

# Welcome to the Desert of the Peale: Why Do Christians Politically Support Liars?

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Much like the character Neo in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, Americans during the Trump presidency perpetually awaken *in media res*, in the middle of things, in a space of tension, conflict, and groundless nihilism. In the film, Morpheus invites Neo into a liminal reality, saying, “Welcome to the desert of the real.”<sup>1</sup> Writing about *The Matrix*, philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests in his book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* that the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack upon the United States, as a cultural event, is a “return to the Real.” This is to say that the event offered an opportunity to experience “passion for the semblance,” of experiencing emotion openly under the belief that reality itself had changed.<sup>2</sup>

Nationalism became the vernacular of politics in ways not unfamiliar to Americans, but the great reality of America, we can be sure, had been restored, united by a divisive war. And in this new reality, American political leadership had to respond to the challenge of structurally reinforcing itself, exhibiting hyper-masculine strength ascribed to flimsy and flaccid “facts.” Facts, then, were rendered factual by convenience and manifest through mythic assurance and hermeneutical bias.

Philosopher Harry Frankfurt wrote a best-selling short book in the first years of the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the rhetorical phenomenon of “bullshitting,” that is, lying when one not only *knows* one is lying, but also *does not care* what the truth really is.<sup>3</sup> The truth of “truthiness” could change in an instant, so long as the moral righteousness of America – as defined by those with the least to lose in wars – remained behind a veil of innocence.<sup>4</sup> Purity rites and rituals abounded for the restored state of America as the City on the Hill, the Bride of Christ, as a temple prostitute whose wisdom knows bottomless and faithful petrol-holiness extractions are healed after every drilling.

Through these wars – the remainder of the second Bush presidency – America had found herself again. Through patriotism and nationalism, all partisan sides lined up for their turn to justify the war she had invented to appear to be in a state of restored greatness. These vapors were already hanging in the air prior to the 9/11 attack with the court-election of President George W. Bush. Bush was searching for an excuse to go to war, believing that we Americans needed a “War Presidency” to assure us that the nation was restored. The Bush II election win in 2000 was a moral and religious victory to the evangelical political machine which emerged during the 1970s, fueled by abjection to the civil rights movement and the sexual liberation of the 1960s. Seeking to return to a time of simpler cultural norms and unchecked white privilege, evangelical Christianity, believing itself to be oppressed by any deviation from its own vision, set the stage for America to become the New Jerusalem it never really was or never will be. The presidential court election in 2000 marked a decisive victory for evangelicalism in the public sphere; the system of checks and balances appeared to be “working.”

By the time of Barack Obama’s election to the presidency eight years later, the mythology surrounding America’s restoration was ready to be challenged. Obama, the politicians and demagogues said, stole the election, he was constitutionally disqualified by virtue of a forged record of citizenship, and his educational credentials were part of a sophisticated conspiracy schemed by university registrars. Obama’s story *had* to be false within “the Real” for which America had passion: Obama was an invented individual played by several actors, his religion was illegitimate, Obama is a proxy jihadist devised to destroy America. Obama’s voters had been brainwashed by evil forces, like the Antichrist narratives of scripture, they claimed, nearly every day on the *Sean Hannity* and *Rush Limbaugh Shows* broadcast in every radio market in the United States played soundbites of Obama

speaking in the foreground of “The Farewell of Slavianka” or his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, screaming “God Damn America!”

Everything about President Obama was controversial and deemed offensive. In 2014, for example, United States Representative Peter King of New York created a national outrage among conservative political media for declaring that Obama’s choice of suit color one day was offensive and scandalous, that the color tan “was a metaphor for his lack of seriousness.”<sup>5</sup> Even rumors spread decrying Obama’s marital illegitimacy, suggesting that First Lady Michelle Obama was biologically male. This rumor has, at the time of this writing, continued well after the Obama presidency among popular conservative media figures trying to convince the public that she is a manipulative transsexual whose real name is “Michael Obama.”<sup>6</sup>

The point of all of these attacks upon the Obamas was to emphasize their illegitimacy, a black man could not be president, a black woman could never reside in the White House. Obama, who had campaigned against Hillary Clinton in 2008 on the basis of his stance against the Iraq War, challenged the mythos of the greatness of America by admitting that she had done wrong. This is to say that Obama’s primal sin was that he interrupted the “return of the Real” in which he and other liberals could not comprehend or understand, threatening and enticing many away from the faith which proclaims national supremacy. Because Obama and his supporters took a stand against that which offered the elements of the passion for semblance, Obama impossibly promised a passage to more innocent days when the public didn’t realize how many wars the United States was fighting.

The sharp opposition to Obama remained in a desire to return to a more nationalistic, more simple, less deconstructing reality. He had stolen an election by virtue of augmenting reality – positively or negatively, depending whom you ask – and nearly every good legislative idea he entertained was stolen from the other political party. The stock market doubled under the Obama presidency but income disparity and dependence upon welfare grew. Drone warfare and nuclear warheads expanded exponentially. Tort reform was never an option in the Affordable Care Act. A Supreme Court justice nominee was completely blocked out of spite toward the president and citizens did not take to the streets. As conflicting realities became louder, especially around police brutality toward nonwhite citizens, instead of delivering a less racist America the latent racism beneath the surface of American reality became more comfortably exposed in open discourse. By the end of the Obama presidency, a new partisan reality was sorely needed for the sake of saving

America – and the most compelling visionary of that reality won 2016 presidential election.

### A New Hope

Before his election on November 8, 2016, President Donald J. Trump was never clever enough to invent his own conspiracy theories about Obama, but he was the one who gave them legitimacy as a major-network television star, a household name whose brand of expensive neckties were the premium offering of J. C. Penny's men's department. Trump was not the first Republican to blame President Obama for everything imaginable (which, to be fair, some of Trump's criticism was fair and even unique), but he was the loudest and most respectable voice among a field of presidential candidates whose credibility was lost in their inability to monetize or gamify their political rhetoric. It did not matter what truths or falsehoods were said by the conservative politicians, Trump formulaically hyperbolized all of them, while presenting himself as a self-made millionaire whose moral nihilism was respectable to evangelical Christians.

Many mainline or progressive Christians pretended to be shocked when rumors began about preachers speaking of the now-President Trump as the "Cyrus" of the new age – referring to the Persian king who, the story goes, released the captive Jews in Babylon to return home and restore Israel to its previous greatness. The second part of the book of Isaiah (45:1) even named Cyrus "the messiah." Surely, I should be careful to make clear that these are fringe voices, yet the prevalence of this belief – stated or unstated – prompted *Psychology Today* to release a statement to its readers.<sup>7</sup> But at the same time, Pat Robertson, one of the most influential evangelical leaders in America, often discusses Trump with messianic formulation, in one example citing Psalm 2 ("God's Promise to His Anointed") in an interview, stopping one verse short of declaring Donald Trump the result of God's world-redemptive announcement spoken with "wrath" and "fury" that "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill" (Psalm 2:2-3 NRSV).<sup>8</sup>

To Trump's credit, he has never made anything close to a messianic claim in traditional religious terms. He has, however, defined himself as the solution to a problem that is largely unnamed and unsolved since time immemorial, positing himself as the only possible choice for a deliverance of America into greatness. For those who ascribe religious significance to the American presidency, the only choice for restoring America must also be part of God's plan for humanity. From the

introduction of Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, critics have debated which America is desired for return: before the Civil Rights era, the Decadent Reagan Eighties, or the Roaring Twenties? The error of this questioning is that *returning* is not the same as *restoring* in Biblical terms – which could take us all the way back to the Great Flood of Genesis chapters 6 through 9, which restores the community from the Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

The interrelated web religious mythologies of America – the myth of the Chosen Nation, the myth of Nature's Nation, the myth of national innocence and exception, etc. – all speak of some need seek and attain restoration with God. With this in mind, "Make America Great Again" is about a return to more dominant times for the American white male, but "MAGA" is more than a return, it is as a prophetic cry and demand rooted in the lamentation of the Real which surrounds us. This is not new, and it is a pervasive theme found throughout American literature, culture, and religion from the moment Christians set foot on American soil. Trump's "MAGA" call, ascribed on headwear as a golem sporting its power, *emet*, on its head or even a *tefillah, shel rosh*, is a radical exhortation with a long history in American ideologies of self-identity, as the "City on the Hill" which, like the Fall of Adam, did not last very long, if it lasted at all. Whether it is an actualized return to something is irrelevant, it is a *restoration* of America's significance in the unfolding of the history of God's people.

While my sweeping generalizations of history are meant to be just that, sweeping and generalized, I do not claim that this historiography which I am constructing is absolute or exclusive to other explanations of the Trump phenomenon. What I am proposing, however, is that while Trump's messianic formula is grounded in American history, literature, and especially myth, the *cultural event* which surrounds and supports Trump's Presidency is not new but is indicative of a larger cultural trend that is "America" itself, a problem whose solution is known but immanently arriving through the American Christian practice of democracy.

How, then, does a New York playboy become the messianic hero of the problem that is America itself? I argue that Donald Trump is the exemplar and pinnacle of the widespread Christian practice and ethos in America of "positive thinking." Positive thinking has the foundation of evangelical psychology and epistemology in the United States, as evidenced by the success of self-help publishing and churches who espouse what is polemically termed the "Gospel of wealth." And the preacher who popularized this concept of "positive thinking" is Norman Vincent Peale.

### Welcome to the Desert of the Peale

During his lifetime, Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993) was called the “minister to millions.”<sup>9</sup> Peale’s popularity and influence cannot be understated, even though academic Christian theologians and historians have yet to seriously engage his ideas. Peale was the child of a middle-class preacher’s home and rose to prominence as not only the minister to millions but the minister to millionaires, whose sermons, books, and ideas inspired nearly every corner of the white middle and lower class during the Great Depression and post-WWII eras. Authoring scores of books, his most famous is *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), which has since been translated into more than twenty languages.<sup>10</sup> Today a statue of Peale stands outside of the walls of his longtime congregation, Marble Collegiate Church in New York City.

Donald Trump’s relationship with Peale is not a secret, even if it is not often discussed. Peale and Trump shared mutual admiration for each other; Peale had said that Donald Trump was his best student; Trump has credited everything he knows about business to Peale.<sup>11</sup> Trump has waxed nostalgic for Peale, praising his commanding presence and authority in the church. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump claimed membership at Peale’s Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, a claim which the church denied; Trump apparently ended his connection with the church after Peale’s death; Trump’s parents’ funerals were both held at Marble Collegiate Church; one of Trump’s marriages was officiated by Peale at Marble Collegiate.<sup>12</sup>

The basic premise of *The Power of Positive Thinking* – and all of Peale’s writings after 1952 – is that emotional or attitudinal positivity was a spiritual practice that is a conduit for God’s power. And once an individual stands in the ever-flowing stream of this power, the kind of life that fosters positivity happens. The first pages of the book summarize his primary thesis:

This book is written to suggest *techniques* and give examples which demonstrate that you do not need to be defeated by anything, that you can have peace of mind, improved health, and a never-ceasing flow of energy. In short, that your life can be full of joy and satisfaction. Of this I have no doubt at all for I have watched countless persons learn and *apply a system of simple procedures* that has brought about the foregoing benefits in their lives...

In saying this I do not ignore or minimize the hardships and tragedies of the world, but neither do I allow them to dominate. You can permit obstacles to control your mind to the point where they are uppermost and must become the dominating factors in your thought pattern. By learning how to *cast them from* the mind, by refusing to become mentally subservient to them, and by channeling spiritual power through your thoughts you can rise above obstacles which ordinarily might defeat you. By *methods I shall outline*, obstacles are simply not permitted to destroy your happiness and well-being. You need be defeated only if you are willing to be. This book teaches you how to “will” not to be.<sup>13</sup>

Above I emphasize the prescriptive and *exorcisma*/nature of Peale’s language: he is teaching “techniques,” “a system of procedures,” and “methods.” If one is unsuccessful, one must “cast out” the negativity which apprehend the true spiritual power to shine. *You* are your own obstacle; *you* alone can deliver yourself.

### The Spiritual Science

Peale’s writings are full of anecdotal examples as evidence of positivity working for people; in fact, some of Peale’s later writings are compilations of testimonies which he curated to propagandize – in a positive way, surely – the Gospel of positivity. The modern reader might particularly find his writings about marriage and divorce problematic and indicative of privileged white men in his own era. A prominent example is the story of a woman whose husband wants a divorce, so she puts into practice a ninety-day positivity scheme. On the ninetieth day the husband magically and matter-of-factly brushes off his earlier request for a divorce, saying, “Where did you ever get the idea I was going to leave you?” Peale explains: “The formula proved a powerful mechanism. She prayerized, she picturized, and the sought-for result was actualized,” adding that “Prayer power solved her problem and his as well.”<sup>14</sup>

Peale emphasizes often the “spiritual science” and pseudo-technological aspect of his methods, often appealing to the developing social science of psychology of the early post-WWII era. When asked by a correspondent whether his methods always work, Peale answers with one word, “Yes,” and then differentiates two approaches to his ideas, which I describe (using more modern theoretical language) as phenomenological and practical. The phenomenological perspective is

from the standpoint of an observer, who observes phenomena or human experiences. This perspective is about “recognizing the negative.” It’s not enough, in Peale’s view, to name and claim what one’s problems are – though recognizing those problems is an important part of the process, positivity might allow one to skip the recognition as a practitioner rather than an observe. Instead, the practitioner who constructs positivity moves beyond simply recognizing negativity but “refusing to dwell in it.” Positivity is practicing as a “habit” the active work of looking “for the best results from the [worst] conditions.”<sup>15</sup>

Although the scope of this conversation is not to trace the genealogy of Peale’s ideas, Peale’s insistence on his ideas as a “science” sound bizarre and of the opposite of popular conceptions of “science” today. His invocation of teaching a “spiritual science” has roots in the interplay between the traditions of western esotericism in America and the Reconstruction Era evangelical awakenings, the latter practicing that one is not, as Martin Luther suggested, saved by faith alone but that there were ritualized ways of thinking, speaking, and communicating which guaranteed certain outcomes. Ironically, these ritualized behaviors were often performed in decidedly non-ritualized religious gatherings in tents, camps, and low-church revival services. There were accepted prayers, confessions, ideas, and ways of thinking which were presented as time-worn practices for the ultimate goal of salvation. In one of Peale’s later writings, he speaks nostalgically of the church abandoning these “old-time” religious practices, which were really relatively new theological innovations, appealing to the spiritual-scientific approach to the Christian faith as a kind of monomythic, homogeneous, unifying experience. Peale’s lament is that these “old” scientific methods have been abandoned, even if the veracity of positivity’s “scientific” evidence has not been adequately challenged.

If the practitioner is not getting the results desired, the problem is with the practitioner and not with the method if one is adhering to the time-worn and scientifically proven methods. Like a college chemistry student trying to create aspirin in a laboratory course, one might follow the directions but if one’s experiment does not result in useable or useful aspirin, the problem is in the technique, measurements, time, or conditions of the scientific agent – and not with the science or the method itself. In fact, the method stands in judgment against the subjective and situational erring of the one performing the experiment. This line of thinking, historically, has its roots in the western esoteric tradition, in which the practice of alchemy rests tremendous importance upon the spirituality and spiritual attunement



of the alchemist. The end result of the operative alchemical process is representative and derivative of the individual's spirituality and the individual's experimental ends. In this sense, the successful alchemist may speak of a "spiritual science," offering her abilities in the laboratory, and her own spiritual presence as adequate, living proof.

To these ends Peale's insistence upon positivity as "science" disingenuously invokes for his readers *social* or *behavioral science*, when what he is really suggesting might better be called *spiritual science* or *occult sciences*. Peale assures his reader that his methods are not "magic" that creates "a job out of the ether," but that his teachings articulate a "definite scientific principle at work," adding that "[t]here is no mysticism here."<sup>16</sup> Yet Peale was entrenched in these influences and ideas, and occasionally offered a nod to popular spiritualism and acknowledged the legitimacy of parapsychology, telepathy, and the existence of ghosts, since these are all "part of God's plan."<sup>17</sup>

### Trump's Messianic Formula

Has America accepted Peale's theologies? When examining the spiritual landscape of America, which I will call "the desert of the Peale," I can only answer affirmatively, given the popularity of Peale's books, his commissioning of nearly every popular Christian preacher since the 1950s (Robert Schuler, for example), his influence on the publishing world, inspiring everything from *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books to Rich Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*. American preaching in large evangelical churches (where most Christians attend) would be reminiscent popular, soft psychology or self-help literature which Peale inspired. Both mainline and evangelical churches have expressed their theologies of praxis in different ways, in some cases defining themselves as *against* this kind of theology, even if, deep down, they were more or less accepting it.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Peale never made the claim that positivity was the central element of a theological system, nor did he explicitly preach a gospel of wealth, even if his metonymical mantra of positivity, rehashing and revisiting his same concepts over and over through scores of books gives the impression of a single-minded, simplistic approach to Christian theology. He might not have offered a theological system of material transaction, but he certainly spoke of it in an exoteric way, assuring us that beneath the surface is an orthodox, confessional doctrine.

Peale did more than offer the building materials and the scaffolding, he provided the manual labor for the church to grow into the gospel of prosperity. To speak of American Christianity, especially evangelicals and many “low-church” Protestants, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is to speak of a culture whose theological assumptions, practices, and behaviors are shaped by a misreading of Norman Vincent Peale. The careful reader must be fair to distinguish Peale from Pealean Christianity, but we should be critically honest that Peale welcomed the popularity of his message, his books were selling, and he was helping people. Why stop the scientific experiment that keeps working?

The liberal Christian and mainstream media voices ask over and over, turning toward Donald Trump as the beneficiary of American Christianity:

*How can Christians support a politician who lies constantly?*

Clutching their pearls over the possibility of hypocrites inhabiting American politics or churches, this question keeps getting asked. The loudest of these voices are from the more leftist secularists, who disingenuously attack Trump’s morality using a religious and ethical standard that the critics themselves reject.

While hypocrisy arguments are not good logic, they make good theater and press. Liberals drunkenly cheered the then-Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg when, on a televised town hall event promoting his own case for the presidency, Buttigieg accused Trump’s Vice President Mike Pence of being a “cheerleader for the porn star presidency,” calling Pence’s sincerity of his Christian faith into question.<sup>19</sup> The Trump administration responded with the Ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, claiming that Buttigieg was creating a “hate hoax,” citing a current example of an openly gay actor who made up a story about being beat up to further his career.<sup>20</sup> In other words, this line of moral criticism against the Trump Administration has preemptively made a blanket claim that any religious argument of morality or virtue-signaling arguments of hypocrisy are akin to hate speech. So there can be no moral argument about peeping on teenage beauty pageant dressing rooms, or race-baiting immigration rhetoric, the incitement of violence against opposing political officials, the desire to constantly blame everyone else for his own shortcomings. What is now deemed “hate speech” is to make moralistic arguments against someone whose station seems to exempt him from consequences or even basic criticism.

The error of the pearl-clutching liberals pontificating upon Christian morality is that they mistakenly forget that American Christianity is a living, breathing cultural force that changes over time – even and especially while constantly making primitivist and restorationist claims about the ancient origins of theological innovations and novelty. Reverse course is not the same as an impending death of a movement. From this mistake liberals ask *why* evangelicals support Trump, when the evangelical position is really “why *wouldn't* I or we support Trump?”

In other words, *evangelicals claim religious exception in their defense of Trump because he is the exemplar of the underlying cultural conditions that are idealized in contemporary American Christianity.*

Stated more directly:

*Evangelicals do not support Trump in spite of their Christian morality; rather, they support Trump because of their Christian morality.*

If American Christianity has arrived to its end of being fully secularized in culture, the state which proports a separation from itself and “the church,” we may now understand that “the church” is no longer an ecclesial body with serious political consequence, rather, “the church” has become “the state.” The President has long been regarded as a spiritual leader – we should note that the only Catholic President ever elected was John F. Kennedy (who was staunchly opposed by Norman Vincent Peale) – by default as the head of State. Like the Baptists, Methodists, and others before the Civil War, the movers and shakers in certain parts of the pews were not accepting of a black pastor-president, and, typical of church systems, did everything possible to undermine his leadership. Now, in the efforts to “make America great again,” an abrogation of the former pastor’s term of service must now occur.

### **Positive Positing and Affirmations**

American Christians, whether they institutionally reside in the church or outside the church, whether evangelical or mainline, have accepted Peale’s positivist Christianity and are searching not for rags-to-riches, worldly-eclectic mythologies such as what we have established with President Obama, but rather “we” want to see someone for whom positive thinking “works.” No matter how many bankruptcies, *Trump wins*. No matter how many marriages, scandals, gaffes, embarrassments, and generally stupid things said, *Trump wins*.

Even when Trump loses, somehow the loss is actually a *win*, because such actualization offers an opportunity to underscore his mythological narrative of the oppressed wealthy white victim who sacrifices himself for unrepentant and undeserving beneficiaries. Trump, by definition, *must win*, as he is the greatest and most positive thinker in America. Even his name bleeds winning: “Donald” is a Scottish name that means “ruler of the world”; “John” means “graced by God”; and while the name “Trump” is Anglicized form of Drumpf, which means “drummer,” the common use of the word *trump* evokes the trump card in card games, as the victory, *triumph* card.<sup>21</sup>

My point is this: The Winner is by default the winner, and anything which stands contrary can simply not be true in this passion for “the Real.”<sup>22</sup> Beyond this abstraction, how exactly does this “work?”

Clearly, Trump believes in himself and might even believe in something more than himself insofar as the beliefs prop up his mythology of being the hero of his own universe – and to be fair, *we all do this in one way or another to varying extremes*. Like all of us, Trump assumes in this mythology a systematic theology which might not always be consistent in content but its form will always positively affirm “Trump.” Again: we all do this. But for Trump, his aspiring self-utopia is a world where privilege and wealth bend reality to accommodate any pesky inconsistencies and magically transfigure the messiness of truthiness and bullshitting into a clear and beautiful vision, attractive to other hopefuls who aspire to grow in prosperity following the *imago Dei* of their Positronic Exemplar.

In other words, in this new exemplary paradigm, what appears to be lies are not “lies” because “truths” are value judgments based upon a worldview that challenges the exemplar and the believer’s desires. Rather, lying is understood as *positing positivity*, simultaneously envisioning and manufacturing “the Real.” Even while denying that such worldviews are “regimes of truth” or systems of truth which exist aside other systems, relativism is convenient only insofar as “I” and “we” – as positively-thinking agents – define the freeplay and boundaries allowed within such systems of “truth.”<sup>23</sup> Within this paradigm, we may speak of a new calculus for truth, falsehood, and shades between them.

*Positing*, then, is a statement which is stated for the purpose of utility toward supporting a belief which must be true within the positive, subjectivist ecology. The statement could be a premise of an argument, the outcome of an argument itself, a public or private statement. *Positing* operates as a survival tactic which offers others

a glimpse of “the Real” invoked by an individual. When inviting others into this “Real” positing becomes a universal survival tactic into which many or all are offered some benefit insofar as this positive paradigm is contingent upon the continued projection of, or by, the primary positing agent. Just as God creates humanity in God’s own image, *positively positing* allows the *positronic agent* to create in his own image a reality where the transcendence of the self is generously made available to others and must be maintained and defended at all costs.

*Positing* does not require blanket, blind doctrinal acceptance of followers. Recalling Peter Rollins’ dictum that the role of a pastor in many religious communities is to believe on behalf of the congregation so that individual congregants don’t really have to believe, the positing leader renders one’s individual beliefs immaterial to the physical outcome and power for reality-construction implicit in one’s acts of positing.<sup>24</sup> Results are results, whether the means are agreed upon.

In fact, the less constituents and followers actually believe the more they are themselves condemned for their inability to live up to the exemplar’s ability to posit reality. Within this positivistic system the centralized truth is tethered to the reality-creation of a primary agent, so that when “I” posit in concert with the positing of the exemplar, “I” can only project my own image insofar as I have actual means to transfigure reality. So long as my exemplar is enormously rich and powerful – or in control of the wealth and power I aspire – “I” will never be enough, no matter how much positive thinking I do. The unspoken goal is to debase the exemplar with one’s own self, but this interrupts the system of power and possibly renders all efforts to prosper. Never, ever questioning the veracity of the exemplar is required to ensure that something will trickle down to me the higher I ascend. (And, as a side-note, allowing and accepting hierarchy in the system allows the business acumen or justification of keeping others from prospering because doing so not only perpetuates the myth but ensures a higher standing over someone else in the trickle-down economics at the center of these systems.)

Just as the pastor in many religious communities, as the spiritual exemplar, can get away with many things that might otherwise be seen as immoral or corrupt, within the intersystemic “regime of truth” of the religious community, this logic makes sense as the spiritual superior who operates with a different set of rules, so as not to disrupt the system where positing “works.” The primary positronic agent gives me faith in the possibility of faith, and leads me to have and desire greater faith, even if doing so condemns my position within the system. The more faith and support given

to the positing pastor, I have a higher standard in which to believe, and his or her moral failings give me license to believe in grace for the privileged and for my own possibility of justification within the system.

To return to the pearl-clutching liberal's cry of "how can anyone, let alone Christians, believe someone who lies over and over again?" we may now understand that Trump's lies aren't lies, they're *affirmations*. When President Trump claimed within hours of being inaugurated that he had the highest-attended inauguration in the history of the United States, the official record of lies began. But if they are not lies, but *positronic affirmations*, are these statements' veracity no longer immaterial? Rather, the power of language is affirming, imaging, *positing*, "prayerizing" that whatever problem this image might solve solves everyone else's problems so long as we're positing the positivity together.

My point here is that President Trump serves as the exemplar of Peale's ideas when mixed together with what is "America." Trump has grafted himself onto America's mythologies of the chosen nation and national exceptionalism – in fact, quite literally he grafts himself onto American symbolism, given his habit of hugging the American flag. While hugging a flag might seem weird to many, the fact is that the symbolic gesture is not only meaningful but attractive. Trump is the American Messiah, or at least one of them.

What is most important to Peale in his instructions for positivity is to *remain steadfast in the method, keep trying, always focus upon victory*. Anything that runs contrary to the triumph of the will is discarded or degraded as unimportant to the overall goals.

In his 1959 work *The Amazing Results of Positive Thinking*, Peale outlines the "formula" directly:

Try, really try.

Think, really think.

Believe, really believe.<sup>25</sup>

But believe in *what*, exactly? One is to believe in oneself, and one's own ability to overcome worldly obstacles. And to believe in oneself is to believe in the transformative power of Jesus. And if you fail, as discussed earlier, since the testimonies of so many people writing to Peale give ample evidence beyond his anecdotal writing proving the soundness of the spiritual science, the problem must

be in the practitioner, whose spiritual alchemy needs adjustment, attunement, refining, confession. Perhaps echoing Gianni Vattimo's smug philosophical statement that "belief" is to "believe in a belief" the circular logic of modern belief is exposed.<sup>26</sup> But its circular logic is also what validates the belief and its science.

"Believers are aggressive," Peale, says, insofar as "they are positive." Believers are "thinkers" but by this Peale is not speaking of book-knowledge but rather *thinking* is the ability to clear, exorcise, or prevent "negative thoughts," the "clutter," from their minds. Thinking is a spiritual activity, an existential modality, with physical effects beyond the embodiment of a single individual. Believers "think positively and think and think and believe." In this way, the spiritual world is transfigured by one's mental and spiritual abilities, by opening the gates of grace from God, that "ideas turn into blessings for humanity."<sup>27</sup> Other people immediately around you benefit from success, and beyond them *humanity* is better. And further, *God* is better in serving the world when believers believe.

The measure of success is that believers "get results." But what is most difficult in believing is affirming the difficulty of belief, particularly believing in God. Peale instructs:

Believe in God. Believe in yourself. Believe in the future. Believe that you *can*.  
Believe in people.  
Believe and keep on believing.<sup>28</sup>

Surrendering oneself to deity is the way to believing in oneself. If one doesn't believe in God, you can't believe in yourself, and one damages the spiritual ecology of the world when one believes neither in oneself or in God. Peale instructs advice from an early parishioner who affected him powerfully: "Pray big prayers... big prayers that are big by faith, big expectation in them," and thinking, believing, and praying "little" gets "little results," concluding, "think big, pray big, act big, love big, live big."<sup>29</sup> Believing in God is to believe in what believing in God can believably achieve. "No matter how self-sufficient" someone is, the help that is from God alone, whose "help is always available." God answers prayers with results that you want, but sometimes through unexpected sources like "through other people."<sup>30</sup>

President Trump's lying is not *exactly* lying. What appears to be lying is a kind of belief, *positing* oneself as the hero of one's own myth, and positively promoting oneself as someone whose mythology is validated and proven over and over again –

predictably, scientifically. One might argue that the purpose of lying in general is for self-promotion but a persistent, prideful, and perspectival approach to the power of one's own self-salvation. The bigger the untruthful positing, the more expansive the inaccurate portrayals are, the more America must believe and must follow if we are to believe in ourselves, in America, or in humanity. The world is watching, not because we are economic imperialists in the wealthiest country in the history of humankind; the world watches, we must believe, because deep down they *need* America to succeed. And if America is to succeed, the pastor-president of the positively-self-righteous nation *must* also succeed.

The desert of Peale's America operates on its own logic, and its logic will only be explained to those esoterically on the "inside," what political pundits call Trump's "base." In their pious prayers to "make America Great again" they boldly supplicate for a return to the semblance of the Real, and in so doing the anointedness bestowed upon the presidency must be built up in faith in order that the ruler is has the power to construct a reality which transforms the uncourageous into the incourageous. The first victory is the miracle of the 2016 Presidential Election, the immanence of which (that is, "winning") is the source of passion for the world in which we live, the world we are creating, the world we consensually allow to be posited for us.

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Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (New York: Verso, 2012).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Matrix*, dir. A. and L. Wachowski (Warner Bros., 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (New York: Verso), p.12.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> "Truthiness" was coined by Stephen Colbert on the first episode of *The Colbert Report*, which aired on October 17, 2005, during the early years of the war and as a direct spoof on George W. Bush's use of "facts."

<sup>5</sup> CNN, "Rep. Peter King Slams Obama for Tan Suit," YouTube, online (29. Aug. 2014), accessed 1. July 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kNSNPwuSjQ>

<sup>6</sup> Chloe Farand, "Alex Jones Claims He Has 'Proof' Michelle Obama is a Man," *The Independent* (25. August 2017), online, accessed 1. July 2019.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/alex-jones-michelle-obama-man-proof-infowars-conspiracy-theorist-sandy-hook-a7911996.html>

<sup>7</sup> Bobby Azarian, "The Belief that Trump is the Messiah is Rampant and Dangerous," *Psychology Today* (28. May 2019), online, accessed 1. July 2019. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mind-in-the-machine/201905/the-belief-trump-is-messiah-is-rampant-and-dangerous>

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the examples and video provided in Brian Tashman, "Pat Robertson: People Who Oppose Trump Are Revolting against God," Right Wing Watch (15. Feb. 2017), online, accessed 2. July 2019. <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/pat-robertson-people-who-oppose-trump-are-revolting-against-god/>.

<sup>9</sup> George Exoo and John Tweed, "Peale's Secret Source," *Lutheran Quarterly* 9.2 (1995), p.151.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Gwenda Blair, "How Norman Vincent Peale Taught Donald Trump to Worship Himself," *Politico Magazine* (6. Oct. 2016), online. Retrieved 7. Feb. 2020.

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/10/donald-trump-2016-norman-vincent-peale-213220>

<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Shabad, "Church Says Trump Isn't an 'Active Member,'" *The Hill* (29. Aug. 2015), online. Retrieved 19. June 2019. <https://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/252246-church-that-trump-claims-to-attend-says-hes-not-an-active>.

<sup>13</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Fireside ed. ([1952] 1980), pp.xi-xii, ital. add.

<sup>14</sup> The entire story is found in Peale (1952), pp.47ff.

- <sup>15</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, *The Amazing Results of Positive Thinking* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1959), p.13.
- <sup>16</sup> Peale (1959), p.15.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 192-193, p.195.
- <sup>18</sup> Exoo and Tweed, p.152, p.165.
- <sup>19</sup> Dan Merica, "Buttigieg Calls VP Mike Pence the 'Cheerleader for the Porn Star Presidency.'" CNN (10. March 2019), online, accessed 5. July 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/sxsw-town-hall-delaney-gabbard-buttigieg/index.html>
- <sup>20</sup> John Riley, "Richard Grenell Accuses Pete Buttigieg for 'Pushing Hate Hoax' against Mike Pence," *Metro Weekly* (22. April 2019), online, accessed 5. July 2019. <https://www.metroweekly.com/2019/04/richard-grenell-accuses-pete-buttigieg-of-pushing-this-hate-hoax-comparing-him-to-jussie-smollett/>
- <sup>21</sup> Further, the word "trump" as it relates to card games is based upon the Latin for "victory"; and even further back in the history of language "trump" has its origins in the Greek word *θρίαμβος*, *thriambus*. The thriambus was a hymn to the Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, performance theater, and religious theosis of ecstatic madness. Coincidentally, *thriambus* is also related a form of the word for "fig tree," *θρίον*, and "of the fig tree," *συκίτης* – the latter of which is the word used for Jesus' cursing of the fig tree in Mark 11 and Matthew 11 (*συκῆν*). See F. W. L. E. Luetcke, *De Graecorum Dithyrambis et Poetis Dithyrambicis* (Berolini: Typis I.F. Starckii, 1829).
- <sup>22</sup> Perhaps the only comparison to draw in American culture is to the actor Tom Cruise, who appears to be given everything he wants or needs by the Church of Scientology so long as he continues to attribute his success to Scientology and its practices. Similarly, Cruise is presented as the evidence of the "science" of Scientology. Although there have been attempts to connect Scientology and Peale, the founding text of Scientology, I suggest that they are cousins with entangled origins in the western esoteric tradition. See John Anderson, "A Brief History of Scientology," *Jacobin* (17. Aug. 2016), online, accessed 5. July 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/scientology-hubbard-miscavige-tom-cruise-tax-exempt/>; Stanton Peele, "Analyzing the Positive Thinking Movement," *Huffington Post* (18. Mar. 2010), online, accessed updated (17. Mar. 2011) version, 5. July 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/analyzing-the-positive-th\\_b\\_420008](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/analyzing-the-positive-th_b_420008).
- <sup>23</sup> Here I am clearly invoking Jacques Derrida's early post-structural or post-modern assumptions, from his foundational and classic 1966 lecture at Johns Hopkins University, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." The lecture was later published in 1967 as "La Structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines" and translated by A. Bass into English in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1970), pp.351-370.
- <sup>24</sup> In Peter Rollins' *Insurrection* (New York: Howard, 2011).
- <sup>25</sup> Peale (1959), p.47.
- <sup>26</sup> In Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).
- <sup>27</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Living* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p.194.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.201.
- <sup>29</sup> Harlowe B. Andrews, in Norman Vincent Peale, ed., *Norman Vincent Peale's Treasury of Courage and Confidence* (Garden City, NY, Doubleday), 1970.

<sup>∞</sup> Ibid., p.256. To this end Peale, with Kenneth Blanchard, issued a book on ethics – *business* ethics, *The Power of Ethical Management* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988), though its scope and application is broader than business. In it, they offer the “Five P’s of Ethical Power”: Purpose, Pride, Patience, Persistence, and Perspective.