. The 2023 version of the same poll revealed that among 18-to-34-year-old Americans, only 59% believe in God.

The United States is a lot less different than it thinks it is. The 'Heartland' will remain true to the old ways for a while longer, but most Americans live within a few hours' drive of the East or West Coasts and that puts them in the modern time zone.

Trump cannot rely on the Christian vote alone to bring him victory. If younger Americans vote in large number, his fake religiosity is political poison.