

NEWS & OPINIONS

Trump Love

Paul Houston Blankenship

Roger Stone is known as a political trickster who practices dark arts in the United States government. Google the Nixon Watergate scandal, the Obama birther conspiracy, and the ongoing Mueller investigation. It won't take long for you to see Stone's fingerprints. In Harry Potter speak, Roger Stone would rule in the house of Slytherin. He's delighted to be the villain in our story.

To no one's surprise, Stone began his political career early. In 1960, his elementary school had a mock election between then-presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Little Roger told everyone waiting in line for mystery meat in the cafeteria, that, if elected, Nixon would make students come to school on Saturdays. Imagine the outrage. After Kennedy won the mock election, Stone got his first taste for the power of disinformation. And so began a long, illustrious career.

In the 2017 Netflix documentary, *Get Me Roger Stone*, Jeffrey Toobin from CNN and *The New Yorker* suggests that Stone effectively produced Donald Trump's campaign for the presidency.¹ He convinced Trump to run for office and helped compose the divisive rhetoric that got him elected.

At the conclusion of the film, Stone is in a limousine discussing why his brand of politics is so in vogue. The outfit he has on is characteristically bold. He is in a black suite with white stripes; he is wearing a grey top hat and large sunglasses. An interviewer asks the cool cat a pointed question: "What message would you have for the viewers of this film who will loathe you when the credits roll?" Almost without hesitation, Stone responds shrewdly: "I revel in your hatred because if I weren't effective, you wouldn't hate me." Stone looks away from the camera and onto the streets of New York City before his limousine arrives at Trump Tower. Hatred, we could say, is the gasoline that got him there.

Everyday Life in the Grip of The Donald

Early in the morning on Wednesday, November 9, 2016, Donald J. Trump officially won the race for president of the United States of America. By nightfall his victory possessed our consciousness. Like it or not, everyday life is being lived in the grip of The Donald. Scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals have been using the term "The Trump Effect" to measure the impact the president is having on our minds and in our cultures.²

I attend a small Quaker church in eastern Washington. Every week we talk with one another about how to keep the light of Christ burning in our souls. It's a very Quaker thing to do. A few weeks ago, one woman, now retired after working for decades at the phone company, stood up and shared how distressed she is over the impact Donald Trump is having on her. She fought back tears as she told us how much she hates Trump and how this hate is basically blowing her light out. "I am trying to figure out how to take responsibility for this," she said genuinely. "I really don't know what to do." Listening to her speak, I got the sense that the challenge was more of a mystery than the Holy Trinity.

The Grammar of Love

Jesus is unambiguous about what it means to be Christian. In the Fourth Gospel, he says that love is the indelible mark of Christian discipleship.³ In Corinthians, Paul tells the nascent and conflicted church that they aren't anything without love, that their prophecies and tongues and knowledge matter for nil if they aren't practicing real love in their everyday lives.

Christianity is invariably complex. Fenella Cannell's fantastic volume, *The Anthropology of Christianity*,

¹ *Get Me Roger Stone*, directed by Dylan Blank, Daniel DiMauro, and Morgan Pehme (Los Gatos, California: Netflix, 2017).

² For example, Reuters curates a comprehensive site dedicated to "The Trump Effect": <https://www.reuters.com/trump-effect>.

³ See John 13, for example.

makes that exceptionally clear.⁴ Notwithstanding this complexity, however, the transcultural project that is Christianity can never reasonably avoid the challenge of love. It's too fundamental. Don't get me wrong, though. I am not suggesting that love is unique to the Christian religion or that our expressions of Christian love are always actually loving. Nor am I suggesting that Christians throughout time and place have loved the same things in the same ways and for the same reasons. No, no. What I am suggesting, however, is that the grammar of Christianity renders love unavoidable and that love is, as a result, always ripe for ethnographic picking.

On Knowing Humanity

The *On Knowing Humanity Journal* exists to “promote the development of a Christian faith-based approach to anthropology.” To this end, the journal is clear and unapologetic about its commitment to using Christian anthropology as a critical resource to help everyday people love the human and nonhuman worlds they live in. We are people of faith seeking understanding in order to love, which is a dynamic we take to be God-breathed and endemic to human personhood.

Let me make a proposal. It is intended to evoke dialogue rather than suggest a final, authoritative answer. God forbid it be read otherwise. We know a lot about what Christians love and how they love but not enough about what Christians hate and how they hate. I don't like the thought of this pithy aphorism, but sometimes I worry it's true. Christian hate makes more waves in the waters of culture than Christian love does. Probably our hated is the principal reason why the academy looks at us so suspiciously and there aren't more people sitting in our pews. We are not forgiven for our many sins.

Those of us who are committed to the groundbreaking work being done in Christian anthropology, and through this journal in particular, should be deeply interested in what makes love most difficult. To know humanity we must know hate. In fact, it may be that by attending to hate we find it possible to love.

Listening

Lately I have been listening to a lot of conservative talk radio. It's become a spiritual practice I find more difficult than centering prayer or The Spiritual Exercises, which are difficult enough. Every few minutes I hear the kind of stuff that made Jesus chase people around with a whip of cords. I notice how

quickly my righteous anger turns to hate and becomes altogether unhelpful. I am not Jesus, but I am listening carefully for his voice in one of the last places I expect to hear it. I wonder what others are doing to love what they hate. I think finding out might be helpful. Let's not do our enemies any favors—or sabotage the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit.



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⁴ Fenella Cannell, ed, *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).