Post-Racial America? The Tangle of Race, Religion, and Citizenship
By Judith Weisenfeld

Jon Stewart, Religion Teacher Extraordinaire
By Mark Oppenheimer

How the State Department Has Sidelined Religion
By Shaun Casey

Religion & Politics
Fit For Polite Company

ISSUE 01
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Religion & Politics is an online news journal, dedicated to the two topics thought unfit for polite company. It is a project of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis.

WE’RE DELIGHTED TO WELCOME you to this anthology of the first five years of Religion & Politics! Religion & Politics is an online news journal that focuses on one of the most contested issues of our time: the role religion plays in the civic and political life of the United States. This journal is an important component of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, an entity that supports excellent scholarly research and teaching while also promoting the public understanding of religion and politics. It’s more than symbolic that we are located close to the nation’s geographic center, a position we hope enables us to include a genuinely diverse array of voices.

Religion, of course, has always been entwined in American politics. From the earliest settlers’ attempts to forge a law-abiding community, which frequently meant expunging dissenters, leaders have struggled to forge a united public out of a fiercely independent-minded populace; and invocations of a divine purpose have often—some would say too often—served as the glue binding us together. As we have grown and expanded into a multiethnic and culturally diverse nation, our religious differences have multiplied and our political divisions have deepened. As the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath have shown, the country is today profoundly polarized and wracked with fear about how best to move forward and mend these fractures.

Our journal was founded to explore these live issues from a broad range of diverging viewpoints, rather than a single grinding axe. That is a tall order, and one we do not take lightly. As our journal tagline suggests, however, we do believe that these conversations are “fit for polite company” and not to be avoided out of delicacy or expedience. Our nation’s future, in fact, demands that we confront our differences and hash them out together.

While the journal does not promulgate a single political viewpoint, we do share some assumptions that are worth noting. As a general principle, we think it’s safe to say that religion can and does inspire both the very best and the very worst in human behavior, along with everything in-between. There is no simple, universally agreed-upon definition of any single religion, or even of the concept “religion” itself. Ours, we know, is something of a moving target. We can live with that.

There is, or ought to be, a vast difference in our politics between stating one’s personal affiliation and manipulating religion into a blunt political tool. There is also a great difference between rapid-fire punditry and slower, deeper reflection on the long and complicated relationship between religion and U.S. politics. The latter is the task we have set for ourselves.

The following pages contain a sampling of some of the best pieces we have published since May 2012. We hope they will provoke, inspire, and educate readers from many different walks of life. Savor and enjoy this look back at where we’ve been and visit us online at religionandpolitics.org to see where we’re going!
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Why American Evangelicals Love the British

By Molly Worthen

Published on May 1, 2012

Their fondness for C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and John Stott is part of a larger pattern.

John R. W. Stott’s death in 2011, at the age of 90, prompted an outpouring of grief and fond memories all over the Christian world. But nowhere were there more panegyrics than among American evangelicals. In a community infamous for squabbles and schisms, polarized by politics and endless theological feuds, here was an unusual moment of unanimity: everyone from fundamentalists to left-wing peace activists adored this self-effacing Anglican preacher.

“You cannot explain English-speaking evangelicalism in the 20th century without crucial reference to the massive influence of John Stott,” Albert Mohler, the conservative president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, told Christianity Today. “Both his keen intellect and his deeply authentic spirit made a powerful impact on me,” wrote Jim Wallis, a progressive activist and spiritual adviser to President Obama, who ranked Stott second only to Billy Graham in his influence over global Christianity. Rick Warren called him “one of my closest mentors.”

Their fondness for C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and John Stott is part of a larger pattern.
followed up with ten tweets about what he learned during all of this globetrotting, Stott was always writing. (He remained celibate his whole life: the church was his bride.) He wrote more than 50 books ranging from Scripture studies to autobiographies explaining how he came by his beliefs, all in a simple, unassuming voice that resonated with American readers. Some loved Basic Christianity most for its straightforward explanation of the faith. He promised that “there is evidence for the deity of Jesus—good, strong, historical, cumulative evidence; evidence to which an honest person can subscribe without committing intellectual suicide.” More theologically minded readers adored The Cross of Christ for its unflinching defense of a traditional understanding of the atonement: “the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man.” Countless American pastors found inspiration in his collections of sermons and reflections on ministry. “Suddenly the meaning of Bible sentences became treasure chests to be opened...Yes! This is what I was starving for and didn’t even know it,” wrote the conservative Minnesota pastor John Piper.

In the lively spiritual marketplace that is American evangelicalism, traditional church authorities have always had to compete with solitary sages, preachers, and writers who win followings through their charisma and clever answers to the era’s problems. From Anne Hutchinson, bête noire of the Massachusetts Bay Puritan establishment, to the healing huckster Benny Hinn, American evangelicals love a guru. Indeed, they turned John Stott into a guru despite his strenuous objections.

He declined to found an eponymous empire of the sort preferred by most American evangelists, and gave his ministry the innocuous name Langham Partnership International. However, when Stott missed a meeting of the American branch’s board of directors, they quickly voted to change their name to John Stott Ministries. They knew their constituents’ taste for Christian celebrity.

AMERICAN EVANGELICALS’ FONDNESS for Stott is part of a larger pattern, a special affection for Christian gurus of British extraction. Doves of American evangelicals stock their shelves with books by British Christian scholars such as N.T. Wright, a professor of New Testament and the former bishop of Durham, and J.I. Packer, a British-born theologian at Regent College in Vancouver. Despite ancient hostility toward Roman Catholicism, American evangelicals lionize the British Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton and raise their children on Catholic J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy. Since the mid-1960s—when the release of Tolkien’s books in U.S. paperback edition infected America with Frodo fever—evangelicals have enthusiastically joined in Middle Earth-inspired role-playing festivals and Tolkien appreciation societies, publishing books with titles like Finding God in the Lord of the Rings and Walking With Frodo: A Devotional Journey Through Lord of the Rings. I once attended an evangelical conference panel devoted to parsing Tolkien’s veiled Christian allegories. One speaker expounded at length on the Christology of Tom Bombadil—uncovering hidden religious symbols that might have surprised Tolkien himself.

And then there is the one British guru to rule them all: C.S. Lewis. Converted by fellow medievalist Tolkien on a famous midnight walk in Oxford in 1929, Lewis could not have been more different from the average American evangelical: a pipe-smoking, claret-drinking Anglican don with a taste for pagan myth and no patience for Biblical literalism. Yet, like so many evangelicals, Lewis found himself at “cross-purposes with the modern world.” He devoted much of his career to defending traditional doctrine against its cultural despisers. Between his conversion and his death in 1963, Lewis published more than a dozen works of Christian apologetics and 14 volumes of fiction, including The Chronicles of Narnia, one of the best-loved fantasy series in the English language—enjoyed by Christian and non-Christian readers alike, despite its heavy-handed religious allegory. Mere Christianity, based on radio talks that Lewis delivered during World War II and published in 1952, provided a simple defense for the divinity of Christ that evangelicals repeat to this day.

If John Stott was American evangelicals’ pope—as one evangelical observer told New York Times columnist David Brooks—then C.S. Lewis is their patron saint. His estate, the Kilns, and the Eagle & Child, the Oxford pub where he and Tolkien gathered with their fellow “Inklings” are popular evangelical pilgrimage destinations. In the United States, rival Lewis shrines vie for devotees. The Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, an evangelical school near Chicago, houses the largest trove of Lewis papers outside the Bodleian Library at Oxford (along with collections representing the other Inklings and British Christian mystery writer Dorothy Sayers). It also boasts a small museum displaying Lewis’ pipe, teapot, desk, ale tankard, and other holy artifacts. In 1973 Wheaton purchased a wardrobe from Lewis’ estate that his brother Warren said inspired the magical entryway into Narnia featured in The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe—for Lewis fans, the equivalent of the True Cross. Shortly thereafter, Westmont College, an evangelical school in southern California, acquired a different wardrobe from the current owners of the Lewis home and proclaimed theirs the authentic model. The controversy of rival relics continued for years. With the help of a local businessman who made a hobby out of collecting British pub
American evangelicals find intellectual and cultural validation in Oxbridge Christians like Tolkien, Lewis, and Stott.

Ever since then, evangelicals have been struggling to overcome an intellectual inferiority complex, to convince the wider world that confidence in the Bible’s authority is compatible with scholarly achievement. For decades, evangelical colleges and seminaries have sent many of their most promising students to the United Kingdom to pursue advanced degrees—to work with particular scholars known for evangelical sympathies, or simply to receive that imprimatur of intellectual gravitas. The PhD from Cambridge or DPhil from Oxford. (New St. Andrews College, an upstart evangelical school in Idaho, has attempted to import that Oxbridge aura to America by requiring Latin and Greek and dressing students in black academic gowns for each week’s disputatio.) A degree from a British university impresses Americans—and evangelicals long ago figured out that escaping to foreign universities allowed them to avoid many of the prejudices and difficult questions they sometimes encounter at American schools, where faculty tend to associate evangelism with wacky Young Earth science and a right-wing political agenda.

Even America’s most ardent fundamentalists have always been keen to dispel the popular stereotype of fundamentalists as yokels with “greasy noses, dirty fingernails, baggy pants and who never shined their shoes,” as Bob Jones once put it. (While Bob Jones University remained a bastion of creationist science and dismissed faculty at the slightest sign of freethinking, “Dr. Bob” enlisted his Alabama socialite mother-in-law to tutor students in etiquette and opera. His son, Bob Jones, Jr., toured Europe each summer with an allowance of American schools, where faculty tend to associate evangelism with wacky Young Earth science and a right-wing political agenda.

THE AFFINITY FOR BRITAIN among American evangelicals has a long history. This attachment is difficult to disentangle from the colonial roots of many evangelical denominations in English and Scottish churches, as well as the transatlantic careers of the greatest American and British revivalists throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But in the decades after the Civil War, American evangelicals began to diverge from their brethren across the pond. Thanks to social and theological dynamics peculiar to the United States, evangelicals here rebelled more sharply against modern intellectual trends, particularly the theory of evolution and the audacious decision of scholars to study the Bible as they would any other historical document. By the time of World War I, conservative American Protestantism was riven by fundamentalism—a movement of Christians who militantly opposed liberal trends in culture and thought, whom H.L. Mencken mocked as uncultured bumpkins who spent their time “denouncing the reading of books.”

American evangelicals find intellectual and cultural validation in Oxbridge Christians like Tolkien, Lewis, and Stott. If these Oxford and Cambridge-trained gentlemen with plummy accents believed that God spoke from a burning bush and Jesus truly rose from the grave, that is proof that one can be an intellectual, a sophisticate, and a Bible-believer too, no matter what the snide mainstream media says. Britain represents high culture and class—but which Britain? Many evangelicals seem to idealize a long-lost arcadia where professor-clergymen praise theology as queen of the sciences and mainline missionaries conquer Africa in the name of Christendom—rather than Britannia as she truly is, secularist, multi-cultural warts and all.

This is Anglophilia’s dark side. When it drives evangelicals to study in a grey Oxford tower because there no professor will force them to read books that challenge their preexisting ideas, or when it fetishizes sherry and tweed jackets as a highbrow vernacular on small-minded prejudices, it becomes mere pretense. “I tend to be suspicious of American evangelical Anglophilia,” said Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, a Baptist from California who worked as Stott’s research assistant in 2006 and now runs the Two Futures Project, a non-profit devoted to the abolition of nuclear weapons. “My fear is that it looks like cosmopolitanism, but it masks provincialism.”

MORE RECENTLY, THE BOOKS and sermons of British Christians have offered American evangelicals a reprieve from the polarized and politicized world of red states and blue states. In Britain, fundamentalism was a marginal phenomenon that did not spawn an American-style Religious Right, and most theological conservatives like Stott have kept out of politics and enjoy mainstream respect. In America, evangelicals are suffering from culture wars fatigue—especially younger Christians who grew up in the shadow of Jerry Falwell and James Dobson and are eager to decouple their faith from a political platform. “British evangelicals believe the gospel transcends traditional political categories. . . . The Evangelical Alliance seeks to be a prophetic witness for the gospel from outside the political order,” wrote one admirer in a Christian Today article titled “What British Evangelicals Do Right.” “Since it seeks to define its position from Scripture and conscience rather than from political ideology, it is respected on both sides of the political aisle in Parliament.”

John Stott represented British evangelical moderation at its very best. He spent much of his career advocating dialogue among evangelicals, Catholics, liberals, and charismatic Christians. He recognized early on that the center of gravity in global Christianity had shifted to the developing world, and worked to break down the ethnocentric mindset of evangelicals in Europe and North America and convince them that preaching the Word and fighting for social justice were two sides of the same coin. “He was utterly convinced that Christians should engage with everything that happens, and doing so didn’t threaten orthodox belief,” Wigg-Stevenson said. When asked to rebuit the latest atheist tract or defend a traditional view of Scripture, Stott was willing to do so, and proudly called himself a “radical conservative Evangelical.” At the same time, he stressed that “if ‘liberal’ means respect for the scientific enterprise, the development of a critical judgment, an emphasis on the importance of reason and conscience, freedom to make up our minds in the light of Scripture, and belief in the mercy of God, whose light shines on all humankind, then emphatically I too could be called a liberal.”

Stottophilia is the best sort of evangelical Anglophilia. It draws evangelicals out of narrow domestic debates in which the only options seem to be Christian dominionism or quietism; it encourages a broader view of a Christian’s obligations in the world, informed by a sense of history and the needs of the less fortunate. Just as Tolkien and Lewis baptized the world of myth, magic, and fantasy for evangelicals whose churches had long proscribed such things as demonic, John Stott helped evangelicals recover a capacity for compassion and civil conversation that was lost in the fog of the culture wars.

Molly Worthen is an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She is the author of Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism.

[Note: The image contains a page from a book with text and a table of contents, but the contents are not relevant to the main text.]
Why is American Foreign Policy so Religious?

By Andrew Preston

Published on May 7, 2012

It has been a product of the American people as much as their presidents.

ON SEPTEMBER 11, with the nation stunned by surprise al Qaeda terrorist attacks, the president mounted the pulpit of the National Cathedral in Washington. From there, in a speech that had the cadences of a sermon, he quoted from the Book of Isaiah to rally Americans to the long and difficult struggle with Islamic fundamentalist terrorism that lay before them. “Whom shall I send,” God asked Isaiah; “who will go for us?” And Isaiah answered, “Here am I, Lord; send me.”

It was a stirring setting, highly charged with emotion, that fused religion and patriotism and set the tone for the president’s response to fundamentalist terrorism. “All of us must stand together,” he declared, “in common commitment to carry on the cause of peace and freedom, to find those responsible and bring them to justice, not to rest as long as terrorists plot to take more innocent lives, and in the end, to convince people the world over that there is a better way of living than killing others for what you cannot have today. For our larger struggle,
Andrew Preston

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Why is American Foreign Policy so Religious?
The religious influence in American war and diplomacy does not belong to liberals or conservatives, Democrats or Republicans. Why is American Foreign Policy so Religious?

Andrew Preston

The greatest incentive to make détente work was access to the U.S. economy and U.S.-dominated international capital and credit markets; Nixon and Kissinger’s leverage, therefore, came from their ability to grant the Soviet Union Most Favored Nation (MFN) trading status that would allow them such access. However, only an act of Congress could bestow MFN status upon a country, and the mood in Congress was decidedly uncooperative. From the Senate, Jacob Javits and Representative Charles Vanik, who thought Soviet Jews and opposition to détente, and they picketed Kissinger’s activities. They also enlisted members of Congress from both parties, such as Senators Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson and Jacob Javits and Representative Charles Vanik, who backed the campaign for Soviet Jews enthusiastically. Nixon and Kissinger unwisely dismissed this bipartisan human rights campaign for religious liberty. Nixon’s announcement, Reagan wanted to discuss only one issue, and it wasn’t nuclear weapons, China, or anything else geopolitical. Instead, he wanted to ask the Soviet ambassador about the fate of a group of Soviet Pentecostals, known as the “Siberian Seven,” who had sought asylum in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow on the grounds of religious persecution. They had been living in the embassy basement for almost five years. Thanks to another Massachusetts Congressman, Barney Frank, among others, they had also drawn the attention of human rights activists in the United States. Before entering the White House, Reagan had championed the Siberian Seven’s cause. Now, as president, and already thinking about détente and curious to see if the Soviets were too, he asked Dobrynin to help ease the Siberian Seven’s flight from the U.S.S.R. In return, he promised not to boast about it. Both sides, said Reagan, could use the quiet release of the Pentecostals as a confidence-building measure. At the same time, Reagan encouraged his friend, the evangelist Billy Graham, to reverse his longstanding anti-communist politics, take his crusade to the Soviet Union, and talk with the Kremlin. By this time, Graham had softened his hardline anti-communist views out of fear that the Cold War was spinning out of control and leading the world towards a nuclear war. In promoting détente, both President Reagan and Reverend Graham emphasized the blessings of religious liberty, and its centrality to democratic reform without hectoring or condescending to the Soviets—and it seemed to work. If the Kremlin was willing to relax restrictions on the freedom of worship, they reasoned, it was likely to embark on other reforms. And if Soviet officials were indeed willing to permit religious liberty, even if it at first only partially, then it was an important harbinger of the peaceful future that lay ahead. “Our people feel it keenly when religious freedom is denied to anyone anywhere,” Reagan declared on a 1984 visit to Moscow, just as the Cold War showed signs of permanently thawing. “We may hope that perestroika will be accompanied by a deeper restructuring, a deeper conversion, a mentanyaga, a change in heart, and that glasnost, which means giving voice, will also let loose a new chorus of belief, singing praise to the God that gave us life,” Reagan, it seemed, was able to have it both ways: peace and justice. The Cold War was coming to a close not through a final military campaign, but through the spread of religious liberty, democracy, and other human rights.

But it was not Reagan’s triumph alone. Behind him stood millions of Americans, from clergy to congregations, in churches and synagogues across the country, as well as members of both houses of Congress, from both parties and every strain of ideological persuasion. When Clinton and Bush spoke of America’s response to al Qaeda’s terrorism from the pulpit of the National Cathedral, then, they were not beginning a new tradition in U.S. diplomatic history, but tapping into a very old and very powerful one.

Andrew Preston is professor of American History at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*. Many Americans, who sprang into action. They bombarded the White House with letters and telegrams of support for Soviet Jews and opposition to détente, and they picketed Kissinger’s activities. They also enlisted members of Congress from both parties, such as Senators Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson and Jacob Javits and Representative Charles Vanik, who backed the campaign for Soviet Jews enthusiastically. Nixon and Kissinger unwisely dismissed this bipartisan human rights campaign for religious liberty and freedom of movement. Instead of petering out, it grew dramatically and undermined popular support for détente among liberals and conservatives alike even though three presidents from both parties—Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, and Jimmy Carter—did everything they could to make it work.

In 1972, the anti-détente campaign achieved a notable success with the passage of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to a trade bill. The Soviets’
The Long Approach to the “Mormon Moment”

By Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp

Published on May 17, 2012

It’s at least a century in the making.

Unless you have been living in a cave or asleep for the last half year, you know that we are living in an era that the media has dubbed the “Mormon moment.” Aided by the religious affiliation of not one but two Mormons, Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman, in the latest presidential election cycle, this moment has led to a flurry of media interest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It also hasn’t hurt that at about the same time the creators of South Park, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, produced The Book of Mormon, a smash Broadway musical that placed the Latter-day Saints squarely in the public eye. In other words, we’ve seen a “perfect storm” of interest in all things Mormon in the past year.

I must admit to feeling some dismay about this course of events. I have been teaching a class on Mormonism at the University of North Carolina since 1999, and several years back I realized that there was a tremendous need for greater knowledge of this religious tradition. So, I am in the midst of researching and
writing a book about the history and current status of Mormonism. And the more that happens in the news, of course, the more there is to write about—so, as a historian I just want to stop the deluge of news for a few days. In my larger project, I seek to explain the history and current configuration of Mormonism to outsiders. But I also hope to cast light on what the Mormon experience in the United States tells us about the rest of us, about our notions of which differences are valuable and which are threatening, and about our tolerance of religious variety and the limits of that tolerance.

My task is to bring some needed historical perspective to current collective conversations about Mormonism in public life. Because I believe that this moment, like many such events that seem to come out of the blue, actually has been about 100 years in the making. In short, my argument is this: Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Mormons in the U.S. and other Americans have struggled with a particular but pervasive problem: how to recognize Mormons as U.S. citizens, with all the obligations and privileges that attend that designation. The last few years mark only the latest round in a series of events that have shaped, but never completely resolved, this question.

Citizenship may seem like a simple and obvious idea to us today, and its relationship to religious belief and practice has been sorted out in the courts for decades. In the narrow sense, citizenship denotes a particular form of political representation, as well as the potential for participation, in the federal government. So it is worth bearing in mind that throughout the nineteenth century, the Mormon movement was effectively barred from making any substantive claims on U.S. citizenship. Joseph Smith, Jr., a young farmhand from upstate New York, founded the church in 1830. Very soon, however, Mormons were forced to flee Missouri after Governor Lilburn Boggs issued an order in 1838 declaring that church members should leave the state or be exterminated. A worse fate met them in Nauvoo, Illinois, after a few years of relative calm Smith was killed by a mob and the community once again forced out. My point in recalling this early history is simply to underscore that, as much as the Mormons appeared to threaten the political stability of older, different religious movements in Missouri and Illinois, their tenure in these states was never long enough or powerful enough that the issue of Mormons as political actors came to the fore.

The scattering of Mormons after 1844 brought a new chapter to this saga. The religious movement split into a variety of factions, most of which were relatively small and fairly quickly assimilated into American society. The largest group of exiles, perhaps 5,000 or so, moved further west to Utah, where over the next half century they built a self-sufficient society in the Salt Lake Basin. This group, by now known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, represented the germ of a community that would grow to over 200,000 people, the majority of them Mormons, by 1890. The U.S. government was not far behind. Mormon settlement in Salt Lake began before the Mexican War, before Utah had any status in American political life and was still a gleam in the eyes of those believers in Manifest Destiny. Once annexation occurred, however, the Mormons found themselves again tangling with the federal government over their practice of polygamy; but this time they were blocked from full participation in the nation because they lived in a territory instead of a state, a district without representation in Washington or the ability to elect its own leadership. Over the next half-century, the U.S. government and church leaders conducted an elaborate cat-and-mouse game: The U.S. held out the carrot of Mormon citizenship in exchange for the Mormon promise to obey the laws of the land and continue the practice of polygamy. Failing to convince the Church to capitulate, the federal courts turned the screws and made life increasingly difficult for Mormons; by 1890, all church properties, including the LDS sacred temples, were in imminent danger of federal confiscation, and as a result the religious community teetered on the precipice of economic collapse. Finally, in a dramatic meeting of the minds, the Church ended its practice of plural marriage and the U.S. government conferred statehood in 1896.

This, then, is where our story really begins: With statehood came the new problem of the Mormon citizen. Although many Americans had harbored suspicion toward the church for years, the threat that it posed had been contained in the far West and limited in its ability to affect the fortunes of the nation. The nineteenth-century Mormon threat was a moral and symbolic threat, not one of political one. Now, Mormons would be participating in the daily practices of public life. Once statehood was conferred, their threat would be unleashed in the halls of Congress and eventually, as we know, would lurk in waiting outside the West Wing itself. The "western" problem of Mormonism now became the internal challenge of the Mormon within the body politic.

If this is how Mormonism looked from the outside, let’s now turn our attention within the religious community. How did the Saints set out to embrace this new political identity? How did individual church members, previously cushioned from the need to become political actors by the disempowering embrace of territorial status, step into this brave new world of citizenship?

THE FIRST THING TO BE SAID is that the Mormon Church had been honing its public relations skills from its earliest years. There were two simple reasons for this: First, Mormons faced immediate criticism and public defamation from detractors. In 1834, a scant four years after the founding of the new movement, the newspaper editor Eber D. Howe published the scathing Mormonism Unveiled (sic), a compilation of accusations, affidavits, and other evidence of what Howe took to be the frauds perpetrated by Joseph Smith. More criticisms followed, and Mormon apologists early on fell into the pattern of spreading the word through debate and polemic, arts that required superior communication skills. Having been born in the early years of publishing, the Mormon movement availed itself of the latest technology—the printing press—that could help to plead its case to the public. The second reason for their P.R. savvy, connected to the first, was the deeply ingrained Mormon missionary impulse. Smith counseled his followers that their primary task was to spread word of the restoration of the gospel to all peoples; within months of establishing a church, the new prophet sent followers to preach to American Indian populations to the West, and shortly thereafter sent another small band to England to begin a mission to Europeans. Missions required robust marketing skills, and Mormons knew that theirs had to be especially good in places where other Christian groups not only had already landed, but had also spread word about Mormon heresies. Pragmatic in their approach, Mormons sharpened their tools in situations of intense competition for followers and a desire to level the playing field with other Christian groups.

In their years of isolation in Utah, moreover, the Saints also practiced public relations by appealing to the small bands of cross-continental travelers who stopped for a visit among the odd but generous Mor- mons. Tourism increased dramatically in the 1870s and 1880s with the completion of the railroad, and Mormons used their notoriety as the ideal opportunity to charm guests with their well-appointed hotels, clean city paths, and ingenious agricultural techniques. Dozens of books and memoirs remain as a testimony to this period when “visiting the Mormons” represented the height of adventure travel for many well-heeled Americans—some of whom then became outsider advocates who could testify to Mormon virtues. This was certainly the role played by Elizabeth Kane, a non-believer touring through

My task is to bring some needed historical perspective to current collective conversations about Mormonism in public life.

The Long Approach to the “Mormon Moment”

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This undated illustration depicts Mormons leaving the state of Illinois and heading west.

The Long Approach to the “Mormon Moment”

Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp

Twenty-three hundred forty pulsating hours of union of evangelism and positive public relations: One LDS visitor exclaimed about the possibilities: “Twenty-three hundred forty pulsating hours of human contact! One hundred and forty thousand precious minutes of continuous revelation! Hundreds of thousands of tracts and pamphlets distributed to truth seekers!”

Mormons leaving the state of Illinois were ready for America, and they had the skills to meet the challenge of—if not a 24-hour news cycle, then certainly the pace of the various dailies that had expected to find neglect and despair with the Mormon households she visited, and she actively sought out evidence that polygamy was enslaving women. Instead, she found similarity to her own life: At one stop she met a woman with a tidy house (including a prominently displayed Bible), and had to admit grudgingly that the woman “appeared to be... happy and contented.” In her first Mormon Church meeting, Kane searched for the “hopeless, dissatisfied, worn expressions” on the women’s faces that others had led her to expect; instead, she noted that Mormons looked much like any other rural congregation she had encountered.

By the time statehood arrived in Utah, Mormons were ready for America, and they had the skills to meet the challenge of—if not a 24-hour news cycle, then certainly the pace of the various dailies that were ready for America, and they had the skills to meet the challenge of—if not a 24-hour news cycle, then certainly the pace of the various dailies that were ready for America, and they had the skills to meet the challenge of—if not a 24-hour news cycle, then certainly the pace of the various dailies that were ready for America, and they had the skills to meet the challenge of—if not a 24-hour news cycle, then certainly the pace of the various dailies that were ready for America, and they had the skills to meet the challenge of—if not a 24-hour news cycle, then certainly the pace of the various dailies that were ready for America, and they had the skills to meet the challenge of—if not a 24-hour news cycle, then certainly the pace of the various dailies that were ready for America, and 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$100,000 ransom for the photos. Church leaders agonized over their options until Talmage proposed that the Saints commission their own photos and publish them, a suggestion that once again gave the Mormons the upper hand in controlling their public image. That same year, the First Presidency—the governing body of the LDS Church—appointed Talmage as an Apostle, and thereafter he served as an exceptionally effective spokesperson. A staid conservative on matters of scripture, he nonetheless held his own on the speaking circuit of interreligious conferences and exhibitions. In 1915, Talmage orchestrated an invitation to speak as the Church’s representative at the Congress of Religious Philosophies, held in San Francisco as part of the Panama Pacific International Exposition. There, activists such as Emma Goldman held forth and claims of ‘Mormonism’, in which was, despite his description of the presentations about his faith as ‘unmagical’ and his presence at the San Francisco Congress, seized on this meeting as an ideal time to spread his message of Mormon arrival among Christian organizations. Talmage, one of several members of the LDS Church who registered for the conference, brought with him credentials from Utah’s governor and the mayor of Salt Lake City, attesting to the fact that he was an official delegate. Initially he was delighted to be brought into the fold of concerned Christians. “It was my privilege to attend several of the meetings; and I was much impressed by the able presentation of the principal subjects, and by the liberal provision made for discussion,” he later reported. By mid-week, however, his reception was considerably chillier. The Congress met that year in the wake of the war, and participants registered a renewed sense of both crisis and moral possibility. The world had fallen apart, and Christians saw this as an opportunity to be the first to decide how it would be put back together. Sessions were thus organized around a series of threats to the attainment of a lasting peace: participants addressed the problems of labor, of race, of economic development, and of Mormonism as an impediment to religious progress. Talmage commented, “To this commendable order of things there was one striking exception, which by contrast with all the rest of the program stands as midnight is to sunshine, as foul license is to wholesome liberty, or as pagan superstition to Christian truth.” Here is his description of the presentations about his faith that followed: The church has worked long and hard to build acceptance as a legitimate player in the world of American public life.

THE THIRD MODE OF entry into citizenship presented by far the hardest challenge for the Mormons: acceptance into the world of American Christian leadership. Liberal Christians and academics may have been willing to take on their cause in the interest of fairness and inclusion, but evangelical Christians continued to have little use for the LDS Church. Nonetheless, the Saints tried, remaining certain that acceptance from American evangelicals would solidify their inclusion in public life. After all, some members surmised, they had a great deal in common with evangelicals in the 1910s, and they found themselves on the same side of a number of moral crusades, most notably the temperance movement. So it seemed logical for the Saints to join gatherings of evangelicals, to band together in a public display of Christian unity.

This story may sound deeply familiar to those who have followed Mitt Romney’s campaign and his early entanglements with unsympathetic evangelicals, but I want to remain in the early twentieth century just a bit longer to underscore the similarities of that moment with the current one. In 1919 the National Reform Association, an evangelical group formed during the Civil War to encourage the incorporation of explicitly Christian values into national life, held an international congress in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. James Talmage, just a few years removed from his appearance at the San Francisco Congress, seized on this meeting as an ideal time to spread his message of Mormon arrival among Christian organizations. Talmage, one of several members of the LDS Church who registered for the conference, brought with him credentials from Utah’s governor and the mayor of Salt Lake City, attesting to the fact that he was an official delegate. Initially he was delighted to be brought into the fold of concerned Christians. “It was my privilege to attend several of the meetings; and I was much impressed by the able presentation of the principal subjects, and by the liberal provision made for discussion,” he later reported. By mid-week, however, his reception was considerably chillier. The Congress met that year in the wake of the war, and participants registered a renewed sense of both crisis and moral possibility. The world had fallen apart, and Christians saw this as an opportunity to be the first to decide how it would be put back together. Sessions were thus organized around a series of threats to the attainment of a lasting peace: participants addressed the problems of labor, of race, of economic development, and of Mormonism as an impediment to religious progress. Talmage commented, “To this commendable order of things there was one striking exception, which by contrast with all the rest of the program stands as midnight is to sunshine, as foul license is to wholesome liberty, or as pagan superstition to Christian truth.” Here is his description of the presentations about his faith that followed: The preannounced topics included: Report of the World Commission of Mormonism; History and Tactics of Mormon Propaganda; The Mormon Menace; Mormonism and the Switz; Defeating Mormon Proselytizing. The estimated attendance was over two thousand during the forenoon and nearly double that number in the afternoon.
The Long Approach to the “Mormon Moment”

The chairman in announcing the opening of the “Conference on Mormonism” made plain the fact that denunciation, not investigation, would be the keynote for the day, and the appointed speakers without exception followed this lead.

Mormon Americans such as Talmage had bumped up against the immovable object of Christian citizenship. The noted anti-Mormon British author Winston Graham spoke first, and opened the session by comparing Mormonism to the late Kaiser and his power, emphasizing that even incipient claims to inclusion needed to be stopped before they ran out of control. As she phrased it, Mormonism “claims all the privileges of a church; and it steps outside of ecclesiasticism and claims all the privileges of a political party, a commercial corporation, a secret society, a civil government.” Graham was followed immediately by a former church member, who rehearsed the litany of Mormon beliefs that other Christians found deeply offensive: the practice of polygamy, the idea that men would become gods, the secrecy of their temple rituals, the wearing of “sacred undergarments,” and the refusal of the LDS to release a complete financial accounting. The final blow was delivered by Luis Laveland Shepard, an evangelical power-house and public speaker known in her day as the Silver-tongued Orator of the Rocky Mountains. Shepard was a former president of the Women Christian’s Temperance Union and a sought-after key-note for the day; and the appointed speakers without exception followed this lead.

Shepard was aghast at the proceedings, which he described in detail in a church periodical later published as Mormon to become an integral part of civic life. But he expressed particular consternation that, when he passed a note to the aide and asked to be heard during the session, he was roundly denounced. “It was voted that I be allowed to speak for five minutes as a courtesy, but with no recognition of any right to be heard, since I, not being a Christian, had no such right.” Note here the precise object of his concern: Talmage assumed that his expression of Christian belief would allow him a voice in this public setting, and that in certifying himself as both a churchgoer and an upstanding citizen (proven through affidavits brought to the conference by a non-Mormon Utah resident), he would be allowed to participate alongside other Christians in this civic display.

Here we see, in stark relief, the limits of Mormon inclusion into the American body politic in 1919. For Talmage and other Mormons of his educational and civic attunements, this reckoning came as a shock; their previous interactions with liberal Christians, with other educators, and with admiring crowds at public exhibitions, had led them to assume that their full citizenship, including a right to speak and to participate in public life, had been won by their hard-fought efforts. 1919 Did Not Mark a conclusion to this battle: In fact, one might more accurately gauge that it was not until the 1950s that Mormons won the day. This decade was probably the apex of Mormon acceptance and civic inclusion. If we are to judge on the basis of the practices of politics in everyday life—in the participation of Saints in the government and in the educational and business sectors, and in the acknowledgement of Mormon cultural achievements, this was the Mormon moment. The popular media of the 1950s heralded the Mormon business acumen and the bevy of successful corporate leaders as a cause for admiration, and gushed that their close-knit communities presented a model of civic cooperation. In 1952 Coronet magazine published an article entitled “Those Amazing Mormons,” in which they were described as “vigorous and independent.” A New York Times Magazine writer in 1952 lauded them for their welfare program and ability to care for members. In 1965, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Wallace Turner published The Mormon Establishment, an analysis of the LDS Church that traced its path from a small, homogeneous community with some radical economic and social ideas to a worldwide corporate and American entity. He admired the buildings lining Temple Square in Salt Lake City; he appreciated the vast church welfare system put into place during the Great Depression, and he favorably compared George Romney, then a potential contender for the Republican presidential nomination, with other moderate party members such as Mark Hatfield. With a few reservations, he concluded, he “found their doctrine to be humane, productive of progress, patriotic, wholesome and praiseworthy.” The Mormons, he concluded, had become a modern American church. So, the question for us today is, what happened? By all measures, and certainly in the eyes of many Mormons, the Saints by 1960 had successfully assimilated into American life, demonstrating admirable civic engagement, educational attainments, and involvement with as many interdenominational religious efforts as would accept them. The church has worked long and hard to build acceptance as a legitimate player in the world of American public life. Why is it that a significant minority of people polled about their voting preferences now says that they would not vote for a Mormon candidate? And what light can this brief history shed on the reasons for that invisible boundary to Mormon citizenship? The short answer is that America, too, has changed dramatically since the 1950s. By the early 1960s, journalists began to report more negatively on the LDS “hard sell” evangelical techniques, their control of Utah politics, and their “rigid conserva"tism.” Writers expressed alarm over the “unquestioning belief” in church leaders. The Civil Rights movement, which swept away many previously segregated white churches into an interfaith embrace, left the Mormons behind as holdouts in the move toward full integration of African Americans. In sum, the rules of inclusion began to change dramatically, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints did not seem to be keeping up with the tectonic cultural and political shifts rolling around it.

A second feature of the current political climate is the pervasiveness and cultural combativeness of anti-Mormonism. Some of the Protestant antipathy, to be sure, has been around for a long time. A movement to police the boundaries of Christian-
The Election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States brought questions about race in America to the forefront of political and social discourse in novel ways. It also gave rise to the claim that America had entered a post-racial era. What people mean when they invoke post-racial is often unclear, however. And is achieving a post-racial nation even possible or desirable? Most often, media figures have deployed the term to indicate that Obama the candidate and president deemphasizes the divisive history of race in America in favor of universal histories and experiences that unite.

Indeed, in his address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, then-Senator Obama himself laid the political and emotional groundwork for this version of the post-racial ideal in asserting that, “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.” During the 2008 Democratic primary, when video clips of sermons by his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, were decontextualized to emphasize black rage and political disloyalty, Obama delivered his landmark speech on race and politics. He condemned Wright’s comments for expressing “a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America.” In that speech, titled “A More Perfect Union,” Obama called on Americans to move past the “racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years” and “asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds.” Even though he made clear that he was not so naive as to imagine
that racial divisions could be overcome quickly or easily, he continued to press Americans to focus on what unites them rather than divides. "Mr. Obama now presides over a White House that constantly projects cross-racial unity," Jodi Kantor wrote in Sunday’s New York Times. “When discussing in interviews what image the Obamas want to project, aides use one word more than any other: ‘inclusive.’

In this view, post-racial means that American social and political life has become race-neutral and that, except for those on the fringes, Americans have rejected the overt practices of racial discrimination and hierarchy that have marked most of the nation’s history. Significantly, of course, this approach to post-racialism also calls on those peoples who have been subjected to such discrimination to themselves become race-neutral, refrain from appealing to the history of racism, and invest their hopes in the possibility of a “colorblind” nation. Indeed, the negative response by many of the president’s critics to his comments on the killing of African American teenager Trayvon Martin earlier this year highlights the complicated position in which the president finds himself with regard to public discourse about race. “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon," Obama noted. And although the majority of his remarks focused on Martin’s grieving family and the investigation, political figures like Newt Gingrich and columnists such as Michelle Malkin criticized Obama for invoking race intentionally but not so black (read angry) that he makes white Americans feel uncomfortable. Had America truly arrived at the post-racial moment, this sort of balancing act would not be necessary.

The widespread contention that Obama was not born in the United States and, therefore, is ineligible to hold the office of president of the United States resonates powerfully as a belief grounded in racism that is impervious to countervailing evidence. Indeed, in invoking the “birther” sensibility in his recent campaign quip that “No one’s ever asked to see my birth certificate,” Mitt Romney gave voice to the suspicions of many. According to a recent poll, 45 percent of Americans are not sure of or reject the authenticity of the official birth certificate Obama released to the public in 2008 in response to relentless questioning of his citizenship. The view that President Obama is not Christian as he professes, but Muslim, has also become commonplace in contemporary American life. In July, a poll from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 17 percent of respondents incorrectly identified Obama as a Muslim and 65 percent among those are uncomfortable with his “religion.” While this represents a 2 percent decrease since 2008 (but among Republicans, an increase from 16 percent to 30 percent), the persistent suspicion is that the president is, at worst, a radical Madrassa-educated Muslim who hates Christianity and America, and at best a dishonest closeted Muslim. Moreover, many Americans connect and conflate these doubts about the president’s religion and place of birth, as in the case of woman who declared at a Rick Santorum event in January that, “I never refer to Obama as President Obama because legally he is not.” She continued, “He is an avowed Muslim. My question is: Why isn’t something being done to get him out of our government? He has no legal right to be calling himself president.” Concerning conflations of race and religion in evaluations of the president, Coates concluded, “The goal of all this is to delegitimize Obama’s presidency. If Obama is not truly American, then America has still never had a black president.

The complex tangle of race, religion, and citizenship requires more nuanced analysis than the reductive binary that post-racial or not post-racial provides. Without question, this is a difficult cluster to disentangle—if such a thing is even possible—made so by the fact that race, religion, and national identity have been bound up together in complicated and shifting ways across American history. Religious beliefs have contributed to the production of ideas about race in American history by helping to interpret inconsequential physical differences through a moral lens and, at times, conferring divine authority on racial hierarchies. Similarly, ideas about race have contributed to evaluations of the religious possibilities and faith claims of differently racialized peoples in American history. These intertwined constructions of race and religion have developed in a context in which both contribute to ideas about American national identity and citizenship. Declarations of post-racial achievement obscure the multidimensional operations of racial thinking in American history as well as the rich spectrum of approaches that people of African descent (who most often bear the burden of “race”) have taken to understanding the relationship among race, religion, and Americanness.

Consider the case of Americans’ military service during the Second World War which, for so many, serves as a sign of American military might, moral commitment, and communal sacrifice. Men and women of African descent participated in the war effort in many capacities, ever mindful of the burdens of what was called the “Double V” campaign: victory in the war abroad and victory over racial discrimination at home. Service in a segregated military in which black units were most often relegated to menial labor provided a clear reminder of the persistence of racial discrimination. Even the experience of registering for the draft sometimes became a contest between long-standing state-authorized ways of defining race and the resistance of many black Americans to shoe-horning themselves into a limited set of racial categories. In fact, the period during which Americans mobilized for the war effort coincided with a time of religious creativity in black urban America that raised a range of unique, unprecedented, and challenging questions about the relationship among religion, race, and Americanness. Fostered by African American migration from the South to northern cities and the influx of immigrants from the Caribbean to these same cities in the years between the world wars, this religious creativity was expressed, in part, in the formation of a number of religious movements that offered alternative religious and racial categories to people of African descent. Rejecting the label of “Negro” and its association with slavery in the Americas, founders and members of these new groups understood their collective histories in ways that lifted them out of the rigid racial hierarchy in force in the United States. Their challenge to the logic of race in

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America was political in that most were interested in gaining full citizenship rights, but their alternative approaches were inseparable from religious led them to embrace a different set of racial categories and others rejected race entirely in favor of a religious sense of self.

On April 25, 1942, for example, the religious leader Father Divine joined an estimated 13 million other men in the United States between the ages of 45 and 64 who were called that same weekend in the fourth round of draft registration for the Second World War. Divine was the founder of the racially integrated Peace Mission Movement in which followers believed that he was God in a body but, as an embodied being, he complied with the requirement that he appear before his local draft board in Harlem. He registered under the name “Reverend Major J. Divine,” the one he used most frequently in public, and listed his occupation as clergyman. Although he was most probably born George Baker in Rockville, Maryland, he gave his birthplace as Providence, Rhode Island, perhaps a whimsical gesture to his sense of his own providential power. The remainder of the form consisted of a “registrant’s report,” including a physical description of the registrant in terms of height, weight, eye color, hair color, complexion, and race. Except for height and weight, the registrant needed only to place a check mark next to the appropriate descriptor on lists already printed on the form. When, however, it came to representing Divine’s race, he and the registrar came into conflict. She placed a check mark next to “Negro,” but his rejection of all racial categories as the product of the devil (“the other fellow,” as Divine often said) moved him to insist upon an amendment to the form. The registrar complied with Divine’s request, writing in the alternative in capital letters so that it spanned the entire list of pre-printed racial designators. In the end, Father Divine’s draft card listed his race as “AMERICAN.”

Father Divine was not the only man registering for the draft that April weekend who normally would have been classified as Negro but who on religious grounds rejected commonplace American racial categorizations. The records of the so-called “old man’s draft” contain rich evidence of unconventionally religiously grounded approaches to racial identity. Members of various congregations of black Hebrews, including immigrants from the British West Indies, rejected Negro in favor of Ethiopian Hebrew, an identity that represented their sense of an ancient connection to the biblical Hebrews. Members of the Moorish Science Temple who understood themselves to be literal descendants of Moroccans and therefore “Asiatic” Muslims, most often characterized their race as “Moorish American.” Father Divine’s followers embraced his theology that denied all racial categories and declared themselves to be simply human which, when they acquiesced to the man’s request, draft registrars usually added next to Negro on the form. But registrars themselves often resisted these attempts by men of African descent to define their identities in ways that did not conform to current American ideas of race. When Faithful Solomon who, like other followers of Father Divine had changed his name to reflect his new spiritual identity, insisted that the racial categories printed on the form did not apply to him, the registrar noted, “says he is of the human race, but is obviously Negro,” as if the two were mutually exclusive.

The image of these men asserting their sense of divinely given identity in a rebuke of the American system of racial categorization even as they affirmed their Americanness is powerful. This group of registrants grew up in the last decades of the nineteenth century as America was producing the system of Jim Crow segregation that would mark the first half of the twentieth century. In 1942, they were required to register for possible service in a racially segregated military, an experience that tainted an expression of national service and belonging with hierarchy and exclusion. This small group of men in the “old man’s draft” represented the positions of many more women and men of African descent who did not find themselves before a draft board in April of 1942 but who also understood themselves, their communal past, and future destiny in terms that broke radically with commonplace notions of race in America. This period was unique in American history: new religious movements flourished in black communities of the urban North and wartime mobilization called for a united citizenry, all while practices of racial segregation and discrimination continued. When these men intervened into the system of racial classification during the draft, they threw a spotlight on the contradictory reality of being called to fight for democracy abroad and being denied access at home on the basis of race.

What we learn from recognizing a longer history of debate among people of African descent in the United States about how religion and race shape what it means to be an American is that the “racial” of “post-racial” has no fixed or obvious meaning. Members of the black new religious movements of the early twentieth century wrestled with the religious implications of American racial categories and the racial meaning of religious commitment in complex ways and reached conclusions that have been embraced by some and reviled by others. However, when we bring their perspectives into view, we cannot help but see the limitations of the stark binary that underlies current discussions of post-racial America. Moreover, taking time to understand why and how religion and race were so intimately intertwined for members of these groups helps to shed light on the diverse ways contemporary Americans draw explicit and implicit connections between these categories. In the current election cycle, as in the previous one, President Obama continues to be cast as unfit for office through “birther” conspiracy claims, a persistent suspicion that he is a closeted Muslim and, therefore, anti-American, and the promotion of an image of him as panderling to angry black Christians (as Tucker Carlson attempted one day before the first presidential debate). Unfortunately, the stark terms of post-racial America or not post-racial America do not provide the tools for interpreting the history of these tangled threads of race, religion, and Americanness in subtle ways. This is not surprising given the starkness of racial hierarchy and the practices of racism in American history. However, acknowledging past perspectives that represent alternative visions may help us resist the present temptation to simply embrace or reject post-racial status and think more carefully and expansively about race, religion, and American life.

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Jon Stewart, Religion Teacher Extraordinaire

The comedian and host of The Daily Show covers religion often, but more important, he covers it well.

As difficult as it is to find good writing about religion, it is harder still to find good television about religion. Most televangelists do not do good (challenging, nuanced) religious television: One of their goals may be to educate, or win converts, but they have to raise money, and offering sophisticated portraits of religion is as likely to close people’s wallets as open them. Religious television series tend to be unwatchable: no Touched by an Angel for me. And talk-show hosts are rarely any better when it comes to religion. The skepticism of Bill Maher can be as simplistic as the basest prosperity gospel, and we should all be glad that the eager gullibility of Oprah is now quarantined on her own network. Except for public television’s Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, it is hard to find intelligent talk about religion on TV.

Except for Jon Stewart, that is. The secular Jewish comedian, host of Comedy Central’s The Daily Show, covers religion often, but more important, he covers it well. Stewart seems to genuinely enjoy interviewing religious figures, whether of the left (like Sojourners magazine’s Jim Wallis) or the right (like pseudo-historian, political advisor and textbook consultant David Barton). Some of The Daily Show’s best sketches deal with religion, and his writers and multi-ethnic cast—including one of the few recognizable Muslim comedians in America, Aasif Mandvi—freely move beyond satire. They are often funny, but just as often smart.

Above all, however, Stewart and his writers do two things that make them unique on popular television. First, they cover—and yes, I would say “cover,” not just satirize or mock—a wide range of religions. If you watched only The Daily Show, you would nonetheless learn, in time, about Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and a whole spectrum of smaller faiths, a category that I would argue includes atheism. And second, they pay attention to points of theology that more traditional news and talk shows skip over. Using chunks of time that would be unthinkable on a network newscast—six minutes for a segment on Mormonism!—The Daily Show teaches the finer points of belief, mining them for humor but at the same time serving a real educational function.

Stewart comes at religion with buckets of derision, but I do not find him offensive, nor should anyone who enjoys comedy. Like so many of the best comedians, he is an equal-opportunity hater. Sometimes it’s atheists he cannot stand, as in his bit about the beams in a shape of the cross that survived the Ground Zero wreckage, which the American Atheists did not want displayed. Sometimes it’s the Catholic Church, which proved a useful point of comparison for the football culture at Penn State: “I get that it’s probably hard for you to believe that this guy you think is infallible, and this program you think is sacred, could hide such heinous activities, but there is some precedent for that,” Stewart said, referring to coach Joe Paterno and the sex-abuse scandal. “Yeah, and just like with the Catholic Church, no one is trying to take away your religion, in this case football. They’re just trying to bring some accountability to a pope, and some of his cardinals.” In both cases, it was the culture of certainty that Stewart was mocking, not the belief system itself. It was the human tendency toward hubris.

But, of course, belief systems are fair game, too. In fact, Stewart and his writers have realized that good theology—getting people’s beliefs right—happens to make for good humor. Consider a bit that aired last October, in which Stewart interviewed cast members Samantha Bee and Wyatt Cenac on the differences between Mormonism and traditional Christianity. Bee, a fair-completed Canadian, was playing a Mormon, wearing a shirt that said “Team Mormon”; and Cenac, a black man of Haitian ancestry, was wearing a shirt that said “Team Normal.” Bee began by complaining about the tee shirts they were made to wear: “Why is Wyatt ‘Team Normal’? That implies that Mormons aren’t normal...We are not a cult. Mormonism is a proud religion founded by a great man who was guided by the angel Moroni to golden plates buried in upstate New York that he placed in the bottom of a hat where he read them using a seer stone.”

Matters devolved from there. Team Mormon and Team Normal began arguing about which group is crazier: the one that believes Jesus was born of a virgin and the Holy Ghost, and that he rose from the dead and ascended to Heaven, or the one that believes all that plus the story that he then returned to Missouri. Jon Stewart intercedes, saying that both Bee and Cenac seem happy to suspend disbelief when it comes to the basic tenets of the New Testament. Both Bee and Cenac then take license to turn on Stewart, for being an adherent to a religion in which “it’s normal to hang out in someone’s living room and watch a guy with a beard cut off a baby’s penis while everyone eats pound cake!” (as Bee puts it). The bit is as comedically deft as it is religiously shrewd: How often do we catch ourselves rolling our eyes at someone else’s belief system, only to realize at the last second that we believe some crazy things ourselves? In that regard, Stewart is a stand-in for all of us, enjoying some fun at the expense of other religions until the gods of dramatic irony hold a mirror to his face.

And except for the fact that circumcision doesn’t involve the whole penis (“In my defense,” Stewart says, “it’s just the tip, and the cake is incredibly...
The End of DOMA and the Dismantling of the “Straight State”

Supporters of marriage equality will rejoice, but there is a lot more litigation to come.

ADVOCATES FOR MARRIAGE EQUALITY came away from yesterday’s Supreme Court pronouncements on same-sex marriage more jubilant than battered. But there was plenty of hurt to go around. Religious commentators are split, like most of the nation. The legal morass has just gotten deeper. The legacy of the Supreme Court’s Proposition 8 decision will be that there is a lot more litigation to come. Opponents of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) won outright (and this is the moment to acknowledge that I was among those historians of marriage who joined a “friend of the court” brief urging the Court to strike down the federal law).

The vital relationship of law, religion, and history is key to Justice Anthony Kennedy’s opinion for a 5-4 majority in Windsor; the DOMA case, which stressed both the traditional location of marriage law in the states, and the ways that the national constitution and federal government have intervened even in such local issues, generally in the interests of equality and the prevention of discrimination, which was the focus of the Windsor opinion.

The opinion did not explicitly address the multiple ways that religious commitments factor into the legal relationship we call marriage, but it is safe to say that in the United States, which has a high “marriage metabolism” according to scholars, and where the overwhelming majority of marriage ceremonies (same-sex and otherwise) are celebrated in religious rituals and spaces, religious actors play a central role.

Equally important, the lives of marrying couples are sculpted—more fun, in fact, than many religious people have in their own observance. Jon Stewart may not be a believer—he did boast that he had a bacon croissantwich for Passover—but he is one hell of a teacher.

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pronouncement, by being performed) is a marker in religious life as well as in political and social culture. Such a ceremony literally “solemnizes” an aspiration to love and live in companionship.

Some religious leaders are genuinely concerned that they may be forced to provide such ritual validation to those they believe as a matter of religious conviction are not eligible to marry. This is something of a red herring, honestly. Those who are divorced in civil law, for example, but not in the eyes of the Catholic Church (that is, without a religious annulment of the marriage) have not been able to coerce Catholic priests to marry them in violation of church teaching.

More likely to be jarring are the ways that—if federal officials begin systematically erasing gender distinctions in federal laws that have now been overturned by Windsor—the rise of the federal bureaucracy and the creation of a system of rewards targeted explicitly at heterosexual couples traveled together in time, across the twentieth century. The disentangling of such rewards from heteronormativity will require intricate and wide-ranging change, and will affect daily life deeply.

Those who support civil unions, as well as supporters of full marriage equality—a total of well over 60 percent of the American population—are likely to welcome these changes. Alterations in federal law would affect even those 31 states that have enacted one man-one woman marriage provisions as part of their constitutions, however. Indeed, we have seen one aspect of such change in Massachusetts, where debates about the effect of same-sex marriage on Catholic adoption agencies has gotten significant attention, including from Republican presidential candidates in 2012.

In Massachusetts, the key was state support for the agencies. To receive state funding, even a private agency must abide by non-discrimination laws of the commonwealth. Money from the state was the true issue, in other words.

This is where a second massive layer of bureaucracy becomes apparent, one that has often been overlooked by scholars and journalists alike. Catholic Charities USA, the Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, United Jewish Appeal, and more have become vital participants in the government’s delivery of poor relief, emergency aid, disaster relief, and so on. They grew in size (and in their close relationship to government) over the same period that Canaday traces the growth of the “straight state.”

These large charitable arms of particular denominations or ecumenical cooperation are the religious organizations most likely to be affected by the disappearance of preferences in federal law. The extent of such change will become apparent only once we start to see modified regulations and procedures play out at ground level.

At the outset of President Obama’s first term, the question of discrimination among religions by such large charities, which employ many thousands of people, was a hotly debated issue. Despite the hopes of many Obama supporters, his administration has never intervened in this area.

Instead, the federal government will now be charged with an even more wide-ranging mandate—ensuring that the federal bureaucracy does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation in the provision of services to Americans. Religious bureaucracies that receive federal funding will be swept into this recalibration, and that is where religious opponents of marriage equality will feel the bite most deeply, and nationwide.

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Radical Mission: What is Aish HaTorah Trying to Teach Young Jews?

By Michael Schulson

Published on October 22, 2013

Ultra-Orthodox Jews work to increase religiosity among their liberal co-religionists.

On my first visit to Jerusalem, in the summer of 2011, I asked an ultra-Orthodox Jew for directions to the nearest ritual bath. The man shrugged and nodded his black-hatted head toward a pack of college-aged students. “Ask those brainwashed fellows over there,” he said before walking away, sidelocks swinging.

This was not the first time that I heard someone apply the term “brainwashed” to the educational efforts of Aish HaTorah (“Fire of the Torah”), an Orthodox outreach organization headquartered in Jerusalem. That summer, Aish’s students seemed to be all over Jerusalem’s Old City, lounging in the plazas, praying at the Western Wall, and sleeping in the same free religious youth hostel in which I was staying.

The boys, at least, were identifiable by their blend of casual American clothing and religious garments—a yarmulke, and perhaps some tzitzit, the fringed undershirts worn by traditional Jews. Inevitably, they were young diaspora Jews from non-Orthodox families. They came out of Aish classes talking about scientific proofs for the existence of God, and about the persuasive skill of their teachers. (I first heard the word “brainwashed” from an Aish student describing his classes.) I met a few students who, after spending time with Aish, were heading off to join the Israel Defense Forces. I met even more who spent much of their free time swapping slurs about Arabs and other non-Jews.

In March 2012, I traveled to Jerusalem again, this time to spend a week taking Aish classes. I didn’t find any brainwashing going on (whatever, exactly, that would look like). What I did find, though, was an educational operation skilled at projecting a moderate image, even as it espoused an immoderate, politicized form of Judaism. Aish may be Orthodox, but, I soon realized, its tactics are far from traditional.

Jews don’t proselytize non-Jews. But, starting in the 1960s, certain ultra-Orthodox groups began coordinated efforts to increase religiosity among liberal Jews—a category that includes Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jews, all of whom are willing to interpret Jewish law broadly. Living in tight-knit communities, ultra-Orthodox Jews seldom interact with this side of the Jewish world. Organizations like Aish, and like the older, better-known Chabad-Lubavitch movement, are exceptions.

Noah Weinberg, an American rabbi, founded Aish in 1974. Early on, Weinberg decided that Jewish outreach was best practiced not by lifelong Orthodox Jews, but by those who had become religious as adults. Aish’s staff is unusual among Orthodox organizations in that it is composed mostly of ba’elei teshuva—Jews who switch to Orthodoxy later in life.

Since the 1970s, Aish has expanded from five students in a Jerusalem apartment block to an operation with outposts around the world, including gleaming headquarters in the heart of Jerusalem and offices in midtown Manhattan. Aish also has one of the largest Jewish presences on the web, with a million visits per month. Aish rabbis teach classes online, lecture at synagogues, and run programs at 27 permanent branches scattered across six continents. As a service to overworked Jewish executives, Aish offers a dial-a-rabbi program that sends Jewish teachers to corporate offices around Manhattan.

The Aish HaTorah World Centre is located in the Old City of Jerusalem.
Aish's headquarters, though, best illustrate the organization's influence. They overlook the Western Wall on what may be the finest piece of real estate in Jerusalem. The interior is wood-paneled and sleek, and foot-long sidelocks explain that he no longer needs to look more corporate.

In Jerusalem, Aish rabbis teach free classes six days a week, on topics ranging from marriage to the Holocaust. As members of a missionizing organization, these rabbis demonstrate a concern with Truth and Testimony that often feels more Mormon than mensch. Aish would never use the word proselytize, of course. Understandably, though, students get confused.

During one class, I heard a young man ask, “If Jews are the 0.4 percent of the world population who seemed interested in observing Aish's methods, Aish bases this lecture on a paper published in a statistics journal 20 years ago, which claims to find predictions of current events encoded in the Torah with a greater-than-random-chance probability. Aish presents the paper pretty well, with little mention of the controversy that followed. Afterward, people seem a little dazed. One of the Orthodox girls tells the lecturer that the code research is "really freaky." Honestly, I found it a little freaky too. I was perturbed not so much by the idea of a true and definite God, as by the idea of a God who, after a few thousand years of incurability, would let Himself be known with such mathematical certainty.

Near the end of the Discovery Seminar, one of the lecturers went on a tangent and tried to show that the German people were probably descended from the Amalekites. The Amalekites, for those not familiar with Semitic grudges, are an enemy of the Biblical Israelites. According to Jewish law, one must kill Amalekites on sight—children included, no questions asked. Fortunately, no one knows who the descendants of Amalek are. When the messiah comes, though, some religious Jews believe that the identity of the Amalekites will be revealed, and a slaughter will commence.

This lecturer, it seems, was convinced that he would be killing Germans, based on a rather elaborate bit of textual interpretation. The visiting rabbi, at this point, became confused. He thought he spotted a logical flaw in the argument—a flaw that might exonerate Germany. The visiting rabbi sounded disappointed.

"So we don't have to kill the Germans when the moibhach comes?" he asked, sounding disappointed.

"Why not?" replied the Aish lecturer, scambling to reconnect Berlin to Biblical nations. They debated a while longer. It remains unclear whether the German nation will be spared.

## By its very nature, Aish targets a demographic far more liberal than itself, both religiously and politically.

If you ask religious Jews about Amelek, most will dodge the question, unless they're pressed to justify their tradition. But for an organization like Aish, committed to the absolute truth of Jewish scripture, that kind of ambiguity is unthinkable. After all, Aish is in the business of presenting truths, not confronting mysteries.

The modern world has a tendency to push people into those radical directions. It asks the questions that make you want to leave unhallowed, forcing you to rationalize strange, ancient, and perhaps harmless traditions. It really shouldn't surprise us that a literalist fundamentalism has accompanied the rise of enlightenment rationalism. Something about that kind of thinking, when applied to a scripture, can force people into places no sane individual ever really wants to go.

A similar pattern, perhaps, takes place among missionaries. Aish's rabbis don't just live an Orthodox lifestyle. They explain Orthodoxy to other Jews. They make it understandable. They make it seem rational. The result is not just a kind of Orthodoxy that is accessible to Jews of all backgrounds. It is an Orthodoxy that is ripe to radicalize.

In 2006, an organization called the Clarion Fund, funded “to alert Americans about the threat of radical Islam,” began distributing millions of copies of a documentary called Obsession. The distribution effort targeted swing states in the 2008 presidential election. Despite a brief disclaimer noting that not all Muslims were violent extremists, Obsession quickly developed into a full-blown polemic about the jihad fermenting in our suburbs. Outraged by the documentary's Islamicophobic tone, one prominent American rabbi compared it to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. In 2012, a New York Times investigation found that the New York City Police Department had shown trainees a different Clarion Fund documentary, The Third Ihsad, with a similarly Islamicophobic message.

Aish, an ostensibly apolitical organization, denied any connection to the Clarion Fund back in 2008. The Clarion Fund denied any connection to Aish. But, as journalist Sarah Posner observed, Clarion’s president and two vice-presidents were also on Aish’s staff, and the Fund shared an address with Aish. But, as journalist Sarah Posner observed, Clarion’s president and two vice-presidents were also on Aish’s staff, and the Fund shared an address with Aish. But, as journalist Sarah Posner observed, Clarion’s president and two vice-presidents were also on Aish’s staff, and the Fund shared an address with Aish. But, as journalist Sarah Posner observed, Clarion’s president and two vice-presidents were also on Aish’s staff, and the Fund shared an address with Aish. But, as journalist Sarah Posner observed, Clarion’s president and two vice-presidents were also on Aish’s staff, and the Fund shared an address with Aish. 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In the classes I took with Aish, I didn’t hear any Islamophobic language. I did, however, hear racist remarks about Arabs and black Americans from some of the students. Aish is not opposed to violentgnu, and Aish straddles two worlds. Few other organizations could get an endorsement from a popular icon like Spielberg, yet route most of its funds through a foundation based in Lakewood, New Jersey—an Orthodox enclave that strictly censors its members’ exposure to the outside world, and in which Spielberg films are almost certainly taboo.

As part of its effort to appear moderate, Aish also solicits the support of politicians, actors, and other luminaries of modern culture. Online, Aish publishes endorsements from, among others, Bill Clinton, Elie Wiesel, Larry King (a former Aish board member), former U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Robert hormats, an under secretary of state in the Obama Administration. It may seem strange that an organization that worked so hard to defeat Obama in 2008 would receive endorsements from a member of his administration. But this too is part of Aish’s strategy: build a web of connections so wide that your radicalism seems improbable.

BACK IN JERUSALEM, Rabbi Motty Berger is lecturing in his Baltimore accent. “Ladies and gentlemen, the world does make sense. Crusades, the Holocaust: It really does make sense. You just have to figure out what’s going on in the world.”

The lead-domed al-Aqsa mosque—the world’s third-holiest site for Sunni Muslims, constructed atop the world’s holiest site for Jews—is visible outside the classroom windows. Berger’s lectures are among the most popular in Aish’s Essentials Classes, the next step after a Discovery Seminar. Berger’s form of Orthodoxy takes the world in broad sweeps: “Once the Gentile does it, the world will say, ‘Is this okay? This is okay, right? Is this okay?’ And we have to say, ‘Yes, it is okay.’”

Berger goes after Reform Judaism with particular zeal. “Generalizations are riddled with error. But is it more compelling? My sidekicks are shoes, and I eat shrimp with gusto. Take my word, though. Radicalism is seductive.

Is that approach a more precise way to approach the world? Sure. Generalizations are riddled with error. Is it more compelling? My sidekicks are shoes, and I eat shrimp with gusto. Take my word, though. Radicalism is seductive.

For young Jews traveling to Israel, the most welcome organizations tend to be radical. Flush with cash from wealthy Diaspora supporters, and completely devoted to outreach, they offer free classes, lodgings, meals, and trips—things liberal Jewish denominations provide more sparingly. If a moderate alternative exists, it’s not nearly so public.

Aish’s students are mostly young, American, and a little lost. They come to Aish hungry not only for a free lunch, but hungry to learn about their heritage. They want answers. They want rabbis who care. Aish offers both. It provides not only a Jewish education but a particular brand of certainty, a vision of the world in which science justifies Judaism, Judaism upholds truth, and truth is understandable and unambiguous.

To its donors, Aish offers a response to the perceived threat of assimilation—a way of keeping Judaism relevant and appealing; a way of bringing unaffiliated Jews back to synagogue. I don’t think that Aish can make good on that offer. Sure, radical ideologies have proven, time and again, their ability to survive and grow in the modern world. But Aish’s presentations, like many flashy things, don’t seem to have much substance. And the kind of certainty Aish offers is unstable: quick to bigotry, quick to defensiveness, quick to make its uglier side known. That’s not to say Aish is harmlessly. Many Jews hate to see any discord in K’lal Yisrael—the greater Jewish community—but when we direct money toward an organization like Aish, or even give our tacit support, we allow it to lay claim to one possible Jewish future, in which the most forceful, most public expressions of the faith are also the most radical. All religious groups, of course, have to figure out how they’ll survive into the next generation. But, as Aish illustrates, survival alone is not enough.
Marilynne Robinson in Montgomery

The author already stirs our souls with her stories of solitude and hard-won hope. Does she have to write beautifully about community and politics as well?

Marilynne Robinson’s new novel *Lila* has been greeted with rapture—not just by critics but also by a host of readers who rely on Robinson for novels that change the way they experience life in the world. During the last days of the countdown to *Lila*’s release, breathless fans took to the Internet to testify to the power of her prose. One commenter on the website *The Toast* wrote that *Gilead* “hooked me like a gasping fish”; another said that as she read it “I kept feeling like I’d been hit in the stomach by something huge and wonderful, and I’d have to stagger off and deal with my pathetic scurrying soul until I was able to face reading more. It was like staring at the rising sun.” Anticipating *Lila*, a third reader vowed, “I will read this book slowly and intently and then reread it seventy times seven.”

I have been one of these ardent, gasping, staggering fans. Two years ago, when I had the opportunity to teach a senior seminar at Yale on anything I wanted, I chose to teach one on James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson.
Marilynne Robinson in Montgomery

Briallen Hopper

My students and I read all of Robinson’s novels and spent a reverent afternoon with her papers in the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. We sifted through boxes and pulled out translucent, grease-spotted letters written while Robinson was cooking dinner, and spiral-bound notebooks filled with the transcendent sentences that would become her first novel *Housekeeping*, her neat cursive words about loss and resurrection inscribed next to crude, crayoned drawings by her small son. We held in our hands tangible evidence of the miraculous intimacy between the quotidian and the sublime.

It is this sacramental significance that makes Robinson’s writing feel so transformative and true. She evokes the hope of heaven in the everyday, and the promise of baptismal blessing in ordinary water. In this way, reading her books can be a religious experience. As one reader writes, “Whenever I’m reading a Marilynne Robinson book, I mostly believe in God and I have like sense memories of what real religion feels like to my body.” For some readers, her books have even been a way back into formal religious faith. After reading Gilead and *Home*, my friend Francisco, who was raised Congregationalist, writes that this selfless and contemplative form of Christianity is “absent of the suffocating, contradictory ideologies that characterize much of its popularized iteration today.” For these reasons and others, Marilynne Robinson is an important figure for those of us who care about the role of religion in our national life. For many, she is a rare writer who can be trusted to represent Christianity to a culture that often sees faith as anti-intellectual or reactionary or easy to dismiss. As Mark O’Connell muses on *The New Yorker’s* website: “Hers is the sort of Christianity, I suppose, that Christ could probably get behind.”

Robinson has not only been hailed as the best person to define Christianity for our age—she’s been held up as a critically needed political voice. For Williams and many others, Robinson’s writing both represents Christianity and transcends it, narrating a political and ethical vision that can serve as a kind of public conscience. To borrow a phrase from *The New Yorker*, there is now a “First Church of Marilynne Robinson,” and its adherents are everywhere: in pulps and libraries and online and at the National Book Awards and in the White House. In her own writing and speaking, Robinson embraces this public role for herself, consciously re-interpreting traditional American Calvinism as a moral model for modern times.

**Making Calvinist Theology Meaningful to Modern Americans**

Robinson has not only been hailed as the best person to define Christianity for our age—she’s been held up as a critically needed political voice. Robinson has had a profound influence on the political process and on the contours of public life in the United States. Her fiction has been considered marginally literate, that by another person to define Christianity for our age. Robinson’s novels have been read and very moving. In a recent interview in *The New York Times*, Robinson told Oseola McCarty, an African American laundress of Lila’s generation who gained fame when, after a long and fragile life, she donated her surprisingly large life savings to the University of Southern Mississippi: “McCarty took down this Bible and First Corinthians fell out of it, it had been signed. And you see, here is this woman that, by many standards, might have been considered marginally literate, that by another standard would have been considered to be a major expert on the meaning of First Corinthians!” Robinson delights in religious narratives like Lila’s and Oseola’s: testimonies of fervent textual engagement that unsettle common assumptions about religious and the relative worth of persons.

But despite this democratic expansiveness, there are some limits of Robinson’s religious vision that she doesn’t test or stretch—aspects of our world that simply don’t exist in the world of her novels. I don’t just mean limits of subject matter. Call them limits of community. Like Robinson herself, every one of her characters is an introvert, a loner, a person filled with the passion of loneliness (to borrow a phrase from Robinson herself). It’s impossible to imagine her writing about anyone who wasn’t. It’s not surprising that in a 2012 essay Robinson defines community in fairly disembodied terms, as an imaginative act that is almost indistinguishable from the practice of reading or writing fiction: “I would say, for the moment, that community at least community larger than the immediate family, consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly. This thesis may be influenced by the fact that I have spent literal years of my life lovingly absorbed in the thoughts and perceptions of… people who do not exist.” In her fiction, grace is communal only in the sense that it sometimes stretches to connect two people for a little while: a sister trying her best to understand an elusive long lost brother, or a mother clapping her child close while he’s still small enough to be held. And even these moments of connection are savored in relation to the knowledge of their precariousness and the aching anticipation of their loss.

The novels’ power lies in their unsparring depictions of the isolated soul communing with itself or...
As a result, her religious vision excludes almost all of us. She can’t represent those of us who are Tweeting and commenting and blogging and chatting about her books’ beauty, or comprehend those of us who find ourselves immersed in thick webs of connection and collectivity and populated chaos. Though Robinson clearly cares deeply about what might be called “social problems,” her stories of individual reckoning and resignation have little to say about lives lived in the midst of congregations or in the shadow of corporations. Whether we resist constant compulsory connection or revel in it or both, we are living outside her novels’ theological and political categories.

DO THESE LIMITS MATTER? It seems almost ungrateful to point them out. Robinson already stirs our souls with her stories of solitude and hard-won hope; does she really have to write beautifully about community and politics as well? Joan Acocella says no. In her review of *Lila* in the *New Yorker*, she admits that “Robinson’s use of politics is...to some extent, a weakness of the Gilead novels.” But Acocella argues that the political limits of Robinson’s religious vision don’t matter because Robinson’s mystical insight is so strong: “Robinson writes about religion two ways. One is meliorist, reformist. The other is rapturous, visionary. Many people have been good at the first kind; few at the second kind, at least today. The second kind is Robinson’s forte. She knows this, and works it.”

I agree with Acocella that Robinson works it, and furthermore that her work gives us painful insights into the spiritually corrosive effects of poverty that “meliorist, reformist” writing rarely does. There is a dire need for lamentation in liberal Protestantism, and I am immeasurably grateful to Robinson for supplying it. But I also believe that Robinson’s political limitations matter a great deal, because she has been cast as a public religious voice and conscience that even after a lifetime of friendship he has no idea how his best friend would react: “Now, the fact is, I don’t know how old Boughton would take all this. It surprised me to realize that. I think it is an issue we never discussed in all our years of discussing everything. It just didn’t come up.” When Ames observes that interracial marriage is legal in Iowa, Jack indulges in a bitter aside: “Yes, Iowa, the race problem in the Iowa trilogy is not that their racial problem is...to some extent, a weakness of the Gilead novels.” But Acocella argues that the political limits of Robinson’s religious vision don’t matter because Robinson’s mystical insight is so strong: “Robinson writes about religion two ways. One is meliorist, reformist. The other is rapturous, visionary. Many people have been good at the first kind; few at the second kind, at least today. The second kind is Robinson’s forte. She knows this, and works it.”

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As it happens, one of the things she gets wrong is the politics of race. In saying this I don’t mean what my friend Jess Row argues in his *Boston Review* essay “White Flights”: that Robinson, like many other post-1960 white writers, assumes “a systematically, if not intentionally, denuded, sanitized landscape, at least when it comes to matters of race,” or that in her novels “whiteness is once again normative, invisible, unquestioned, and unthreatened.” Row uses persuasive examples from *Housekeeping* to bookend his essay, but his critique is inappplicable to *Gilead* and *Home*. Their racial problem is quite different.

The race problem in the Iowa trilogy is not that Robinson ignores non-white people and their violent eviction from white landscapes and white religion. *Gilead* and *Home* are Robinson’s attempt to reckon with that horrible history. She mourns the ethical declension that turned the multi-racial abolitionist outposts of the 1850s into the white sun-down towns of the 1950s. She repeatedly shows us the traces of racial terror on the Iowa farmland and the hushed-up events led to this “denuded, sanitized landscape”—the burning embers of black churches and the black flights through and from Gilead, from slavery days to Jim Crow. Race is likewise at the center of the novels’ plots and their family dramas.

Ames’s grandfather was a John-Brown-style radical abolitionist who attended black churches because the preaching was better, but Ames’s pacifist father disavowed that militant legacy, creating a bitter rift. Meanwhile Jack Boughton, the prodigal son of Ames’s best friend, is secretly and illegally married to a black woman and they have a son, which is why he believes he can never be fully received back into his white family. Furthermore, the problem is not that Robinson fails to call whites to account for their racial complicity. The character of Jack Boughton allows her to indict the kind of white Christian obtuseness that is effectively white Christian racism. When Jack shows Ames a picture of his black wife and child to try to gauge how his own father might respond to having an interracial family, Ames realizes that even after a lifetime of friendship he has no idea how his best friend would react: “Now, the fact is, I don’t know how old Boughton would take all this. It surprised me to realize that. I think it is an issue we never discussed in all our years of discussing everything. It just didn’t come up.” When Ames observes that interracial marriage is legal in Iowa, Jack indulges in a bitter aside: “Yes, Iowa, the
There are dangers both in what she leaves out of her fiction and what she puts into it.

shining star of radicalism.” Except for Ames, Jack keeps his secret to himself, but he talks to his sister about W.E.B. DuBois and pushes his minister father to take responsibility for racial injustice, telling him about the murder of Emmett Till, and quoting an article that argues that “the seriousness of American Christianity was called into question by our treatment of the Negro.” His father inadequately responds that if black people are good Christians, “then we can’t have done so badly by them, can we?” Jack deferentially disagrees. Through Jack, Robinson represents religious faith less as a spur to action and more as a beautiful individual reckoning with inevitable loss and anguish. Above all, her writing honors an individual’s submission to the forces of fate of the world.”

One answer, a simple and troubling enough answer, is that Robinson simply made a mistake—one that reflects the limits of her racial attention. Robinson mixes up Montgomery and Birmingham because her precision when it comes to figurative language or classic theology doesn’t extend to major events in American racial history. For decades she has immersed herself in rigorous reading of Calvin and Shakespeare and the Puritans and the Latin Vulgate, but she hasn’t read enough about the Civil Rights Movement to get it right; Calvin is clear but black people are a blur. And insofar as she is using undifferentiated black people on TV as a way to throw her white characters’ moral development into relief, it might not much matter to her what happened in Montgomery. It’s also possible that she decided that conflating the facts would work better to characterize her white characters, so she silently changed them. Either way, she could be seen as illustrating Toni Morrison’s critique in Playing in the Dark of “the way black people ignore critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them.” Morrison sees white writers’ “arbitrary, mysterious, and predestined. The forces of fate are inscrutable and immense; the capacity of human agency is comparatively small. Perhaps because of her acute awareness of the cosmic imbalance of power between the human and the divine, Robinson represents religious faith less as a spur to action and more as a beautiful individual reckoning with inevitable loss and anguish. Above all, her writing honors an individual’s submission to the forces of fate.”

Over and over again, Robinson’s characters find a kind of peace in accepting their arduous lot: Ames spends decades praying in an empty house without seeking the comfort of a human touch; Glory gives up her dreams of a husband and home of her own with a resigned “Ah, well”; Jack painfully accepts exile from both his white and black families without ever telling his sister or father his racial secret, or opening the door to the possibility of embodied beloved community. We watch him as he walks away into an emptied world, Christ-like in his weary submission to his fate: “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their face. Ah, Jack.”

Robinson teaches us that these resignations, these “Ah, [fill in the blank]” moments, are their own redemptive reward. Over and over again, in a paradoxical pattern that Amy Hungerford calls Robinson’s “logic of absence,” the novels state that lack is its own fulfillment; loss its own restoration; sorrow its own solace. As Robinson writes in Housekeeping, “need can blossom into all the compensation it requires,” or, as Lila says, “fear and comfort could be the same thing.” In surrendering themselves to the passion of loneliness, in nourishing themselves with a spiritual imagination that turns the stones of sorrow into bread, Robinson’s characters find grace
in the midst of death and death. In the world’s fall-
erness, they envision a paradise regained.

When you consider Robinson’s deep disinterest in current communities and profound interest in the aesthetics and theology of resignation, it makes sense that a successful boycott could never be repre-
sented in her fiction. Robinson ignores black com-
unity organizing in Montgomery for some of the
same reasons she ignores the white congregation
in Gilead: she is not interested in representing embod-
ied collective life. But beyond that, her displace-
ment of the Montgomery bus boycott with images
of brutality and suffering seems almost predestined
by her theology. She is replacing a story of black
people successfully coming together to transform
their society with images of black people enduring
pain inflicted by the powers that be. The protest-
ers in her Montgomery do not walk together with
tired feet and rested souls for 381 days. Instead
they are passive objects of violence, pushed and
dragged by police. (Robinson’s fictionalization of
the Civil Rights Movement is entirely reduced to
these brief images of black suffering: her novels do
not include speeches, sermons, sit-ins, strategies,
meetings, music, marches, legal battles, freedom
rides, or voter registration drives.) Though Robin-
son mentions Rosa Parks in her essays, her novels
dwell on the private, pious perspectives of white
people who resemble Oseola McCarty. She is not
interested in telling the stories of people who fight
their fate, alone or together.

Still, Robinson is unparalleled at finding meaning
and beauty in suffering and deprivation. This is why
her novels are so heart-wrenchingly gorgeous. It is
also why they are troubling when they are used to
define religion or politics for our time, or when they
are claimed as a public conscience for the oppressed
and voiceless. There are dangers both in what she
leaves out of her fiction and what she puts into it.
And the beauty and peril of Robinson’s vision can
be seen with stunning clarity in the last pages of Home.

A few days after Jack has left Gilead, probably
forever, his wife and son, Della and Robert, show
up at his family home looking for him. Glory, who
knows that Jack has a wife but does not know she
is black, doesn’t recognize who they are at first. When
Della asks after Jack and finds he is gone, she pre-
pares to go away in silent sadness without explain-
ing who she is (ah, Della). But Glory, yearning for
an impossible momentary connection, stops her:
“You’re Della, aren’t you. You’re Jack’s wife.” They
talk together about Jack in a reserved, tentative,
heartrending way. Glory dreams with him about base-
ball, and he reverently touches a tree in his father’s
yard, “just to touch it.” Tears are quietly
shed and wiped away. And then Della and Robert
leave without ever walking in the front door. As
Della explains, they have to leave before sundown:
“We have the boy with us. His father wouldn’t want
us to be taking any chances.”

Overcome in their absence, Glory sits on the
porch steps and reflects on her meeting with her
black family. She is overwhelmed by a sense of
the cruelty of the situation and her own inability to make
it different: “Dear Lord in heaven, she could never
change anything.” In a moment of empathetic imagi-
nation, she sees Gilead through Della’s eyes, grieving
that Della “felt she had to come into Gilead as if it
were a foreign and a hostile country.” Her own sense
of her home is transformed, made alien. And then, in
the last paragraphs of the novel, Glory consoles her-
self for her own sadness and for Jack’s and Robert’s
and Della’s, as members of a family torn apart by rac-
ist anti-miscegenation laws and Jim Crow. In a rap-
turous vision of imagined connection, Glory pictures
her nephew’s brief return, decades into the future:
“Maybe this Robert will come back someday….And
he will be very kind to me….He will talk to me a
little while, too shy to tell me why he has come, and
then he will thank me and leave, walking backward
a few steps, thinking….This was my father’s house.
And I will think. He is young. He cannot know that
my whole life has come down to this moment.”

This is the power and inadequacy of Robinson’s
racial vision. An empathetic encounter with a black
person can totally transform a white person’s view of
their own place in the world; and a dream of inter-
racial connection (however partial and temporary)
is enough to give meaning to a white person’s entire
life, and incidentally to wrap up the worn and ragged
threads of the novel. It’s a lovely liberal reverie, and
its limits make it even more poignant: even in her
wildest dreams, Glory can’t imagine Robert being
welcomed into his white father’s childhood home.
But Glory does nothing to make even this modest
fantasy of a family reunion come true. The dream
of Robert’s return is so consoling to her, so meaningful,
that for Glory’s emotional purposes, and for the pur-
poses of the novel, it doesn’t much matter whether
it actually happens. The mere longing is enough.
It feels more satisfying than any real attempt at
interracial community or racial justice could ever
be. Actual black people need never displace the shy,
grateful, undermanned black man of Glory’s dreams.
This kind of consolation can be captivating, if you
identify with Glory and not with Robert or Della,
and if you don’t think too much about the impli-
cations. And of course, characters and novels don’t
have to be moral models. We can love Glory and
Home without following in their steps. But as I write
in the wake of mass protests against racial injustice
in Ferguson and New York and around the world,
I can’t accept unfulfilled cravings, empathetic fan-
tasies, and suffering beautifully borne as the best
possible public Christianity for our age.

These are beautiful novels, complete in themselves, but
insofar as they are held up as a political and ethical
example they are far from enough.

I WILL FOREVER READ all the fiction Robinson
writes. We who love her books read them because
they give us what we miss, a spectator of a stripped
simplicity we’ve lost or never had, imbued with a
fullness of meaning that we can hardly bear. I’ve
barely quoted Robinson in this essay because I sus-
pect that the sheer beauty of her words would over-
whelm any criticism I could possibly make. Writing
about Montgomery and what it means has been like
trying to pry her books out of my own hands. But I
know that when I close Robinson’s novels and step out
of the baptismal pool of her pages, I re-enter
a world I could never find in Gilead: a world full
of struggling and striving people of every religion
and race, classrooms full of clamorous voices, bright
threads of friendship woven across the Internet, and
wild desires for change and justice and beloved com-
community that overcome all my half-hearted attempts
at relentless resolute Calvinist resignation.

Novels can be partial and still be perfect, but
religion needs to be practical. These are beautiful
novels, complete in themselves, but insofar as they
are held up as a political and ethical example they
are far from enough. We need to read Marilynne
Robinson, but we need to read Morrison too, and
so many others. And we need to imagine a more
capacious and yet unwritten vision of grace for our
moment. We need a grace large enough to extend
to those who prefer churches with people in them;
a religious sensibility that is finely attuned enough
to care when and where people are staging boycotts
or facing down cops and dogs for freedom, and new
prophetic voices that will inspire us to join them.

I read Lila in a day, marveling in the quiet words,
sometimes stopping to wait for my tears to subside
so I could see the page. Some sentences I read aloud
to myself so I could hear them spoken, just as Rever-
end Ames read aloud during his long decades of soli-
tude. I copied bright phrases into a commonplace
book like Lila copying the prophecies of Ezekiel
in her ruined cabin. In the end, I was grateful to
have ached and starved and wept with Lila, and I was
ready to let her go.

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For Michael Brown, Justice Is Not A Gift. It’s A Right.

By Lerone A. Martin
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Why must black people and black communities always prove themselves worthy of receiving justice?

His Whole Michael Brown thing, a local white business owner informed me, “is a case of reverse racism!” The Saint Louis native continued, “Those people over there on the north side kill and shoot each other all the time and nobody says a word. Now that it’s a white cop, it’s suddenly a big deal.” As he brazenly brushed aside the “no free refills” sign at the coffee shop in order to refill the beverage he bought yesterday, he continued without a hint of irony, “And I’m glad they released that video of him stealing, they tried to paint that kid as an angel. He wasn’t no angel. He was a thief!”

Black and/or impoverished people steal. White and/or wealthy folks enjoy customer perks. “This kid was a criminal,” he maintained, “plain and simple. You can’t expect to steal, assault a store clerk, and then expect to get away with it.”

I asked him why, then, Wynona Rider or Lindsay Lohan do not end up fatally shot when they shoplift or engage in familiar, reckless young adult behavior? Or why police officers did not accost the seven privileged 18 and 19-year-olds who recently broke into NBA all-star Ray Allen’s Tahiti Beach home in Coral Gables?

He responded, “Look, I don’t have all the answers, okay.” But he did have the parameters by which a just inquiry into the shooting of Michael Brown should occur. He concluded his lunchtime soliloquy by stating, “Look, those people over there just need to work on their own problems before they blame or ask the police for anything and expect any sympathy.”

Residents of a nearby suburb expressed similar sentiments to a New Republic reporter. Under the condition of anonymity, a group of white residents gathered in a coffee shop chime in with disputed narratives about the crime, followed by certainties such as “I don’t even know what they’re fighting for.”

Another embellished, “The kid wasn’t really innocent...he’s got a rap sheet already, so he’s not that innocent.” In reality, Mike Brown does not have a criminal “rap sheet.” In fact, Mike Brown’s juvenile record is stellar compared to that of white teen idol Justin Bieber. But Brown does have another kind of rap: He is black. African Americans, and those living in underserved communities, are expected to somehow pull off the herculean feat of proving themselves fit for justice in the eyes of the wealthy and elite before they can “rightfully” petition for a just investigation.

These local spokespersons resonate with their national religious counterparts.

MSNBC host and activist, the Rev. Al Sharpton, spoke for many when he employed a similar trope during his eulogy for Michael Brown. The Obama administration, according to one former top Obama aide, “sort of helped build him [Sharpton] up because the White House needed someone “to deal within the African-American community.” As the anointed one, Sharpton is considered the point person in all things black and B/brown. At the funeral, he sharply and rightly criticized national policies but then made a caveat: “What does God require?” he asked rhetorically. “We’ve got to be straight up in our community!” Certain expressions of youth and hip-hop culture and especially “black-on-black crime,” he told the congregation, are seen by many (and perhaps himself) as “justifying” malicious and neglectful policies toward black communities.

Since the expression “white-on-white crime” (also an all too common occurrence) does not exist in the everyday lexicon, black communities are stigmatized and pathologized. Justice is then intricately tied to the perceived communal standing of black people. When black neighborhoods (finally) begin the process of internally rectifying all their ailments, the plot lines goes, then black and poor people will prove themselves ready for justice. Sharpton made it plain: “Nobody,” he enlightened mourners, “gone help us if we don’t help ourselves.”

Perhaps Iyanla Vanzant best put this sentiment in motion. The acclaimed spiritual guru, celebrity life coach, and star of her own show “Iyanla: Fix My Life” on the Oprah Network (OWN) has helped countless followers and admirers navigate personal and family crises through her spiritual wisdom. The stated purpose of her special televised visit to Ferguson was to “join the community in finding a path from violence into healing.” Looking into the OWN cameras she stated, “We are heading off to Ferguson, Missouri, hopefully to bring a healing bond to a very hurt and angry outraged community. A community that’s calling for justice.” After praying, singing a Negro spiritual, and making a water offering to pay homage to Michael Brown, she talked with locals, and then sat down with Ferguson Police.
Chief Thomas Jackson and Brown's great uncle, the Rev. Charles Ewing. After Ewing expressed his emotions and fears, Vanzant asked the chief several apropos questions about the investigation—How did this shooting happen on his watch? Why was there no police report made immediately? Why the tear gas, etc. Seeing the chief flummoxed, however, she relented and asked what he needed in order to conduct a thorough investigation. “Fourteen days of peace,” he responded. Vanzant asked Ewing on camera if he could agree to such terms. He did. The peaceful protests were actually the result of an incompetent investigation shrouded in secrecy and nondisclosure (the lack of an officer statement, no immediate police report, etc.). However, for Vanzant and her crew, black protest was the cause of the slack legal proceedings. Stopping the protest would be a show of good faith by African Americans, and the condition by which justice and transparency would flow freely.

My respective encounters with these echoing critiques left me with one question: Why must black people and black communities always prove themselves worthy of receiving justice?

Local and national discussions in the aftermath of Brown (as before the shooting) continually link just proceedings in the case to black performances of respectability and decorum. Justice is held up as a gift bestowed upon “model” minorities and their communities. Equal treatment under the law is not deemed a right. It’s a prize.

As my coffee shop lecturer kindly told me, “See, look at you,” he said, dressed in his shorts, T-shirt, and sandals. “Look at how you dress. You aren’t scary and intimidating like those folks over there on the north side.” My necktie won me the prize of his gracious presence, comments, and the benefit of presumed innocence and worth. Glad I wore a tie on my day off.

This local and national mood, and the religious language that complements it, is deeply flawed. Spiritual guidance that calls for racial minorities to prove their individual and collective abilities and respectabilities before they can expect justice or seek the accountability of their elected officials is paralyzing. Moreover, as Howard Thurman wrote in _The Luminous Darkness_ in 1965, it further entrenches the ideology that the wealthier classes and those in power are the rightful and “sole judges of who should and who should not be granted the rights and the responsibilities of citizenship.” Everyday people are rendered as idle patients of democracy or undeserving beggars waiting on the diagnosis and alms of elites. Once black communities get in line, “black leaders” can then bargain for equality on their behalf.

When a local or national religious professional and/or celebrity cleric unintentionally espouses such “politically debilitating” spirituality, as Jeff Stout points out in his book _Blessed Are the Organized_, that minister can be said to be negligent at best. If the spiritual guru is intentional in such effects, “something harsher should be said.”

One thing can certainly be said now: Part of the work of doing justice and pursuing equal treatment under the law in the aftermath of the Brown shooting is to eschew all rhetoric, monologues, dialogues, and reasoning that unwittingly or purposely supports ideas of black pathology (black-on-black crime) or places black and/or poor communities in the position of proving that they are worthy of due process and the resources of justice. American law provides all its citizens.

This kind of freedom language may not be abundant in the chatter of coffee shops across the region and nation or in the pronouncements of national media, celebrity ministers, and life coaches. However, I have heard it echoed countless times during peaceful marches, in local faith communities like Christ the King, Washington Missionary Baptist Church, and Eden Theological Seminary, as well as in the meetings of local groups, such as the Organization of Black Struggle and the Metropolitan Congregations United and their partners, and in many classrooms at Washington University in St. Louis. The call is the same: Just investigations are needed in order to work of doing justice and pursuing equal treatment under the law in the aftermath of the Brown shooting is to eschew all rhetoric, monologues, dialogues, and reasoning that unwittingly or purposely supports ideas of black pathology (black-on-black crime) or places black and/or poor communities in the position of proving that they are worthy of due process and the resources of justice. American law provides all its citizens.

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visiting New York for a single day in 1965). A papal visit to Washington would have been, for Kennedy, an extremely awkward affair.

American anti-Catholicism in the 1950s was a pale reflection of its earlier manifestations. Hostility to Catholicism had generated inter-confessional rioting in the pre-Civil War decades, along with a political party whose principal purpose was the exclusion of Catholics from public life. As late as the 1890s, an anti-Catholic political movement was capable of electing scores of local and state officials and even a handful of congressmen. A resurgent Ku Klux Klan in the early 1920s was at least as anti-Catholic as it was anti-black, responsible in Oregon—where the Klan managed to elect a governor and a majority in the state legislature—for a law effectively outlawing all parochial schools. And we all learned in high school history classes about the rumors that flew with regard to Al Smith’s run for the presidency in 1928. The pope, to pick my personal favorite, was said to be hiding in Grand Central Station, disguised as a barber, ready to take up residence in the White House once Smith was elected. Even Donald Trump hasn’t managed to achieve this level of imaginative paranoia.

Fast forward now to 2015 and the Francis-frenzy we have just witnessed in the nation’s capital. Has any visiting head of state been accorded so warm an official welcome or generated such excitement across the partisan divide? Even politicians who resented the pope’s message on climate change and immigration offered praise of his spiritual leadership and sought as eagerly as anyone else to be photographed with him. A normally staid Washington, where cynicism is the reigning mode, was seized by a kind of effervescence; enormous crowds, which included many non-Catholics, waited patiently for even a distant glimpse of the pope and cheers were the order of the day. In the midst of the euphoria, it seemed almost unremarkable that Francis had been invited to address a joint meeting of Congress, though he would be the first pope to accept the invitation. Whatever remained of the anti-Catholic cause was apparently in the custody of a few noisy dissenters in the crowd.
that awaited the pope's arrival at the White House, bellowing through their bullhorns about the Anti-
christ. They seemed not only rude but impossi-
bly antiquated, as if they had just awakened from
almost a century's sleep.

A number of factors explain the erosion of
anti-Catholicism in the United States. The church
itself has changed. The Second Vatican Council
(1962-1965) made official Catholic peace with reli-
gious liberty and the religiously neutral state, lib-
erating popes from what had become a pointless
ritual battle against nineteenth-century liberal-
ism. Catholic immigrants to the United States saw
their children and, more frequently, their grand-
children become socially mobile. Especially after
1945, a rapidly growing Catholic population—fully
one-quarter of the nation's total by 1960—moved
in large numbers into the ranks of the middle and
upper-middle class. Newly affluent Catholics were
less reliably Democratic in their voting behavior
than their immigrant forebears, emerging in recent
decades as a crucial swing vote in national elec-
tions. And Catholics themselves proved to be adept
at politics. Pope Francis, invited to address the Con-
gress by a Catholic speaker of the House, spoke to a
body where 30 percent of the members are Catholic,
joined by several members of the majority-Catholic
Supreme Court, the Catholic vice president, and
the Catholic secretary of state. But Catholic suc-
cess in this country ultimately rests on our national
genius at assimilating widely diverse populations
of immigrants. It was this genius, which Ameri-
cans have periodically doubted, that Pope Francis
invoked to such moving effect in his various Wash-
ington addresses.

The longest and presumably most consequential
of those addresses was delivered to the joint meet-
ing of Congress. The pope spoke slowly, in heavily
accented English, and with an air of humility. (He
did not use the papal “we.”) But his moral authority
was palpable. The essence of the legislator's call-
ing is service to the common good, he reminded
the members, who are so divided along partisan
lines that a government shutdown looms. We see
polarization on every hand in our deeply trou-
bled world, the pope told his hearers, for whom
this could scarcely have been news; “our response
must ... be one of hope and healing.” Invoking the
lives and legacies of four Americans—Abraham
Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day,
and Trappist monk Thomas Merton—Francis pro-
posed a “dialogue” with the Congress “through the
historical memory of your people,” artfully avoid-
ing the scolding tone that sometimes marked the
speeches of Popes John Paul II and Benedict on
their trips to the United States. In essence, he
reminded both the Congress and his media audi-
ence of what Lincoln called the “better angels” of
our national nature.

Americans, like other denizens of the Western
hemisphere, “are not afraid of foreigners,” said
the pope, “because most of us were once foreign-
ers”—thereby asserting a common hemispheric
identity and reminding this particular nation of its
immigrant past. Given the xenophobia currently
in evidence on the Republican campaign trail and
Obama's executive efforts on behalf of illegal immi-
grants, one might plausibly see the pope's heartfelt
remarks on immigration as a plus for the Demo-
crats. But Francis went beyond politics, at least in
the partisan sense. “We must not be taken aback
by their numbers,” he said with regard both to His-
panic migration and the swelling population of ref-
ees fleeing Africa and the Middle East, “but see
them as persons.” Even Democrats are presumably
unsure of the extent to which this particular coun-
sel can be lived. The pope also urged Congress “to
protect and defend human life at every stage of its
development,” which brought lusty cheers from the
Republican side of the aisle, but pleaded in the very
next sentence for “the global abolition of the death
penalty.” (Members of the Supreme Court, for whom
this plea would seem to have been most immedi-
ately relevant, do not appear to have applauded
any of the pope's remarks, which I assume reflected
judicial etiquette.) As any Catholic voter could tell
you, their church's teaching does not fit neatly into
American political categories.

In the remainder of the speech, Francis spoke
movingly of the urgent need to address both global
warming and poverty. “Now is the time for coura-
geous action” on both issues, he told the legislators,
whose recent sessions have produced hardly any
action at all. He spoke passionately about the evil of
the arms trade, in which members of both political
parties have long been complicit. No comfort there
for members who could not muster votes even to
restrain domestic access to high-powered firearms
in the wake of the Newtown massacre. The pope
concluded with a paean to the family, an institution
that—in his words—is threatened as never before.
“Fundamental relationships are being called into
question, as is the very basis of marriage and the
family.” An attack on gay marriage, recently legal-
ized by the Supreme Court? Such is apt to be the
dominant reading. But Francis went on to speak of
the factors, both cultural and economic, that deter-
mine young from marriage and family formation.
Perhaps the pope is more concerned about a radical
decline in our marriage rate and the sharp rise in
fatherless families.

Francis, as has often been noted, speaks most
powerfully when he speaks the language of exam-
ple. By means of example, he gave the last word in
Washington to the poor and those who serve
them. Leaving the Capitol with minimal ceremony,
the pope traveled to nearby St. Patrick's church, a
downtown institution with a long history of social
outreach. Addressing a congregation of the home-
less and local representatives of Catholic Charities,
Francis—wreathed in smiles—seemed more fully
at ease than in any of his previous Washington
appearances. “The Son of God came into the world
as a homeless person,” he told his listeners, whom
he urged to pray and be comforted by the knowl-
edge that God Himself suffered with them. But
he did not let the powerful off the hook. “We can
find no social or moral justification, no justifica-
tion whatsoever, for lack of housing.” Calling God
“Father” means that we are brothers and sisters,
said the pope, who had previously referred to him-
self as “your brother” before the Congress, at the
White House, and when speaking to the American
bishops assembled at Washington's St. Matthew's
Cathedral. Now he reminded these powerful peo-
ples, and indeed his entire national audience, that
their family responsibilities extended to what
some preachers like to call “the least, the last, and
the lost.”

Political pundits will doubtless say that on the
Washington leg of his visit the pope clearly favored
the Democrats. The gratitude he expressed for
Obama's recent initiatives on climate change and
Cuba would be cases in point, along with the gener-
ally progressive tenor of his Washington addresses.
That he touched lightly on such hot-button issues
as gay marriage and abortion will not go unnoticed,
either within the Catholic ranks or beyond. So the
pundits will not wholly wrong. But Francis artic-
ulated a vision of politics premised on so demand-
ing a standard when it comes to compassion and
solidarity with the oppressed that the Democrats
too are bound to fall short. That is why judging his
Washington visit in terms of partisan gains and
loses misses what was most important about this
historic visit.
On Planned Parenthood, Beware of False Prophets

The organization’s foes protest with pithy if frequently misleading slogans.

The Bible says, ‘Beware of false prophets,’” outgoing House Speaker John Boehner told Face the Nation host John Dickerson on September 27. Boehner was referring angrily to “people out there . . . spreading noise about how much can get done” and hoping to force a government shutdown over Planned Parenthood, an organization despised by many conservatives. Planned Parenthood has become a renewed target in the wake of widely viewed videos purporting to show the organization’s employees crassly discussing the procurement and sale of aborted fetal tissue. Boehner said many in his own Republican party “knew it was a fool’s errand” to promote a shutdown in an effort to force the federal government to stop funding Planned Parenthood—but pressure from uncompromising constituents in the anti-abortion camp made them do it anyway.

As predicted in the wake of Boehner’s resignation, the Senate and the House both passed a continuing resolution enabling the government to keep running until December 11. But that doesn’t mean the shutdown war is anywhere near resolved. Those same uncompromising foes of Planned Parenthood rant on social media, troll the comments section of news articles, and protest with pithy if frequently misleading slogans. They ignore or dismiss evidence that the videos themselves were heavily edited and portions of the transcripts fabricated to the point of discrediting the sting operation itself. Repeatedly, they equate Planned Parenthood and its supporters with Hitler.

Republican elected officials join the outrage chorus or else risk getting primaried out of the next election: Planned Parenthood president Cecile Richards’ a predecessor to what would eventually become the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Critics in her own day reviled Sanger as selfish, immoral, and even diabolical; haters today, who incorrectly but persistently insist that Sanger was an advocate of abortion—about which she was, at most, ambivalent—are as likely to call her an “elitist bitch.”

Hatred of Sanger’s work has been fueled by the perception that she was a eugenicist, one whose real goal was the extermination or forced sterilization of those she deemed unfit or undesirable, especially black Americans. In recent years, presidential candidates—notably, African American candidates—seeking the Republican nomination have made this charge as if it were a proven fact. In 2011, Herman Cain told Face the Nation host Bob Schieffer that 75 percent of Sanger’s birth control clinics were “built in the black community” and that while Sanger didn’t use the actual word “genocide,” she did talk about preventing the increasing number of poor blacks in this country by preventing black babies from being born.” In August, Ben Carson expanded on this theme when he said on Fox News:
Well, maybe I’m not objective when it comes to Planned Parenthood. But you know, I know who Margaret Sanger is, and I know that she believed in eugenics, and that she was not particularly enamored with black people. And one of the reasons that you find most of their clinics in black neighborhoods is so that you can find a way to control that population. And I think people should go back and read what Margaret Sanger said, about who Hillary Clinton is by the way she says she admires. Look and see what many people in Nazi Germany thought about her.

When he accepted Planned Parenthood’s Margaret Sanger award in 1966, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed the importance of family planning to white and black Americans alike.

If Cain and Carson have (as Washington Post “Fact Checker” Glenn Kessler confirmed) “wildly exaggerated” many facts to make their point, there is no doubt that racism is a stain on the early history of the birth control movement. This reality should never be discounted, for Sanger or any other leader: In fact, Sanger’s eugenic views during the 1920s were thoroughly in keeping with those of many other Americans, conservative and liberal alike, who wanted to see the populace strengthened and did not foresee the dire consequences that could and did come of scientific human breeding. A list of early eugenics supporters reads like a “who’s who” of early twentieth-century bigwigs: Psychologist G. Stanley Hall believed eugenics was “a legitimate new interpretation of our Christianity”; while health reformer John Harvey Kellogg, financier J.P. Morgan, industrialist John D. Rockefeller, Sr., Protestant minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, Quaker writer Rufus Jones, Rabbi Louis Fisch and David de Sola Pool, Catholic reform leader Father John A. Ryan, and many more socially minded men and women worked, to varying degrees and at different moments, with the American Eugenics Society, drawn to what they considered a program of social reform. Some, like Ryan and other Catholics, withdrew support by 1930, when Pope Pius XI issued Casti Connubii and affirmed that eugenic sterilization violated natural law. Others, like Sanger, distanced themselves from portions of the older eugenic program and its potential excesses as the Nazis’ horrific genocide came to light. Plenty of white eugenics supporters were racists, but many of these reformers worked to dismantle racial inequality in hopes of “uplifting” Americans of African descent.

Sanger herself worked extensively with a number of African American leaders, and they with Planned Parenthood, on various social justice issues: As a few alert commentators recently pointed out, Rosa Parks, whom several presidential hopefuls recently picked as their choice for the first women to be on the U.S. paper currency, was an active advocate of Planned Parenthood. Researchers have shown the many ways in which African Americans have supported and participated in the birth control movement throughout all stages of its history, sometimes independently of white dominated organizations and other times as part of them; while there have always been African American critics of the movement, there have also been advocates who do not regard the movement as inherently or unremarkably racist. When he accepted Planned Parenthood’s Margaret Sanger award in 1966, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed the importance of family planning to white and black Americans alike: “[T]ogether we can and should unite our strength for the wise preservation, not of races in general, but of one race we all constitute—the human race.”

Sanger’s contempt for the Roman Catholic hierarchy has also fueled conservative Christian rage against her. She knew that church leaders taught that birth control destroyed the morality of women and the structure of home life, and this was a position that feminists such as Sanger found deeply misogynistic. After New York Catholic officials thwarted their goals in the way of her birth control campaign there, she developed a very successful strategy: partner with Protestant and Jewish leaders on birth control, stoking the long antipathy between Protestants and Catholics to win Protestant favor for her cause. It worked, as mainline Protestant leaders rapidly saw it her way and began openly to advocate for access to birth control among married couples. Sanger never tired of vividly lambasting Catholic leaders, in public and in print, for the great disservice she felt they did to their own people by forbidding contraception and ignoring the plight of overworked, exhausted mothers and fathers and the sprawling families they were forced to bring into the world, whether they wanted so many children or not. No wonder she is the bête noire of many Catholics today, despite the fact that the vast majority of American Catholic women have, for decades, used birth control and approved of its availability.

It is true that Planned Parenthood, like the U.S. federal government and many state governments, was heavily involved in population control programs here and across the world whose practices of forced sterilization are today considered appalling, even by experts still worried about global overpopulation and its effects on poverty rates and climate change. The wretched history of national efforts at population control has been well told and acknowledged, though many remain uninform about this history’s scope and scale. But it is as disingenuous to equate today’s Planned Parenthood with forced sterilization as it is to equate today’s Roman Catholic Church with the Vatican’s pro-fascism and anti-Semitism during the same era. The moral terrain we need to reckon with now, in determining what to do with Planned Parenthood, pertains to its activity and impact in our own time.

There have been many conservative officials, at all levels of government, who affirm that they are strongly pro-life and would like to see abortion heavily restricted, yet who also promote the life-saving benefits of medical research using embryonic stem cells. Researchers have studied fetal tissue since the 1930s; its many useful contributions include vaccines for polio, rubella, and chicken pox. Planned Parenthood has been legally procuring such tissue from legal abortions for some time now, in the name of such medical research. This doesn’t mean the ethical issues no longer warrant scrutiny or debate, but the history may suggest that we should explore them with a long and comprehensive view rather than peevishly shutting down the government for a short-term glory. The options are not to say that, even if you oppose abortion as inherently morally wrong, surely you cannot oppose the life-giving healthcare services—cancer screenings, physical exams, gynecological care, birth control, adoption referrals—that Planned Parenthood provides to women, including low-income women who would not have access to such services otherwise.

But we never quite get at the contemporary moral terrain, because of the adamancy and fixed conviction of a very vocal minority that Planned Parenthood is a deceitful, eugenicist, and murderous organization in league with the Devil herself. The current stand-off over the procurement of fetal tissue is the product of very old convictions about Sanger and Planned Parenthood: that the real goal was extermination of those deemed unfit or racially inferior, and that a vicious anti-Catholic prejudice drove the birth control campaign. Feminist supporters today often cannot persuade opponents even to consider the possibility that Planned Parenthood may be a worthy, if not necessary health-care provider for women—or to acknowledge the moral complexity of these many intersecting issues—because they too are believed to be either deceitful or hoodwinked, if not somehow both.

Responding to Boehner’s resignation, the liberal pundit Paul Begala predicted on CNN that the next House speaker will be “a prisoner of the most extreme elements of his party.” Begala said, “There are two kinds of political leaders, just like there’s two kinds of religious leaders: those who hunt down heretics, and those who seek out converts.” It’s tough to stay hopeful when a narrow minority in one party seems bent on spreading mistrusts and wreaking chaos, and the stakes are high, even beyond a government shutdown. But we need to try. To forsake all hope in facing the paradoxes and inconvenient truths of our history is to invite the false prophets and heretic hunters to take charge.
When Our Truths Are Ignored: Proslavery Theology’s Legacy

We are daily living with the remnants of a theological white supremacy.

F OR AN AFRICAN AMERICAN writer during slavery, there was an expectation that a “white envelope” framed the “black message.” For autobiographers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, or for poets like Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley, this convention dictated that their written work feature a statement of authenticity from a white voice, proving that the black writer had indeed crafted the message. And so, white abolitionists, lawyers, prominent citizens, and sometimes even former slaveholders, wrote a letter or a preface or an addendum to the works of the black author, certifying that what was contained therein was truthful, authentic, and crafted by the author. In other words, whiteness was necessary to validate black veracity.

There are a number of reasons for this need for whiteness to validate black truthfulness during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The horrors of slavery were so unbelievable, that someone like Harriet Jacobs needed this “white envelope” to confirm that she had hidden in crawl spaces and attics for seven years in order to escape her brutal owner. Frederick Douglass’ descriptions of the particular brutalities that both enslaved men and women faced, as they were systematically beaten, sexually abused, and financially exploited by “kind” slave masters and mistresses, would have been quite offensive to the ears of his “tender” audience. His white authenticators reassured what was mostly a Northern Christian reading public that Douglass’ words barely scratched the surface of the indignities of chattel slavery.

These white voices functioned to certify that black men and women were capable of intellectual thought; these white voices provided proof that those whose legal status rendered them property were actually able to read, write, and participate in higher levels of reasoning. In other words, it took white writers to affirm that black writers were fully human and not the animals to which they were often likened. In the case of poets like Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon, white voices were necessary to prove that both these writers knew Greek, Latin, classical mythology, and literature. At the age of nineteen, Wheatley had to undergo a trial in which she was examined by an all-white jury of “prominent” Boston citizens in order to prove that she had the intellectual ability to compose her own poetry.

Of course, legal documents that involved African Americans during slavery were their own separate case in terms of whiteness and black veracity. Enslaved men and women were not citizens and could not enter into or uphold legal contracts without white authority. Even free blacks, presumably citizens, could not conduct legal business on their own terms, lest a lawyer or judge invalidate their legal documents on the basis of race. Far too many African Americans being cheated, exploited, and taken advantage of despite obtaining proper legal documents. There was no justice to be had within the judicial system for African Americans without the authentication provided by white benefactors or supporters.

But the underlying issue during the antebellum era of the need for whiteness to verify black truthfulness was a moral and theological matter. There was a fundamental assumption in the proslavery theology born in the New World, that men and women of African descent were not truth-tellers and that they could not morally and ethically discern right from wrong. Enslaved men and women were not considered trustworthy, even after they converted to Christianity, because they were deemed inherently sinful and morally inferior. Proslavery theology simply maintained that a creature that God had cursed, as evidenced by the “Myth of Ham,” could never be a truth-telling, law abiding, and morally upstanding Christian. In his work Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South: A Brief History with Documents, historian Paul Finkelman reminds us that many slaveholders believed that Christianity was the only force keeping enslaved people from being lawless and godless, arguing: “If freed and denied the guidance of white masters, Africans and their descendants might very well revert to their pre-Christian ways.”

We often fail to deconstruct how proslavery theology still influences American Christianity. But simply put: Theological arguments upheld the institution of slavery long after every other argument failed. American Christian theology was born in a cauldron of proslavery ideology, and one of the spectacular failures of the Christian church today is its inability to name, interrogate, confront, repent, and dismantle the cauldron which has shaped much of its theology. We are daily living with the
remnants of a theological white supremacy, coupled with social and political power, which continues to uphold racist ideologies.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, black acts of resistance and agitation for emancipation were read as acts of sin and willful disobedience. The enslaved were seen as unruly children who refused to listen to their white parental authorities. And slaveholders viewed themselves as benevolent patriarchs, biblically justified in their keeping of human chattel. Because of their “disobedience” to their earthly masters, enslaved people were assumed to be in rebellion against God, their Heavenly Master. By far, the most common sermon preached to the enslaved community was for “slaves to be obedient to your masters.”

Proslavery theology saw willful disobedience to God’s authority instead of the actual reality of black resistance and revolution. When enslaved men and women escaped, or broke their tools, or sabotaged their work, proslavery theology preached to them a gospel of blackness as sin, needing to be washed white as snow. There was no room for understanding the radical, liberatory gospel in which many enslaved people believed: a God who came to set the captives free, who did not will perpetual servitude for God’s people. Proslavery theology preached patriarchal guardianship and generational curses, insisting that even if individuals opposed slavery, the institution itself was God’s will. There was no room for understanding how enslaved men and women themselves were pondering deep theological questions. Within their slave narratives, some asked, “How can a stolen ‘thing’ steal other things?” Others wondered, “Is it better to disobey man in order to live righteously for God?”

One of the most pernicious legacies of proslavery theology, with implications for the twenty-first century, is a world in which black people are still being asked to frame their stories and words with white envelopes. It is a world in which, as African Americans, we are assumed to be lying unless our stories can be authenticated by a white lens; we are assumed to be guilty, unless our innocence can be proven. Mainstream media reported that Walter Scott was justifiably killed after taking a police officer’s Taser; no one believed that Scott was unarmed and fleeing, until video evidence proved otherwise—video which also showed evidence being planted besides Scott’s dead body. Somehow, our own lived experiences and our very lives have to be verified, again and again, and checked against the legitimacy of white authority. African Americans are often not believed when we insist we are targeted for traffic stops or we face harsh penalties for daring to “drive while black.” Many of us are not believed when we insist we are being followed in stores or being racially profiled in certain businesses. Many of us are not believed when we share experiences of racial micro-aggressions that we experience daily in our work places. Short of having a cross burned on our front lawns, we are not believed when we discuss the weight of living in a world in which we fear being the next Twitter hashtag, or the next victim of police brutality or a racist shooting. Even when we dare to share our stories, as painful as these stories may be, we are constantly told: “Show us the evidence” that racism still exists.

And so, we provide the evidence, the research, the statistics, and the social-scientific data which confirm racist environmental policies, or disproportionate rates of traffic stops, or cradle-to-prison pipeline numbers, or racial inequities in public education.

We demonstrate how people of color are literally breathing more toxic air or how African Americans are 75 percent more likely to be stopped than white drivers in a place like Missouri, despite being less likely to have contraband in their cars. A series of recent studies found that African American children receive less pain management in the emergency room; another study reported that white Americans believe that black children, as young as seven, simply feel less pain than white children. All of these studies relate to the legacy of slavery: a) the stereotype that black people are just physically stronger and can endure harsher conditions, and b) the stereotype that there is more drug abuse and addiction in black communities. But the most painful outcome of these studies was the unfortunate confirmation that black children are simply not believed when they indicate that they are in severe pain, and so their pain is undermanaged. We live in a nation where the medical establishment can insist that a black child, fresh out of surgery, is not a truth-teller and is lying about his or her pain. That child suffers unnecessary bodily pain when his or her truth is ignored. It is unfortunately a cruel foreshadowing of the psychic and spiritual toll of living a life in which black truth, unless confirmed by whiteness, is not considered truth at all.

The evidence is amply available, but the message that African Americans receive is also quite clear: Your personal stories of experiencing racism in America will not be believed unless the data is produced by upstanding white academic institutions; peer-reviewed by white university presses; and corroborated by trusted white scholars and white journalists. And this demand for evidence applies not simply to the larger culture, but to white churches that have systematically failed to come alongside black communities during times of racial unrest, as these white churches wait for more data, more facts, more evidence before they “risk” supporting hurting black people or commenting on burning black churches. As one journalist suggests, we are more interested in seeing these recent church burnings as individual acts that exist in a vacuum rather than confronting a narrative of terroristic racial violence which stands within a long tradition.

And while African Americans struggle with being seen as truth-tellers, even as we struggle with bearing the burden of both proving and resolving our oppression, we also resist the white lens that dares to shape the racial narrative. We know far too much about systems of whiteness and the lack of truthfulness that these systems represent. We have too many painful experiences with false police records, criminal evidence being planted, crime scenes altered, statistics only confirming racist biases, and mainstream media outlets reinforcing racial stereotypes. African Americans live in this liminal space: Our personal stories of racism are not believed, and yet the white-dominated narratives often do not tell the truth about race. When anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells wrote that “those who commit the murders, write the reports,” she sums up this contradiction. When the victim is dead and the body cam is non-existent (and even when it is present), the assumption is that the words of the official report must be true. Where does that leave the person seeking justice when racism harms, wounds, and kills, but cannot be verified with white-supported data?

August 2015 marks one year since the killing of an unarmed African American teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri. In July 2015, a 28-year-old African American woman, Sandra Bland, died in jail three days after being pulled over and arrested for failing to signal a lane change. In both these cases, and many more, the “facts” remain in dispute. We are told to trust the official records generated, even as the victims are killed again and again through character assassination. These families are still grieving and justice seems elusive to those of us who do not believe the “facts.” But can this nation afford to keep ignoring the truth that black people in America live under a threat of racial violence, never quite feeling that we are fully equal citizens in the nation that our enslaved ancestors built?agog

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Orlando: A Lament

On mourning in the aftermath of the Pulse Night Club shooting

LIKE MOST PEOPLE on the East Coast, I got the first news in the blare of waking on Sunday morning. I checked my email for an overnight report about an ailing family member in Dallas. What I got instead was “Orlando,” as we are learning to call the massacre. Another name is added to the apparently endless litany.

No matter how many times the country goes through this, I fumble my response. First, I am taken unaware. Surprise is an ingredient in these horrors, I know that I am supposed to feel next some new resolve. After all, we have been through this before—too many times. There are things to be done: candlelight protests, funds for the victims (or their families), declarations of solidarity or identification. Hashtags and logos. Ready-made political arguments. But I am never ready to move on. Instead of calculating at once what the latest would let us meet. They offered a chance to improvise new family when “real”

families slammed the doors. (That is why the clubs once made a point of being open around Thanksgiving.) Most of all, they held open a place to celebrate what so many others condemned. That is why these clubs have been for decades the targets of violent attack—by the police or roving gangs or the arrogantly pious. The massacre in Orlando recalls a history of other attacks. It makes clear why Pride parades memorialize what happened after a raid on the New York bar called Stonewall.

However dubious or improbable it may seem, “queer” clubs have been and still are important ritual spaces. There are others, of course, like the churches or temples that have long welcomed sexual outcasts who were trying to keep some connection to the sacred. Cities offer LGBT sanghas and ashrams, pub churches, and weekly spiritual gatherings. The countryside hosts the splendid utopian encampments of music festivals and faerie circles. Still, much of the ritual of making new sexual selves takes place around dance floors.

Growing up queer in a straight society often requires strict bodily control. To pass as straight, we have to watch how we dress or walk or cut our hair or move our hands. The eyes can give away the secret. So too can the sway of hips. Dancing is particularly risky, not least because it is supposed to rehearse the approved gender relations. (Not so many decades back, a woman dancing with a woman at certain clubs, or a man with a man, might be subject to arrest.) So imagine what it feels like to step for the first time into the space where you can move freely—where you can dance your desire with the one you desire. I never danced at Pulse in Orlando, though I have danced at other Pulses in other cities. I’m sure that I could anticipate the scintillating changes of rhythm into the room where I write, violating its intimacy. When the bloody news arrived from Charleston about the slaughter at Mother Emmanuel, I felt with so many others the shock of desecration. Cut down at a Bible study in that church, that haven, that stubborn testimony of impossible hope.

Now Orlando. Can you understand how an attack on an LGBT club during Pride might also feel like a domestic violaton and even a desecration? These clubs have been our town squares and community centers when no other places would let us meet. They offered a chance to improvise new family when “real”

Let me stay beside that dance floor a while longer. I don’t doubt that the country needs a rational gun policy or that this presidential campaign calls out for reminders that demagoguery has real consequences. But I can’t yet move past the bodies of these dead and wounded to propose policies or tout candidates.

Lamentation is a forgotten rite deep in our religious traditions. It is often associated with repentance. In the old language of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, we are taught to “acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness.” We could certainly benefit from a little national repentance. But we need even more to kneel down beside the reality of the mounting losses. The politics we most require in the wake of Orlando is a politics of tears shed over what we have destroyed and can never ourselves restore. The civil politics of religious lamentation: No hashtag can do this for us. 

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The varied responses to his candidacy have revealed deep fractures within evangelicalism.

By Mark Valeri

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Donald Trump visits a church in Las Vegas nine days before the 2016 election.
Donald Trump and the Evangelical Political Schism

Mark Valeri

Trump’s popularity has appalled other high-profile evangelical leaders. Russell D. Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, charged Trump’s supporters with betraying their religious convictions for the power politics of a candidate who speaks in “often racist and sexist” language, who has never been reliably anti-abortion, whose gambling empire destroys families, and whose declarations on Muzlims contradict the very meaning of religious freedom so cherished by evangelicals and especially by Baptists. Other evangelical leaders joined Moore’s declarations, such as the popular author Max Lucado, the editors of the Christian Post, and Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Several befuddled observers produced studies suggesting that the bulk of Trump’s supporters were evangelicals only in name: merely occasional churchgoers and theologically uninterested.

All of this displayed deep fissures in the evangelical community, even within single evangelical institutions. Jerry Falwell, Jr., president of Liberty University, hosted Trump for a widely publicized speech and supports him, while Mark DeMoss, who was the chair of the university’s executive committee, refused to support Trump and resigned his board position over the matter. As Michelle Boekestijn of The Washington Post put it, Trump “is tearing evangelicals apart,” defying the notion of any single voting bloc. The very term “evangelical” ought no longer to be used as a political moniker.

After the June meeting with hundreds of evangelical leaders, Trump assembled an executive council including staunch supporters and suspicious critics, to “advise” him on the presidential campaign. This merely reinforced divisions. Robert Morris, pastor at Gateway Church, and Tony Suárez, vice-president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (and previous supporter of Marco Rubio), spoke for critics when they blasted the candidate’s positions on immigration and religious freedom. Some members of the advisory council suggested that they were not endorsing Trump but merely attempting—with no much success to date—to move him to a compassionate stance on refugees. On the other side, Paula White, the television prosperity preacher and one of Trump’s staunchest evangelical defenders, reiterated her support for the candidate, as did Robert Jeffress, the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, who cited Trump as a promoter of national security and defender of American interests. We might say that Trump’s bellicose nativism attracts him.

Moreover, the leading evangelical advocates for Trump through the spring primary season argued for their candidate by distinguishing religious character and doctrine from political position. They admitted that Trump has a morally problematic personal background and omitted mention of his positions on theologically weighted issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and religious freedom. Jeffress dismissed such issues and defended Trump with reference to secular dynamics. Trump had the economic policies that conservatives cherished: a low-tax, anti-regulatory, pro-business agenda that would spur the American economy and enhance employment. His rough manners and impolite language—what Jeffress called his “tone and language”—bespoke a George Patton-like militancy needed for the general election. Jeffress saw Trump as “the most conservative candidate who’s electable.” And he declared, “The Bible gives absolutely no checklist for how to vote.” This was quite a change from Jeffress’s position in 2011, when he refused to support Mitt Romney because of Romney’s Mormonism and argued that Christians ought to favor candidates who shared their beliefs.

As the RNC met in Cleveland to formally nominate Trump and Pence, evangelical supporters mentioned religious freedom, abortion, and the Supreme Court, yet they still stressed secular rationales for their candidate. During his convention speech, Falwell made his case for Trump with no mention of Trump’s personal faith. He did include remarks on a party plank opposing IRS rules that barred churches from political speech and the need to appoint “conservative” Supreme Court justices, but only in passing. He listed Trump’s virtues chiefly in other areas: his abilities to enhance job creation and reduce the national debt, love for America and patriotism (the redundancy as a matter of emphasis), concern for “the common man,” zeal for Second Amendment rights, opposition to the Iran nuclear deal, and, of course, the need to oppose Hillary Clinton. A recent Pew survey confirms the resurgence of non-religious interests of the concerns of pro-Trump evangelicals. It reveals that nearly 80 percent of evangelicals support Trump over Clinton but the issues that drive them have little to do with the faith of the candidates. Survey takers were most concerned about terrorism, the economy, and foreign policy.

Moving into the general election, then, Republican-leaning evangelicals have been split into two opposite positions on the Republican presidential nominee: moral disapproval and support for Trump’s ideas about national defense and the economy. Both positions, however, reflect a version of secular thinking, if by that term we mean the separation of explicitly theological or religious concerns from the politics of American power. Foreign affairs, national security, and economic freedoms have their own, non-religious mandates and rationales. Mohler, Moore, and other detractors have asserted their deep Anabaptist roots. Baptists from the late eighteenth-century such as John Leland and Isaac Backus emphasized the virtues of sharp distinction between religion and political power. They cherished religious freedom as the freedom for communities to sustain practices that were peculiarly Christian. Those practices could flourish only apart from any engagement in politics, which was by definition worldly, rapacious, and violent. Contemporary heirs to this tradition such as Mohler and Moore refuse to give their mandate not only to Trump but also to Hillary Clinton. Having lost the “culture wars” of the last two decades, they promote a Christian vision apart from national politics and yearn chiefly for a type of pluralism that would allow their religious communities to continue to practice their convictions without molestation from the government.

Jeffress, Falwell, Mike Huckabee, and Ralph Reed of the Faith and Freedom Coalition take evangelical secularism in a different direction. For them, Trump offers the promise of an anti-establishment political ethos, economic protectionism, a belligerent stance toward ISIS and Islam as a whole, and resistance against what they call “political correctness.” They do not especially trust Trump on so-called cultural issues, but they nonetheless see him as the preferred candidate on such policies as politically superior to the views of his Democratic rival. They argue that Trump promotes the interest of the American nation, religiously based moral qualms aside.

It is not necessarily the case, as some critics have charged, that such a view is amoral. It bespeaks a kind of secular morality of personal freedom and national power, whatever its political flaws. It is, in fact, what many critics have advocated for a long time: the removal of theology from public affairs. It is an irony, then, that mainstream commentators have criticized pro-Trump evangelicals as betraying Christian teaching.

The result of the Trump candidacy, in sum, has been in part to override the evangelical practice of the late twentieth century to inject notions of a Christian America into national politics. There is little talk in today’s campaign about providential designs and transcendent moral purposes—that is, little such talk except, perhaps, from the Democratic left.

One twist in this year’s presidential campaign is that a strong, resonant moral language, sometimes infused with references to America’s greater purposes and “who we are” is uttered from the progressive side. Hillary Clinton speaks openly about her Methodist identity and the Bible she carries with her. Her running mate, Tim Kaine, told the DNC audience during his acceptance speech that Jesus training shaped his politics and his life-long interest in social justice. “My journey,” Kaine confessed in religious cadences, “has convinced me that God has created a rich tapestry in this country.” At the DNC, President Obama asserted America’s divine purposes by quoting Ronald Reagan’s line about “a shining city on a hill,” a quotation in itself from the Puritan John Winthrop, who was paraphrasing Jesus as quoted in the New Testament. Perhaps such a recurrence to moral values that transcend political and social exigencies is the only way to confront a phenomenon such as Donald Trump. We see

Mark Valeri is the Reverend Priscilla Wood Neaves Distinguished Professor of Religion and Politics at the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis.
Eric Metaxas’s Bonhoeffer Delusions

In the end, Metaxas’s Bonhoeffer resembles no one so much as Metaxas.

We are better than this,” declares Marian Wright Edelman, the president and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund. “Bonhoeffer, the great German Protestant theologian who died opposing Hitler’s holocaust, believed that the test of the morality of a society is how it treats its children. We flunk Bonhoeffer’s test every hour of every day in America as we let the violence of guns and the violence of poverty relentlessly stalk and sap countless child lives.”

Over the course of this tumultuous political season, the legacy of the German pastor and theologian, who was executed by the Gestapo in 1945 for his participation in a plot to kill Hitler, has frequently been invoked by commentators and operatives across the political spectrum as a means of punctuating the historical significance of the presidential election. “The current ferment of American politics has brought comparisons to Europe in the 1930s, with echoes of leaders who stoke anger against outsiders and promise a return to greatness through the application of a strongman’s will,” observed former George W. Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson in The Washington Post.

At times, Bonhoeffer’s story, and more broadly that of the anti-Nazi church movement called the Confessing Church, has been used to the frame the 2016 U.S. presidential election in a global and in some cases even metaphysical narrative. Conservative commentator David Brooks calls the Zeitgeist “a Dietrich Bonhoeffer against Hitler moment,” while adding the cautionary words, “I don’t want to compare [Trump] to Hitler. That’s a little over the top. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer-type heroism is required.”

In fact, some who “claim that American Christians are facing a ‘Bonhoeffer moment’ would have us believe that we are facing threats to freedom analogous to those Bonhoeffer faced and that we should react in analogous ways. But they need to be clearer on both counts,” writes the theologian and Holocaust scholar Stephen Haynes at the Huffington Post.

Enter the flamboyant Eric Metaxas, the conservative evangelical writer, radio host, and founder of Socrates in the City, a New York-based forum on faith and culture. In an editorial last week in The Wall Street Journal, Metaxas could not have been more clear, if by clarity we mean the exceedingly bold claim that it’s 1933 Berlin in America. “The anti-Nazi martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer also did things most Christians of his day were disgusted by. He most infamously joined a plot to kill the head of his government. He was horrified by it, but he did it nonetheless because he knew that to stay ‘morally pure’ would allow the murder of millions to continue.”

Likening the Third Reich to a Democratic administration would not be surprising from the obstreperous right-wing crusader Ann Coulter, who appears regularly on “The Eric Metaxas Show.” But Metaxas, who purports to be a winsome, irenic apologist for the Christian faith, in the fashion of his friends Tim Keller and Os Guinness, blindsided some evangelicals in proclaiming that a Hillary Clinton victory in November portends the vanquishing of the Republic—and that taking Bonhoeffer seriously in our time means voting for Donald Trump.

At the same time, Metaxas emboldened and excited many other evangelicals with his supreme confidence that the 2016 presidential election confronts America with a world historical decision: salvation by Trump, or damnation through “Hitlerly,” as Metaxas has called Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential candidate and lifelong Methodist, on social media. With Hillary, America will not get a second chance. A certain sector of white American evangelicals labors beneath the unrelenting anxiety that the Democratic Party and its leaders actively seek to destroy the Christian way of life.

Recently Metaxas has begun reciting, in language resonant in the evangelical subculture, a litany of right-wing radio talking points as widely accepted truth: Hillary Clinton “champions the abomination of partial-birth abortion” and a “statist view of America.” She is the enemy of religious freedom. She would have Bible-believing men and women “bow to the secular authority of the state.” If elected, the “liberty and self-government for which millions have died” will be gone, forever.

Eric Metaxas attends a debate reception at the New York Society for Ethical Culture in 2012.
Charles Marsh

“Not only can we vote for Trump, we must vote for Trump,” Metaxas told the National Review in June, his first public statement in support of the thrice-married “value” candidate, “because with all of his foibles, peccadilloes, and metaphorical warps, he is nonetheless the last best hope of keeping America from sliding into oblivion, the tank, the abyss, the dustbin of history.” Metaxas may have preferred to cast his vote for Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio—in the past he’s been a loyal supporter of Rick Santorum—but you can’t pick your messiah.

When it comes to using Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and more broadly the Confessing Church, to carry the weight of your ideological preferences, Metaxas is in a league of his own.

W R I T T E N  W I T H  B U T  t he slightest familiarity with German theology and history, Metaxas’s best-selling Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy was published by Thomas Nelson in the spring of 2010 and launched at the Young Republicans Club of New York City. Christians in the United States needed to learn some very important lessons from Bonhoeffer’s story, and Eric Metaxas, who some followers call “the American Bonhoeffer,” had been called by God to deliver these lessons in our own hour of decision: It is not the role of the state to take care of people. America is the greatest nation in the world. People who like big government don’t believe in God; Germans turned to Hitler to do the force and the abyss, the dustbin of history.” Metaxas may have more broadly the Confessing Church, to carry the weight of great nation, the world. His more popular works make biblical faith

In praying for the defeat of Germany, and conferring pastoral blessings on those who sought to kill the Führer, Bonhoeffer could not be called a pacifist in the manner of Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. But Metaxas’s claims that Bonhoeffer never called himself a pacifist reveals only a lack of familiarity with volumes 11 and 12 of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, which had been published in English translations after Metaxas had finished writing his biography, which is free of German sources.

“The hour is late. The world is choked with weapons,” Bonhoeffer told an ecumenical gathering in 1934 on the southern coast of Denmark. “The trumpets of war may blow tomorrow. Who knows if we shall see each other again in another year? What are we waiting for? Peace must be dared. Peace is the great venture.” Refusing the Christian tradition of just war first expounded by Augustine, Bonhoeffer would, not long after, declare that for “Christians, any military service except in the ambulance corps, and any preparation for war, is forbidden.”

Scholars of modern German theology and history excoriated Metaxas casting Bonhoeffer in the role of a white evangelical family values Republican. Reviewers were aghast to see Metaxas likening the difference between the liberal Protestant nationalist Adolf von Harnack and the neo-orthodox socialist Karl Barth to contemporary debates “between strict Darwinian evolutionists and advocates of so-called Intelligent Design.”

Little mistakes cast light on vast tracts of incomprehension; most objectionable is perhaps his dangerously simplistic portrayal of Nazis as godless liberals and German dissidents as Bible-believing Christians. Had Metaxas done the most casual background reading on the so-called Church Struggle, he would have learned, one would hope, that Bonhoeffer eventually despaired of the Confessing Church movement because it refused to speak forthrightly against the Nazi government. The failure of even dissident Christians to mount a meaningful opposition to Hitler was the context within which Bonhoeffer agreed to take part in the conspiracy alongside a cadre of humanists, atheists, and the disillusioned “children of the church.”

Another point worth mentioning: In portraying Bonhoeffer as a conservative Christian who fiercely denounces humanism, Metaxas blithely ignores Bonhoeffer’s abiding loyalty to the Western humanistic tradition and to the liberal ideals of toleration, justice, humanity, and reconciliation. Late in his life, with the nation in ruins, Bonhoeffer spoke of his great joy in finding once again nourishment in that great scholarly tradition of the nineteenth century, and he affirmed the “polyphony of life” and “religionless Christianity.” But Metaxas dismisses these fragmentary and luminous meditations from prison as little more than fodder for the death of God movement of the late 1960s, explaining lamely that Bonhoeffer never intended the writings to be taken seriously.

It must be terribly embarrassing to Metaxas, fearful as he remains of same-sex marriage and other recent LGBT political achievements, to realize that Bonhoeffer’s letters to his friend Eberhard Bethge—especially those written from the Benedictine monastery in Ettal, Germany, published in 2006 in volume 16 of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke—reveal Bonhoeffer’s homosexual desires, however suppressed by the voluntary vow of celibacy, which Bonhoeffer took seriously as a Protestant monastic of sorts.

Portraying Bonhoeffer according to our own ideological preferences does a grave disservice to his legacy. Bonhoeffer’s life and thought exhibit above all an uncommon generosity and openness to the world. His more popular works make biblical faith intelligible to believers and nonbelievers alike—The Cost of Discipleship and Life Together are books written amidst the chaos and fury of the KGB, that the church struggle to remain independent against the intrusions of Nazi rule—and do so without reducing complex ideas to clichés or pious talking points.

WHAT MIGHT BONHOEFFER make of his “Moment” in American politics? Born in 1906 into a prodigiously humanist family, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had rarely discussed politics in his university years; when he had, it was mostly in response to his brothers, who, radicalized by the Great War, never missed an opportunity to butt heads concerning the finer points of the Weimar government or the morality of its democratic reforms. A university friend complained of Bonhoeffer’s inclination to escape into etereal regions of “comprehensive” ideas and thus “avoid the muck and mists of boiling-hot politics.” Indeed, during Bonhoeffer’s postdoctoral year at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, there is not even mention in his notes or letters of what was the lead item in the Times on the day of his arrival: “Fascists Make Big Gains in Germany.”

This changed during that transformative year in America. Between August 1930 and May 1931, Bonhoeffer would journey into new regions of experience: into the tenement buildings of New York, into the Harlem Renaissance, into the Deep South weeks after the Scottsboro Boys went to trial, into a six-month immersion in the black church in Abyssinian Baptist in Harlem. He spent time with the National Women’s Trade Union League and the Workers Education Bureau of America; he wrote notes on the labor movement, poverty, homelessness, crime, and the social mission of the churches. He met with officials from the American Civil Liberties Union, the nation’s premier defender of civil liberties, which
Bonhoeffer’s faith had been chastened by history, its failures and misuses. His was a sober assessment of the gospel’s political captivity—and how to escape it.

Bonhoeffer asked Eberhard Bethge in a letter from prison. In light of all that had happened, “we are approaching a completely religionless age,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as ‘religious’ aren’t really practicing that at all; they presumably mean something quite different by ‘religious.’ Religion as it had been lived before was obsolete.

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“There is only one way that I can visualize religion being a legitimate issue in an American political campaign,” Nixon claimed. “That would be if one of the candidates for the Presidency had no religious belief.” While Kennedy went on to become the nation’s first, and only, Catholic president, the Cold War blockade against candidates without religious belief was kept very much in place. Even now with the threat of godless communism having largely dissipated, the atheist badge remains an automatic disqualifier for more than 40 percent of the American electorate. A mere whiff of irreligion can be a serious political encumbrance, an unforgivable breach for those who still take the nation’s biblical, city-on-a-hill status with exceptional seriousness.

Raising the atheist specter against presidential candidates has been a tried-and-true part of the attack apparatus in American politics from the beginning. The sometime Anglican, mostly deist Thomas Jefferson was relentlessly assailed by Federalist clergy, if Americans elected a freethinker like Jefferson, they might as well throw their Bibles into bonfires and teach their children to chant mockeries of God. His Cincinnatian pastor stepped forward to emphasize that Taft’s mother and father had been longtime members of the church and that their son had joined in enthusiastically as a youth, including on one occasion playing the part of a “very plump” pixie in a church play. “Taft Once Unitarian Fairy” was the headline of The New York Times story explaining how Taft met the religious bona fides for the office he was seeking. Needless to say, that report did not solve Taft’s religious problem. Evangelical opponents dogged him throughout the election season, claiming that no Christian could vote for such a heterodox candidate, especially in comparison to their champion, Presbyterian William Jennings Bryan.

Down ballot the politics of irreligion have been much the same. American unbelievers occasionally reported electoral successes, but they were usually small victories claimed under a cloud of suspicion. An atheist alderman in Lyons, Iowa—one Samuel Infidel—served for years as a member of the City Council in the 1830s, set out for Salubria, Iowa, in search of freer climes. There he kept up his infidel activities, organizing celebrations of Tom Paine’s birthday and criticizing Christian “bigotry” and “superstition.” He also stayed involved in party politics. Entering the fray on behalf of the Whigs over the Whigs, he quickly became a lightning rod, with the local Democratic candidates getting tarred as “Kneelandites.” To underline the point, some hotheaded acolytes of the “Christian party in politics” burned the “Old Infidel” in effigy, a potent symbol (as they saw it) of the election’s religious and political stakes. Kneeland’s favored candidates went down in flames with his likeness.

Still more infamous was the brouhaha that erupted in 1877 over the news that President Rutherford B. Hayes was about to appoint the infidel orator and Republican politico Robert G. Ingersoll as ambassador to Germany. “Only think of committing this whole Christian Republic to the man Empire by a clever, loud, contemptuous scoffer at the Christian religion and the Bible!” The nomination was quickly set aside.

The snubbing of Ingersoll lit up freethinking liberals. Here was an eminently qualified statesman, a Civil War veteran and lawyer, excluded from holding an office of public trust entirely on religious grounds. The dire message that secularists took from Ingersoll’s squashed diplomatic career and from any number of episodes like it was one of persisting disenfranchisement through Christian statecraft. As Kneeland’s old infidel newspaper, the Boston Investigator, editorialized in 1885, “Our politics this day are governed almost as much by religion as if we had a nationally established church and creed, for no man who is not religious can be elected to any office.” That despairing conclusion overstated the absoluteness of the barrier, but not by much.

Even as the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has grown over the last 20 years—now about 25 percent of the population—the demand that politicians make their atheism manifest continues to resound. Some took the populist success of Senator Bernie Sanders, a secular Jew with thin religious ties, as an indicator that the nation’s obligatory godliness is finally tapering off. Perhaps, but a staffer at the Democratic National Committee was nonetheless caught, in a hacked email, wondering if Sanders might be an atheist and whether that could be used against him in the primaries. After he left office in 2013, Barney Frank, the first openly gay member of Congress, admitted that during his career he had never been fully candid about his nonbelief and advised atheists against using that harsh identifier in public life. Why should a politician, he asked, “pick a fight that doesn’t have to be waged?” On this front, the secularist minority still has a long way to go. Public expressions of faith, however perfunctory, retain a strong pull in America’s electoral politics. Insinuating that one’s opponent does not pass this de facto religious test has been a recurring smear in the nation’s history, one no less nefarious for its familiarity.

Illustration by Irene Rinaldi
In the Age of Trump, Muslim Voters Mobilize

A coalition of groups has pushed to register one million new Muslim voters.

“Are you planning on voting in the upcoming election?” Farheena Mustafa, 22, asked the person on the other line. A recent University of Virginia graduate, Mustafa came to the phone-banking event with two of her sisters. They came to mobilize Muslim voters, even though Donald Trump may well do that on his own. The Republican presidential nominee has proposed banning Muslim immigration to the United States. He has accused Muslim Americans of harboring terrorists, and he has insulted the Muslim parents of a fallen American soldier. Just a few hours south in Virginia, one of Trump’s steadfast supporters, Liberty University Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr., has suggested concealed-carry weapons may be the solution to “end those Muslims,” only later clarifying that he meant terrorists.

In northern Virginia, though, the phone bank was about getting out the vote, not telling people how to vote. Still, it was hard to escape Trump. Some people will say, “We don’t want Trump to win,” Remaz Abdelgader, the phone bank manager, warned the group. “As non-partisans, we can’t endorse someone. So we’ll just listen. If they sound really passionate, ask them if they want to volunteer. That’s where they can put their passion.”

The event, held on a Sunday in September, was a collaboration between Emerge USA, a nonprofit promoting Muslim civic engagement, and MakeSpace, a Muslim community organization geared toward young professionals. Emerge USA’s nonprofit status forbids politicking, though its other arm, a PAC, funds candidates and one of its board members, Farooq Mitha, is Hillary Clinton’s Muslim outreach director. While the phone-banking stays neutral, Abdelgader, 23, knows that most of her volunteers come because they do not want Trump to win on November 8. “That’s the mentality and what drives people,” she said.

Emerge USA’s efforts are part of a larger wave of Muslim American activism this election cycle. A coalition of groups has pushed to register one million new Muslim voters, spearheaded by the U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations (USCMO). This summer during Ramadan, when mosque attendance tends to be highest, volunteers around the country handed out flyers and staffed voter registration tables outside Islamic centers. This fall, activists have continued holding voter education workshops, phone banks, and candidate forums, and USCMO created a “National Muslim Voter Registration Day” to coincide with Eid Al-Adha, one of Islam’s holiest festivals.

“This appears to be the most important election for the American Muslim community,” said Robert McCaw, the director of government affairs at the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), which is a USCMO member organization. “Never before have we been so front and center when it comes to political rhetoric—especially against the community.” He said voter registration has become “one of our community’s highest priorities.” As of June, CAIR estimated there were 824,000 likely registered Muslim voters, up 300,000 since the last presidential election.
In the Age of Trump, Muslim Voters Mobilize

Tiffany Stanley

Pennsylvania, and Virginia. There is room to grow: Muslim Americans lag behind other faith groups in voter registration; only 60 percent are registered to vote, compared to 66 percent of Jews and more than 94 percent of Christians, according to the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding.

For new citizens, the challenge can be conveying the importance of voting, and that each vote counts. Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center is a large mosque in Falls Church, Virginia, that has become the religious home to many asylum seekers and refugees. “Most of the countries our population comes from have governments that are incredibly dysfunctional, if not in the middle of a civil war,” said Colin Christopher, Dar Al-Hijrah’s deputy director of government affairs. “The idea of civic engagement is different. They see government as corrupt and dangerous.” This year, the mosque has held frequent voter and government education sessions, in an effort to counter that message and get the community engaged.

It wasn’t long ago that many Muslim Americans were thought to be a natural Republican constituency. One of the most racially diverse faith groups in the U.S., they defy easy categorization.

It wasn’t long ago that many Muslim Americans were thought to be a natural Republican constituency. One of the most racially diverse faith groups in the U.S., they defy easy categorization.

In response, in Virginia and all over the country, calls are being made. “Are you voting this year?” “Do you know your polling location?”

Mustafa dialed again and again. “This election is very important and we’re so excited that you’ll have the chance to stand up for the community and cast your vote,” she said on a call.

Around the room were women and men in their 20s and 30s, some the children of immigrants, with family roots going back to Pakistan, Sudan, and Afghanistan—precisely the sorts of places that Trump would halt immigration from if his proposals became policy.

At the center of the room stood Abdelgader, wearing an Emergent t-shirt and a blue hijab. Last October, she became something of a news sensation when she stood up at George Mason University, where she was then a student, and asked Bernice Sanders about Islamophobia. Sanders gave one of the more personal responses of his campaign, saying as the descendant of Holocaust survivors, “We have got to stand together and end all forms of racism.” He hugged Abdelgader onstage, and the video went viral. In an election inundated with anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim rhetoric, here was a Jewish politician embracing a Muslim woman, who was also a Sudanese immigrant. The moment embodied the hope that politics could be different.

Abdelgader found a kind of calling on that stage. “From there I kept doing things, speaking on panels, and helping with voter registration at my own mosque,” she said. She volunteered for the Sanders campaign, and soon Emerg USA’s Virginia chapter hired her to run its phone-banking operations.

Abdelgader was not the only former Sanders supporter to vote for Hillary Clinton. Ayesha Mian, 35, canvassed for Obama in 2008, but has not done the same for Clinton. Instead, she came to the phone bank to tell fellow Muslims to simply go vote, hoping that effort will take care of the rest. Compared to 2008, Mian said, “I feel like this election is way more important, and so consequential I feel like there’s so much at stake. The difference between the two candidates is so stark. I think it really matters, especially to minority communities.”

And yet, it can be hard to pinpoint potential minority voters for outreach, and the science of determining Muslim voter rolls is imprecise. Because the U.S. Census does not ask Americans about their religion, a list of likely Muslim voters is often based on ethnicity, which can be a misleading indicator of religion.

At the Virginia phone bank, some potential voters were weary, or worried, about being getting called. Why am I on a list?

“You’re database is wrong,” a man told Mustafa. “I wasn’t trying to offend,” she said. “I apologize.”

He did not sound mad, she said after the call. Really, he just wanted her to know he had been voting since 1960, when he came to the United States. “I haven’t been in this country a long time,” he told her. “I have been voting.”

It was a repeated theme, as other callers felt compelled to reiterate their civic involvement, and assert their American identity, in an election year when their religion has become a flashpoint. Mustafa said, “People are like, why are you calling me? Of course I want Trump to win!”

By the end of the afternoon, more than 300 calls had been made. Thousands more have been logged since the campaign began. Emerg staff asked the volunteers to fill out a sheet, saying why they volunteered that day. “I care about our society,” one read. Another: “Because every voice matters.”

Nagina Bhatti calls likely Muslim voters at a phone-banking event in Alexandria, Virginia.
INTERVIEW

The Quest for Confident Pluralism

An Interview with John Inazu

By Gordon Haber

Published on November 21, 2016

It doesn’t seem like there are many people talking about unity right now, modest or otherwise. So what inspired this book? And who did you write it for?

It started as a scholarly follow-up to my first book, which focused on the right of assembly. But I had some friends and mentors say that the ideas are applicable to a broader range of issues. So they challenged me to write in a way that wasn’t for specialists. I was looking to broaden the conversation, so I wrote with an eye toward the smart, educated twenty-something with no particular political background. I thought if I could make it accessible and interesting, then I could engage with a wider range of people.

What has been the reaction to the book?

I’ve gotten agreement and pushback from both the left and the right.

The pushback isn’t surprising. One problem is that the mere mention of certain topics gets people upset before you even have the opportunity to investigate their logical implications. For example, raise the topic of abortion and people get angry.

Given that you work in St. Louis, you must have been following the Ferguson protests.

I had a sabbatical that year. I left St Louis two days before Mike Brown was killed. So as I was driving across country to spend the year in Virginia, I did a lot of media calls because I teach criminal law too.

We are still grappling with the aftermath, the coarseing of our political discourse, and the frightening outbursts of violence. We are still wrestling with how this vicious divide is new and different. But in some ways, it’s not a new fight. The issues of racism, sexism, immigration, LGBTQ rights, terrorism, abortion, and law enforcement in minority communities have been polarizing Americans for decades, if not longer.

One notable person delving into these issues is John Inazu, the Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion at Washington University in St. Louis and the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, which publishes this journal. In his new book, Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference, Inazu investigates the radical possibility of common ground.

Inazu suggests a two-pronged approach to a “modest unity” in American politics. First, Americans must reaffirm “constitutional commitments” to pluralism and the institutions that make pluralism possible. He argues that current constitutional understandings of the right of association, weakened public forums, and certain forms of public funding all insufficiently protect pluralism and dissent, and that we need legal reforms in each of these areas.

Second, the public can engender the spirit of pluralism with the “civic aspirations” of tolerance, humility, and patience.

Gordon Haber interviewed Inazu via Skype before Election Day. He followed up with him after Donald Trump became the president-elect. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.
That’s not always true. Law students are particularly good at not jumping to anger. To be a good lawyer you’ve got to be able to understand both sides of an argument, even if you are normatively predisposed to the other side. So if in my classes we get into a controversial case like Hobby Lobby, I’ll split them up based on their priors and say, “Okay, now you argue for the other side.” But yes, there is a more emotive response from some audiences. It really cuts in both directions politically. Certainly online and in social media. In those situations I’ve found that tone and framing can go a long way.

It seems that in Confident Pluralism, a lot of it does come down to tone. You seem to be arguing for a kind of base level of cordiality.

That’s part of it. The two-fold move is to be more cordial and also more genuine. Especially on campus right now, there’s plenty of talk about cordiality and trying to respect everybody, to be attentive to everyone’s concerns. On some campuses that’s really sacrificing the genuine nature of disagreement. It’s papering over the differences. I’m pushing for both. We’ve got to be civil and kind, and at the same time there are very deep disagreements, sometimes very painful disagreements. We can’t pretend they don’t exist.

Where do you see cordiality emphasized over intellectual exchange?

I don’t want to over-generalize, but there is an assumption on some campuses that you have to be for social justice, full stop. Sometimes there is very little room to push back and say, “What do we mean by social justice? How can we complicate that?” For example, you write about “tolerance, humility, and patience.” Are those practices or aspirations?

That’s a good point. I settled on the word aspirations because I have some hesitation about claiming that as nation and a people we have the institutions and the habits that can sustain practices, or what some other people might call virtues. So you might think of tolerance, humility, and patience as either virtues or practices. But philosophically and sociologically, we need institutions and common understandings to sustain them. That’s why I punctuated and used the word aspirations instead.

But it’s not possible to institutionalize things like tolerance, humility, and patience. You can’t legislate that.

Oh, definitely not legislate. When I say institutionalize, I don’t mean law. I mean institutions, most likely at the local level that convey these practices and the norms behind them. This goes along with the claims from Robert Putnam about the loss of mediated institutions in our society. Places like religious institutions or public schools. In our public schools, do we have the will and the resources to teach tolerance, humility, and patience? I’m not sure we do, so that’s the hesitation around these concepts. It can’t come from above. They have to be willfully chosen habits.

This may be an oversimplification, but it sounds like you’re talking about the death of the civics class. Sure. The death of the civics class writ large in society. The civics class was replaced by Twitter and Facebook.

Let’s talk about constitutional commitments. You discuss how legislation moved away from important values, pluralistic values imbued in the Bill of Rights, as the right of assembly. Who should be doing the committing?

By commitment, I mean to suggest that both legal and official actors have to commit. Courts and legislators have to own them. But also we the people have to believe in them to some degree. The whole idea of democratic norms, even those that are enforced by law, hinge on a kind of consensus, a belief that they actually matter. If we all lost collective faith in need for the First Amendment, we wouldn’t have it anymore, even if it’s still on the books.

So we as citizens mutually agree to uphold the Constitution, because it’s not like the laws of physics. Our rights can go away, as in the case of your Japanese-American forebears.

Right. As I talk about in the book, my Japanese-American grandparents were forced into internment camps during World War II. My father was born in those camps. One would hope that we would now have consensus that we don’t do this sort of thing. And yet in the last year, we’ve heard both Democrats and Republicans positively citing the internment of Japanese Americans as a reason to restrict the liberties of Muslims in this country. Which to me is a profoundly unsettling idea, that a couple of generations after we did this in WWII, that’s it on the table.

It seems with the isolationism and talk of internment camps, it’s fair to make comparisons to the World War II-era. Is it better or worse now?

I tend not to talk in terms of whether we were better or worse off in the past. Our entire history has been trying to hold together in the face of deep disagreements and deep fissures that cut into or crosscut demographics. We’ve had profound religious tensions in this country before, we’ve had social and class tensions, the history of labor unrest, the history of racial unrest, the civil rights movements, Civil War, national politics in the early nineteenth century—we have all kinds of moments in history where that push for consensus or modest unity confronted profound challenges. We’ve seen this before.

But there are two things that I find uniquely disconcerting about the current moment. One is social media. We get it all much faster and more incessantly than before. Every five minutes we get updates. The second is that we have a crisis of authority in this country, such as the right of assembly. Who should be doing the committing?

By commitment, I mean to suggest that both legal and official actors have to commit. Courts and legislators have to own them. But also we the people have to believe in them to some degree.
The social media tendency is to make issues uncomplicated and clear-cut. The stakes make things seem pretty bleak. The religious piece is that by virtue of what I do and who I am, I am in a lot of church religious circles, and I’m in a lot of non-religious circles. I think both the necessity but also the ability to form relationships with people in very different settings undergirds part of this book. Part of that too is a kind of hopefulness, a recognition of people with whom I disagree—and I have disagreements with people in both settings—that we can have actual friendships and find agreement on things that matter. And also trying to mediate the other side in other settings. If you don’t have a lot of friends of no faith or who are deeply Christian or deeply Jewish or deeply Muslim, you’re defaulting to a kind of stereotype or caricature that is very unlikely to be close to reality. As a Christian that leaves me with a hopefulness rooted in my own faith. And I’d want other Christians to share a lack of ultimate confidence in the state. I sense more fear than hope. And that doesn’t comport with my own understanding of faith. We have to work together to minimize the kinds of words and actions that flow from fear and self-interest. Now that Trump won the election, what’s next? The arguments for confident pluralism remain exactly the same. We must find a way to coexist in the midst of our deep difference, we must insist that government officials honor basic constitutional protections of difference and dissent, and we must redouble our efforts toward tolerance, humility, and patience. 

Are you a religious person? It seems like there’s a personal aspect to these arguments for you, your interest in religion and politics, in addition to your family history. I am a Christian. I am on the board of a ministry called the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. So this discussion is deeply personal for both of those reasons. I teach and write in areas of constitutional law and civil liberties. As a Japanese-American whose family comes from the camps, I view everything through that lens. It prevents me from getting too close to authority structures whoever they are. There’s a critical distance I want to maintain from people in power. Deep in the political theory that I try to argue is this reaction to or against that state, a lack of ultimate confidence in the state. The religious piece is that by virtue of what I do and who I am, I am in a lot of church religious circles, and I’m in a lot of non-religious circles. I think both the necessity but also the ability to form relationships with people in very different settings undergirds part of this book. Part of that too is a kind of hopefulness, a recognition of people with whom I disagree—and I have disagreements with people in both settings—that we can have actual friendships and find agreement on things that matter. And also trying to mediate the other side in other settings. If you don’t have a lot of friends of no faith or who are deeply Christian or deeply Jewish or deeply Muslim, you’re defaulting to a kind of stereotype or caricature that is very unlikely to be close to reality. As a Christian that leaves me with a hopefulness rooted in my own faith. And I’d want other Christians to share a lack of ultimate confidence in the state. I sense more fear than hope. And that doesn’t comport with my own understanding of faith. We have to work together to minimize the kinds of words and actions that flow from fear and self-interest. 

Now that Trump won the election, what’s next? The arguments for confident pluralism remain exactly the same. We must find a way to coexist in the midst of our deep difference, we must insist that government officials honor basic constitutional protections of difference and dissent, and we must redouble our efforts toward tolerance, humility, and patience. 

By Hugh Urban
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W HITE HOUSE CHIEF STRATEGIST? Steve Bannon’s job may be in jeopardy, according to recent news reports. Coming on the heels of his removal from the National Security Council, the commotion surrounding the alt-right provocateur has raised new questions about his broader ideology—and to what degree it may or may not be influencing the policies of the Trump administration. Is the current infighting between Bannon and more moderate elements in the White House a result of personality clashes, or is it tied to his extreme political and religious ideals? By now, Bannon’s brash and aggressive political discourse is well known. Comparing himself to “Dick Cheney, Darth Vader, Satan,” Bannon pulls no punches when describing his own radical vision of America’s future—for example, by calling for the “deconstruction of the administrative state.” Yet Bannon’s complex religious rhetoric is much less well understood.

Since his career as a documentary filmmaker in the early 2000s, to his tenure as the head of Breitbart News, to his most recent speeches and interviews, Bannon has in fact articulated a fairly consistent religious ideology. While he was raised and self-identifies as Catholic, Bannon does not express a worldview that would be recognized by most Catholic theologians today. Rather, he has crafted his own complex amalgam that combines aspects of Christianity with a profoundly dualistic worldview, an intensely negative view of Islam, and a quasi-apocalyptic historical narrative drawn from novels and popular sources.

Steve Bannon had a long career in various fields before assuming the position of Trump’s campaign strategist. A Navy veteran and a former Goldman
Since his career as a documentary filmmaker in the early 2000s, to his tenure as the head of Breitbart News, to his most recent speeches and interviews, Bannon has in fact articulated a fairly consistent religious ideology.

incendiary diatribe, “Political Correctness Protects Muslim Rape Culture.” In all of these, we find that the enemy is no longer specified as “radical Islam,” but more often as Islam itself, whose own sacred scriptures are claimed to preach violence and the takeover of American communities.

One of Bannon’s most frequent literary references when describing the struggle with Islam and the broader problem of Muslim immigration was the controversial French novel, Le Camp des Saints. Published in 1973 by Jean Raspail, the novel presents a very dark picture of massive immigration to France by immigrants from India, which ultimately results in the destruction of Western civilization. The title itself comes from the Bible, a story from the book of Revelation in which “the camp of the saints” is surrounded by the armies of Satan until the fire of God comes down to devour the wicked. On various radio segments and interviews from his Breitbart days, Bannon repeatedly invoked the novel to describe global Islam and Muslim immigration to Western countries. As he put it on his Breitbart News radio show in January 2016: “It’s not a migration. It’s really an invasion. I call it the Camp of the Saints.”

The religious and political rhetoric espoused in journalistic form in Breitbart found perhaps its most explicit articulation in a controversial speech given by Bannon via Skype at a conference at the Vatican in 2014. Hosted by the conservative Catholic group the Human Dignity Institute, the conference was supposed to focus on poverty, but Bannon used the occasion to build upon the Good-versus-Evil binary of his films. He described a vast, historic, and religious struggle between the West and its many adversaries. Such a conflict demands that all Christians join together to form a new “church militant” in order to “fight for our beliefs against this new barbarity that’s starting.” In this great battle, the United States is clearly identified as the primary flag bearer of the Good and the True, embodying both “a church and a civilization” that is nothing less than the “flower of mankind.”

Significantly, however, Bannon describes this Good-versus-Evil struggle in both religious and economic terms. He clearly identifies the former with a particular brand of capitalism—namely, an “enlightened” form of “Judeo-Christian” capitalism that is both the foundation and the primary driver of Western civilization. But this enlightened capitalism is now faced with a real crisis, a deep moral failing caused by the rise of secularism, which “has sapped the strength of the Judeo-Christian West to defend its ideals.”

But rather than celebrate all forms of capitalism, Bannon distinguishes this form of capitalism from various other religious and political systems. He distances it from “state-sponsored” Chinese and Russian capitalism, which in his view is authoritarian, anti-individualist, and creates wealth only for the few. Second, he distinguishes it from a purely secular, Ayn Rand-style of libertarian capitalism, which values the individual but lacks a religious dimension.

Finally, Bannon contrasts his enlightened capitalism with what he sees as its polar opposite—“Islamic fascism,” which he depicts as neither capitalist nor individualist but resting upon a kind of perverse form of religion. In his Vatican speech, Bannon said the West is now “in an outright war against jihadist Islamic fascism. And this war is, I think, metastasizing far quicker than our governments can handle it.” He compares the current war
In writing about Bush, Lincoln observed that powerful theological ideals can very easily be put to powerful political uses. Above all, a binary logic of Good versus Evil can easily be wielded to justify all manner of this-worldly and material agendas. Once one political formation is identified as the Good and its adversary identified as metaphysically Evil, the door is potentially open to a number of actions: “Preeventive wars, abridgements of civil liberty, cuts in social service... and other like initiatives are not just wrapped in the flag; together with the flag, they are swathed in the holy.” If Lincoln is correct, then Bannon’s theology—with its far more extreme, quasi-apocalyptic narrative of Good versus Evil and its extremely simplistic, homogenized, and hostile view of Islam—should be a particular cause for concern.

It is not difficult to see Bannon’s influence in the rhetoric and early policies of the Trump administration. Bannon was in fact a co-author of Trump’s first inaugural address, with its repeated refrain of “totalitarianism, pseudo-historical narratives, Islamophobia—first in his call for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” and subsequently in his two executive orders banning refugees and travel from seven (and then six) predominantly Muslim countries.

But Bannon’s removal from the National Security Council in April 2017 may well be an indication that his extreme ideology is not entirely welcome under the new national security advisor, H.R. McMaster. Bannon retains his key position as White House chief strategist, still close to the ear of the president. Yet his radical ideological positions are apparently at odds with other more moderate voices in the White House. The degree to which Mr. Trump decides to act upon or ignore the theology of Steve Bannon may well help determine the course of his presidency.

**Hugh Urban is a professor of religious studies in the Department of Comparative Studies at Ohio State University.**
Reinhold Niebuhr was a theologian of the nuclear age. He became a public intellectual after the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan at the end of World War II. To a country run by mainline Protestants, who had long ago abandoned Armageddon, rapture, and the end times, Niebuhr needed them to believe that the end was possible, and perhaps probable. By the early 1940s Niebuhr was well-known among theologians as a professor at New York’s Union Theological Seminary who published largely in the Christian press. By 1948 he was on the cover of *Time* magazine, which promoted him as a figure who could help Americans understand the new predicaments they faced. Hiroshima created a world suitable for Niebuhr’s theological grand drama and launched him to fame.

Sin, irony, tragedy. These words leapt out of the pages of Niebuhr’s books and speeches. Humanity was fallen and redeemed through God’s grace, Niebuhr wrote. But that redemption is always incomplete and we can never rise to the standards set forth in the Bible. Only by accepting our limitations could we make the best out of an imperfect situation. In a world full of evil, we must choose good, but we must accept that we can never get rid of sin entirely. The irony of our situation is that we must often do what is considered evil for the sake of good.

Jimmy Carter could quote by heart from Niebuhr’s 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. It contained what many believe is one of Niebuhr’s most important insights: Individuals were capable of overcoming sin, he argued, but groups were not. “Individual men may be moral” because they “are endowed by nature with a measure of sympathy and consideration for their kind,” Niebuhr wrote. But to empathize with others is “more difficult, if not impossible, for human societies and social groups.” Man could become moral but he was always destined to live in an immoral society.

With this book Niebuhr parted ways with his pacifist past. As Cornel West says in *An American Conscience*, “Part of the greatness of Reinhold Niebuhr is that he was willing to risk his popularity in the name of integrity.” When pacifists took exception to Niebuhr’s use of Christianity to endorse violence, “he had to engage them and tell them I have changed my mind owing to these kind of arguments and insights that I have learned.”

Niebuhr’s debates were never this civil. A reviewer wrote in 1933 of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

“A new documentary called *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, tries to capture and explain why Niebuhr is experiencing something of a renaissance. It is directed by Martin Doblmeier, who has worked on dozens of faith-based films. *(The John C. Danforth Center at Washington University in St. Louis co-hosted a screening of the film.)* “The questions Niebuhr raised in his time,” Doblmeier said in an interview with *The Christian Post*, “are all themes that seem in the forefront for many Americans today and Niebuhr is an insightful companion for those kinds of reflections.”

Niebuhr’s “realist” theology became the new Cold War orthodoxy.

“To call this book fully Christian in tone is to travesty the heart of Jesus’ message to the world.” The reviewer took issue with the text because Niebuhr implied that Christians must sometimes resort to violence when dealing with groups. Niebuhr traded barbs with pacifists for the rest of the decade. “If modern churches were to symbolize their true faith,” he wrote in 1940, “they would take the crucifix from their altars and substitute the three little monkeys who counsel men to ‘speak no evil, hear no evil, see no evil.’

The lead-up to World War II thrust Niebuhr into the spotlight. His calls to understand power—which
historian K. Healan Gaston identifies in the film as his “major preoccupation of his thought and his primary legacy”—were prophetic calls to his fellow Americans in 1939 and 1940 to join the war effort against Nazi Germany and Japan. In his view the aggressive fascist powers stood on one side. On the other were the naïve pacifists who would refuse to fight evil. We must choose the sensible middle ground, he argued. We must do evil for the sake of the good.

Events turned his way. With American entry into the war, Niebuhr’s pacifist critics were largely silenced. Niebuhr had effectively created a just war theory for a religion that had none. Or, as historian David Hollinger puts it, “Reinhold Niebuhr made war safe for American Protestants.” In the process, he silenced some of the most trenchant critics of American power.

But these critics had prophetic qualities of their own. Pacifists A. J. Muste and John Haynes Holmes Jr. warned that installing military bases around the world would pull Americans into one war after another. They called on America to give up its empire. They counseled that conscription would militarize domestic life. But very few people listened. Niebuhr’s “realist” theology became the new Cold War orthodoxy.

By 1952, Niebuhr had become a celebrated Cold Warrior, who was invited to State Department meetings to advise America’s mandarins to act wisely and humbly in their fight against the Soviet Union. That year, he wrote one of Barack Obama’s favorite books, The Irony of American History. That book repeated the earlier warnings about the imperceptibility of society, but now he was writing about American foreign policy. The world was an imperfect place, and Americans had to shed their innocence if they were to act wisely in their fight against the Soviet Union. Stay firm against the communist threat, Niebuhr counselled, but do not succumb to arrogance or crusading.

This transcendent Niebuhr—speaking beyond his time to our own—appears in the recollections of the many figures interviewed in An American Conscience. But to his contemporaries he sounded differently. In 1952, in the middle of the Korean War, nobody really needed to be convinced that the United States must take responsibility in the world. Niebuhr cautioned against crusading, but the United States was doing just that. And in putting a theological stamp of approval on the Cold War, Niebuhr was endorsing as a responsible middle ground the very fanaticism he was warning against.

In other words, Niebuhr was not speaking truth to power. He was reassuring the powerful that they were on the right side of history. The most uncharitable criticism in this vein came from Noam Chomsky. He called Niebuhr’s ideas “soothing doctrines for those preparing to face the responsibilities of power,” or, in plain English, to set forth on a life of crime. Niebuhr’s ideas were more than this, of course. Niebuhr continues to inspire reflection by some of today’s most astute critics of American power, like Andrew Bacevich and Cornel West. But biographer Richard Fox got it right that Niebuhr helped America’s Cold Warriors “maintain faith in themselves as political actors in a troubled—what he termed a sinful—world. Stakes were high, enemies were why, responsibility meant taking risks. Niebuhr taught that moral men had to play hardball.”

Niebuhr’s popularity began to wane in the 1960s and 1970s. Liberation theology overtook Niebuhr’s Christian realism in seminars, while popular commentators became suspicious of endorsements of America’s military muscle at a moment when it was being flexed in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Millions of mainline Protestants stopped going to church while evangelicals cared little for Niebuhr’s liberal theology. Niebuhr was losing his audience.

By the 1980s, academics—who had never taken Niebuhr seriously—deconstructed the very foundations of Niebuhrian thought. Niebuhr spoke of the sinful nature of man. But academics showed that “human nature” was a fiction. The world is radically pluralistic. There is no singular, universal person but a variety of people divided by culture, nationality, and gender. And what seems natural to us is usually “constructed” through historical and political forces, often times for nefarious ends. Niebuhr’s ideas started to seem misguided at best.

It took the tragic events of September 11, 2001, to revive Niebuhr. Sin, irony, and tragedy had returned to the American vocabulary. Those fighting the war on terror—Obama the most famous among them—turned to Niebuhr. But Niebuhr’s revival begs the question: Why does a theologian who reached the height of his popularity in the atomic age speak clearly to so many in the age of terror?

“One of those powerful people is FBI Director James Comey, who likely used the pseudonym ‘Reinhold Niebuhr’ on his Instagram and Twitter. Comey had written his undergraduate thesis on Niebuhr’s call to public action in 1982. ‘Niebuhr’s book Moral Man and Immoral Society says it’s not enough to sit in an ivory tower,” Comey later reflected about his decision to go into law enforcement in an interview with New York magazine. Referring to his son’s death, 9/11, and the Holocaust, Comey asserted that “it is our obligation as people not to let evil hold the field. Not to let bad win.”

Comey became the U.S. attorney in New York City in January 2002, just months after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. He argued that Jose Padilla, who was accused of planning to set off a dirty bomb in New York, had no right to a defense lawyer. Padilla, a natural-born American citizen, spent three and a half years in a military prison as an enemy combatant. In 2004, Comey became assistant attorney general in the Bush administration and signed off on the CIA’s use of waterboarding and other forms of torture. In his role as director of the FBI, he has been in charge of programs that surveil Muslim Americans, prosecute domestic terrorism, and prevent would-be terrorists from infiltrating the United States.

Do Comey, Obama, and other powerful people read Niebuhr because he tells them to act with humility and caution? Or is it because Niebuhr tells them that moral men have to play hardball? The most likely answer is both, and we should find that more than a little troubling. **Gene Zubovich is a postdoctoral fellow at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics.**
Where Do Pro-Life Feminists Belong?

By Ellen Duffer
Published on June 27, 2017

Feminism has long been synonymous with abortion rights. But what about pro-life women who identify as feminists?

As the Democratic Party scrambles to redefine itself in the wake of Hillary Clinton’s loss, a woman’s right to abortion has emerged as a central issue. Though both parties once counted pro-life politicians in their ranks, the Democratic Party has more recently enshrined a pro-choice platform. That stance is in contention, however, as the party considers its demographics and its get-out-the-vote strategies for upcoming elections. By now, it’s widely known that white Christians, including Catholics in once reliably Democratic Rust Belt states, contributed considerably to Donald Trump’s victory. The party, with newly elected chair Tom Perez at its helm, is now working out how, or if, it should win those voters back.

“[To Win Again, Democrats Must Stop Being the Abortion Party],” read a much-discussed New York Times op-ed written by a Catholic theology professor. Christians, especially Catholics and evangelicals, are largely characterized as pro-life, single-issue voters; as Democrats look to widen their electoral advantage, it appears they’re looking to court these voters too. Perez and Bernie Sanders stumped for an anti-abortion Democratic mayoral candidate, to the outrage of many on the left—women’s groups in particular. Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi, in response, invoked her Italian Catholic roots in an interview with The Washington Post: “Most of those people—my family, extended family—are not pro-choice,” she said. “You think I’m kicking them out of the Democratic Party?”

Meanwhile, women are leading the opposition to the Trump Administration, and the Women’s March—which championed abortion rights—galvanized millions, becoming the largest single-day protest in U.S. history. Can Democrats continue to harness this energy while simultaneously reaching out to pro-life voters? It’s an interesting quandary, trying to salvage the votes of pro-life constituents who may agree with a lot of the DNC platform while keeping the right to choice safe for those who feel that bodily autonomy should be central to it.

This tension is mirrored directly in the feminist movement itself. Feminism has long been synonymous with abortion rights. But what about pro-life women who identify as feminists? Should these women, many of them Christian, be allowed to use the label? And are they welcome in the Democratic Party?

A Texas-based group of pro-lifers finds its members’ feminist identities central to its mission. The organization, New Wave Feminists, faced backlash and was removed from a list of Women’s March partners soon after The Atlantic reported on its freshly acquired partner status. The group, which is proud to include members from a variety of faith backgrounds and considers itself secular, is “trying to shut down the stereotype of what it even really means to be pro-life,” said its vice president, Cessilye Smith. “There is an overarching stereotype that ‘pro-life’ means you’re just pro-birth. We are pro-baby; we are pro-woman—which means all women,” said Smith, who is a doula. New Wave Feminists is developing an app, HelpAssistHer, to provide resources for women in need—as long as those resources do not lead women to an abortion facility. Smith, who identifies as a non-denominational Christian, is also emblematic of a population of self-identifying feminists who are motivated by their faith to help women within the church and outside it.

Take, for example, Claire Swinarski, founder of the podcast “The Catholic Feminist.” Raised by a mother who intentionally incorporated feminist history into her child-rearing, she’s identified as a feminist for her whole life. “My mom took me to Seneca Falls to go see where the women’s rights convention was held,” she said. “I agree with a lot of things that most feminists would agree with, like equal pay, like paid maternity leave, ending the poverty cycle.” The difference between her feminism and that of feminists portrayed in national media is her pro-life stance, which she recognizes sets her apart from many others. But even here, her view is more supportive than the Catholic church at large, and she’s frustrated by...
Where Do Pro-Life Feminists Belong?

Ellen Duffer

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Where Do Pro-Life Feminists Belong?

Maryland and author of

Evangelical Feminism: A History. The change led to questions about biblical interpretation, which, when paired with the larger societal rethinking of homosxuality and gay rights, ultimately “caused that shift in thinking which bled over into people’s recognition of women’s rights,” Cochran says.

Now, according to the 2014 Women in Leadership National Study—which Cochran advised—nearly 94 percent of Christian men and women surveyed believe that “men and women should serve equally in leadership positions in society.” The statistic is tempered by respondents’ answers to follow-up questions: While 84 percent of women believed in equality within the church and 79 percent believed in equality within the family, only 66 percent of men believed in equality within the church and 64 percent within the family.

Frustration with unequal opportunity within the church is a sentiment that evangelical writer and speaker Jory Micah knows intrinsically. After completing her master’s degree in biblical studies, she was at a dead end. Job descriptions for pastor openings would state that they were looking for male applicants—even if those men only had bachelor’s degrees. She was told she could teach or lead a children’s ministry instead. Since then, she’s made it her mission to spread feminist thought to her Christian community. “When I first started writing, I was more egalitarian, but as I’ve progressed I’ve identified more with feminism because I think that women still need a lot of extra empowerment,” she said. “I focus a lot more on lifting women and girls up.”

Micah identifies as a feminist but she struggles with the label, feeling aligned with a personal definition of feminism rather than one perpetuated by conservative media—that all-pervasive “man-hater” stereotype. She’s pro-life, but feels very strongly in favor of other parts of the feminist platform. She understands the pro-choice argument, and ultimately voted for Hillary Clinton in the general election—a decision that she said hurt her relationship with her mother, who was against Clinton. Micah said she fought publicly for Clinton “because I thought Donald Trump was so anti-woman. His administration is almost all white men.” After the election, she said, “I cried my eyes out the entire next day.”

Though Micah’s a registered Republican, she now considers herself left-leaning and doesn’t “see the Republicans doing anything to move women or people of color forward.” Her perspective seems like the exact kind of voter the DNC could be and probably should be targeting in future elections.

And the feminist movement should be cultivating these women too, according to Rachel Hewes, a non-denominational Christian and a senior at Pepperdine University, which is affiliated with the Churches of Christ. Hewes said she is a feminist and believes abortion and contraception should be legal (“People are having abortions whether it’s legal or not,” she said—and when it wasn’t, they also did). She thinks that, when it comes to the feminist movement’s opponents, “dividing and conquering is a very good strategy.” She said, “If the feminist movement allows itself to be divided, it’s going to be conquered. It needs to unite and “allow pro-life people to engage.”

These younger Christian feminists—including those coming from communities that have been intricately linked to the pro-life movement for decades—are eager to have a conversation about abortion (which 57 percent of Americans believe should be legal in most cases), especially if it means becoming closer to the feminist movement overall.

Historically, feminist voices have often been religious, according to Kristin Kubes Du Mez, chair of the history department at Calvin College, and author of A New Gospel for Women: Katharine Bushnell and the Challenge of Christian Feminism. She credits religious women with pushing through the suffrage movement and assisting in the creation of the National Organization for Women. Christian feminism “helped transform” the suffrage movement to a mainstream movement, she said. Cochran agrees, having written at length about the theology of Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Both sides of the abortion debate have, in the past, tried to have an open dialogue. Karen Swal-low Prior, a writer and English professor at Liberty University in Virginia once worked with the anti-abortion organization Operation Rescue, and she helped start a chapter of Feminists for Life. She was also involved with the Common Ground Network for Life and Choice, which tried to bridge the gap between the pro-life and pro-choice movements in the 1990s. The group held formal conversations between pro-choice advocates and ardent pro-lifers until each side came to some sort of understanding. Finding “common ground” was and continues to be a big part of Prior’s perspective on abortion. “Most pro-life people and most pro-choice people care about women and children,” she said, and focusing on what benefits women and children and families provides the foundation for a conversation.

In practical terms, this emphasis has often meant supporting welfare programs meant to reduce the economic burden of child-rearing for women, increasing access to childcare, and, most controversially for some Christians, advocating for sex education and an array of contraception options. But Prior is uncertain about how attaining policies that appease both sides would go over now. “The political climate today is like nothing I’ve ever seen,” she said. “It is so fractured and filled with animosity and division.” She added, “Vigorous debate and vigorous disagreement is based on at least an acknowledgement of the other. I don’t even think we have that in common anymore, in culture in general.”

Within the Christian feminist movement, these contentious debates are often made more fraught, since many of the women involved are having to relearn decades of religious and social teachings. Micah, who wrote her master’s thesis on women in leadership roles in the Christian Church, now believes, “The Bible has to be read in proper context.” She said, “We see Jesus do some pretty radical things to empower women in a culture that was extremely patriarchal.”

Smith of New Wave Feminists thinks that both sides of the abortion debate should eliminate false assumptions. She said, “On both ends, we need to remove stereotypes.” Many Christians are still hesitant to support the feminist movement, and many secular feminists are reluctant to embrace members of the Christian community, whom they see as threatening to women’s reproductive rights.

Smith said, “We have villainized everybody and we are just barking at each other, instead of saying, ‘Okay, what about the solution?’” Having been kicked off a list of women supporting one of the biggest protests in national history, she would probably know. Her work, she says, is “about building bridges, not walls”—a line that echoes one of the Hillary Clinton campaign’s popular slogans from last fall. It’s also a goal that may serve the feminist movement as a whole, and the Democratic Party in particular. As the party continues to debate the details of its platform and the breadth of its membership, it’s clear that some pro-life feminists—and some pro-choice feminists too—are interested in having a conversation about how to move forward. Perhaps in bringing their differences, they can achieve goals dear to feminists on all sides.

ELLEN DUFFER is the managing editor and blog editor of Ploughshares.

Blaming a woman for getting pregnant is 100 percent the wrong way to handle that situation.
How the State Department Sidelined Religion

By Shaun Casey

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And yet, its role in diplomacy remains more important than ever.

IN EARLY 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry asked me to join the State Department and launch a new initiative, the Office of Religion and Global Affairs. Over the course of almost four years, we built a staff of 30 charged with the mission of advising the secretary when religion cut across his portfolio, engaging religious actors, assessing religious dynamics globally, and building the capacity of State Department offices and posts to do this work. The office served as the portal for anyone who wanted to connect with the department on issues related to religion.

Secretary Kerry’s insight was that religion was widely recognized as a public, multivalent, global force, and U.S. diplomacy needed to develop a better capacity to interpret the implications of religion. As he put it, “We ignore the global impact of religion at our peril.” Figuring out how to do this better was the task he gave me. As Harvard Kennedy School’s Bryan Hehir once opined, this sort of work is like brain surgery—necessary, but fatal if not done well.
Despite eliminated our success and innovation, the office as I knew it is no more. Recently, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson wrote to Congress, announc- ing his intentions to fold what is left of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs (RGA) into the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF). The RGA office budget will be stripped away; the titles of special representative for religion and global affairs, the special representative to Muslim communities, and the special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation will be eliminated; and the special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism will be moved to another bureau. The RGA staff slots will convey to the IRF office, which will almost double that office’s permanent staff but will hardly suffice to keep the work of the RGA going. The IRF office has a narrow mandate to compile and edit an annual report on the state of religious freedom worldwide. In its almost 20 years of existence, it has a spotty performance record and has suffered from chronic weak leadership. Despite the secretary’s intention to expand the religious freedom office, I have little confidence that the vital work of the RGA will continue under its auspices.

It pains me immeasurably to say this. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into bringing this crucial capacity to the State Department. It’s work that still matters. But given the moral and political fail- ings of the Trump administration, the mission of the RGA office will no longer be carried forward in a tenable way. I can only hope that the next admin- istration will restart work in this arena, and be able to correct the damage done by continuing it in the present diminished iteration.

While I cannot summarize every line of work the RGA office pursued, let me give some high- lights. We drew on the academic and diplomatic expertise of our staff, government partners in and outside the State Department, and academic resources around the globe to be able to under- stand lived religion, in geographical context. There is no such thing as religion in the abstract, no essence of religion to be isolated abstractly and then applied to the world. Religion needs to be understood in specific social, political, and histor- ical contexts, interacting with myriad social and political dynamics. It is phenomenally complex, and policy makers are constantly tempted to fol- low stereotypes. Our job was to resist stereotypes and interpret religious dynamics in a manner that reflected nuance and study.

Likewise, we had a commitment to radical inclusivity, which meant we built a set of con- tacts and relationships with thousands of reli- gious actors, organizations, and communities, meeting with any that wanted to meet with us, without endorsing any particular theological com- mitments or domestic political standing. Many of these interlocutors are now shut out of the State Department as the RGA office has withered to under five staffers in the first eight months of the administration. Now it is unclear who they will be meeting with as the State Department reorganizes. It is clear that the senior leadership at the White House and the State Department does not want to engage a broad set of religious communities, preferring instead to focus mainly on evangelical and fundamentalist Christians.

We significantly expanded the department’s efforts to monitor and combat anti-Semitism through the work of the special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism. This expansion came in a period when anti-Semitism grew not only in raw numbers of incidents, but also in terms of such acts becoming more overtly public and more vio- lent. The Trump administration’s delay in filling this position—after openly talking about cutting it—can only be described as reflecting a latent, if not overt, anti-Semitism. Seen in the context of the presi- dent’s reprehensible defense of the perpetrators of violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, this represents a dark and disturbing reputation of a core historic U.S. diplomatic commitment.

The RGA office worked on many issues. We pro- vided support for the Israeli-Palestinian negotia- tion, and for responding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We helped with peace efforts in Cyprus, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Ethiopia. We supported the Paris Climate talks and enhanced U.S. refugee resettlement work. Our work entailed combating Islamophobia globally and assisting with post-con- flict reconstruction in Iraq. We contributed to resolving hostage situations and opposing Female Genital Mutilation. We helped build deeper rela- tions with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. We promoted LGBTI rights in parts of the world where criminalization and rising violence were prevalent. The list could go on and on.

We have enough data on the administration’s approach to religion to be afraid of where it is heading.

In its first eight months, the current adminis- tration has systematically dismantled the historic American diplomatic capacity. We no longer have a fraction of the global influence and reach we once had. It is unprecedented in the modern pres- idency. Secretary Tillerson remains bunkered in his seventh-floor aerie, virtually cut off from any career expertise on his payroll. There is not a func- tioning routine policymaking apparatus in foreign policy. Let that sink in for a moment. The White House has not had a working system of assessing global dynamics on a day-to-day basis and forming wise strategic global policy since this administra- tion began. There are dozens of events every day around the world where missteps in diplomatic responses on the part of our government could lead to war, and this White House does not have a way to tap the vast expertise at its disposal nor does it seem to care about responding in the smartest ways and avoiding the perilous options that could lead to war.

Almost every undersecretary and assistant sec- retary position remains unfilled with permanent appointees. As a result, the White House receives virtually no expert analysis as our erratic president tweets foreign policy at all hours of the night, and White House staffers scramble to de-conflict the chaos as our allies and enemies search for coer- cing our policies around the world because they do not have clear guid- ance from Washington. From the nuclear brink in North Korea, to the search for peace in the Middle East, to the global refugee crisis, we have no formal strategies. Instead we read news stories of senior administration principals disagreeing and fighting among themselves.

Currently, Secretary Tillerson is conducting a strategic review of the department’s mission. His present plan includes eliminating dozens of special envoy and special representative posts, including the office I once held at the RGA. Assuming he continues to support the proposed massive cuts in personnel and budget, the State Department’s cur- rent ennui and collapse will be formalized via these cuts, thus further weakening America’s diminished role in the world. Even if this process yields a cred- ible plan for the department, it will take more than a year for him to nominate, vet, and gain Senate
Gone are the days when the State Department had the capacity to understand lived religion in almost any part of the world.

To the extent one can discern any form of strategy to govern and guide the treatment of religion, it is simply to burnish evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity both domestically and abroad. Gone are the days when the State Department had the capacity to understand lived religion in almost any part of the world. Gone is the capacity to train staff at embassies and posts around the world in how to understand and interpret religious dynamics. The vast network of contacts and relationships the State Department built are no longer tapped and consulted. Domestically, hundreds of religious communities are now shut out of the building and no longer welcome to critique, to partner, or to convey global messages.

In addition to the instrumentalization of religion in the short term, I have a long-term fear. If this administration chooses not only to dismantle the Obama strategy of integrating religious understanding into our diplomacy, but also pursues a path that rewards only conservative Christians through the State Department and other agencies, the next administration may see religion as an analytical category so poisoned and compromised as to be irredeemable. So even a progressive administration might not be able to see its way clear to replicate its own version of what we did under Secretary Kerry.

I had always thought it would take at least two presidential terms to stabilize the mission of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, and after that its leadership should come from someone in the Foreign Service, not a political appointee like me. Two terms would have demonstrated the ongoing viability of the contribution to U.S. diplomacy. After two terms, I had hoped that a career diplomat would be appointed to be the next special representative for religion and global affairs. I believed such a person might be able to resist any pressure to transform the office into a partisan shop. It would have preserved the integrity of the office mission to provide analysis and continue to engage a wide and diverse set of religious actors irrespective of their theological beliefs.

I am saddened that the U.S. special representative for religion and global affairs will no longer be a position at the State Department. It is devastating that the Office of Religion and Global Affairs will cease to exist as it once was. But given this administration’s failures, perhaps there is no palatable alternative to closing the office and waiting for a new, smarter administration to renew some version of what we accomplished under Secretary Kerry’s vision and leadership.

Shaun Casey is director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University. He previously was U.S. special representative for religion and global affairs and director of the U.S. Department of State’s Office of Religion and Global Affairs.

In 2016, Shaun Casey, the former U.S. State Department Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs, stands between the Greek Orthodox Christian Archbishop Chrysostomos and Muslim Grand Mufti Talip Atalay.

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