The Evangelical Roots of Our Post-Truth Society

Molly Worthen

THE arrival of the “post-truth” political climate came as a shock to many Americans. But to the Christian writer Rachel Held Evans, charges of “fake news” are nothing new. “The deep distrust of the media, of scientific consensus — those were prevalent narratives growing up,” she told me.

Although Ms. Evans, 35, no longer calls herself an evangelical, she attended Bryan College, an evangelical school in Dayton, Tenn. She was taught to distrust information coming from the scientific or media elite because these sources did not hold a “biblical worldview.”

“It was presented as a cohesive worldview that you could maintain if you studied the Bible,” she told me. “Part of that was that climate change isn’t real, that evolution is a myth made up by scientists who hate God, and capitalism is God’s ideal for society.”

Conservative evangelicals are not the only ones who think that an authority trusted by the other side is probably lying. But they believe that their own authority — the inerrant Bible — is both supernatural and scientifically sound, and this conviction gives that natural human aversion to unwelcome facts a special power on the right. This religious tradition of fact denial long predates the rise of the culture
wars, social media or President Trump, but it has provoked deep conflict among evangelicals themselves.

That innocuous phrase — “biblical worldview” or “Christian worldview” — is everywhere in the evangelical world. The radio show founded by Chuck Colson, “BreakPoint,” helps listeners “get informed and equipped to live out the Christian worldview.” Focus on the Family devotes a webpage to the implications of a worldview “based on the infallible Word of God.” Betsy DeVos’s supporters praised her as a “committed Christian living out a biblical worldview.”

The phrase is not as straightforward as it seems. Ever since the scientific revolution, two compulsions have guided conservative Protestant intellectual life: the impulse to defend the Bible as a reliable scientific authority and the impulse to place the Bible beyond the claims of science entirely.

The first impulse blossomed into the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Scripture became the irrefutable guide to everything from the meaning of fossils to the interpretation of archaeological findings in the Middle East, a “storehouse of facts,” as the 19th-century theologian Charles Hodge put it.

The second impulse, the one that rejects scientists’ standing to challenge the Bible, evolved by the early 20th century into a school of thought called presuppositionalism. The term is a mouthful, but the idea is simple: We all have presuppositions that frame our understanding of the world. Cornelius Van Til, a theologian who promoted this idea, rejected the premise that all humans have access to objective reality. “We really do not grant that you see any fact in any dimension of life truly,” he wrote in a pamphlet aimed at non-Christians.

If this sounds like a forerunner of modern cultural relativism, in a way it is — with the caveat that one worldview, the one based on faith in an inerrant Bible, does have a claim on universal truth, and everyone else is a myopic relativist.

Nowadays, ministries, schools and media outlets use the term “Christian worldview” to signal their orthodoxy. But its pervasiveness masks significant disagreement over what it means. Many evangelical colleges allow faculty and
students to question inerrancy, creationism and the presumption that Jesus would have voted Republican.

Karl Giberson taught biology for many years at Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, Mass., where freshmen take a course that covers “the Christian worldview” alongside topics like “racial and gender equity” and “cultural diversity.” In the Church of the Nazarene, many leaders have been uneasy about the rationalist claims of biblical inerrancy, and Dr. Giberson openly taught the theory of evolution. “I was completely uncontroversial, for the most part,” he told me. “The problems emerged when I began to publish, when I became a public spokesman for this point of view.”

Nazarene pastors and church members — who absorbed the more fundamentalist worldview of mainstream evangelicalism — put pressure on the school. “The administrators were not upset that I was promoting evolution,” he said. “But now they had a pastor telling the admissions department, ‘we do not want you recruiting in our youth group.’ ” The controversy drove him to resign in 2011.

Dean Nelson, who runs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, told me that he doesn’t see “how you can teach ‘Christian journalism’ any more than you can teach ‘Christian mathematics.’ ” But he acknowledged that “many of the students’ parents were raised on Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck and distrust the mainstream news media. So it’s a little bit of a dance with parents who are expecting us to perpetuate that distrust and raise up this tribe of ‘Christian journalists.’ ”

The conservative Christian worldview is not just a posture of mistrust toward the secular world’s “fake news.” It is a network of institutions and experts versed in shadow versions of climate change science, biology and other fields, like Nathaniel Jeanson, a research biologist at the creationist ministry Answers in Genesis, in Petersburg, Ky.

Dr. Jeanson is as important an asset for the ministry as its life-size replica of Noah’s Ark in Williamstown, Ky. He believes the earth was created in six days — and he has a Ph.D. in cell and developmental biology from Harvard.
Home-schooled until high school, Dr. Jeanson grew up going to “Worldview Weekend” Christian conferences. As an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, Parkside, he dutifully studied evolutionary biology during the day and read creationist literature at night.

This “reading double,” as he calls it, equipped him to personify the contradictions that pervade this variety of Christian worldview. At Harvard Medical School, he chose a research topic that steered clear of evolution. “My research question is a present-tense question — how do blood cells function,” he told me. “So perhaps it was easier to compartmentalize.”

Dr. Jeanson rhapsodized about the integrity of the scientific method. Before graduate school, “I held this quack idea of cancer,” he said. “But that idea got corrected. This is the way science works.” Yet when his colleagues refuse to read his creationist papers and data sets, he takes their snub as proof that they can find no flaws in his research. “If people who devote their lives to it can’t point anything out, then I think I may be on to something,” he said.

Dr. Jeanson calls himself a “presuppositionalist evidentialist” — which we might define as someone who accepts evidence when it happens to affirm his nonnegotiable presuppositions. “When it comes to questions of absolute truth, those are things I’ve settled in my own mind and heart,” he told me. “I couldn’t call myself a Christian if I hadn’t.”

We all cling to our own unquestioned assumptions. But in the quest to advance knowledge and broker peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic world, the worldview based on biblical inerrancy gets tangled up in the contradiction between its claims on universalist science and insistence on an exclusive faith.

By contrast, the worldview that has propelled mainstream Western intellectual life and made modern civilization possible is a kind of pragmatism. It is an empirical outlook that continually — if imperfectly — revises its conclusions based on evidence available to everyone, regardless of their beliefs about the supernatural. This worldview clashes with the conservative evangelical war on facts, but it is not necessarily incompatible with Christian faith.
In fact, evangelical colleges themselves may be the best hope for change. Members of traditions historically suspicious of a pseudoscientific view of the Bible, like the Nazarenes, should revive that skepticism. Mr. Nelson encourages his students to be skeptics rather than cynics. “The skeptic looks at something and says, ‘I wonder,’ ” he said. “The cynic says, ‘I know,’ and then stops thinking.”

He pointed out that “cynicism and tribalism are very closely related. You protect your tribe, your way of life and thinking, and you try to annihilate anything that might call that into question.” Cynicism and tribalism are among the gravest human temptations. They are all the more dangerous when they pose as wisdom and righteousness.

Molly Worthen is the author, most recently, of “Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism,” an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a contributing opinion writer.

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