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American Evangelicals and the European Union

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the potential reasons for the antagonistic sentiments that are held by many Protestant evangelicals, in the United States, towards the European Union. The possible causal factors include the following:

- 1) The legacy of anti-internationalism among evangelicals, dating back to the debate over American membership in the League of Nations almost 100 years ago;
- 2) The level of attraction to the current wave of “populist” politics and economics;
- 3) The aversion of politically conservative American evangelicals to the perception of Europe as a “socialist” continent;
- 4) The negative portrayal of the European Union, as an instrument of “globalism,” in widely held manifestations of American evangelical theology.

A major dimension of this paper will be an examination of the points of tangency between the preceding elements, including a consideration of the extent to which they reinforce and support one another. Does the skepticism with which American evangelicals view the European Union – and other multinational institutions – primarily stem from the application of certain theological positions that are reinforced by their political perspectives, or is it the other way around? Is evangelical antipathy towards the EU a manifestation of the recent observation by Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway and Director-General of the World Health Organization, that Americans who maintain that “Washington is the problem,” and Europeans who assert that “Brussels is the problem,” are essentially making the same argument? How accurate is the economic narrative that emerges from this interaction of politics and theology?

In his book, The Meaning of the Twentieth Century: The Great Transition, the Quaker economist Kenneth Boulding maintained that a worldview consists of three parts: a persuasive interpretation of history, a moral system which produces subsequent actions, and a particular outlook for the future.¹ All of these dimensions are relevant to an understanding of the reasons for the antagonistic sentiments which are held by many conservative Protestant evangelicals, in the United States, towards the European Union.² The historical roots of this perspective can be found in the opposition of conservative Protestants to American membership in the League of Nations one hundred years ago.³ Markku Ruotsila has concluded that the skepticism towards international institutions that emanated from this event “was a clearly argued and widely believed-in set of attitudes that objected to multilateral cooperation in international organizations that were multiethnic, secular, and political; that contained members from many different religious traditions; and that pretended to worldwide supranational authority.”⁴ This final element has been an integral part of the anti-internationalist narrative from the time of the League of Nations debate until the present day. A prime example can be found in the widespread evangelical interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel, which can be found in Chapter Eleven of the Book of Genesis. Jacob Viner, who is regarded as one of the early founders of what has become known as the “Chicago School” of economics,⁵ cited this passage,

¹ Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Meaning of the Twentieth Century: The Great Transition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 162-163.

² The historian George Marsden has asserted that “the essential evangelical beliefs include (1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life.” *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 4-5. The use of the adjective, “conservative,” primarily refers to the political and cultural inclinations of a significant proportion of the evangelical community in the United States.

³ It should be noted that persons with evangelical beliefs, as defined by George Marsden, were present, in significant numbers, in a wider range of Protestant denominations than would be the case today.

⁴ Markku Ruotsila, *The Origins of Christian Anti-Internationalism: Conservative Evangelicals and the League of Nations* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 188.

⁵ Although the “Chicago School” phrase did not become commonly used until after Jacob Viner left the University of Chicago for Princeton University in 1946, he is identified by Johan Van Overtveldt as a “prime example” of a

in the 1960's, as an example of "a text which has been an obstacle to acceptance on religious grounds of a universalistic or cosmopolitan approach to international relations."⁶ A contemporary example of this reluctance can be found in the writings and commentaries of David Jeremiah, the senior pastor of Shadow Mountain Community Church, an evangelical "megachurch" in the suburbs of San Diego, California, who is also the featured speaker on the Turning Point syndicated radio and television programs. His interpretation of this passage is that "mankind, settling in smaller communities throughout the world, would not be tempted toward the self-importance and sense of power that massive centralization would foster."⁷ It should be noted that these sentiments have not been shared, historically, by other branches of Protestant Christianity in the United States. Michael Thompson has written that one of the defining features of what he has described as "Christian internationalism," in the time period between the two World Wars, "was its distinct *structure of thinking* (emphasis in the original) that held Christian universalism to be a check against nationalism rather than a boon for it."⁸ By contrast, Thompson maintains that conservative evangelicals were largely disengaged from these initiatives, in part because of their disagreements with those Protestants whose theological

"Chicago" economist. *The Chicago School: How the University of Chicago Assembled the Thinkers Who Revolutionized Economics and Business* (Chicago: B2 Books, 2007), 2, 4.

⁶ Jacob Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order: An Essay in Intellectual History* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1972), 48. As an aside, it has been quite common, in the years following the Second World War, for American evangelical pastors, who hold an anti-internationalist perspective, to metaphorically refer to the United Nations headquarters in New York as a modern-day "Tower of Babel." For an example, see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 161. A very recent application of the "Tower of Babel" metaphor, to this year's World Economic Forum, in this case, can be found in Jon Miltimore's Acton Institute commentary, "What if Davos Man got baptized?"

<https://acton.org/publications/transatlantic/2018/01/26/what-if-davos-man-got-baptized> Accessed 29 January 2018.

⁷ David Jeremiah, *The Coming Economic Armageddon: What Bible Prophecy Warns about the New Global Economy* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 34-35.

⁸ Michael G. Thompson, *For God and Globe: Christian Internationalism in the United States between the Great War and the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 4. Scott Thomas has added that Protestant internationalists, during this time period, "not only backed the Marshall Plan but also engaged in the construction of the Bretton Woods system" (which included the establishment of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank). "The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Changing Character of International Politics" (pp. 110-138), in Max L. Stackhouse with Diane B. Obenchain (eds.), *God and Globalization, vol 3: Christ and the Dominions of Civilization* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 125-126.

perspectives were too “liberal” and “modern” for their way of thinking.⁹

During this time, evangelical theology in the United States also incorporated, to an increasing degree, the last dimension of Boulding’s conception of a worldview: a particular outlook for the future. Thompson describes this outlook as “a belief that contemporary history as interpreted through biblical prophecy revealed the activity of the anti-Christ and the end of the world.”¹⁰ One of the manifestations of this perspective, in combination with the historical background that has been discussed previously, is a skepticism, if not outright hostility, to global organizations to which the United States not only belongs, but was also instrumental in their establishment, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.¹¹ As the “European project” of economic and (to some extent) political integration has both widened and deepened over the last seventy years, this outlook has been extended to what has become the European Union, even though the United States is not, and never will be, a member of this body. An example of the theological roots associated with this disposition can be found in David Jeremiah’s application of certain passages in the Old Testament book of Daniel. Jeremiah’s interpretation leads to the conclusion that the European Union not only represents a

⁹ Ibid., pp. 5-6. As a part of the same discussion, Thompson also argues that the views of American Protestant internationalists of the inter-war period resisted a simple characterization, representing instead “a conciliatory and astute blend of neo-orthodoxy and traditional evangelicalism.” On the original point, Markku Ruotsila has concurred in the judgment that Christian anti-internationalism, at the time of the League of Nations debate in the United States, “was an aspect of the wider fight against modernist theology and the Social Gospel,” which evangelicals associated with a de-emphasis on the need for personal conversion. Ruotsila, op. cit. Mark Amstutz has added that while evangelicals “have been strongly committed to the idea of the world as a coherent moral community, they have nonetheless been skeptical of the role of international governmental organizations,” in part due to the judgment that these institutions embodied a belief “that world peace could be achieved without a fundamental spiritual transformation.” *Evangelicals and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 66.

¹⁰ Thompson, p. 6.

¹¹ David Jeremiah provides a negative characterization of the mission and work of the United Nations, including the statement (p. 38) that “many of these works (of art in the United Nations headquarters building) contain biblical allusions, though Bible passages are often misquoted and certainly misapplied by their use in support of globalism.” *The Coming Economic Armageddon*, pp. 37-40. By contrast, Jeremiah treats the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in a more benign manner, while indicating that their current existence could pave the way for a “real global bank” with “real control of the world’s economy.” Ibid., pp. 60-61.

revival of the ancient Roman Empire, but will also provide the institutional platform for the eventual rise to power of the person of the anti-Christ, who is referenced in the New Testament book of Revelation.¹² The irony of this situation is that a number of the early proponents of European integration were motivated by their Christian (albeit not evangelical) convictions, and that the European political parties in the Christian Democratic tradition have been historically supportive of the European project. Frans Alting von Geusau has supported the former argument by stating that “these men changed the course of European and Western history, acting from the depth of their faith as Christians.”¹³ With respect to the latter position, Wolfram Kaiser has contended that the Christian Democratic movement across Europe, as represented by the contemporary European People’s Party (EPP), “dominated the formation of the ECSC/EEC core Europe with fundamental long-term repercussions for the present-day EU.”¹⁴ The lack of awareness of this historical legacy could very well explain why the association of European integration with Catholicism has never found much traction among American evangelicals. In

¹² David Jeremiah, *What in the World Is Going On? 10 Prophetic Clues You Cannot Afford to Ignore* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 56-65. Jeremiah’s specific statement, on page 65, is that “the new European Union is one of the conditional preludes to the coming of the Antichrist.” Page 61 of this volume also contains a map in which the assumed boundaries of the old Roman Empire are imposed upon the current Member States of the European Union. Brent Nelsen and James Guth have maintained that similar sentiments are present among European evangelicals, but they conclude that once an observer has taken “denominational and party membership into account, we can safely assume that the number of end-times Christians is fewer than five percent in each of the Protestant European countries.” “European Union or Kingdom of the Antichrist? Protestant apocalyptic narratives and European unity.” *National Identities*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2017), 253. Nelsen and Guth also conclude that “popular American teachings on the EU have combined with traditional anti-Catholicism to undergird the anti-EU stance of conservative Christians in Protestant areas of Europe.” *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹³ Frans A. M. Alting von Geusau, *European Unification into the Twenty First Century: Fading, Failing, Fragile?* (Oisterwijk, NL: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2012), 39. The specific persons who are referenced in this passage are Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Alcide de Gasperi, and Konrad Adenauer. Alan Fimister has affirmed this conclusion by writing that Robert Schuman “was resolved to apply to these (political and economic) problems (Jacques) Maritain’s philosophy of Christian Democracy.” Fimister also concludes that “Konrad Adenauer was determined to integrate Germany within a western Christian bloc,” and that Schuman viewed Jean Monnet’s proposal for an European Coal and Steel Community “as a way of moving towards the supranational Christian Democratic society in which he believed.” *Robert Schuman: Neo-Scholastic Humanism and the Reunification of Europe* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2008), 255-256.

¹⁴ Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9. The acronym “ECSC” stands for the European Coal and Steel Community, while the abbreviation “EEC” represents the European Economic Community. The Web address for the European People’s Party is <http://epp.eu/>

recent decades, the dominant narrative in the United States has been one of a sharp decline in Christian belief and practice throughout most of Europe, crossing denominational and ecclesiastical lines.¹⁵

While American evangelical perspectives on the European Union may have their roots in history and theology, they have certainly been influenced by various modes of thought, as well as current trends, within political economy; the paradigm in which politics, economics, and ethical judgments interact with one another. This combination constitutes an example of the second element of Boulding's description of a worldview: a moral system which produces subsequent actions. One of the common political critiques of the European Union, particularly among "conservatives" on both sides of the Atlantic, is that the EU's mission has evolved from the original intent of its founders – the promotion of post-war recovery and peace through economic integration – to the creation of a regional system of administrative control that will erode both democracy and national sovereignty. Todd Huizenga, a former U.S. diplomat in Europe who is now affiliated with the Acton Institute of Grand Rapids, Michigan, has described the EU as a "soft utopia," in contrast to the "hard utopias" of fascism and Communism.¹⁶ The Acton Institute, which includes both conservative evangelicals and Catholics in its base of support, expanded upon this theme in a three-part series, authored by Stephen Copp, entitled "God, Brexit, and EUtopia," which was posted on its Religion and Liberty Transatlantic Webpage between December 5th and 18th, 2017.¹⁷ In the first of these essays, Copp asserted that

¹⁵ For an example of this perspective, see George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

¹⁶ Todd Huizenga, *The New Totalitarian Temptation: Global Governance and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), viii. As an example of the potential linkage between political and theological judgments, Huizenga also describes contemporary Europe as "atheistic" and "post-Christian," and asserts that the "soft utopia that is the EU might be considered the natural, almost inevitable face of Christendom gone apostate" (p. xvii).

¹⁷ The Web address for this online publication is <https://acton.org/publications/transatlantic/>

while “the key protagonists of the early European project included some no doubt who shared an explicit moral/religious vision for its future,” the inner soul of contemporary Europe is “empty” and “a vacuum which has yet to be filled – and history sets dangerous precedents for this.”¹⁸ In the third column in this series, Copp argues that “the EU utopian vision, like all utopian visions, clashes with the ideal of self-determination.”¹⁹ All of these arguments help to form the basis for the judgment that the European Union represents an example of an attempt to engage in “global governance”: a phrase that immediately raises concerns among both political and religious “conservatives,” because the institutional manifestations of this concept are seen as potential threats to their respective freedoms. Robert Gorman, in a publication of the Acton Institute’s Christian Social Thought series, supports this conclusion by claiming that certain institutional representatives of the European Union, such as the president of the European Commission, are “identifiable advocates of global governance.”²⁰ While Todd Huizenga concludes that while “the global governance ideology has not yet won the day in the EU,” he expresses the view that there is still a fundamental difference in outlook between the United States and the European Union with respect to the potential trade-offs between “democratic sovereignty and global governance.”²¹ This distinction could help to explain the enthusiasm of American conservatives – of all varieties - for the outcome of the “Brexit” referendum in the United Kingdom in June, 2016, in spite of the fact that the United States had no direct stake in the outcome of that vote.²²

¹⁸ Stephen F. Copp, *God, Brexit, and EUtopia (Part 1)*. Religion and Liberty Transatlantic. <https://acton.org/publications/transatlantic/2017/12/05/god-brexit-and-eutopia-part-1> Accessed 12 December 2017.

¹⁹ Copp, *A non-utopian Christian vision for Europe: God, Brexit, and EUtopia (Part 3)*. Religion and Liberty Transatlantic. <https://acton.org/publications/transatlantic/2017/12/18/non-utopian-christian-vision-europe-god-brexit-and-eutopia> Accessed 19 December 2017.

²⁰ Robert F. Gorman, *What’s Wrong with Global Governance?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, 2016), 41.

²¹ Huizenga, pp. 124-125. John Fonte, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, is more definitive in his judgment on this issue. Chapter Six of his book, *Sovereignty or Submission: Will Americans Rule Themselves or Be Ruled by Others?* (New York: Encounter Books, 2011) is entitled, “The European Union: A Model of Global Governance.”

This reaction to Great Britain’s decision, by majority vote, to leave the European Union, was preceded by warnings, from both sides of the Atlantic, that the United States should be wary of following Europe’s example: not just in politics and culture, but in economics as well. Daniel Hannan, a Member of the European Parliament from the United Kingdom who was a prominent supporter of the Leave campaign in the run-up to the “Brexit” referendum, is also the author of a previous book whose title is partially derived from Friedrich von Hayek’s 1944 volume, The Road to Serfdom.²³ The fifth chapter is entitled, “Don’t Copy Europe,” and consists of a series of admonitions by Mr. Hannan to the effect that the United States would do well to resist an approach to public policy which would “Europeanize” (i.e., increase the size and scope of governmental responsibility, with correspondingly higher levels of public spending, taxation, and regulation) American life in areas such as health care, welfare, civil society, immigration, and federalism, as well as the economy as a whole.²⁴ In a more recently published work, Samuel Gregg, who serves as Director of Research for the Acton Institute, sees “worrying parallels” between the United States and the European Union in the following areas:

- The distribution of economic benefits on the basis of political criteria;
- The establishment of public systems of social welfare that are financially unsustainable;
- “Creating a monetary system that has fallen prey to a dangerous cycle of debt and deficits”;

²² An exception to the standard “conservative” critique of the EU has been provided by Dalibor Rohac, of the American Enterprise Institute, in *Towards An Imperfect Union: A Conservative Case for the EU* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

²³ Daniel Hannan, *The New Road to Serfdom: A Letter of Warning to America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.73-118. Mr. Hannan was also the opening speaker at the 2011 Free Market Forum in Atlanta, Georgia. The author attended this conference, which was primarily sponsored by Hillsdale College, in cooperation with the Acton Institute and the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, an organization of evangelical institutions located primarily in the United States.

- An inconsistent response to the process of globalization, which is contributing to an increased level of political and economic tensions.²⁵

These concerns resonate with conservative evangelicals in the United States, given the historic aversion to governmental actions that might be regarded as a movement in the direction of “socialism,” in spite of the imprecision often associated with the definition of that term. Looking back to the 1930’s, Darren Dochuk has maintained that a combination of “their end-times beliefs” with their conservative social outlook “caused them (evangelical Protestants) to rail against the *isms* (emphasis in the original) perceived to be at the center of the New Deal – socialism and internationalism.”²⁶ In our present age, these dispositions can also help to explain the intensity of conservative opposition, including among evangelicals, to the centerpiece of the Affordable Care Act – the individual insurance mandate – even though that legislation built upon the existing private health insurance system, and did not constitute a national (“single-payer”) approach.

What is the connective tissue that holds all of the various dimensions – historical, theological, political, and economic – of American evangelical antipathy towards the European Union together? Writing in 1950, the English Catholic theologian Ronald Knox characterized the evangelical emphasis on an experiential faith as one in which “you needed neither a theology nor a liturgy; you did not take the strain of intellectual inquiry, nor associate yourself wholeheartedly with any historic tradition of worship.”²⁷ Knox also concluded that “at the heart of him, the Evangelical is always an experimentalist,”²⁸ and that the United States is “the last refuge” for this type of religious enthusiasm.²⁹ For a number of reasons, American evangelicals

²⁵ Samuel Gregg, *Becoming Europe: Economic Decline, Culture, and How America Can Avoid a European Future* (New York: Encounter Books, 2013), 120.

²⁶ Dochuk, p. 121.

²⁷ R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1950), 589.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 588.

appear, for the most part, to have made a major contribution towards the current political and social “experiment” with populist nationalism in the United States. One of the “enthusiasms” which propels this latter movement, in both the North American and European continents, is a critical perspective towards institutions, of all types, which are thought to represent “the establishment,” and the European Union serves a prime example for those who hold these views.³⁰ Martin Wolf, the associate editor and chief economics commentator for the Financial Times, has described the populist phenomenon in the following manner:

The abiding characteristic of populism is its division of the world into a virtuous people on the one hand, and corrupt elites and threatening outsiders on the other. Populists distrust institutions, especially those that constrain the ‘will of the people,’ such as courts, independent media, the bureaucracy and fiscal or monetary rules. Populists reject credentialed experts. They are also suspicious of free markets and free trade.³¹

The argument can certainly be made that all of the factors which have contributed to a negative outlook on the European Union, on the part of American evangelicals, have also helped to facilitate a certain degree of acceptance of the populist narrative that Wolf has described. American evangelicals already regard themselves as a “virtuous people,” even in comparison to members of other Christian traditions, and the theological and political perspectives which have been previously discussed help to foster an inherent suspicion of “elites” and “outsiders.” The evangelical emphasis on “experience,” which was referenced by Ronald Knox, may very well provide support for the lack of trust in “institutions” and “credentialed experts” which is mentioned by Wolf, especially if those institutions and persons are not rooted in a relatively local community. Although American evangelicals tend to think of themselves as “pro-market”

²⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁰ In a public lecture last April, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway and Director-General of the World Health Organization, stated that “Americans who maintain that ‘Washington is the problem,’ and Europeans who assert that ‘Brussels is the problem,’ are essentially making the same argument.” Author’s notes from the 32nd Adlai E. Stevenson II Memorial Lecture, held at Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois, April 13, 2017.

³¹ Martin Wolf, “The economic origins of the populist surge.” *Financial Times*, June 27, 2017, p. 9.

(especially if it is regarded as the opposite of being “pro-government”) their openness to nationalist economic arguments suggests that those “enthusiasms” may very well stop at the water’s edge.³² These sentiments may have also been fueled by a delayed reaction to the events surrounding the financial crisis and global recession of 2007 – 2009. Martin Wolf has stated that these events “not only had huge costs,” but that “they also damaged confidence in – and so the legitimacy of – financial and policy-making elites.”³³

While American evangelical pre-dispositions towards the European Union, as an institution, may have their intellectual roots in particular theological perspectives and certain readings of history, the contemporary vigor with which these views are held has been fueled by widely shared outlooks in politics and economics, including, but not limited to, the current trends towards populist and nationalist policies. The employment of words and phrases such as “sovereignty” and “global governance” by critics of transnational institutions, including the European Union, resonate with considerable portions of the American evangelical community in ways that reinforce and accelerate the intensity with which a critical position is held, in part because it makes these issues seem more relevant to citizens of the United States. The passage of time will tell how the winds of change that were ushered in by the beginning of the “Age of Anxiety,” which Gideon Rachman, the chief foreign affairs commentator for the Financial Times, dates from 2008 to the present, will influence the application of these beliefs.³⁴

³² This figure of speech was used by U.S. Senator Arthur Vandenberg, in the 1940’s, to refer to a bi-partisan approach to American foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II. See Arthur H. Vandenberg, Jr. (ed.), *The Private Papers of Senator Vandenberg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), 112.

³³ Wolf, *op. cit.* A defense of the role of institutions during these years has been provided by Daniel Drezner in *The System Worked: How the World Stopped another Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁴ Gideon Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future: American Power in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 11.

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