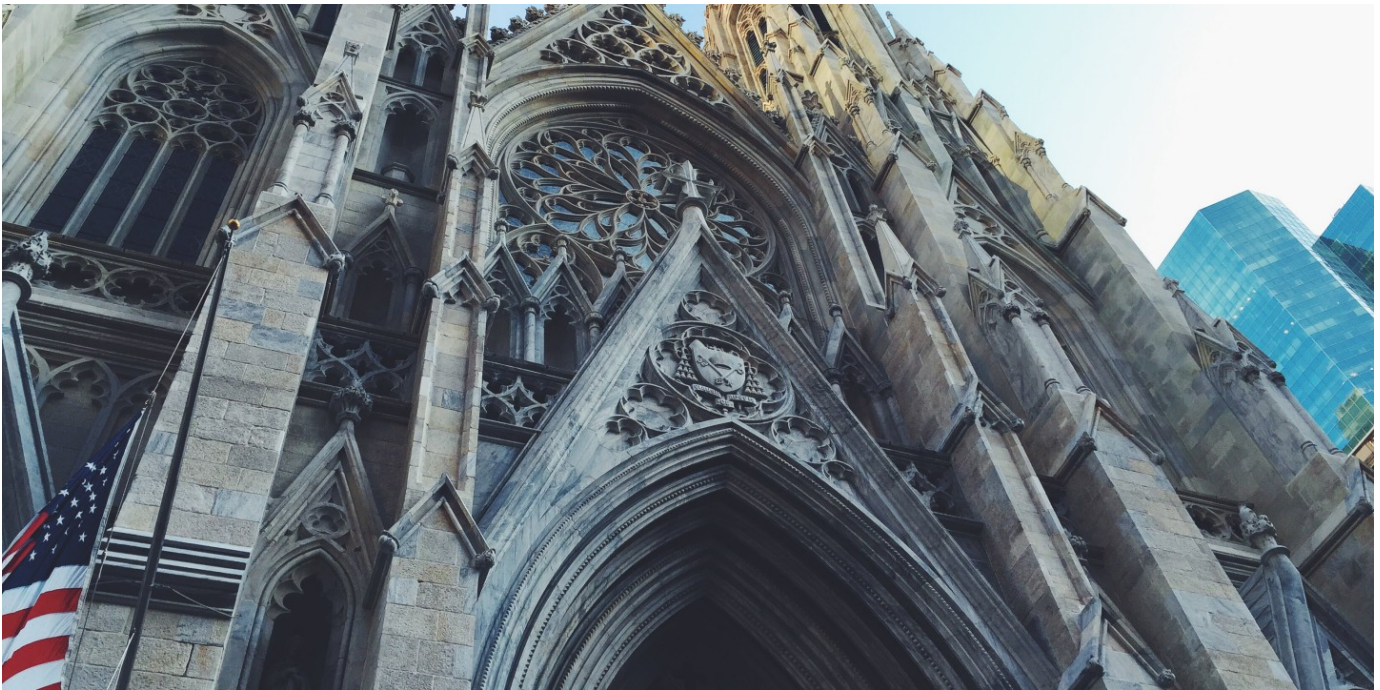


Political slogans and the nature of God

## **When an anthropologist wants to understand a culture, he or she studies its gods.**

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

December 28, 2016



*Build the wall!*

*Drain the swamp!*

*Lock her up!*

These words resonated for many Americans who attended Donald Trump's rallies, even as they demanded to cut away the heart and core of what is beautiful in our country—diversity, gender equality, and democracy.

These were slogans, built on gut emotion rather than thoughtful policy. For instance, does Trump plan on draining the swamp of wealthy lobbyist and Washington

insiders? Bloomberg Business is gleefully announcing that “[Goldman is Back on Top in the Trump Administration](#).” Goldman Sachs President Gary Cohn (top economic advisor in the White House) and Former Goldman Sachs partner Steven Mnuchin (top nominee for Treasury secretary) “are poised to preside over a roll back of financial regulations... that congress passed to protect consumers and prevent a repeat of the financial crisis.” In other words, the gators just overran that foggy bottom.

We have no idea what’s going to happen to these slogans. Hopefully, the most misogynistic t-shirts will fade, and people will stop proclaiming that their candidate was the only one with testicles. The racist signs will find their rightful place in the garbage dump. People will realize that they just voted in someone who plans to take away their health care, give more tax breaks to the wealthy, bust what’s left of the unions, dismantle public education, destroy the environment, and basically go against every economic interest of the middle class and working poor, and they will begin looking somewhere else for solutions. Then men and women will be embarrassed to tell their children and grandchildren that they chanted the syllables with such glee. As they think back to the rallies, they won't understand what came over them.

Yet, we cannot ignore how all of this happened. Spiritually. Theologically. How did those slogans wield so much power? How did we get to a place where millions of people chanted racist, sexist, undemocratic sentiments? Does this have something to do with our religious views?

We know that evangelicals [overwhelmingly supported Trump](#). Now, many have a giddiness that goes beyond the possible nomination of a pro-life Supreme Court nominee. They overlook Trump’s bragging of sexual assault and [child pornography](#) (that’s what you call getting off on intentionally walking in on naked 15-year-old girls, right?). They say that he has been recently converted and has given Evangelicals access to power. Trump made the Evangelicals winners again.

The [National Cathedral](#) will be celebrating Trump’s inauguration in the heart of their sanctuary. They are carefully planning their supporting role as they reinforce Trump’s era and secure their power position as a bulwark of civil religion. It doesn’t matter how repugnant his policies might be in the light of Christ’s teaching, the Cathedral is gladly handing their support over, because it is a matter of custom. And custom trumps theology.

The Pope took a very different tact. He compared the consumption of fake news—including the lies that he supported Trump—to [eating feces](#).

We also know that [many churches](#) are gearing up for faithful resistance as they provide sanctuary for those who fear deportation.

How do our Christian beliefs differ so much? Why do we respond in such varied ways to the teachings and actions of Jesus? Why do some sanctuaries live out their names while others do not? I think it has to do with our image of God. People reflect and respond to their image of God. When an anthropologist wants to understand a culture, he or she studies its gods. If the god is violent and angry, then the people exalt vengeance and warfare. If the god is peaceful and loving, then the people tend to work for nurturing relations. We focus on something, then neurologically, we have evolved so that we tune into what our neighbor feels, and our culture reflects those priorities, emotions, and drives. Those rallies, like the post-inaugural prayer service, like our own church services, home in our emotional and spiritual attention on that image. Then, we reflect the God we worship.

It's extremely important right now to focus on who our God is. Is our God vengeful, oppressive, prosperity driven, patriarchal, or power-hungry? Is our God merciful, loving, welcoming, inclusive, and nurturing? This is not just a matter for theologians—our whole society could depend on it.