

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Mystics for Skeptics *On Trump, Mysticism, and the Power of Positive Thinking*

By: Reverend Charles Brock

June 2020

Donald Trump doesn't seem to be very religious in any conventional sense. Many will think that "mystic" doesn't apply to him at all.

But he does represent more than himself. He has a huge following out there, especially the evangelical wing of both Protestant and Catholic churches. Why is this? Clearly because Trump represents their views on many subjects, and they are willing to give him a pass on his sexual sins, which shows how important they think his views are parallel to their own – especially on immigration, Israel, a deep state that thwarts good people, abortion, school prayer, "rugged individualism" vs. "socialism," and white supremacy. Many believe Trump was chosen by God.

Trump is a self-proclaimed Presbyterian, which is probably the least mystical in the "presence" mysticism of all the denominations. But they are strong on the will of God. And evangelical Presbyterians bring out identification with Christ and biblical stories in their sermons as a key aspect of the faith.

Trump also represents a group of more liberal Christians, not primarily evangelicals, who believe in a self-help gospel known as "the power of positive thinking," and I want to look at that and compare Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, former minister of Trump's Marble Collegiate Church, with Reinhold Niebuhr, the leading New York City liberal theologian during the Peale era. Neither were mystics, but they were the major players for the soul of America in their time.



Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking: A Practical Guide to Mastering the Problems of Everyday Living* is a 1952 [self-help](#) book. It provides anecdotal case histories of positive thinking, and practical instructions that were designed to help the reader achieve a permanent and optimistic attitude. These techniques usually involved affirmations and visualizations. Peale claimed that such techniques would give the reader a higher satisfaction and quality of life. *The Power of Positive Thinking* was negatively reviewed by scholars and health experts, but was popular and has sold well.

Peale states 10 rules for “overcoming inadequacy attitudes and learning to practice faith.” The rules include the following with religious points in italics:

1. Picture yourself as succeeding.
2. Think a positive thought to drown out a negative thought.
3. Minimize obstacles.
4. Do not attempt to copy others.
5. Repeat *“If God be for us, who can be against us?”* 10 times every day.
6. Work with a counselor.
7. Repeat *“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me”* 10 times every day.
8. Develop a strong self-respect.
9. *Affirm that you are in God's hands.*
10. *Believe that you receive power from God.*

[Trump](#) called Peale “his pastor” and “one of the greatest speakers” he had ever heard. [Fred](#) and [Mary Trump](#), President Trump's parents, traveled to the Marble Collegiate Church in Manhattan with their children to hear Peale's sermons. Trump grew up hearing Peale's teachings from his parents, and Peale officiated his first wedding. Trump credits his survival in 1990 after bankruptcy to Peale's positive thinking teachings.

Trump follows Peale's views and claims they will help America. This helps explain some of his views on the coronavirus and getting America back to work again. Believe it to be true that the virus is on the wane, and help others believe it too. It is not just a gimmick

to gain re-election, but he really believes it because it is optimistic and religious to do so. That is Peale all the way.

There are many criticisms. [M. Scott Peck, M.D.](#), defines sound mental health as “a dedication to reality at all costs.” This includes tolerance for delayed gratification, the pain of problem-solving, and the willingness and ability to take responsibility for mistakes. Peale sounds more like a commencement speaker than a theologian.

[Episcopal](#) theologian John M. Krumm criticized Peale's teachings for their basis in religion. Very little is said about the sovereign mind and purpose of God; much is made of the things men can say to themselves and can do to bring about their ambitions and purposes. Krumm argues that “the predominant use of impersonal symbols for God is a serious and dangerous invitation to regard man as the center of reality and the Divine Reality as an impersonal power, the use and purpose of which is determined by the man who takes hold of it and employs it as he thinks best.”[1]

[Edmund Fuller](#), book review editor of the *Episcopal Churchnews*, warned against following Peale's teachings in an article titled “Pitchmen in the Pulpit” from March 1957. He writes that Peale's books have no connection to Christianity and that they “influence, mislead and often disillusion sick, maladjusted, unhappy or ill-constructed people, obscuring for them the Christian realities. They offer easy comforts, easy solutions to problems and mysteries that sometimes, perhaps, have no comforts or solutions at all, in glib, worldly terms. They offer a cheap 'happiness' in lieu of the joy Christianity can offer.”[2]

Reinhold Niebuhr accused Peale of “trying to make a success story out of Christianity” by seeking a largely white, middle-class audience. And many psychologists wrote off his book as simplistic Pollyanna poppycock.[3]

During the Covid-19 crisis of 2020, most churches were closed for in-person worship by governors' orders. Trump said America needs more prayer especially now. He ordered that houses of worship be allowed to reopen and claimed he will overrule any governor who refuses. He said: “Some governors have deemed liquor stores and abortion clinics as essential, but have left out churches and other houses of worship. It's not right. So I'm correcting this injustice. In America, we need more prayer, not less.”[4] “Although Trump called for worshipers to return to church in person on the holiday weekend [Memorial Day 2020], the president did not. He played golf on Sunday morning.”[5]

Trump is a Presbyterian born and bred. His grandfather was a German Lutheran. The small town of Kallstadt has only one religious building, the Central Lutheran church but the area is overwhelmingly Calvinist. Donald's father, Frederick Christ Trump, was born in the Bronx, and his mother was born in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, a land famed for its strict Presbyterianism. They were both members of the Reformed Church of America.

A few words about Calvinism, probably the most influential Protestant theology in America (though not the biggest – Baptist and Methodist outgun the Presbyterians, and the Roman Catholic Church is by far the largest).

“While [Lutheranism](#) was largely confined to parts of Germany and to [Scandinavia](#), Calvinism spread into England, [Scotland](#), France, the Netherlands, the English-speaking colonies of [North America](#), and parts of Germany and central Europe ... Geneva became the center of an international movement and a model for churches elsewhere. [John Knox](#), the Calvinist leader of Scotland, described Geneva as “the most perfect school of [Christ](#) that ever was on the Earth since the days of the Apostles.”

Calvinism was immediately popular and was appealing across geographic and social boundaries. In France it was attractive primarily to the nobility and the urban upper classes, in Germany it found adherents among both burghers and princes, and in England and the [Netherlands](#) it made converts in every [social group](#). In the Anglo-Saxon world, Calvinist ideas found embodiment in English [Puritanism](#), whose [ethos](#) proved vastly influential in North America beginning in the 17th century.”[6]

There are some famous views associated with Calvinism, especially from Max Weber about the relation to the spirit of Capitalism. Roughly his argument is that Calvinism expressed support for hard work, frugality, discipline, avoidance of life’s pleasures, and willingness to defer satisfactions as a formula for wealth individually and nationally. Earning money is a gift from God and is a religious duty to do so. Calvin was not a keen supporter of the poor such as his German counterpart Thomas Munzer, the leader of the Peasants Revolt. The rich very much liked Calvinism.

“Calvinism entailed that people were predestined to be either among the saved or among the damned. There was nothing that the individual or the religion could do to affect that fate.

Yet the idea of predestination left people uncertain about whether they were among the saved. To reduce this uncertainty, the Calvinists developed the idea that signs could be used as indicators of whether a person was saved. People were urged to work hard, because if they were diligent, they would uncover the signs of salvation, which were to be found in economic success. In sum, the Calvinist was urged to engage in intense, worldly activity and to become a ‘man of vocation.’”[7]

Trump often says he loves hard work. At his White House news briefing on the coronavirus on March 19, President Trump offered high praise for the commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, Stephen Hahn. “He’s worked, like, probably as hard or harder than anybody,” Mr. Trump said. Then he corrected himself: “Other than maybe Mike Pence — or me.”

There are other parallels. “Calvin believed that humans are subject to two kinds of government. There is the “the kingdom of Christ,” which “is situated in the soul ... and relates to eternal life,” and there is the “civil government,” which relates to “civil justice and the regulation of external conduct.”

Calvin was clear that, although these two governments are not at variance with one another, they are nevertheless things very different and remote from each other. He went so far as to describe it as a “Jewish folly ... to seek and include the kingdom of Christ under the elements of this world.”[8] In other words, keep government out of religion, and Trump and evangelicals strongly agree.

What Trump completely ignores is one of the stoutest and foremost points in Calvinism – its emphasis on sin, forgiveness, and repentance. He is (in)famous for his statement: ‘Why do I have to repent, why do I have to ask for forgiveness if [I’m] not making mistakes?’ But he also said: ‘When I drink my little wine ... and have my little cracker, I guess that is a form of asking for forgiveness.’”[9]

One could search a long time before coming across a less profound view of the Eucharist.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), very much an Anglican Calvinist at least in his liturgies, wrote a prayer of confession still widely used in Anglican churches today. Interestingly later versions dropped the underscored phrases which were strict Calvinism:

"Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways, like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders. Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults. Restore thou them that be penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind, in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy name. Amen."

Every Reformed service worth its moniker begins with a prayer of confession similar to the above. And what follows are words of forgiveness. Repentance – changing one’s ways – is then expected.

Regarding Capitalism, ironically, Trump likes socialism for the rich but not for the poor. According to Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor: “Trump is promoting socialism for the rich and harsh capitalism for everyone else in other ways. GM has got more than \$600m in federal contracts, plus \$500m in tax breaks. Some of this has gone into the pockets of GM executives. Chairman and CEO Mary Barra raked in almost \$22m in total compensation in 2017 alone.

60 percent of America's wealth is now inherited. Many of today's super-rich have never done a day's work in their lives. After a few generations of this, almost all of the nation's wealth will be in the hands of a few thousand non-working families. To the conservative mind, the specter of socialism conjures up a society in which no one is held accountable, and no one has to work for what they receive. Yet that's exactly the society Trump and the Republicans are promoting for the rich.”[10]

How does this compare with mysticism? Does it fit any of my three categories of presence, will of God, or identification? It is a stretch, but taking the religious people Trump represents (around 35 percent of the religious population of America depending on criteria), I would say there is a strong belief in will of God and identification in most of them. In that sense, Trump strongly represents a form of mysticism even if he isn't one himself.

There are many problems in his presidency. According to a Washington Post article in late May: “In recent days, as the coronavirus death toll has approached 100,000, Trump has pushed conspiracy theories alleging criminality by his predecessor, [made baseless charges of voter fraud](#), [accused dozens of people of felonies](#), used [taxpayer-funded events to advance his political message](#) and fanned coronavirus culture wars over issues such as face masks and church closings.”[11]

On another issue, he is never happy with Islam. “They [Muslims] are chopping off heads in Syria. Christianity is under siege. I'm Protestant, Presbyterian, and I'm proud of it. Other religions frankly are banding together, we need to band together.”[12]

Trump is not popular with some Republicans. David Frum, a conservative and former speechwriter for George W. Bush, condemned “the moral damage Trump has inflicted on America's global power and domestic politics.” Frum laments the deceit and pseudo-information infecting our discourse, the performative cruelty overpowering our politics, and the misguided disdain for our democratic allies. “How to stand for any liberal, democratic, or humane principle or value under a president who so noisily repudiates them all?” he asks.

Frum emphasizes the complicity of his old Republican and conservative comrades. In his book “Trumpocracy,” Frum laments that Trump had “ripped the conscience out of half of the political spectrum,” but he still hoped that a “redeemed and repurposed” GOP could emerge. Now, that hope is mostly dead; Republicans have embraced “white ethnic chauvinism,” Frum writes, and even with another presidential victory their party will be “wrecked forever.” That's because, to win in November, Trump will need to wage a full-on culture war and suppress minority voters, all in the service of a narrow Electoral College majority to offset a possible second popular-vote defeat, the third such outcome in 20 years. “What will be the character of such a political party after such a history?” Frum wonders. “Not a democratic political party, that's for sure. It will have degenerated into a caudillo's personal entourage.”

After two books and one term of Donald Trump, Frum can't seem to take it anymore; the Trumpocalypse wrought by this Trumpocracy is just too much. "Over the past four years, I have thought and spoken and written about Donald Trump almost more than I can bear," he confesses. 'We have to believe this shameful episode will end soon,' he writes, and that Trump will occupy the very lowest place on the roster of ex-presidents.'"[13]

To end, Trump's Presbyterianism and especially the Norman Vincent Peale brand has had an influence. He has attracted huge amounts of evangelicals and liberals in the Peale tradition. But though they may be mystics in the sense of both will of God and identification, one must say that there are problems here that need to be worked on. The churches need to weigh in. We leave it ultimately to the American voter to see if it can be put right.

Addendum: In the week of June 1, 2020, there were protests all over America because of the killing of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis on Memorial Day. One subsequent protest across from the White House was peaceful, but riot troops cleared the place with force and tear gas. After they were dispersed, Trump and party walked from the White House to the little church where presidents since James Madison worshipped, and stood in front of the church holding up a Bible. Participants "saw on their phones images of the president and cohort striding across the space they had just been ousted from, to stand before the church as cameras rolled. ... The White House tweeted a video showing Trump's walk and pose and giving the thumbs up as he strode past a line of riot police, set to triumphal music. The Right Rev. Mariann Budde, Episcopal bishop of Washington based at St John's Lafayette, which is known for its liberal bent, said she was also outraged. She told ABC: "This is an excruciating moment and a crisis moment in our country, where we need healing and reconciliation and we need justice." The Right Rev. Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, accused Trump of using "a church building and the Holy Bible for partisan political purposes." [14]

Why did he display a Bible? One can only speculate as he didn't say anything, but it may be to convince the Evangelicals that he is on their side. It reminded me of those who lifted Mao's Little Red Book or radicals elevating the Qur'an in times of war. And strangely it reminds me of John Brown making the pledge in church to fight slavery. Ah, if only Trump had followed him today and pledged to eliminate white supremacy. "D.C. had no problems last night," the president wrote. "Many arrests. Great job done by all. Overwhelming force. Domination." [15]



- [1] *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Wikipedia (edited)
 - [2] *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Wikipedia (edited)
 - [3] Russell Chandler, *Obit for Peale*, Los Angeles Times, Dec. 26, 1993
 - [4] Fox TV News, May 22, 2020
 - [5] Washington Post, Memorial Day 2020
 - [6] [William J. Bouwsma](#), *Calvinism*, Encyclopedia Britannica, revised 2018
 - [7] From Max Weber – *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, excerpts from Chrome ISA, 2020
 - [8] Jonathan Cole, *A Calvinist Take On Why Evangelicals Support Donald Trump*, Political Theology Network, Dec. 12, 2017
 - [9] Huff Post
 - [10] Robert Reich, *Trump offers Socialism for the Rich, Capitalism for Everyone Else*, Guardian UK, Feb. 11, 2019
 - [11] Toluse Olorunnipa, Ashley Parker, *Trump opts for a 2016 disruption strategy that Democrats say is ill-suited for a pandemic*, Washington Post, May 23, 2020
 - [12] Ibid Fox News
 - [13] Caolos Lozada, *What is the Trumpocalypse, and is there a way out?* Review of David Frum’s book TRUMPOCALYPSE: Restoring American Democracy, Harper 2020 – May 21, 2020, Washington Post
 - [14] *“They turned holy ground into a battleground” – clergy teargassed by Washington police*, The Guardian, June 2, 2020
 - [15] Washington Post, June 2, 2020
- Marble Church Image from <https://www.marblechurch.org/welcome/press>
Trump image from thebriio.com
John Brown image from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/brown-pottawatomie-massacre/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Board of Trustees.

