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Reaching Beyond National Leaders

What the Church and America need more than Donald Trump

After Donald Trump finishes plastering a snarling face on conservatism, any Republican nominee will face a dauntingly steep climb to reach even the paltry numbers that doomed Mitt Romney. --George Will

It was the meteoric rise of an obscure community organizer to the pinnacle of world power in 2008 that calls to mind the late Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) and his “The Medium Is the Message.” McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher of communication theory, adopted the term “massage” to denote the effect each medium has on the human sensorium, a part of the brain or the brain itself regarded as the seat of sensation. In this world, broad media exposure—good and bad—evidently excites our sensoriums and is strangely enhancing in a celebrity-driven culture.

Among current presidential contenders, “The Donald” has especially excited evangelical “sensoriums,” perhaps causing many to wonder if he is a very real help in a time of need.

For nearly six weeks, Donald Trump, the bombastic billionaire mega-developer and reality TV personality has sucked the oxygen from the campaigns of his nearest rivals—especially Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), and Rubio’s political mentor, former Florida governor Jeb Bush. After announcing he was “in,” Trump’s media-saturated campaign rallies featuring lengthy, unorthodox, self-aggrandizing speeches, coupled with his unpredictable and combative encounters with the press corps, quickly propelled him to star status—and a comfortable double-digit lead in the polls over his nearest rivals—until a shocking new poll released this morning.

According to a Monmouth University Poll, Iowa Republicans are giving Dr. Ben Carson a serious look-over. The retired neurosurgeon and presidential aspirant, is now tied with Donald Trump as a front-runner for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination. These latest results mark the first time since July 26 that a poll in any of the first four nominating states has not shown Trump with a nominal lead. <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/Monmouth-University-Monmouth-Poll/2015/08/31/id/672824/>

Carson and Trump, each polling at 23 percent of the Iowa sampling, lead a pack of some 15 other prominent Republican hopefuls. The only other candidate in double-digits is former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina at 10 percent, who like Carson, is trending up in most leading polls. Following is Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas at 9 percent, and Gov. Scott Walker with 7 percent. Falling short of earlier expectations is Jeb Bush at 5 percent with lesser numbers for the remaining contenders.

Demonstrating how fluid a presidential campaign is in its early stages, leading political pundits, fewer than 90 days ago, opined that the 2016 Republican Party presidential nominee would likely feature a showdown between Jeb Bush, and his one-time protégée Marco Rubio. While neither candidate is stimulating many sensoriums at the moment, that could certainly change at any time.

We suspect Trump resonates with conservatives who are tired of politicians who say that America’s best days are ahead, when they can see for themselves that things are going terribly wrong.

Like the Titanic, there is a sense that America is not only off course, its leaders are ignoring all warnings. Instead of taking heed, many perceive the hastening—the fundamental unraveling—of America’s godly heritage. Instead of readying lifeboats, far too many are calling up the musicians.

While Mr. Trump may seem reckless, he is evidently perceived as someone who isn’t looking for work and doesn’t need any money. He isn’t politically correct, and he doesn’t worry about offending those who find his opinions offensive. Mr. Trump is someone who says what we are all thinking. And, it feels good!

Yet, if there is anything puzzling in this season’s campaign, it is the fact that with no shortage of professing born-again believers in the race to the White House, including most of the aforementioned plus Perry, Huckabee, Paul, and Santorum, why, pray-tell, do opinion polls show so many evangelicals favoring Donald Trump? Trump admits he can’t recall ever confessing his sins to the Lord, much less repenting and asking for forgiveness.

In a recent interview, Trump volunteered that his favorite book of all time is the Bible. When asked if he had a favorite passage, he would not or could not recite one, saying it was too personal. Another interesting peek into Trump’s interior is his mention that Dr. Norman Vincent Peale is his favorite theologian. Likeable? Yes. But the late Dr. Peale’s theology was at best, a mixed bag.

As a young man, Dr. Peale was ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church, later changing his affiliation to the Reformed Church in America. After developing a fascination with psychiatry as an answer, or partial answer, to his congregant’s problems, he teamed up with a Freud-trained psychiatrist, Dr. Smiley Blanton, to begin a religious-psychiatric clinic in the church basement. Peale came to believe that we live in a world that is mental more than physical and this allows our thoughts to be determinative. During his lifetime, Peale authored 46 books—the most noted was The Power of Positive Thinking.

According to Pastor Tim Challis with Grace Fellowship Church in Toronto, Ontario, and co-founder of Cruciform Press, “Dr. Peale denied that God was a being, saying ‘Who is God? Some theological being? He is so much greater than theology. God is vitality. God is life. God is energy. As you breathe God in, as you visualize His energy, you will be reenergized!’ As a Christian minister he told Phil Donahue ‘It’s not necessary to be born again. You have your way to God, I have mine. I found eternal peace in a Shinto shrine ... I’ve been to Shinto shrines and God is everywhere. ... Christ is one of the ways! God is everywhere.’ He denied the very heart of the Christian faith and replaced it with his doctrine of positive thinking.”¹

Says, Pastor Challis:

“The Bible makes it clear that the troubles we experience in this life are not merely the result of negative thinking that can be overcome by tapping into our potential through positive thinking. They are the result of a deep seated rebellion against God that involves not only the mind, but the will. We simply cannot overcome the evils of this world, or even the evil in our hearts, in our own strength. Apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5). Apart from being born again, we are eternally dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). Where Peale taught that our deepest problem is a lack of belief in ourselves and that our salvation comes with a simple shift in thinking, the Bible teaches that no man can save himself, regardless of how positive his thoughts may be. His salvation must come from outside himself. The glory of Jesus Christ is in the fact that he “has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death” sinners “who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Colossians 1:21-22). Tragically, by his life and legacy, Peale showed that he rejected this Savior and chose to trust in his own strength.” ^{ibid}

While it is a fundamental duty of Christians to select and prefer godly leaders in a republic, spiritual discernment must necessarily overrule the human sensorium. It is not Old Testament to cry out to God for wise counsel—especially at this hour with so much hanging in the balance.

Rick Forcier

¹ The False Teachers: Norman Vincent Peale, April 02, 2014, challies.com/articles/the-false-teachers-norman-vincent-peale