

# The Religious Right's Hostility to Science Is Crippling Our Coronavirus Response

Trump's response to the pandemic has been haunted by the science denialism of his ultraconservative religious allies.

By Katherine Stewart

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Donald Trump rose to power with the determined assistance of a movement that denies science, bashes government and prioritized loyalty over professional expertise. In the current crisis, we are all reaping what that movement has sown.

At least since the 19th century, when the proslavery theologian Robert Lewis Dabney attacked the physical sciences as "theories of unbelief," hostility to science has characterized the more extreme forms of religious nationalism in the United States. Today, the hard core of climate deniers is concentrated among people who identify as religiously conservative Republicans. And some leaders of the Christian nationalist movement, like those allied with the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, which has denounced environmental science as a "Cult of the Green Dragon," cast environmentalism as an alternative — and false — theology.

This denial of science and critical thinking among religious ultraconservatives now haunts the American response to the coronavirus crisis. On March 15, Guillermo Maldonado, who calls himself an "apostle" and hosted Mr. Trump earlier this year at a campaign event at his Miami megachurch, urged his congregants to show up for worship services in person. "Do you believe God would bring his people to his house to be contagious with the virus? Of course not," he said.

Rodney Howard-Browne of The River at Tampa Bay Church in Florida mocked people concerned about the disease as "pansies" and insisted he would only shutter the doors to his packed church "when the rapture is taking place." In a sermon that was live-streamed on Facebook, Tony Spell, a pastor in Louisiana, said, "We're also going to pass out anointed handkerchiefs to people who may have a fear, who may have a sickness and we believe that when those anointed handkerchiefs go, that healing virtue is going to go on them as well."

By all accounts, President Trump's tendency to trust his gut over the experts on issues like vaccines and climate change does not come from any deep-seated religious conviction. But he is perfectly in tune with the religious nationalists who form the core of his base. In his daily briefings from the White House, Mr. Trump actively disdains and contradicts the messages coming from his own experts and touts as yet unproven cures.

Not every pastor is behaving recklessly, of course, and not every churchgoer in these uncertain times is showing up for services out of disregard for the scientific evidence. Far from it. Yet none of the benign uses of religion in this time of crisis have anything to do with Mr. Trump's expressed hope that the country would be "opened up and just raring to go by Easter." He could, of course, have said, "by mid-April." But Mr. Trump did not invoke Easter by accident, and many of his evangelical allies were pleased by his vision of "packed churches all over our country."

"I think it would be a beautiful time," the president said.

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Religious nationalism has brought to American politics the conviction that our political differences are a battle between absolute evil and absolute good. When you're engaged in a struggle between the "party of life" and the "party of death," as some religious nationalists now frame our political divisions, you don't need to worry about crafting careful policy based on expert opinion and analysis. Only a heroic leader, free from the scruples of political correctness, can save the righteous from the damned. Fealty to the cause is everything; fidelity to the facts means nothing. Perhaps this is why many Christian nationalist leaders greeted the news of the coronavirus as an insult to their chosen leader.

In an interview on March 13 on "Fox & Friends," Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Liberty University, called the response to Coronavirus "hype" and "overreacting." "You know, impeachment didn't work, and the Mueller report didn't work, and Article 25 didn't work, and so maybe now this is their next, ah, their next attempt to get Trump," he said.

When Rev. Spell in Louisiana defied an order from Gov. John Bel Edwards and hosted in-person services for over 1,000 congregants, he asserted the ban was "politically motivated." Figures like the anti-L.G.B.T. activist Steve Hotze added to the chorus, denouncing the concern as — you guessed it — "fake news."

One of the first casualties of fact-free hyper-partisanship is competence in government. The incompetence of the Trump administration in grappling with this crisis is by now well known, at least among those who receive actual news. February 2020 will go down in history as the month in which the United States, in painful contrast with countries like South Korea and Germany, failed to develop the mass testing capability that might have saved many lives. Less well known is the contribution of the Christian nationalist movement in ensuring that our government is in the hands of people who appear to be incapable of running it well.

Consider the case of Alex Azar, who as secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services has had a prominent role in mismanaging the crisis. It seems likely at this point that Mr. Azar's signature achievement will have been to rebrand his department as the "Department of Life." Or maybe he will be remembered for establishing a division of Conscience and Religious Freedom, designed to permit health care providers to deny legal and often medically indicated health care services to certain patients as a matter of religious conscience.

Mr. Azar, a "cabinet sponsor" of Capitol Ministries, the Bible study group attended by multiple members of Mr. Trump's cabinet, brought with him to Health and Human Services an immovable conviction in the righteousness of the pharmaceutical industry (presumably formed during his five-year stint as an executive and lobbyist in the business), a willingness to speak in the most servile way about "the courage" and "openness to change" of Mr. Trump, and a commitment to anti-abortion politics, abstinence education and other causes of the religious right. What he did not bring, evidently, was any notable ability to manage a pandemic. Who would have guessed that a man skilled at praising Mr. Trump would not be the top choice for organizing the development of a virus testing program, the delivery of urgently needed protective gear to health care workers or a plan for augmenting hospital capabilities?

Or consider Ben Carson, the secretary of Housing and Urban Development, a member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force and another “cabinet sponsor” of Capitol Ministries. As a former pediatric neurosurgeon, Mr. Carson brought more knowledge about medicine to his post than knowledge about housing issues. But that medical knowledge didn’t stop him from asserting on March 8 that for the “healthy individual” thinking of attending one of Mr. Trump’s then-ongoing large-scale campaign rallies, “there’s no reason that you shouldn’t go.”

It is fair to point out that the failings of the Trump administration in the current pandemic are at least as attributable to its economic ideology as they are to its religious inclinations. When the so-called private sector is supposed to have the answer to every problem, it’s hard to deal effectively with the very public problem of a pandemic and its economic consequences. But if you examine the political roots of the life-threatening belief in the privatization of everything, you’ll see that Christian nationalism played a major role in creating and promoting the economic foundations of America’s incompetent response to the pandemic.

For decades, Christian nationalist leaders have lined up with the anti-government, anti-tax agenda not just as a matter of politics but also as a matter of theology. Ken Blackwell of the Family Research Council, one of the Christian right’s major activist groups, has gone so far as to cast food stamps and other forms of government assistance for essential services as contrary to the “biblical model.” Limited government, according to this line of thinking, is “godly government.”

When a strong centralized response is needed from the federal government, it doesn’t help to have an administration that has never believed in a federal government serving the public good. Ordinarily, the consequences of this kind of behavior don’t show up for some time. In the case of a pandemic, the consequences are too obvious to ignore.

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