

# Judgments of God? A moral history of the 2016 United States presidential election campaigns <sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** From the apocalyptic kingdom sequence and Nebuchadnezzar's madness narrative in Daniel, Ellen G. White developed a cosmic-conflict account of divine judgment in human history: God's character is revealed through the moral principles of governance by which he judges the nations. Drawing on OT prophetic oracles against the nations, Steven J. Keillor discerns divine judgment in US history, not only in calamitous events, but also in historical processes that "sift" the righteous from the unrighteous. The 2016 U.S. presidential elections and their outcome fit both patterns of divine judgment, yielding the provisional, working conclusion that they were the culmination of a sifting judgment that humbled and revealed moral defects in the right-, center-, and left-wing factions of American politics. In response to a sense of being under divine judgment, American Christians should be taught to align their political loyalty to God instead of political factions so as to form characters fit to govern with Christ in the age to come.

**Keywords:** historiography; providentialism; Seventh-day Adventism; theopolitics; Donald Trump;

## JULGAMENTOS DE DEUS? UMA HISTÓRIA MORAL DAS CAMPANHAS ELEITORAIS DE 2016 PARA A PRESIDÊNCIA DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

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<sup>1</sup> This research was previously presented at the 13th Annual Seminary Scholarship Symposium, Berrien Springs, MI, 9–10 February 2017. I acknowledge with special thanks to my professor, Nicholas P. Miller (Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University), for challenging me to take up this question for his seminar on Historical Research and Historiography, Autumn 2016. The inevitable lag between academic publication and unfolding events as reported in the news media makes any attempt to engage on a scholarly level with what Timothy Gerton Ash called "history of the present" liable to incomprehensiveness due to the ongoing potential for information about its subject to be made available (1999, p. xiv), not to be conflated with the same expression as used by Michel Foucault (no reference). This is especially the case when that subject is a newsmaker. Hence, there is much I could have added to this article to account for events that have transpired between when this research was first presented and eventually published. Thus, by way of acknowledging and leveraging my existential constraint, in preparation for publication I have limited myself to sources available up to the time of President Trump's inauguration when this research was first presented and have endeavored to maintain the general perspective and thesis I had at that time. My intent is to give the reader a sense of what it was like to evaluate human governance decisions as history unfolded by self-consciously retaining the gap between what was able to be known then and what the reader may have learned of developments since, highlighting both the historical boundedness of the interpretive horizon that informed my thesis and, by extension, the same for subsequent evaluations thereof.

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**Resumo:** Da sequência apocalíptica de reinos e da narrativa da loucura de Nabucodonosor em Daniel, Ellen White desenvolveu um conto de conflito cósmico de julgamento divino na história humana: O caráter de Deus é revelado através dos princípios morais de governo pelos quais ele julga as nações. Esboçando sobre os oráculos proféticos do Antigo Testamento, Steven J. Keillor aponta o julgamento divino na história dos EUA, não apenas em eventos calamitosos, mas também em processos históricos que peneiraram os justos dentre os injustos. A eleição presidencial dos EUA em 2016 e seus resultados servem a ambos padrões de julgamento divino, produzindo a conclusão provisória de trabalho de que eles foram a culminação de um julgamento penoso que humilhou e revelou defeitos morais nas facções de direita, centro e esquerda da política americana. Em resposta a um sentimento de estar sob julgamento divino, os cristãos americanos devem ser ensinados a alinhar sua lealdade política a Deus, em vez de facções políticas, a fim de formar um caráter apto a governar com Cristo na era futura.

**Palavras-chave:** historiografia; providencialismo; Adventismo do sétimo dia; teopolítica; Donald Trump.

Russel Moore, head of the religious liberty arm of the Southern Baptists, said that as he traveled around the United States (U.S.) during the 2016 presidential election campaign, he was commonly asked whether the choice of Donald Trump versus Hillary Clinton as party nominees was a manifestation of divine judgment on America (BOORSTEIN, 2016). Dr. Moore, a prominent, right-wing opponent of Mr. Trump's presidential candidacy, represents the double-bind into which the Republican nominee thrust right-wing Christian voters. They expected to cast their votes in the general election for a Republican candidate who, contra the Democratic nominee, would politically support traditional Christian values. Mr. Trump promised to do this, yet, in his personal life, was not an exemplar of those values. As a celebrity billionaire, he was known to flaunt his promiscuous prodigal lifestyle, at times through vulgar statements, in the tabloid media. According to Dr. Moore, "There's a kind of person for whom every year seems like an end time novel. This year has even sober-minded people feeling they are in an end time novel." Matthew Schmitz, deputy editor of *First Things*, could not help but wonder, "Could Donald Trump be an agent of divine wrath, sent by God to punish a nation of haters and losers (SCHMITZ, 2015)?"

Were these intuitions correct? Were the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaigns and their outcome a judgment of God in human history?<sup>3</sup> The following exploration of this question through the moral lenses on history offered by Ellen G. White's probationary and Steven J. Keillor's "sifting" conceptions of divine judgment in human history will arrive at the provisional, working conclusion that, indeed, Mr. Trump's unexpected rise to the U.S. Presidency was the high-point of a national sifting judgment, in that it both manifested moral defects in the American political left, right, and center and threatened their demise as currently configured.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this research, the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaigns (also referred to in this research as Mr. Trump's rise to the U.S. Presidency) encompass the trajectory of events that began 15 June 2015, when Mr. Trump announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination, and culminated in Mr. Trump's general election victory on 8 November 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The meaning of "moral" in "moral history," will emerge in this research along the same lines as that which Alasdair MacIntyre takes to be its original meaning in Latin: "Moralis; like its Greek predecessor *êthikos*,... means pertaining to character where a man's character is nothing other than his set of dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead a particular kind of life" (MACINTYRE, 2007, p. 38). MacIntyre argued that, in the tradition of Aristotelian virtue ethics, morality was embedded in theology, law, and aesthetics and was not founded on "rational justification" independent of considerations based on these and other modes of being and knowing (MACINTYRE, 2007, p. 39). For MacIntyre, the crucial difference between the ancient and modern conceptions of morality is that "ethics . . . in this [Nicomachean] view presuppo-



The conclusions of this study are provisional because, as George Edgar Shankel noted in his theological reflection on history, “No responsible historian should have the temerity to assign providential action to specific historical events as was done through the prophets of Old Testament times (1967, p. 203).”<sup>5</sup> But he also allowed that “We can . . . accept God’s deep concern for history in all ages, including our own,” and wrote approvingly of historical figures who expressed their sense of God’s intervention in world-historical affairs (SHANKEL, 1967, p. 204).<sup>6</sup>

Shankel’s hesitation may to have stemmed from his lack of a methodology to test whether one’s sense of God’s specific involvement in history can bear provisional assertion. For that we turn now to White and Keillor. These two disparate sources—in terms of historical circumstances, mode of historical authority, not to mention gender—who nevertheless share a common preoccupation with the moral interpretation of history, can be read as concordant in perhaps unexpected ways that invite a fresh look at the question under consideration.

## Ellen G. White’s Probationary Model of Divine Judgment

In the chapter “History and Prophecy” from the book *Education*, Seventh-day Adventist co-founder and visionary, Ellen G. White (1827–1915) laid out a “philosophy of history” based on Daniel’s apocalyptic, four kingdom sequence (Dan 2, 7, 8) and the narrative of Nebuchadnezzar’s madness (Dan 4) (WHITE, 1903a, p. 173, 175). White takes Daniel 4 as a paradigmatic case of divine judgment in history. God prophetically revealed to Nebuchadnezzar his general purpose for those national governments not bound in covenant relationship to Him in the dream of the tree. That is, to promote that which “protects and upbuilds the nation (WHITE, p. 175). When Nebuchadnezzar was stripped of his kingship, it was prophesied as a divine judgment, not only for his arrogance and pride in forgetting that God had granted him authority but also for the injustice and oppression that resulted from his decision to rule his people as

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ses . . . above all some account of human telos,” and he argued that without this purposive frame, ethics becomes incoherent (MACINTYRE, 2007, p. 52, 259). The approaches to history developed by Ellen G. White (1903a, p. 173–184) and Steven J. Keillor (2007) are derived from interpretations of Christian Scripture and thus rely on a similarly ancient conception of morality: one which pertains to character and coheres within a theological frame (MACINTYRE, 2007, p. 184). Specifically, the moral lens through which White and Keillor view history is embedded in the reality of God as a historical agent, who is moving humanity toward an eschatological telos (see n. 47). While not completely satisfying all questions of theodicy, this MacIntyrean account of morality provides a framework in which an answer to the question of how God can involve himself in the horrors of human history. As long as God’s good purposes for human flourishing include, as the highest good, the telos of a character that can enjoy an eternal relationship with him for its own sake, it would not be inconsistent with his character for God, when acting in human history, to trade off lesser goods, to some extent, against that highest good. This moral view of history does not imply that every historical atrocity is necessarily explicable in terms of such a tradeoff. But it does remove the potential to cause human suffering as a *de jure* objection to God’s historical agency in destructive events—contra, e.g., the view in Sigve Tonstad (2016, p. xviii, 140–141, 394) that the Holocaust, as a singular historical event, renders implausible views of God’s historical agency that do not sufficiently embargo his salvific work from the Devil’s destructive activity, so that God’s judgments no longer cause destruction, but rather are a result of sin’s inherent self-destructiveness (see n. 52 for further discussion on theodicy). On this MacIntyrean understanding, “moral history,” “characterological history,” and “providential history” are conceptually overlapping expressions. Without excluding the other meanings, I will default to “moral history” as the expression which best foregrounds the fact that a research question about divine judgment requires morally evaluative interpretations of history, including the use of categories such as right and wrong to characterize movements, events, figures, nations, etc. As Harry S. Stout put it in the introduction: “Insofar as ordinary language is implicitly ethical, all history writing implies moral discernment; a moral history, however, calls for a determination of right and wrong (2006, p. xi).” See footnotes 7, 14, and 19 for further discussion on providential interpretation and methodology.

<sup>5</sup> There is a weaker sense in which all conclusions about history are provisional, because they are prone to be overturned on the basis of new evidence or interpretation. However, conclusions about God’s activity in history on the basis of historical study are provisional in a stronger sense—that in which, for example, conclusions regarding what will take place in the future are provisional. Such conclusions are provisional because we are at least one step removed from contact with the reality of the future. In the same way, without specific prophetic indication, we are always at least one step removed from the reality of God’s activity in human history. For we do not have contact with the mechanisms by which God acts in history, only the effects of God’s acts.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding Churchill’s acknowledgement of a “guiding hand” in the U.S. entry into WWII, Shankel wrote, “Such an acknowledgement of God’s active intervention in one of the great turning points of history is as refreshing as it is rare” (1967, p. 204).



if he owed nothing to God. That we might avert a humiliating divine judgment, the warning, according to White, applies today with the same force as when it was originally given: “Break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquility (Dan 4:27) (WHITE, p. 174).”

White implies that even those governments without access to or neutral in constitution with respect to special revelation may, in principle, discern through general revelation, especially through the study of history, the moral purposes for which God has empowered them. These moral principles, by which God judges the nations, are manifested to the degree that “the blessings thus assured to Israel are, on the same conditions and in the same degree, assured to every nation and every individual under the broad heavens (WHITE, 1903a, p. 174).”

Every nation that has come upon the stage of action has been permitted to occupy its place on the earth, that it might be seen whether it would fulfill the purpose of “the Watcher and the Holy One” [Dan 4:13]. Prophecy has traced the rise and fall of the world’s great empires—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome [...]. Each had its period of test, each failed, its glory faded, its power departed, and its place was occupied by another (WHITE., p. 176).

In other words, there is a probationary quality to God’s interactions with human nations and individuals during the probation on which humanity as a whole was placed after the fall (cf. Gen 15:16, Acts 17:26–27). During this probation, God acts providentially in history to simultaneously prove his loyalty to fallen humanity and prove redeemed humanity’s loyalty to him.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, White’s probationary basis for the moral interpretation of history entails that humans who take the divine, however they may understand divinity, seriously as a historical agent have some capacity to recognize the conditions under which a divine judgment in history may take place and can act to avert it.<sup>8</sup> It further assumes that those who do not take the divine seriously

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<sup>7</sup> “Yet the race was not left without hope. By infinite love and mercy the plan of salvation had been devised, and a life of probation was granted” (WHITE, 1903a, p. 15; See also WHITE, 1890, p. 53; WHITE, 1911, p. 489).

<sup>8</sup> For White’s nineteenth and early twentieth century American audience, that instances of providential intervention could be identified through the study of history was an idea with cultural currency. Since “the end of the seventeenth century,” “in an effort to avoid reckoning with the recent (and messy) history of England,” “New England ministers, historians, and orators had established a distinctive historical providentialism for America (GUYATT, 2007, p. 82). Making a case for the apocalyptic significance of the U.S., Uriah Smith, in the first and last full-book length treatment an Adventist scholar has devoted to a providential reading of American history, was able to appeal to “the convictions expressed by some of the eminent authors from whom we have quoted, that the hand of Providence has been more conspicuous in the development of this nation than in that of any other (SMITH, 1885, p. 118).” Percy Tilson Magan (1899), applied an Adventist providential reading of history to policy questions, including those associated with America’s rising global power. E.g., in a chapter titled “American Imperialism—National Apostasy” Magan argued that the annexation of the Philippines was immoral (MAGAN, 1899, p. 97). On the other hand, see Mark A. Noll, “The Crisis over Providence” (2006, p. 75–94) for an account of how “the hollowness of providential reasoning that was everywhere on display in the War between the States” (NOLL, 2006, p. 92) bolstered the case of postbellum “American thinkers . . . who gave up on providence and embraced agnosticism about the ultimate meaning of the world” (NOLL, 2006, 94). Noll concluded that “the difficulty was not trust in providence as such but trust in providence so narrowly defined by the republican, covenantal, commonsensical, Enlightenment, and—above all—nationalistic categories that Protestant evangelicals had so boldly appropriated with such galvanizing effects in the early decades of the nineteenth century” (NOLL, 2006, 94). For discussion of White and Keillor’s providential interpretation of the Civil War, see footnote 19. Gary Land has traced the course that took Adventist historians away from the “mixing of theology and history” and into modern critical, academic historiography, which accounts for events exclusively in terms of human contexts and causes (LAND, 1980, p. 90). The critical approach to “history out of an awareness of Adventism’s cultural context” likely first gained acceptance in the church with Richard Weeks’s 1967 dissertation on the failed predications of Adventist evangelists regarding the apocalyptic role of Turkey during WWI (LAND, 1980, p. 90). With a view toward integrating Christian faith and history in the classroom, Land concluded that “sensitivity to God’s activity in history arises out of faith, not from the study of historical documents. Assertions that God is at work can never rest on the kind of evidence used by historians” (2000, p. 41). Absent of any ability to discern the transcendent by means of historical study alone, critical historiography “engages its audience at the moral level without pontificating” by avoiding the categories of “good or bad when measured against some ultimate standard,” opting instead for a contextualized assessment or morality based on “effects or consequences” (NOLL, 2006, p. 48, 74; see n. 36 for a discussion of American “success morality”). Land allowed for the validity of a providential/moral interpretation of history, as long as it is grounded theologically and not in critical



as an agent in history are to some degree willfully ignorant such that they are still “by their own choice deciding their destiny (WHITE, 1903a).” Yet even these can be brought to a humble recognition of God through the experience of divine judgment in history as was Nebuchadnezzar. Thus, for White, the only safe choices in the political arena are those consistent with God’s moral principles for the governance of nations “according to the light that has been given” them in their particular historical situations (WHITE, 1911, p. 232).<sup>9</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere, for White, history’s primary theological import is the medium through which character of moral agents is revealed in the choices they make and the consequences that result (HAUSTED & HAMSTRA, 2017). This implies that, for humans embedded in the matrix of historical cause and effect, there is no way to opt out of revealing character when confronted with morally salient political questions. To choose not to choose is itself a morally significant choice with attendant consequences.

In White’s reading, history as the record of the past reveals the moral inability of human beings to govern themselves amid this immanent cascade of events, especially those without an orientation toward a divine historical agent. This God of history reveals His character in the moral principles by which He supervises—in part, through judgments in history—the rise, probation, and fall of nations. From this perspective, the significance of the decisions Christians make related to morally salient questions of governance is whether those choices reveal in the Christian a character that reflects loyalty to God’s character.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, White’s probationary concept of divine judgment in history assumes that Christians will undertake moral readings of history so that, by comparing patterns of judgment in Scripture to the record of the past, they can arrive at working conclusions about history that can inform how to remain loyal to God insofar as they are granted to exercise governing power and influence.<sup>11</sup> When undertaken as a scholarly study, such interpretations rely on the development of criteria for identifying divine judgments in human history. This moral approach to history ought to ensure that, at the very least, if and when Christians make governance choices contrary to the moral standards by which God judges nations in history, they will be able to recognize a judgment event for what it is and repent of their disloyalty.

In outlining her philosophy of history, White did not develop specific criteria to guide a moral interpretation of history. Given the eponymous subject of the volume for which the short chapter under consideration was written, that omission is, perhaps, unsurprising. Presumably, the articulation of these principles is the work for which she expected a well-rounded Christian education to equip students of history. Her other writing on moral governance issues was more focused on interpreting circumstances, not propounding a general theory. Nevertheless, for that

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methodology (NOLL, 2006, p. 42). I hold that where historical methodology seems unlikely to produce a satisfactory explanation for events in terms of human contexts and causation, a theologically grounded identification of divine judgment in human history has historical warrant. But divine activity in history cannot be identified simply on the absence of better explanations (see n. 20).

<sup>9</sup> For White, the standard of divine judgment is always “the measure of light given” (1940, p. 210).

<sup>10</sup> “From the rise and fall of nations as made plain in the pages of Holy Writ, [men absorbed in the pleasures and the pursuits of sense] need to learn how worthless is mere outward and worldly glory. . . . As ‘the flower of the grass’ it has perished. So perishes all that has not God for its foundation. Only that which is bound up with His purpose and expresses His character can endure” (WHITE, 1903a, p. 183).

<sup>11</sup> By “working” conclusions I mean conclusions with the degree of robustness necessary to inform moral governance decisions, as opposed to conclusions that aim at more critical explanations of historical events, on the one hand, or, perhaps, more comprehensive explanations, on the other.





limited purpose she was able to identify moral principles for the violation of which a nation in her time, the U.S., could expect to fall under judgment.

For example, White was particularly engaged in the fight for alcohol prohibition in the U.S. (MORGAN, 2013, p. 1054–1057). Drawing on the example of God’s judgment of fire on Nadab and Abihu, priests whose putatively drunken ministrations in the tabernacle cost them their lives (Lev 10:1–11), White advised her fellow citizens that “intemperate men should not by vote of the people be placed in positions of trust (WHITE, 1880).” Based on biblical patterns of divine judgment on cities, she concluded that the San Francisco earthquake was part of God’s design to “wipe out the liquor saloons that have been the cause of so much evil, so much misery and crime (WHITE, 1906a).” As evidence for the earthquake as a judgement event, she noted that, contrary to the civil unrest anticipated by the authorities in the event of a catastrophe, it had the effect of reducing “disorder and crime,” which she attributed to the earthquake’s effect of temporarily reducing alcohol consumption. But “the people of San Francisco must answer at the judgment bar of God for the reopening of the liquor saloons in that city (WHITE, 1906b).” For White, the free sale of alcohol and its use by those to whom the governance of their fellow humans is entrusted are contrary to God’s moral principles for human governance, and polities where these abuses are tolerated come under liability to divine judgment. She wrote along similar lines regarding slavery, bribery, corruption, and other affronts to God’s purposes for the governments of the nations (WHITE, 1948, p. 264; 1890; 1903b).<sup>12</sup>

While White pushed for Christians to unite on issue-based advocacy for moral social reform,<sup>13</sup> she did not hold any ideological faction or political party for her time as representing moral governance to the extent that those loyal to God would be loyal to the faction, so that she specifically warned Christians against aligning with political parties.<sup>14</sup>

White saw in the record of history—with the crucial exception of Scripture—an account of the nations’ probation from the limited and flawed human perspective. Nevertheless, that record is reliable as a source for corroborating the revelation of God’s character in Scripture when studied with a consciousness of moral principles that lie behind the rise and fall of governments and nations. Thus, for White, the moral interpretation of history and its application to the moral decisions we face, including those relating to human governance, is indispensable to Christian character formation. As she concluded:

We need to study the working out of God’s purpose in the history of nations and in the revelation of things to come, that we may estimate at their true value things seen and things unseen; that we may learn what is the true aim of life; that, viewing the things of time in the light of eternity, we may put

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<sup>12</sup> For a more complete introduction to Ellen White’s views on morality as applied to questions of governance see Jones (2013).

<sup>13</sup> White urged Adventists not to break with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union when it began formally supporting “Sunday rest laws as a means for protecting the rights and welfare of industrial workers” (MORGAN, 2013, p. 1056). She devoted a chapter in *The Ministry of Healing*, to advocating for an end to “The Liquor Traffic and Prohibition,” concluding with this call to issue-based, legislative activism: “Let an army be formed to stop the sale of the drugged liquors that are making men mad. Let the danger from the liquor traffic be made plain and a public sentiment be created that shall demand its prohibition. Let the drink-maddened men be given an opportunity to escape from their thralldom. Let the voice of the nation demand of its lawmakers that a stop be put to this infamous traffic” (WHITE, 1905, p. 337, 346).

<sup>14</sup> “There is danger, decided danger, for all who shall link themselves up with the political parties of the world. There is fraud on both sides. God has not laid upon any of our people the burden of linking up with either party. We are under Christ’s banner, and every one who names the name of Christ is to depart from all iniquity” (WHITE, 1896). For more on how White balanced the imperative of contributing to human governance with the peril of partisan politics see Morgan (2013, p. 1037–1040).



them to their truest and noblest use. Thus, learning here the principles of His kingdom and becoming its subjects and citizens, we may be prepared at His coming to enter with Him into its possession (WHITE, 1903a, p. 184).

And so, in more directly addressing the question of whether Mr. Trump’s rise is an instance of divine judgment in history we turn to the work of Steven J. Keillor. His application of biblical patterns of divine judgment to a moral reading of American history makes him a suitable guide pick up where White left-off on the question of how to recognize instances of divine judgment in human history. For he is perhaps the only Christian historian active in the twenty-first century specializing in American history to attempt the kind of non-partisan yet morally inflected, providential history White called for in the nineteenth century (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 72).<sup>15</sup>

## Steven J. Keillor’s Sifting Model of Divine Judgment

Where Ellen G. White developed her concept of divine judgment in human history from the apocalyptic book of Daniel, Steven J. Keillor draws on all the “oracles against the nations” (OANs) found in OT prophetic literature (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 64). Following Morris’s study on the semantic range of the Hebrew cognates, *shaphat* (שָׁפַט) and *mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט), Keillor arrives at a conception of divine judgment in history as sifting. This indicates that God’s “judgment is not ‘merely negative and destructive’ but has ‘a creative element’ in separating a righteous remnant from evildoers (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 66 apud MORRIS, 1960, p.23).”<sup>16</sup> Also, as made clear in “Daniel’s OAN,” divine “judgment does not reinstate a prior status quo absent of proud powers but pushes history along toward a *telos*, a final goal (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 71).” Thus, Keillor finds that divine judgments in history can be identified not only with those events that bring punishment on a nation for its sins (of which, the foremost in the OANs is an attitude of “national pride and/or a ruler’s arrogance”; KEILLOR, 2007, p. 69), but also with those historical processes that divide the righteous from the unrighteous prior to a judgment even in ways that make it clear to those with the correct moral perspective who is in the right and who is in the wrong.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In his survey of *Christian Historiography: Five Rival Versions*, Jay D. Green associates providentialism with Christian historians who “appropriately fear that life in the modern, secular, mechanized West has too easily tempted us to live as if God doesn’t exist. Some call this tendency in modern Christianity practical deism—an abstract assent to God’s providence without it having any discernable impact on our priorities, our choices, or our decisions” (GREEN, 2015, p. 137, emphasis original). With the exception of Keillor, the American providential historians Green surveys offer right-wing, triumphalist narratives of Christian America (GREEN, 2015, 132–135). Keillor rejects simplistic, partisan “omni-historicism” that explains all events providentially, in terms of all God’s purposes in history, exhaustively, and claiming all Truth” (KEILLOR apud YERXA, 2015, p. 156–157, emphasis original). Dan O. Via’s interpretation of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (9/11) as divine judgment on the U.S. for its recent history of distributive injustice is an example of a left-wing, providentialist interpretation of American history (2007, p. 72). While “providential history’s greatest contribution to student learning has been its power to reinforce the truths of the faith and to instruct the moral imagination” (GREEN, 2015, p. 131), Green ultimately concludes that the distortions to which providential history is prone should prompt us to use “better, more sustainable ways to establish one another in the faith” (GREEN, 2015, p. 139). But the question is not whether there are better ways to bolster faith, but whether moral history is one means by which Christians, according to a Scriptural mandate, ought to grow in character. Via links the OT “prophets’ electric language” in proclaiming the reality of divine judgment to anthropological considerations. “Israel is led astray by a victimizing spirit of whoredom and is unable to return (Hos. 4:12; 5:4); the human heart is devious and perverse beyond understanding (Jer. 17:9), or in Ezekiel’s words (11:19–20), we have in our flesh a heart of stone. . . . If we human beings really are that obdurately hardened against truth and righteousness, it will take a bugle blast, and explosive event, to function as a wake-up call” (2007, p. 73, emphasis original).

<sup>16</sup> Quoting Leon Morris: “Whether through the agency of men or not, Yahweh’s judgment sifts men. It separates the righteous from the wicked and thus makes the ‘remnant’ appear. This points us to a creative element in judgment. We must not think of it as merely negative and destructive. It has, it is true, negative and punitive aspects. But what emerges as the result of judgment is, so to speak, all clear again. It is the beloved community, and we cannot imagine how this could possibly appear apart from judgment” (1960, p. 23).

<sup>17</sup> “I tried to correlate known causes of the event with known categories of divine holiness and judgment” (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 72).



In applying this judgment model to more recent history, Keillor develops methodological controls that ground his moral reading of American history in the biblical sifting pattern. First, he divides the American political scene into three historical factions: right, center, and left. A national judgment of God would be expected to sift the righteous from the unrighteous across all three factions, demonstrating that God is not beholden to those in each faction who have arrogantly developed their goals for America as if God does not intervene in human history. This principle controls for political bias in the moral interpretation of American history (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 56–59).

In Keillor's typology of American politics, all three factions champion systems that are at once necessary but at the same time tempt us to act as if God does not intervene in history. The right, when it assumes an absence of divine intervention in free markets, does not allow that God can judge the unjust outcomes they produce. The center, when it assumes an absence of divine intervention in democracy, does not allow that God can judge the immoral outcomes it produces. And the left, when it assumes an absence of divine intervention in science, does not allow that God can judge the dehumanizing outcomes it produces (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 45–46).

Keillor illustrates this attitude through the reasons representative authors of the three factions gave for their *prima facie* dismissal of the notion that 9/11 could have been a divine judgment. The right assumed that God cannot judge evil done in the name of the Christian God to protect the free markets of goods and ideas that sustain his favored nation. The center could not entertain the category of divine judgment because it is not susceptible to the technical expertise they rely on to solve the social evils they conceptualize as merely problems. "The left seeks a people, idea or force to bring justice to history" and cannot conceive of a God involved in judgments in history because human flourishing exclusively with respect to this-worldly concerns is the only moral end (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 43).

Keillor articulates other methodological controls on identifying God's judgments historically. To begin with, it is prudent to "limit our list of judged sins to acts or conditions that clearly played a causal role (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 57)," because that constrains the desire to align with one faction by using God's judgment in a speck-removing manner by inferring moral superiority from calamitous events that befall the other factions (Matt 7:3, Luke 6:41, 13:2–5).<sup>18</sup> This control is also consistent with the category of probation implicit in White's approach, which entails that divine judgment in probationary history should be, in principle, recognizable to those upon whom it falls, especially those affected by it.<sup>19</sup>

Another mark of divine judgment is that the sum of the causes of the historical event in question do not add up to the effect. Here, Keillor follows Abraham Lincoln's confession of divine judgment in his Second Inaugural Address (1865). Slavery was the necessary cause for the U.S. Civil War, yet for all the country had done to avoid a war over slavery, the war still came. With the proximate, human causes not adding up to a war, Lincoln held that the sufficient cause of

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<sup>18</sup> "That personal bias, of 'everyone's own word' (Jer 23:36), is what we tried to avoid when we identified three tentative, non-partisan causes for judgment on the United States" (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 72). On the other hand, Franklin Graham identified "God's hand" operating in Mr. Trump's rise to the U.S. Presidency exclusively in that it checked "secularist" and "atheistic and humanistic" political power. For Graham, it was simultaneously a judgment on his political opponents and a vindication of his political cause (GRAHAM, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> See pp. 58–59.



the war was divine intervention in human history (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 153).<sup>20</sup> Thus, while divine judgments in history are responsive to human agency, there should be evidence that they are not entirely explicable in terms of human causes.<sup>21</sup>

With methodological controls that account for political bias, human agency, and divine agency in place, the question remains, Is it within the power of human beings to apply these criteria without turning every disaster or event we disapprove of into divine judgment?<sup>22</sup> While ultimately skeptical of the possibility of identifying discrete instances of divine activity in human history apart from special revelation due to the “profound limits of human knowing,” Jay D. Green, in his survey of Christian historiographical methodology, found that Keillor’s project’s “most interesting feature” is that he “spends considerable time looking at actual events.” He thus reviews Keillor more favorably than other providentialist historians, but in the end concludes that they are all engaged in an unnecessarily risky venture (GREEN, 2015, p. 141, 136).

But the nature of historical knowledge as “limited, provisional, and subject to ongoing revision” is not a defeater for knowledge of divine judgments if moral history is grounded in White’s probationary framework (GREEN, 2015, p. 141).<sup>23</sup> Provisional, working conclusions about God’s judging activity are sufficient where the divine standard of judgment accounts for human limitations, including those imposed by particular, historical circumstances. And so, trusting that God superintends history such that we can grasp its moral import in the present even while acknowledging that the following working conclusions may be revised in light of future events and ongoing interpretation, we have come to the place in our exploration where we can take up what may turn out to be the most important question of American public morality in this decade.

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<sup>20</sup> The Civil War functions as the paradigmatic case of divine judgment in Keillor’s moral reading of American history. Ellen White took a similar view of the Civil War based on a vision she had (3 August 1861) in which she saw that divine intervention in the First Battle of Bull Run (21 July 1861) had caused the Civil War to be prolonged in the same way as the biblical plagues were on Egypt. God was carefully superintending events, on the one hand, to ensure the eventual liberation of the slaves and, on the other, the punishment of both “the South for the sin of slavery, and the North for so long suffering its overreaching and overbearing influence” (WHITE, 1948, p. 264; see O’Reggio, [2006, p. 135–158] for more on the apocalyptic religious context in which White’s vision was received). In Mark A. Noll’s view, American “intellectual elites” and “ordinary folk” “found it easy to reduce the complexities of the [Civil War] to simple, if sharply contrasting, providential calculations” (NOLL, 2006, p. 84), which eventually led to a loss of confidence in providentialism when the war did not go as either side anticipated (see n. 7). However, Chandra Manning found that white Northern soldiers’ views of providence during the war were complex and morally responsive to unexpected historical developments. They initially, along with civilians in the North, understood the moral significance of the war in the simplistic terms of a divinely sanctioned campaign to visit swift judgment on the South. But once it became clear that the war would be long and sacrificial, many were able to reinterpret the war’s meaning as including divine judgement on the North for white-on-black race riots and denial of civil equality to freed slaves, which led some soldiers to advocate on the freed slaves’ behalf to Northern civilians back home (MANNING, 2007, p. 118–119). “White Southerners, on the other hand, generally found” that “sort of introspection and social reexamination” “threatening and heretical.” (MANNING, 2007, p. 145) They instead interpreted military setbacks in the war as divine judgment on their lack of personal piety and individual moral shortcomings, which had made them collectively unworthy of blessing (MANNING, 2007, p. 143). Based on the Exodus motif through which they narrated their experience, black Union soldiers, many of them former slaves, interpreted the war as a liberating outpouring of divine wrath on the nation (MANNING, 2007, 128). White’s vision of the providential purpose at work in the First Battle of Bull Run rejected the reductive Southern moral understanding of providence, anticipating the interpretation of the Civil War that white Northern soldiers and the president were eventually to adopt, based on the Exodus motif that also animated the black narration of the war.

<sup>21</sup> This approach need not entail the kind of ‘God of the gaps’ fallacy that either implicitly denies divine causation in that which can be explained by other means or implies that God must have been involved in any event for which we lack complete causal understanding. Rather, it is a methodological control, operating in conjunction with other such controls, for drawing provisional, working conclusions about those divine judgments made intelligible through historical cause and effect.

<sup>22</sup> When seeking a non-human explanation for destructive historical events, one may begin with the assumption that they are more aptly attributed to one named “Destroyer” (“Ἀπολλύων” and “Ἀβασδών,” Rev 9:11) than to the One for whom destruction is “alien” (“רַחֵם” and “רַחֵם,” Is 28:21–22). Scripture also acknowledges random occurrences in history (e.g. Eccl 9:11; taking the irony of Qoheleth as not unable to convey a phenomenologically reliable account of life “under the sun”). A providential interpretation of history with methodological criteria that account for these alternatives need not rely on a meticulously deterministic or predestinarian view of providence.

<sup>23</sup> Keillor anticipates this objection: “Some argue that while ignoring judgment may have its costs, treating it as a real category has higher costs that outweigh the benefits, for we cannot know if the Civil War was God’s judgment. We cannot know for sure that other interpretations of the past are correct, but we make them anyway (2007, p. 121).” Therefore, the question is not whether the conclusions of a historical study are provisional or not, but what degree of provisionality is warranted by the purpose for which a given study is being undertaken (see n. 4).



## Is Donald Trump's Rise to the U.S. Presidency a Judgment of God in Human History?

Working by process of elimination, there are biblical patterns of divine judgment identified by Ellen G. White and Stephen J. Keillor according to which the outcome of the 2016 presidential election is not a divine judgment. The 2016 U.S. presidential election campaigns were not a national catastrophe in the order of a 9/11 or a Civil War judgment event. They were directly responsible for few if any deaths. A significant segment of the population viewed the outcome as a positive or neutral event, especially in consideration of the widespread dissatisfaction with former U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee.<sup>24</sup> With respect to some future calamity that may unfold as a result of the presidential election, it is still possible that the “four winds of the earth” (Rev 7:1) will continue to be held back, and the president’s unconventional tendencies in national leadership, which some consider dangerous (Isa 19:4), mitigated.

It is also not the case that the election winner himself experienced a personal humiliation in the way that Nebuchadnezzar was placed under judgment (Dan 4). Rather, given his public record of personal immorality and arrogant claims about his capability to change history,<sup>25</sup> he is an example of how God sometimes allows the wicked to prosper (Jer 12:1), sending blessings, in his mercy, on the “righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt 5:45). Not all receive a recompense of their deeds in this life (cf. Luke 16:25); it is possible for the most heinous political leaders to escape divine judgment in this world and face it only in the next. On the other hand, given that God delays final judgment for the sake of saving the unrighteous (2 Pet 3:9), God may well be working a providentially salvific purpose for Mr. Trump personally in superintending his rise to the presidency. The overwhelming burdens of the office may provoke him to “seek the LORD while he may be found” (Is 55:6).

In other words, any who to date<sup>26</sup> have rushed to declare the 2016 U.S. presidential election result as a divinely ordained national catastrophe have made the same mistake as “the editors” of a “Congregationalist journal” who, in Keillor’s estimation, “mistakenly saw a national pro-slavery decision [the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act] as the sign of divine judgment,” in that it ended the possibility for the nation to claim “righteous standing before God” and set the U.S. on a path to war. The Kansas-Nebraska act was not in itself the national catastrophe we remember as the Civil War, and so cannot be identified as a catastrophic judgment event. But it was, in Keillor’s moral interpretation of American history, the high point of a sifting judgment process, “when an intensifying national disunity marked God’s sifting out prior to a judging war (KEILLOR, 2007, p. 145–146).” A sifting judgment event forces individuals to make moral governance choices that clarify across factional lines whom amongst the nation is righteous with respect to a testing question of political morality and who is unrighteous.

Even if there is no subsequent catastrophic national judgment event, the 2016 elections laid bare America’s national disunity across and within the political right, center, and left; forcing individual citizens to make governance choices that clarified their character. It has also humilia-

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<sup>24</sup> Ms. Clinton’s unpopularity with both right and left was recognized soon after the election as contributing to Mr. Trump’s victory (see, e.g., BUMP, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> See footnotes 29–30.

<sup>26</sup> As qualified in footnote 1.



ted those factions in ways that manifested their arrogant madness in championing free markets; democracy; and justice as if God does not intervene in human history. For the following reasons, this fits the biblical patterns of divine judgment identified by Keillor and White in history sufficiently well for American Christians to raise an alarm about the potential for a subsequent judgment event on the U.S. and call on individuals to repent if they have been disloyal to God's principles of moral governance.

1. The whole of Mr. Trump's rise to the US presidency appears to be greater than the sum of its human causes. Even the architects of his triumph were taken by surprise at his victory and were uncertain as to how exactly it was that their plan succeeded.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that the debate over how he attained the presidency will sustain the career of many a political scientist and historian.<sup>28</sup> This effect of national surprise would not have been caused had the election turned out the way most had predicted, and it leaves open the possibility of a divine judgment associated with the outcome.

2. Major causes of the 2016 U.S. elections results identified by professional observers of American politics can be traced back to arrogant failures to acknowledge God as an agent in history on the part of the right, center, and left of American politics. The American right sought to protect America's traditional Christian values and free markets from a centrist candidate who had abandoned her support of religious liberty protections in the marketplace for those holding traditional sexual morality and whose relationship with Wall Street reeked of collusion.<sup>29</sup> But they did it by electing a candidate of indefensible moral character who at the same time claimed to be a Christian and to never have asked for God's forgiveness (SCOTT, 2015).<sup>30</sup> He showed no evidence of character transformation following a subsequent reported conversion that coincided with his political interests.<sup>31</sup> In stark contrast to the humble character of Christ and in seeming defiance of God as an agent in history, Mr. Trump proclaimed, regarding the American political system, "I alone can fix it (TRUMP, 2016, p. 12)."

The candidate of the free-market championing right was also deeply invested in the gambling industry and leveraged his personal fame as a brand to persuade consumers to accept dubious value propositions.<sup>32</sup> This craven expediency—electing an immoral candidate to achieve moral ends—exposed them as hypocrites who seek to turn the nation from God's judgment for violation of moral norms by electing the kind of political leader who violates those same moral norms, trusting their party apparatus, not God, to be able to control him.<sup>33</sup> The hypocrisy of the

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<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Lauter (2016).

<sup>28</sup> Before Mr. Trump's surprise victory, his unconventional rise had already made it "a bit of a cliché to say that this presidential election will be studied in political-science classes for many years to come (KILGORE, 2016)."

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Dulk (2016); n. 38.

<sup>30</sup> "Evangelicals emerged as one of Donald Trump's most ardent bases of support" (NOTIONAL CHRISTIANS, 2016)

<sup>31</sup> "Remember the [survey] question: 'an elected official can behave ethically even if they have committed transgressions in their personal life.' When that was Bill Clinton, Evangelicals were 'nope' but now that it's Trump, they're 'yep'" (STEZER, 2016). Mr. Trump famously abstains from alcohol, but, according to White, "those who eat and work intemperately and irrationally, talk and act irrationally. An intemperate man cannot be a patient man. It is not necessary to drink alcoholic liquors in order to be intemperate" (1948, p. 618).

<sup>32</sup> E.g., the Trump University lawsuit was settled days before the president's inauguration (HOROWITZ, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., historian and author Eric Mataxas, who justified his support of the Republican nominee by dichotomizing character and moral governance: "[Trump's] morality doesn't come into governance in the way that [Clinton's] does. In other words, it's not about private morality" (MATAXAS apud BRIERLEY, 2016) See also, e.g., systematic theologian and ethicist Wayne Grudem—author of *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010]—who endorsed the Republican nominee on a greater good argument, then retracted his endorsement over concerns about Mr. Trump's immoral character when new information about his past behavior came to light, and finally reinstated his endorsement a week later on the same grounds for which he originally gave it (GRUDEM, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c).



right would not have been as manifestly pervasive had Mr. Trump failed to retain enough right wing votes to win the U.S. presidency.

The political center was exposed as incompetent in their failure to foresee the potential success and halt the rise of a candidate with no prior experience in electoral politics. The statistical calculations of social scientists attempting to make sense of the patterns of public opinion were found to have little better predictive, much less prescriptive, value than the ancient astrologers calculating the patterns of the heavens.<sup>34</sup> Their trust in their own technical mastery of the democratic processes to safeguard the nation's well-being, absent of any appeal to transcendent moral obligations, was revealed to be specious and bankrupt.

The Democratic nominee's centrist claim of competence was found to be no substitute for her lack of trustworthy moral character in the eyes of the electorate.<sup>35</sup> Her reliance on a slew of technocratic policy positions carefully crafted, not to galvanize the moral support of the electorate, but to garner issue-based support by appealing to a broad range of interests,<sup>36</sup> arguably blunted her moral authority to critique the Republican nominee as an opportunist lacking the character necessary for the presidency. The negative reaction to her attempt to stake out the moral high ground in distinction to the nation's "basket of deplorables" (the memorable aspersion she cast on Mr. Trump's majoritarian supporters) revealed the degree to which many Americans perceived the Democratic nominee as so vapidly opportunistic in her own commitments so as to have lost the integrity necessary to credibly condemn her opponent's immorality.<sup>37</sup> This uniquely centrist hubris, which elevates competence over character, would not have been manifested as such had Ms. Clinton's expertise secured her the election result.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, the political left was exposed as unjust in their pursuit of justice for America's lower classes and racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities while ignoring the needs of the middle, working class; traditional families; and the white, Christian majority. Finding themselves unable to entrust the outcome of their cause to divine intervention in history, the left relied on the upper and professional classes to support their justice project through a party apparatus sensitive to upper and professional class concerns—a situation exemplified by its centrist nominee's close ties to Wall Street.<sup>39</sup> This resulted in an unjust state of affairs in which the professional class arrogantly

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<sup>34</sup> Cf., Levinovitz (2016).

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Przybyla (2016), and right e.g., Crouse (2016). For centrists, this was not a character defect to be humbly acknowledged and reformed but a messaging problem to be solved e.g., Gearan (2016).

<sup>36</sup> This can be most clearly seen in contrast to her left-wing opponent for the Democratic nomination, Senator Bernie Sanders, who campaigned out of an uncompromising moral core, regardless of how politically costly, and ultimately was seen by some on the left to have forced Ms. Clinton to change policy positions to retain the support of his highly motivated constituency (see, e.g. ATKIN, OLLSTEIN, LERNER (2016).

<sup>37</sup> Again, this character flaw was noted as such by commentators on the right—e.g., "Richard Nixon played the same amoral game and was caught and ruined, while the Clintons prosper and swim in treasure" (KASS, 2016)—and left—e.g., "People aren't meant to be relaunched as often as phones" (LUND, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Richard Stivers has described the typical features of this American pragmatic "success morality," which assumes that "success is not the result of moral character, nor even the proof that one possesses such a character; rather it is moral character itself" (STIVERS, 1994, p. 24). He traced the origins of this "new morality," in part, back to Machiavellian and Smithian political and economic theories from which "the belief that God is active in human history" "is absent" (STIVERS, 1994, p. 17). These, when combined with social Darwinism, laid the intellectual foundation for building an approach to attaining public goods that replaced a sense of living out morally significant, historical narratives with the promise of a new future built on efficiency gains offered by following technical procedures, including those that "have as their object the control of human beings" (STIVERS, 1994, p. 72, 140–141). Thus, in a characterological sense, Ms. Clinton's orientation toward the public good is amoral to the extent that it is guided by technocratic procedure in place of personal virtue. By contrast, Mr. Trump's lack of an orientation toward the public good is immoral to the extent that his dispositions are constrained neither by considerations of competence nor of character.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Head (2016).





showered the lower class with pity and the middle, working class with disdain.<sup>40</sup> At the same time upper class siphoned the lion's share of the economic gains from the recovery from the 2008 recession with no economic relief in sight for the middle-class (FRY; KOCHINAR, 2014). The collapse of middle, working class electoral support for the left's favored general election candidate, Ms. Clinton, in key battle-ground states where the middle, working class most felt abandoned to injustice for the sake of justice for the poor and minorities has been cited as a key reason for Trump's unanticipated victory.<sup>41</sup>

3. The revelation of these moral flaws exposed as a result of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections is recognized as signaling an existential threat to the moral core of the American political factions as currently configured. The "#NeverTrump" movement has opened a rift in the right, such that "the 79 percent that evangelicals awarded to the GOP nominee was actually the lowest level of evangelical support for a Republican candidate since Bob Dole lost to Bill Clinton in 1996, garnering 74 percent of their support (NOTIONAL CHRISTIANS, 2016)." Trump's plan to bring jobs back to America is thus far predicated on mercantilist tariffs and government intervention in corporate decision-making, potentially splitting the right on the moral nature of the free market system it champions.<sup>42</sup> And the Christian values championed by the right look set to continue to lose influence in a secularizing society due to the perceived hypocrisy of the right in the election.<sup>43</sup>

Writing for a centrist newspaper of record after the presidential election, Steven Keillor's brother, Garrison Keillor—the avuncular radio personality and man of letters who, during the presidential campaign, turned his biting wit against the Republican nominee in syndicated newspaper columns—recalled how his parents did not participate in democracy because they believed to do so would constitute an affront to God's sovereignty over human governments. Garrison Keillor then offered his own challenge to centrist belief in democracy as the inviolable locus of political power by allowing, with tongue half in cheek, that

maybe God did choose this bloated narcissist and compulsive liar and con man to be president, and maybe He will send a couple of Corinthians to light his pathway. . . . But it does seem like the very thing God might do. Put an idiot in charge and cluster his clueless children around him and a coterie of old hacks and opportunists and thereby teach us haughty journalists a lesson (2016).

Some in the U.S. expert class are beginning to realize they will be ineffective if they carry on reducing moral questions to technical problems and bracketing matters of ultimate concern.<sup>44</sup>

For the left, the U.S. presidential election signaled an end to their belief that middle class, rural, white, Christian values in America were inexorably fading from political relevance and

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<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Williams (2016).

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Guo (2016).

<sup>42</sup> Writing for the right-wing, free market championing media outlet, The Wall Street Journal, Bill McGurn split with Mr. Trump on the wisdom of his market intervention keep factory jobs from moving to Mexico (2016).

<sup>43</sup> The 2014 Pew Religious Landscape study found that the most common reason Americans who do not affiliate with a religion offer for leaving Christianity is that one no longer believes. "Too many Christians doing un-Christian things," was one response Pew classified as indicating non-belief as a reason for disaffiliation (LIPKA, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> E.g., anthropologist Arlie Russell Hochschild attempts to elucidate the moral framework of white, working-class Louisianans for a centrist and even left-wing audience (2016).



could be safely ignored for the sake of the priorities of justice (JONES, 2016).<sup>45</sup> The left's mobilization of minority identity politics opened the door to a new expression of white identity politics, and their marginalization of those who do not adhere to increasingly esoteric, however well intentioned, speech codes burnished the appeal of the one candidate who had the freedom to speak whatever might come to his mind.<sup>46</sup> Some on the left have opined that their faction must learn how to speak justice to those who feel that the poor and minorities are being shoved ahead of them in line while social elites mock all that they hold dear, lest they continue to drive wedges further into the divisions from which the previous president, elected with their support, promised, and failed, to heal the nation.<sup>47</sup>

4. The humiliation of the American right, center, and left is consistent with the pattern of divine judgment on human governments experienced by Nebuchadnezzar in his madness. The right arrogantly believed it could protect the free market of goods and ideas (i.e. religious liberty) only by electing a president who does not live according to moral principles. Thus, they brought the madness of hypocrisy upon themselves. The center arrogantly believed it could control the processes of democracy through techniques and expertise that methodologically bracket the moral principles of governance. Thus, they brought the madness of incompetence upon themselves. And the left arrogantly believed that to establish justice without divine intervention in history it had to ignore the justice claims of the middle, working, and white classes along with their traditional, Christian values. Thus, they brought the madness of injustice upon themselves. And the madness that came upon all three as a stunning surprise would not have been manifested as such by any other election outcome.

5. Two other trends associated with the 2016 U.S. elections indicate that Mr. Trump's rise to the U.S. Presidency could lead to a catastrophic national judgment event associated with political repression that would mark the end of certain American liberal democratic norms:<sup>48</sup> (1) increasing apathy toward liberal democratic values and (2) the rise of majoritarian nationalism. (1) While likely not as threatened as during the Great Depression era when the government machine-gunned striking miners, the Republican and Democratic parties had armed wings, and the

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<sup>45</sup> PPRI demographer Robert P. Jones portrayed white Protestants as political reactionaries moving through the Kubler-Ross stages of grief over their demographic demise and concluded that they ought to be lowered gently to their political rest as they corporately come to accept the end of their era of political dominance (2016, p. 197-239).

<sup>46</sup> "It's offensive to tell a laid-off person who couldn't go to college that their economic struggles aren't as much of a concern as using the right pronoun" (HAGERMAN, 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild identified this as the "deep story," the "feels-as-if story," that her white, working class subjects experience in America today (2016, p. 135, emphasis original). "Abandoned and without any party willing to champion their interests, people cling to candidates who, at the very least, are willing to represent their moral convictions. The smug style [in American liberalism] resents them for it, and they resent the smug in turn" (RENSIN, 2016).

<sup>48</sup> Both White and Steven Keillor view the U.S. as the inevitable subject of future judgment events that will lead to the total downfall of the nation. In a planned providential history of the United States, Keillor intends to historically demonstrate that, at the least, God has a providential purpose for the United States in furthering the global spread of the gospel. "But history's end will show [American history] to have been merely a means to another end" (KEILLOR apud YERXA, 2015, p. 162). By appropriating critiques of America leveled by "secular, revisionist, feminist, [and] neo-Marxist historians," Keillor has concluded that "Americans of European descent share in the general Western rebellion against the Christianity that Western civilization claims to promote" (KEILLOR, 1996, p. 13). Thus, "American exceptionalism can only, finally, be seen to be false in the light of Christian eschatology," that is, "Christ's return" (KEILLOR, 1996, p. 304-305). While there are any number of ways the U.S. might collapse, Keillor holds that the U.S. will soon be liable to a catastrophic judgment if it does not restrain the free-market, democracy, and science from colluding to pursue a secular, counterfeit resurrection: the late-modern transhumanist vision of technological immortality via genetic and/or computer engineering (KEILLOR, 1996, 2007, p. 182), which he identifies as a "Babel Project" (KEILLOR, 1996, p. 299). While making similar observations about the role of the immoral use of technology in bringing divine judgment upon humanity (cf. WHITE, 1890, p. 123; WHITE, 1899), for White, the U.S. will come under a probation ending judgment in conjunction with the second coming, when, by persecution of religious minorities under false-Christianity, it rejects the purpose for which God raised it up: to be the original haven of true religious liberty (WHITE, 1911, p. 291-292, 605; see MORGAN, 2013, p. 1237-1241).



U.S. fascist party held large rallies; liberal democratic values in the U.S. are at their lowest level of popular support since that time (FOA; MOUNK, 2016, p. 15).<sup>49</sup> Mr. Trump's campaign rhetoric seemed to tap into these sentiments by questioning the effectiveness of certain liberal democratic norms, raising the possibility that liberal democratic values could continue to erode under his presidency, ushering in a new era of corruption and repression.<sup>50</sup>

Along similar lines, (2) Mr. Trump's campaign rhetoric was unique in the post-1960s, -Civil Rights era for his public, negative characterizations of (non-)white minority groups, specifically Muslim and Hispanic immigrants.<sup>51</sup> In addition, he promised to restore the "power" of Christianity in the U.S. by removing the restrictions on political speech for tax-exempt organizations (WARD, 2016). This assertion of the political interests of the majority over against solidarity with minorities galvanized white nationalists (rebranded as the white identitarian "alt-right") in support of the right's candidate, who renounced their ideology while refusing to discontinue the rhetoric that energized them (BARROW, 2016).

Expressions of majoritarian nationalism during the 2016 U.S. elections pale in comparison to those of the nineteenth century when, for example, Reconstruction failed to end the de facto race-based slavery and the National Reform Movement had congress considering a Constitutional amendment that, had it passed, would have declared the U.S. a Christian nation. But white nationalism and Christian nationalism have been forces in American politics from the colonial era on, and American democratic institutions are a historic means by which repression of minorities in America is accomplished (ROBIN, 2004, p. 1061–1093). The electoral success now associated with Mr. Trump's pro-majority, anti-minority rhetoric opens the possibility that white and/or Christian nationalism may become the ideological platform on which a, potentially violent, reactionary movement might overthrow certain American liberal democratic norms regarding treatment of racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities, in so far as they are perceived to be a threat to American social cohesion around a majoritarian identity. A national reversal of norms on that scale would likely be resisted, potentially with violence, and result in a conflict traumatic to all sides. Thus, the results of the 2016 presidential elections have opened at least one possible path that an unrepentant America could travel toward a catastrophic national judgment event.

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<sup>49</sup> "In the United States, for example, forty-one per-cent of those born during the interwar and initial postwar decades state that it is 'absolutely essential' in a democracy that 'civil rights protect people's liberty'. Among millennials, this share falls to thirty-two percent" (FOA; MOUNK, 2016, p. 9).

<sup>50</sup> In a cover story for *The Atlantic*, David Frum, journalist and former George W. Bush presidential speechwriter, surveyed twenty-first century examples of how this has taken place in other former democracies and sketched how the new presidential administration could follow a similar path. Frum concluded that twenty-first century autocrats require less overtly repressive means to accomplish their self-aggrandizing goals than did their twentieth century counterparts (2017).

<sup>51</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff defines whiteness as a social identity that first emerged as European contact with "indigenous peoples" in the context of "colonial plunder" giving rise to a new consciousness of the "commonalities across warring European peoples" (ALCOFF, 2015, p. 108). Alcoff demonstrates that white identity need not be essentially racist, as evidenced, e.g., in the Civil Rights era by "poor whites who created their own self-described organizations in both the [American] North and the South to join in a coalitional effort to 'fight the power' on behalf of their own communities" and also "developed antiracist agendas that brought them into allegiance with . . . black- and brown-led organizations" (ALCOFF, 2015, p. 18–19). Thus, while "whiteness is a historical formation of racism, and its subsequent iterations have also been profoundly influenced by racist 'racial projects,' . . . that is not all that whiteness is or has been about" (ALCOFF, 2015, p. 97–98). "The formation of white identity was not merely a ploy, but a category that helpfully filled a void created by the European diaspora and cross-ethnic amalgamations" (ALCOFF, 2015, p. 13). In America, whiteness gradually expanded including the Irish, Southern Europeans, Jews, Latinos, and, according to U.S. Census classifications, Arabs; though Jewish and Latino identity "have had an unstable relationship to whiteness" and Middle Eastern identity, following 9/11, has become a major focus of discrimination and violence (ALCOFF, 2015, p. 76, 23). It appears non-coincidental that Mr. Trump focused his opprobrium on the two minority groups most at the margins of whiteness and that the anti-Semitic elements of the "alt-right" seek to direct the racist impulse in his rhetoric toward the third most marginal white minority group (KAMPEAS, 2016). Alcoff concludes that what America needs is a model of whiteness not so much "organized around anti-racist efforts" as much as "the more ordinary challenges of life, from making a living to raising a family." In this way, white ways of being can take their place as "ordinary among others, neither more nor less, without state-enforced advantage or border control" (ALCOFF, 2015, p. 189).



## Conclusion and recommendations

Taken together, the causes and outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaigns are consistent with the patterns of madness/humiliation and sifting divine judgment identified in the moral readings of history offered by Ellen G. White and Steven J. Keillor. Whether one fully accepts their methodologies as outlined here, they are serious attempts to grapple with a complex and sensitive subject few contemporary historians and theologians are willing to take up. Yet those who take a high view of Scripture and along with a historical view of Scripture's God cannot ignore questions relating to God's judgment in human history and the moral issues of human governance that arise out of it without regard to the eternal consequences. Therefore, in the absence of any clearer moral lenses on history and pending further study, it is reasonable to assert as a provisional, working conclusion that Donald Trump's rise to the U.S. presidency is the culmination of a divine sifting judgment process in history. It follows that God's people in America; whether they lean toward the right, center, or left; should be warned to repent if they have participated in human governance as if God does not intervene in human history in intelligible ways. And, even where no repentance is needed, they should be taught how to align themselves with God's moral principles for human governance while trusting in God's agency in human history to vouchsafe the outcome of their faithful actions.<sup>52</sup>

While the thesis of this study is intended to be robust with respect to the standard of decision-making during divine probation, further historical research may be expected to revise the claims of this study with regard to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, and more nuanced readings of the moral history based on the findings thereof may be necessary to adequately inform future decisions. Further theological research is also necessary to systematically relate the category of moral history developed here to considerations of providence, theodicy, ethics, and eschatology.<sup>53</sup> Finally, further research into biblical patterns of divine judgment in human history should continue to guide the application of those patterns in moral readings of history, including this one.

Ultimately, the development of a pastoral approach is necessary to relate these findings to the lived experience of God's people. Some Christians may have never been morally educated with respect to their political participation and therefore view it strictly as a matter of private opinion. When combined with apocalyptic expectation, this can lead to the immorality of fatalistic political disengagement. In other contexts, Christians may have been taught that loyalty to one of America's political factions is the only morally correct governance option and have thus idolatrously substituted loyalty to a political faction or party for loyalty to God. To address these issues and others, church leaders will need to find ways of opening pastoral conversations with

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<sup>52</sup> "An open invitation awaits [Adventists] to become yet another 'conservative' or 'progressive' denomination and ally our identity respectively to one of the two false gospels, that of the legal/moral gospel or the economic/social gospel. *We must resist that invitation.*" (YOUNKER, 2014, p. 187, emphasis original).

<sup>53</sup> If the goal of divine judgment during probation is to provoke humans to consider transcendent questions, the proclamation of judgment should be accompanied with answers to questions relating not only to the character of humanity but also the character of God as judge. However, a satisfying answer that reconciles providence and theology may not always be available in specific at the moment of judgment. As John Webster reasons, "Providence is thus directed to the creature's good. With this we return to the rock of offence. How can this be when we suffer or watch inexplicable horrors? Here the gospel counsels us to endurance in which we may attain knowledge" (2009, p. 169). Thus, it may be that at times the answers to questions of theodicy, providence etc. can only be known after the experience of perseverance in time of judgment (as may also be the case in an ultimate, eschatological sense [Rev 14:12, Rev 20:4]). From this perspective, historical judgment events are an indispensable means of expanding our horizons of moral interpretation and character development (see n. 14). None of this is to suggest that theories of providence and theodicy ought not impinge on our identification and interpretation of judgment events. However, for a theology committed to sola scriptura, theories of providence must account for biblical patterns of judgment, not vice versa (PECKHAM, 2016, p. 214 n. 59).



their flocks about how the faithful can use their probation to display God's character and thus, through their influence on moral questions of human governance, form characters fit to govern with God and Christ in the age to come (Rev 3:21, 20:6).

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