

Drinking is the Devil: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Evangelical Christianity and Alcoholism

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Andrea Millheim, my mother, grew up in a house that feared alcohol and its power for good reason. Her uncles' struggle with alcoholism had left a scarred and newly devout family. Now they navigated what it meant to be Christian out of deep commitment and gratitude to the force that had led to her uncles' miraculous sobriety. Consequently, as a child, Andrea witnessed the cultural, emotional, psychological, and spiritual changes that occurred very suddenly in her family. The assimilation to evangelical Christianity uniquely combats addictions such as alcoholism, as Andrea experienced. That said, the all-consuming nature of the conversion may lead to unintended worldview and behavioral changes that perpetuate both personal and societal harm. Decades later, the process of assimilation and the effects of conversion still have a visceral grip on the lives of our family.

When explaining her story, Andrea prefaces that if someone were to meet her uncles, Gary and Paul, today, they would never guess how they used to be. Devout evangelical Christians, attendant husbands, loving grandfathers, steadfast conservative republicans, and never so much as glancing at alcohol. They are the epitome of what white, conservative Christians in America wish everyone lived like. So how did that happen? Her uncles had been alcoholics long before marrying her aunts and would struggle with the addiction for decades after. She recounts how they were absent fathers. They were the stereotypical dads on the couch while their wives cared for everything from food to children to bills. When asked how her aunts felt about this dynamic, she explains that there was never a complaint or expectation that it would change; that was just the way it was. Her mother and aunts had all been raised under the idea that divorce was never an option unless the reason was infidelity. You were with them no matter what, through good and bad. Although for her aunts, it was mostly the bad.

When my mother was in middle school, she and her family moved closer to be with her grandparents, and they began to attend church for the first time in her life. Her aunts and uncles soon after began attending as well. Their involvement in the church grew at an exponential pace, and soon their lives were occupied with bible study, youth group, church camps, and the like. They dedicated every aspect of their lives to the culture of the church, and they assimilated quickly. But something more than just spending weeknights in church groups and listening solely to Christian music had happened. Paul and Gary had started their journeys to sobriety, and it seemed, for the first time, to be working.

Remnants of this staggering shift remain if only one looks closely enough. You hear it in the lessons about alcohol passed down through the family—the fear-mongering that has surpassed responsible warning or caution—and you see the fervor in their eyes when they talk of God's transforming power. The assimilation into white American Christian evangelicalism is unique and

all-consuming. The effects extend beyond the individual, seeping into daily life through how children are raised, the media consumed, the education sought, and political beliefs. However, the deal was truly sealed when her family realized her uncles had reached sobriety, a sobriety that had stuck. This breakthrough ensured a commitment to the church, which has never wavered since. However, no one in the family thought further beyond the word "God" as to why the church seemed to be the miracle solution to multiple family members' alcoholism.

Before we begin to understand why assimilation into the conservative evangelical church has a particularly immense impact, we must examine what assimilation as a process looks like. Gailliard describes assimilation as evolving and multidimensional, with fluctuation over time. It is both a social and individual process of building relationships, personalizing involvement, and understanding the norms, requirements, and expectations of the organization (Gaillard). For Andrea and her family, this would look like all of the smaller groups and teams that they became involved with within the church. Conservative churches, such as the one that they attended, would have had clear expectations of what was permissible and how one should act. This was highly effective as it created a closed world that reinforces its own culture. McGuire explains this effect by saying, "The regulation of spiritual expectations included normative pressure." In other words, you were expected to conform in all aspects of life to be spiritually moral. Social pressure to do so, mixed with the added belief that one could go to hell if one sinned and did not adequately repent, created an environment where people underwent great internal changes. These changes were facilitated by the social support of the church which includes three prongs: spiritual support from church members, emotional support from church members, and emotional support from the pastor (Krause). These three pieces form a comprehensive support system entirely reliant upon a set of shared values that is self-contained in the church. Essentially, you receive all of your emotional and spiritual needs from the same place, and that place has fixed norms that compel you to act in accordance. For her uncles, this meant fighting their addictions with renewed vigor.

Christians, specifically what Erzen dubs the Christian Right, employ a narrative of being born again or personal transformation to convert people, particularly those deemed sinful, such as incarcerated citizens. The effectiveness of this tactic lies in the need for the person to fully redefine their identity and a core belief that they are able to start with a blank slate. The church offers a path not available in any other space: the chance to have your past left behind with no perceived further consequence or effects so long as you commit to your new faith. However, Erzen continues to make a critical point: "In the focus on individual transformation, the testimonies place the blame on a person's choices rather than on the aspects of society." This can be a very harmful strategy, but in the case of people with addiction, like her uncles, a heightened sense of accountability is critical. The person begins answering to a higher power, and that personal belief is a powerful tool.

It is not just anecdotal evidence that suggests faith involved in substance abuse treatment is effective because "more than 84% of scientific studies show that faith is a positive factor in addiction prevention or recovery... the value of faith-oriented approaches to substance abuse prevention and recovery is indisputable" (Grim et al.). So, faith is an invaluable aspect of recovery, but what is it about faith? As it turns out, faith controls which behaviors people engage in and also fosters a sense of belonging (Grim et al.). Belonging is a powerful force that compels commitment from people. Andrea Millheim recalled how her family members craved this sense and the feeling

that it was an achievable system they could succeed in. Amidst strained marriages and addiction, the church was something they believed they could control by checking the required boxes of expectations and staying on a path that has been neatly paved with explicit right and wrong. The predetermined black-and-white nature made the transition feel attainable and as though you were successfully bettering yourself or successfully redeeming yourself.

Most of these effects mentioned seem good, or at least acceptable when the return is sobriety in a family that has been deeply broken by alcoholism. However, the evangelical church is not a magic wand that cleans up one's life for the better without unintended and damaging byproducts. When one dedicates their life to a religion, that becomes an intrinsic part of their identity and worldview, even when it can be harmful. Andrea Millheim acknowledges that, while they were always conservative, the church closed off room for growth or discovery. It narrowed their path to explore only within the confines of what is deemed acceptable to white nationalist Christian evangelicalism, which is a very small world. One example of this is how "one of the strongest predictors of anti-vaccine attitudes in the U.S. is Christian nationalism" (Corcoran et al.). Paul and Gary, their wives, and their children did not receive a coronavirus vaccine, despite seeing family members become critically ill. Reaching sobriety through faith requires a level of blind commitment that can come back to haunt when the religion or church community encourages harmful behavior.

This begs the question: why do people become complacent in blind commitment, and what is it about religion that makes people happy to narrow their growth and worldview? A study was done on the impacts of conversion to the Jesus Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly after drug and substance abuse. It was found that "conversion represented a solution to personal conflicts that these people had experienced previously" (Simmonds). Conversion offered a clear-cut moral and belief system with a built-in, reinforcing community. This structured environment creates a "comparatively easy existence. Few or no emotional problems regarding identity or self-definition would occur after affiliation with the group" (Simmonds). The turmoil that many feel in their lives when wrestling with purpose, identity, and what is ethical is painful, but it is also a marker of growth. Simmonds goes on to say that this feeds into addictive personalities, but it is crucial to also mention that even those without addiction are and can be drawn to such an existence. The struggle of understanding your place and what you believe is a hallmark of maturity and an evolving human, one that many Christians do not experience.

When we look back at why this can be harmful, we must examine the rise of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and misogyny that was amplified by the Trump administration. Those enraptured by the Christian evangelical world, commonly white men, were drawn to Trump as he affirmed their conviction that "they were under assault by the ungodly agents of secularism" (Ehrenberg). This rhetoric carried to the polls as "Christian nationalist ideology was among the strongest predictors of Americans voting for Trump in 2016" (Perry et al.). In essence, it is not only that hateful beliefs were intensified within the distinctive echo chamber of the Christian evangelical community, but also how they translated into action. For instance, white nationalism has been directly connected to Christianity. To clarify, Reyna defines white nationalism specifically using the identifying terms white, European, and Christian. This group manifests in violent, tangible ways, such as the "deadly 2017 Unite the Right white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, [which] served as a frightening reminder of the threat white nationalism

and hate groups pose to the United States" (U.S. Government Publishing Office). The environment cultivated within conservative evangelical Christians generates the conditions that fester into nationalism and radicalized hate groups.

While Paul and Gary were not in Charlottesville, Virginia, and may not have reached that level of violent extremism, the dangers of the spaces they now live in post-conversion cannot and should not be understated. Christianity's pattern of attracting and encouraging people with a dependence on external gratification can be and has been weaponized by figures such as Donald Trump (Simmonds). This dependence leads to people acting and behaving in ways they would previously have never naturally done. Paul and Gary would not have denied a vaccine or become steadfast Trump supporters without the conditions that evangelical Christianity puts in place. With the narrative of persecution and self-confirming worldviews intensified in an isolated group, there is no space for deviation or questioning. When such a considerable group of people is in an environment influenced solely by that group, individual choices such as avoiding life-saving vaccines become monumental issues. For instance, the lack of vaccines puts themselves and others at risk, and the desire to conform leads to more family members following. The choices and beliefs of people are their own until they harm others and consequently involve those not seeking involvement.

Christian faith is a proven reliable factor and even a tool in substance abuse recovery. That said, the lasting implications for one's belief system and actions must be considered. The correlation between Paul and Gary's particular vein of Christianity and rising violence and harm is not only indisputable but deeply troubling for modern-day America. While Paul and Gary can live healthier and happier lives with sobriety, we cannot neglect how their actions, values, votes, and health decisions inherently and negatively impact many people and communities beyond themselves. There may not be a clear path forward but if substance abuse programs are conscious of the future it can lead to, then perhaps we can stem one piece of the pipeline to white Christian nationalism.

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