

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

2018



SPECIAL ISSUE  
CELEBRATING  
FIVE YEARS

*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.



John C. Danforth Center on  
RELIGION AND POLITICS



Washington University in St. Louis

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Marie Griffith  
Editor

## Celebrating Five Years of R&P

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**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](http://religionandpolitics.org) to see where we're going!



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# CONTENTS

ISSUE 01  
2018

## 2015

### Pope Francis Comes to Washington

By Leslie Woodcock Tentler PG 57

### On Planned Parenthood, Beware of False Prophets

By Marie Griffith PG 62

### When Our Truths Are Ignored

By Yolanda Pierce PG 66

## 2016

#### ORLANDO: A LAMENT

By Mark D. Jordan  
PG 70

#### TRUMP & THE EVANGELICAL POLITICAL SCHISM

By Mark Valeri PG 72

#### ERIC METAXAS'S BONHOEFFER DELUSIONS

By Charles Marsh PG 76

#### AN ATHEIST FOR PRESIDENT?

By Leigh Eric Schmidt  
PG 81

#### IN THE AGE OF TRUMP, MUSLIM VOTERS MOBILIZE

By Tiffany Stanley PG 84

#### THE QUEST FOR CONFIDENT PLURALISM

By Gordon Haber PG 88

## 2017

### The Theology of Stephen K. Bannon

By Hugh Urban PG 93

### Reinhold Niebuhr, Washington's Favorite Theologian

By Gene Zubovich PG 97

### Where Do Pro-Life Feminists Belong?

By Ellen Duffer PG 102

### How the State Department Has Sidelined Religion

By Shaun Casey PG 106

## 2012

#### Why American Evangelicals Love the British

By Molly Worthen PG 4

#### Why is American Foreign Policy so Religious?

By Andrew Preston PG 11

#### The Long Approach to the "Mormon Moment"

By Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp PG 16

#### Post-Racial America? The Tangle of Race, Religion, and Citizenship

By Judith Weisenfeld PG 26

#### Jon Stewart, Religion Teacher Extraordinaire

By Mark Oppenheimer PG 32

## 2013

#### THE END OF DOMA AND THE DISMANTLING OF THE "STRAIGHT STATE"

By Sarah Barringer  
Gordon PG 35

#### RADICAL MISSION: WHAT IS AISH HATORAH TRYING TO TEACH YOUNG JEWS?

By Michael  
Schulson PG 38

## 2014

### Marilynne Robinson In Montgomery

By Briallen Hopper PG 44

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

By Lerone A. Martin PG 54

ON THE COVER: GIRL POWER BY BRANDEN EASTWOOD/REDUX; CECILE RICHARDS BY THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES

Cover illustration by Michelle Thompson

# Why American Evangelicals Love the British

By Molly Worthen

Published on  
May 1, 2012

CULTURE  
EDUCATION

Christians around the world revered the Rev. John Stott, a self-described “radical conservative Evangelical.”

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

**J**OHAN 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.” He

KIERAN DODDS





followed up with ten tweets about what he learned from Stott, the longtime rector of a traditional London parish and a chaplain to the queen with a degree from Cambridge—at first glance, an odd role model for Warren, a megachurch pastor known for preaching in sandals and a Hawaiian shirt.

Stott was the only person whose words could hush the bickering evangelical horde. Upon his death, he has been beatified by Christians on both sides of the culture wars who say he was just the man of faith they aspire to be—whether their aspirations include campaigning against global warming or raging abortion clinics (and despite the fact that Stott did neither of these things himself). A closer look at Stott's popularity and influence reveals a great deal about American evangelicalism's aspirations and ambiguities. Stott shared his American fans' most basic beliefs, but they loved him so much because he was so wholly unlike them.

**JOHN STOTT WAS BORN** in 1921 to an upper-middle class London family. His father was a doctor who had little patience for religion and disapproved when Stott informed the family—before he was yet out of high school—that he would not sign up to fight the Germans, but would instead devote himself to the “spiritual battle” at home. After studying modern languages at Cambridge (his father clung to the hope that Stott might become a diplomat), he came home to serve at his childhood parish, All Souls Church at Langham Place.

Stott owed his conversion to the influence of a charismatic Bible teacher who mentored him as a teenager. From the earliest years of his ministry Stott too had a heart for students, traveling all over the world to speak to them, preaching sermons that would become the basis for his most influential book, a slim volume called *Basic Christianity* (1958), which has sold 2.5 million copies in 54 languages. He helped organize Billy Graham's 1954 London crusade and worked closely with the leaders of American evangelicalism from then on, visiting the United States frequently to speak at missionary conventions and teach at Christian colleges. His collaboration with Graham culminated at a mammoth 1974 congress in Lausanne, Switzerland, the apogee of efforts by evangelicals to assemble co-believers from every inhabited continent in a “Spirit-filled”

push to defend Biblical authority, while acknowledging Western evangelicals' longstanding neglect of social justice. More than 2,300 evangelical leaders from 150 nations and dependencies spent ten days drafting the Lausanne Covenant, in which they emphasized that “reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation.” Stott agreed, but he stressed in his own commentary that “it is our duty to be involved in socio-political action; that is, both in social action (caring for society's casualties) and in political action (concerned for the structures of society itself).” Throughout his career he called upon evangelicals to decry inequity and cruelty wherever they found it, just as the prophets of ancient Israel did: “apathy is the acceptance of the unacceptable,” he wrote.

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



J.R.R. Tolkien

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. Drove 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 cultured despisers.



C.S. Lewis

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.

paraphernalia, Taylor University in Upland, Indiana, has constructed a replica of the Eagle & Child in the basement of the university library. The beer pulls at the bar, of course, are just for show: Taylor is a dry campus.

**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.”

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 evangelicalism 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 from the Board of Trustees to purchase fine works by Renaissance and Baroque masters for the university’s growing collection.) In recent decades, evangelicals have transformed some of their most conservative colleges into serious academic institutions and racked up accolades in mainstream academia. Yet the most accomplished evangelical scholars still think that the movement has a long way to go: In his 1994 book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, historian Mark Noll wrote, “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”

American evangelicals find intellectual and cultural validation in Oxbridge Christians like Tolkien, Lewis, and Stott. If these Oxford and Cam-


bridge-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 manly Livingstonian 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 varnish 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 respite 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 *Christianity 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 rebut 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*.





ESSAY

# 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.

FOREIGN POLICY

**O**N 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,

*Illustration by Irene Rinaldi*

Religion & Politics



for hope over hatred and unity over division, is a just one. And with God's help, it will prevail."

9/11 will scar the collective American consciousness for years to come. But on this occasion, the president speaking from the pulpit of the National Cathedral wasn't George W. Bush, but Bill Clinton. And the year wasn't 2001, but 1998. Clinton's address marked his effort to respond to the al Qaeda bombing against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, attacks that killed 223 people. Three years later, of course, Bush would use strikingly similar rhetoric to make sense of the far more horrific attacks of 9/11.

It was entirely fitting that two presidents of such different outlooks—one a liberal Democrat, the other a conservative Republican—should respond to terrorism and foreign crisis by using religious imagery, rhetoric, and values in an almost identical manner. Contrary to conventional wisdom, religion has consistently been a major component of America's foreign relations. From liberals like Clinton, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman to conservatives like Bush, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan, religion has been central to the conduct of America's relations with the wider world.

The religious influence in American war and diplomacy does not belong to liberals or conservatives, Democrats or Republicans. It never has. Religion is instead a shared value, a bipartisan outlook common to most Americans throughout their history, and it has been at the heart of U.S. foreign policy for centuries. George Washington began the tradition of promoting peace and democracy through religious liberty, and even impious presidents such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison continued it. In modern times, it was FDR—a liberal Democrat and mainline Episcopalian ecumenist who detested theological rigidities and doctrinal niceties—who enshrined religion at the heart of U.S. foreign policy.

But religion's influence hasn't relied on pious presidents in the Oval Office. In fact, the role of religion in U.S. foreign policy has mostly been the result of religion's prevalence in American politics, culture, and society. It has been a product of the American people as much as their presidents.

**WHY IS U.S. FOREIGN POLICY** so moralistic? Why, unusually among the diplomats of the world,

do American foreign policymakers appeal to ideals and values, such as the promotion of human rights and democracy, when the leaders of other nations do not? U.S. presidents have been known for their moralism for a long time—Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first to be scolded by European leaders for it. But where does it come from?

In large part, the answer has to do with religion, particularly the pressure from below applied by ordinary religious Americans who did not wield policy-making influence or political power. The reason they were able to do so is two-fold. First, for most of its history—indeed, until the nuclear age—the United States was free from attack or invasion and thus enjoyed what national security analysts call "free security." This afforded Americans a foreign policy of almost total choice, and with it the freedom to envision the world as they wanted it to be. It also meant that foreign policymakers in Washington couldn't suppress popular causes on the grounds of national security. To be sure, the advent of air power and nuclear weapons during World War II brought the age of free security to an end, but not before foreign policy habits and cultures had formed indelibly. Second, in a democracy, American officials couldn't ignore popular pressures from below, especially if they couldn't dismiss them on national security grounds. The combination of free security and republican democracy, in other words, gave religion an opening it might not otherwise have had to influence the making of U.S. foreign policy.

Conducting foreign policy is about serving the national interest, which often leads nations into morally questionable behavior. Religion, on the other hand, is about doing what's right. People of faith are inherently idealistic. Others may disagree with those ideals, but at its core religion is about believing in a set of principles that imagines the world as it should really be. When motivated by an issue they believe to be important, religious communities are indefatigable, determined, averse to compromise, highly activist, politically connected, and deeply concerned with the wider world. They relentlessly press their elected officials to protect and promote ideals that are often universal rather than national.

From antebellum evangelical and Unitarian abolitionists who opposed territorial expansion to missionaries who dragged the U.S. government



into the Chinese interior, ordinary religious Americans have advanced their own foreign policy agendas that officials in Washington have found impossible to resist. And history is littered with examples of presidents who failed to handle religious controversies adeptly, and either suffered for it at the ballot box or lost control of their foreign policy. It is, however, a relatively recent case study—the rise, fall, and reemergence of détente, from the early 1970s to the end of the Cold War in 1989—that provides perhaps the best illustration.

**IN THE EARLY 1970s**, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger wanted to forge a new relationship with the Soviet Union. In the midst of the war in Vietnam, a slowing economy, and racial strife at home, they felt that the United States couldn't continue to bear the limitless costs of waging the Cold War. Their solution was détente, a relaxation of tensions with the Soviets that would allow Nixon to reduce military spending and extricate the nation from Indochina.

Détente, however, meant that the U.S. government could no longer criticize the Soviets' appalling human rights record. In the name of stable and

President Franklin Roosevelt attends prayer services at St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. on March 4, 1942. At left is the Rev. Endicott Peabody and at right is Major General Edwin M. Watson.

friendly relations, American ideals were suppressed; justice was sacrificed for order. "I have no doubt that Soviet Jews as a group are severely disadvantaged," Kissinger said dispassionately to a colleague in 1969, "but there is virtually no way in which we as a government can exert pressure on the Soviet Union to ease their plight." In fact, he continued, American hectoring of the Soviet Union would be "counter-productive" because the Soviets "are exceptionally defensive about the Jewish problem, and inevitably regard any official U.S. Government action on the subject as an attempt to interfere in Soviet internal affairs"—which, of course, is precisely what détente's critics had in mind. Even worse, the Kremlin then used détente as cover to launch a renewed assault on the basic rights of their Jewish citizens—and

AP PHOTO



# The religious influence in American war and diplomacy does not belong to liberals or conservatives, Democrats or Republicans.

many Christians, too. Unable to practice their religion, Soviet Jews pressed to emigrate to Israel; the Kremlin wouldn't let them, virtually imprisoning a people because of their faith.

This didn't sit well with 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'

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, Jackson teamed up with Vanik in the House to make the extension of MFN status to the Soviet Union dependent upon a demonstrable improvement in their treatment of Jews, especially the right to emigrate to Israel. Knowing that they could command bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress, and knowing that the Soviets would never consent to the meddling which their amendment demanded, Jackson and Vanik had effectively killed détente. As Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrynin recalled, "no other single question did more to sour the atmosphere of détente than the question of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union." It was a question Nixon and Kissinger had never wanted to ask.

By 1979, détente had collapsed under the weight of its own internal contradictions. But Americans' campaign for the religious rights of others continued apace. Democratic politicians like Senator Jackson and Massachusetts Congressman Father Robert F. Drinan—the first priest elected to Congress—worked in tandem with Republicans to call attention to the anti-religious human rights abuses of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In turn, nongovernmental organizations like Human Rights Watch and the Christian Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights supplied Jackson, Drinan, and others with evidence smuggled out of Europe of communist abuses of religious liberty.

Nixon, Ford, and Carter handled domestic religious politics poorly. And there things stood when Ronald Reagan became president in 1980. Reagan's solution was to blend religion with foreign policy in a way that would promote American values while also serving the U.S. national interest. The result was the end of the Cold War.

This solution, however, did not come easily, and Reagan initially stumbled by promoting American exceptionalism, particularly the idea that America

was God's chosen nation, at the expense of religious liberty. In March 1983, in a major address to the National Association of Evangelicals, Reagan denounced the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" and called for a renewed effort to win the Cold War. "There is sin and evil in the world," he reminded the NAE delegates, "and we're enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might." In that same speech, he condemned his domestic critics in the nuclear freeze movement, mostly Catholic priests and bishops, who assailed U.S. policies on strategic weapons and in Central America. Such rhetoric alarmed people around the world and created opposition to U.S. foreign policy at home and abroad.


But then Reagan pivoted to religious liberty instead of religious exceptionalism—at precisely the same time he began to explore a relaxation of tensions with Moscow—and he found his progress much easier. The same year as his "evil empire" speech—and, amazingly, two full years into his presidency—Reagan invited the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, to the White House for their first-ever private conversation. To Dobrynin's astonishment, 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 long-standing 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 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 1988 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 *mentanoya*, 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. 

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# The Long Approach to the “Mormon Moment”

By Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp

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CULTURE  
ELECTIONS

It's at least a century in the making.

**U**NLESS 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

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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 the East and regroup in the Midwest—first in Missouri, where in the mid-1830s Mormons began to gather in Jackson and then Clay counties, and later in the newer settlements of Caldwell and Daviess counties. From the start their arrival, coming as it did in large numbers (in the thousands) and through continuing streams of immigrants from both the eastern states and Europe, caused political and economic tensions with older settlers. Following years of sporadic violence and threats on both sides, the 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, where 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 settlements in Missouri and Illinois, their tenure in these states was never long enough or peaceful 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 Mormon, 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 discontinue 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, but never seriously a 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

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

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 Mormons. 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





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

the Salt Lake Basin in the early 1870s. She 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

graced newsstands in 1900. And most Saints met the challenge of Mormon citizenship gladly, knowing that it provided both a measure of security for their own families and community as well as an opportunity to spread their religious message to places that previously had been blocked, if not entirely closed to them. It was in that moment of arrival on the American political scene that the peculiar talents of an oppressed religious community became useful in another sense: The Saints had learned to live with the gaze of the world upon them, and that self-consciousness would become an ally in their campaign to assimilate, to function simultaneously as Mormons and as American citizens.

**THE MOST OBVIOUS MEANS** of joining the nation was, of course, to become involved in politics by running for office. Indeed, it was the trial in 1904-1907 of elected U.S. Senator Reed Smoot, a church member from Utah who met with fierce resistance to being seated, that precipitated the realization from church leaders that a broader campaign for acceptance would need to be launched. If Mormons were

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to become citizens, they would need to find a variety of ways to ensure their membership. Smoot eventually was seated, and he served in Congress into the 1930s. But the resistance to his claims, brought not because of anything he had done himself but because of his leadership in a church that was still suspected of breaking federal laws by harboring polygamists, was a lesson learned well by the Saints. Instead, they looked to other modes of inclusion.

Building on the perceived success of the Utah state exhibit at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Mormon leaders wagered that culture gatherings such as World’s Fairs and Expositions offered a non-threatening way to present a positive image to the American public and to emphasize contributions of the Mormons to the nation. Their first approaches quite purposefully diverted public attention from overtly religious practices. Whereas a focus on religion might have prompted consideration of recent battles over the legacy of polygamy or unusual practices such as baptisms for the dead, early exhibitors instead steered the public gaze toward the economic, agricultural, and technological achievements of Utah (still majority Mormon) and its surrounding areas. In 1904, for example, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition was held in St. Louis, then the fourth largest city in the United States. Utah officials erected a reproduction of Little Zion Valley, showing small farms ringed with mountains, as its agricultural offering. In the Exhibition Palace the Utah displays won prizes in education, mining, metallurgy, and irrigation. A year later the state garnered even more acclaim in Portland, Oregon, at the Lewis and Clark Exposition, when the Ogden-based Mormon Tabernacle Choir performed to sold-out crowds. The piece they sang, composed by a fellow church member, was entitled the “Irrigation Ode”—dexterously honoring local technologies and simultaneously showcasing the superior musical skills of the choir. More than 1,000 people were turned away from their final concert, and Mormon leaders considered the show a rousing success in increasing national acceptance of the church.

After a dozen similar forays into public exhibitions, Mormons felt emboldened to present themselves not simply as technological wizards or superior irrigation specialists, but as participants with a religion. By the time of the second World’s

Fair in Chicago in 1933, Mormon contributions more overtly addressed the church’s religious distinctiveness. Volunteers distributed religious literature, recited the 100-year history of the church, and proudly displayed a miniature replica of the Salt Lake Tabernacle and Organ to approximately 4,000 visitors per day in the Hall of Religions. Church members clearly saw this achievement as the ideal 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!” George S. Romney, great-uncle to Mitt and mission president for the Chicago region, noted how ably the exhibits showcased Mormon family life (now safely monogamous and nuclear in structure), and remarked on how “hungry” visitors seemed to be for the Mormon message.

**A SECOND CHARACTERISTIC** mode of assimilation employed by Mormon leaders was outreach through educational spokespersons, church members who had been trained outside of the Salt Lake Basin and could serve as bridge builders through both personal connections and common academic interests. Mormons had always valued education, so this seemed like a natural place to forge substantive ties that could help with other enterprises. The most prominent example of this trend can be seen in the career of James Talmage. A British-born convert to the faith, Talmage migrated to Provo, Utah, with his family in 1877. After high school Talmage left for the east coast, where he studied chemistry and geology at Lehigh and Johns Hopkins Universities before receiving a PhD from Illinois Wesleyan in 1896. Returning west, Talmage joined the faculty at the University of Utah, where he taught geology. In 1911, he was called as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (the highest level of leadership underneath the Presidency), and served there until 1933.

Along with his skills in science, Talmage was a master of public relations. In 1911 the LDS Church had discovered that the interior of the Salt Lake Temple, considered a sacred site, had secretly been photographed; the perpetrators demanded a



\$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 brilliant 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 staunch 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 on atheism and Murshida Rabia Martin presented on Sufism. Talmage spoke in a session alongside Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant luminaries; his paper on “The Philosophical Basis of Mormonism” was later prepared for missionary distribution. In each of these settings, Talmage presented Mormonism as a viable religious option among others, and in this regard his performance of civic parity with other religious leaders was as significant as the words he spoke.

One evident effect of these forged intellectual connections was a score of friendly outsiders who began to publish sympathetic accounts of the church. *The Case Against Mormonism* (which was, despite its title, a congenial rendering and close analysis of what the author called the “lies” perpetrated against the Saints) appeared in 1915; the author, who used the pen name Robert C. Webb, advertised the book as the product of a “non-Mormon,” and everything in its pages seemed addressed to an educated audience well versed in the fields of economics, sociology, and theology: “What is needed in the premises is a careful and conscientious examination of the origin and claims of ‘Mormonism,’ in order that intelligent people may oppose it intelligently, if so disposed, or, in any event, estimate at a fair appraisal this system of teaching and practice.” Using anti-Mormon excitement as evidence of the significance of the subject, he criticized Christians who would easily dismiss the claims of the faith. “The candid observer of all this can scarcely fail to conclude that there must be something really interesting in a system, in

opposition to which people will thus stultify themselves and lie, as so many anti-Mormon writers have done, and which, in spite of the contemptible character ascribed to it, still seems sufficiently important to excite so great antipathy.” The author was, it turned out, an Episcopalian and Harvard Divinity School graduate named James Edward Homans; during the course of writing his defense of the faith, he had lunched occasionally with James Talmage and shared his labors with him—thus demonstrating the efficacy of intellectual ties.

Increasing numbers of Mormons by the 1920s and 1930s forged paths similar to James Talmage, traveling roads that eventually led to positions in business and the government. By the 1930s, church member J. Reuben Clark served as the U.S. ambassador to Mexico. Clark had received a law degree from Columbia, and had then served as an attorney in department of state and undersecretary of state for Calvin Coolidge. After years of public service, he returned to administration within the LDS Church itself, bringing years of bureaucratic experience back to his role as a counselor in the First Presidency. In this way, through the use of channels of education, the world of Mormon Utah inched ever closer to the networks of academic and professional power, forging ties cemented by shared intellectual sensibilities and liberal religious sympathies.

**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

## The church has worked long and hard to build acceptance as a legitimate player in the world of American public life.

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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 Swiss; Defeating Mormon Proselyting.... The estimated attendance was over two thousand during the forenoon and nearly double that number in the afternoon.

The chairman in announcing the opening of the “Conference on Mormonism” made plain the fact that denunciation, not investigation, would be the key-note 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 Winifred 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 Lulu Loveland Shepard, an evangelical powerhouse 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 critic of the “Mormon menace.” In her address to the delegation, she called upon Christians to wake up and stop the Mormons from engulfing the nation in another Civil War. If nothing were to change, she warned ominously, the Mormon Church would gain enough power to control the government; she predicted that the church would appoint by fiat the next president of the United States, an act that would certainly lead to a war between East and West, “unless you people awake... and throttle the power of the Mormon Church.”

Talmage was aghast at the proceedings, which he described in detail in a church periodical later that year. Most instructive for our purposes is the target of his anger: he expressed astonishment that one of the speakers criticized an LDS church member who had served as a chaplain in the U.S. Army; he also seemed astounded by the charges leveled

at other American Christians for allowing Mormons to become an integral part of civic life. But he expressed particular consternation that, when he passed a note to the aisle 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 attainments, 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 Republic 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” evangelistic techniques, their control of Utah politics, and their “rigid conservatism.” Writers expressed alarm over the “unquestioning belief” in church leaders. The Civil Rights movement, which swept away many previously segregated white churches into an interracial 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 roiling 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 Christianity more aggressively accompanied the growth of conservative evangelical political strength in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, we witnessed the growth of an anti-cult movement that targeted the Mormons as a dangerous social force. The salient issue and possibly the worst offense, at this point, was that Mormon social mores were so much like those of evangelicals. Whereas in 1919 evangelicals could still use the recent legacy of polygamy to distinguish their behavior from those of the Mormons, by the 1970s Mormons seemed quite, well, conservatively Christian in their behavior. They touted wholesome family values, they supported traditional roles for women, and they practiced an admirable fastidiousness toward the use of coffee, alcohol, and cigarettes.

In the current moment, too, Mormons have fewer liberal sympathizers and more enemies. Now, we see atheists who are cultural combatants every bit as assertive as their evangelical counterparts, and we hear regularly from liberal pundits such as Maureen Dowd and Lawrence O’Donnell as they invoke temple rituals and sacred undergarments to measure the oddities of Mormons. Currently, the church seems to be getting it from all sides.

For Saints themselves, this negative response can seem quite puzzling in light of their history of steadily increasing acceptance. They thought they knew how to be citizens, how to participate and to be included as full members of the body politic. They have practiced for a century, tinkering with the formula when necessary, and yet their efforts still don’t seem to be good enough for other Americans, who keep moving the bar in response. This dynamic raises an interesting theoretical question, for which we still don’t have an answer: what would Mormons have to do, short of renouncing their religion, to be accepted in the public square? As the Saints have attempted to resolve the dilemma of Mormon citizenship, the stakes of the long Mormon moment have crystallized in this election cycle. Mitt Romney’s candidacy has served as only the latest catalyst to solidify the tensions and problems of a long and complex history. 

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# Post-Racial America? The Tangle of Race, Religion, and Citizenship

Is achieving a post-racial nation even possible or desirable?

By Judith Weisenfeld

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**T**HE 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 naïve 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 at all, with the former calling his comments “disgraceful” and the latter, “political opportunism.”

Varied commentators in this “age of Obama” have made insistent and powerful arguments that America is *not* a post-racial society, that the claim is just naïve colorblindness repackaged, and that the long, painful, violent history of racial inequity requires continued attention to how race and racism operate in contemporary life. A banner headline—“Putting ‘Post-Racial’ to Rest”—at the top of the cover page of the Fall 2010 centennial issue of the NAACP’s magazine *The Crisis* exemplifies the resistance among African Americans in particular to the premises of post-racialism becoming accepted as fact. In the strongly-worded opinion piece to which the banner referred, Rutgers-Newark Law Professor David Dante Trout wrote that, “Ever since Barack Obama became a presidential contender and the term came into use, many of us have looked forward to its demise. Not because it is unworthy.” In fact,

Trout noted, American liberals in the Civil Rights Movement had premised their work on hopes similar to those invoked by the term post-racial, but he emphasized that the mythology currently attached to the word obscures the persistence of racial inequity in American society. In a 2011 *New York Times* blog post, Touré pleaded with Americans to stop using the term. “It’s a term for a concept that doesn’t exist. There’s no there there.” Last month in *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates reflected on the political consequences and constraints that claims of a post-racial America have placed on the president. “The irony of Barack Obama is this,” Coates wrote, “he has become the most successful black politician in American history by avoiding the radioactive racial issues of yesteryear ... and yet his indelible blackness irradiates everything he touches.” Coates charted the challenges that Obama, the child of a white American mother and a black Kenyan father, faces in signifying as black (both inevitably and 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 confluences 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 hierarchy. 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 burden 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

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.

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



America was political in that most were interested in gaining full citizenship rights, but their alternative approaches were inseparable from religious commitment. In seeking to become post-racial—in the sense that they rejected conventional American categories—members of some groups took routes to understanding their place in wartime America that led them 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 “registrar’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 registrar 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 unconventional religiously grounded approaches to racial identity. Members of various congregations of black Hebrews, many of them 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 pandering 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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Father Divine stands in his office at Circle Mission Church in Philadelphia in 1947.



COURTESY PALACE MISSION CHURCH

# Jon Stewart, Religion Teacher Extraordinaire

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

By Mark  
Oppenheimer

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**A**S 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—frequently 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-complected 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

BRAD BARKET/STRINGER



moist”), the dialogue is exceptionally accurate about all three religions: traditional Christianity, Latter-day Saint practices, and Judaism. The Mormons’ special underwear is played for laughs, it’s true—but the point is that Stewart and his writers convey more specifics about religious practice in less than four minutes than any documentary or nightly news segment I’ve ever seen.


And the implicit message is one that religion scholars are always trying to convey: All religions have beliefs that seem bizarre to outsiders, and “cult” is often just a word to describe the other guy’s religion. *The Daily Show* approaches American religion in the spirit of tolerance, but not with the wimpy, eager-to-please hand-wringing that characterizes so much liberal dialogue in this country. Rather, religions are shown to be strange and possibly cringe-inducing: Our job is to take an honest look, then tolerate them anyway. It’s a call to rigorous citizenship.

At some point, every one of Stewart’s regulars is called upon to represent a different religious group—Mandvi is often the Muslim, Cenac the Christian, and in one episode the Englishman John Oliver tries to claim Halifax, Nova Scotia, as a new holy site for Jews (“Challahfax”—although according to Mandvi, who is trying to claim the site for Muslims, it is pronounced “Halalifax”). The cast is like a merry band of religious satirists, with a joke for every faith playing in their repertoire.

Stewart himself has said very little about his own Judaism, although he is clearly non-practicing by most any definition: He has gone to work, and recorded shows, on the High Holidays, for example. The writer Marty Kaplan tells the story of moderating a forum about why Jews who don’t believe go to synagogue on the holidays: “At one point, a congregant, without prompting, told the room that Stewart didn’t take the High Holy Days off,” Kaplan writes. “His tone was a mixture of anger and disappointment, the kind of sentiment someone might feel about a misguided family member.” And it so happens that I think Stewart’s humor might even be stronger, more durable, if it weren’t all quite so frivolous to him. For example, the writer Shalom Auslander, who was raised very religiously, is capable of a kind of enduring, deeply poignant satire that is beyond Stewart. Similarly, I suspect that Stephen Colbert, erstwhile *Daily Show* cast member and now host of *The Colbert Report*, has comedic

hues that come from his Catholic religiosity, which he speaks openly about.

But if Stewart is himself indifferent to religion, he is clearly not bitter about it. There is no apparent ideology, either religious or skeptical, animating Stewart’s treatment of religion. More than anything, he and his writers have the scrupulosity of objective journalists. They win laughs without deforming, or even exaggerating, the religion’s actual beliefs. This is an extraordinary feat. Most religious humor, especially on television or in the movies, depends on stereotypes, which are by definition crude and reductive. Stewart’s writers, by contrast, find humor in the specifics of each faith. They would rather laugh at the finer points of belief than stick pins in some caricature. When they are especially fortunate, they can describe a faith through its antagonists—while making those antagonists look ridiculous. Here I am thinking of a segment from 2010, in which Wyatt Cenac interviewed a Muslim woman whose application to be a foster mother was rejected because she would not allow pork products in her house. He made the foster agency look absurd and bigoted, and he helped explain Muslim dietary practices to the audience.

Especially when taken out of context, disembodied from the civilizations and cultures in which they make sense, religious claims are frequently of the bizarre sort that no sane person ought to believe. Humor actually proves to be one of the best devices to help skeptics or the uninitiated talk about religion. And it offers a great litmus test for believers: How confident are you in your beliefs? After all, no confident believer should be afraid to chuckle about religion’s seeming absurdities—just as no mirthful human being should pass up the chance to laugh along with the unbeliever. *The Daily Show* has more fun with religion than any show on television—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 croissanwich for Passover—but he is one hell of a teacher. 

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ESSAY  
CIVIL LIBERTIES  
LAW & ORDER  
SEXUALITY &  
GENDER

By Sarah Barringer  
Gordon

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# 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.

**A**DVOCATES 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 and reflected in such ceremonies. The performance of a marriage (the “I now pronounce” part is what scholars call a “performative”—it becomes true through the



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*—smaller yet ubiquitous changes in citizenship, federal welfare policy, Social Secu-

**Religious commentators are split, like most of the nation. The legal morass has just gotten deeper.**

riety, immigration, and more will follow. As the historian Margot Canaday argued persuasively in her 2009 book *The Straight State*, 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 hetero-normativity 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. **REP**

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

By Michael Schulson

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CULTURE  
EDUCATION  
FOREIGN POLICY  
SCIENCE

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

**O**N 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.

**JEW’S 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’alei 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.

REYNOLD MAINSE/DESIGN PICS



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, with white stone archways that pay tasteful homage to the architecture of Old Jerusalem, and a Dale Chihuly blown-glass sculpture in the middle of the atrium. Serious men in yarmulkes walk about. Their black suits speak "executive" more than "ultra-Orthodox." I overheard one Aish rabbi with shaggy hair and foot-long sidelocks explain that he no longer taught in Aish's introductory seminar because "you need 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 *mensh*. 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 that are truth-holders, then why isn't there a need to tell people?"

The teacher was bewildered. "There is."

"But Jews don't evangelize," the student pointed out.

The teacher changed the subject.

I spent my first day at Aish taking the Discovery Seminar, Aish's five-part, day-long introductory course. Aish claims on its website that 10,000 students take the class every year. That day, an elderly couple and a handful of young, non-Orthodox men were in attendance, along with an Orthodox rabbi who seemed interested in observing Aish's methods, and 60 or so young women, all of them students in a yearlong Talmud study program. "You don't have a *chance* with them," their program director warned me, unprompted, some 90 seconds into our conversation. "They're all Orthodox." He reconsidered. "But they haven't seen a man in months."

The Discovery Seminar teachers emphasize that they have no interest in faith. "The key word today is knowledge," explained Rabbi Aaron Neckameyer, who grew up in Los Angeles and has a degree in marketing. "If the Torah is what the Torah claims to be, we can know it. We can verify it." To do so, Aish's rabbis borrow a logical rubric from Mossad,

the Israeli counterpart to the CIA. Nicknamed "Fail-safe," this method is designed to test whether the sender of a message is who he claims to be—or, in the case of the Torah, who He claims to be.

All of this is a fancy way of saying that Aish thinks it can prove God's existence by analyzing the Torah very, very carefully. It's "the science of belief," according to Aish's website, and the result is a surreal blend of Hebrew School and math class. One lecture, developed by a rabbi with a PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, shows, with the help of relativity, that the first six days of creation could have lasted 15 billion years or so, reconciling the Torah and the Big Bang.

Other lectures focus on mild coincidences of the kind that lead people to hum the *Twilight Zone* theme song and giggle nervously. The executions that followed the Nuremberg trials, for example, had a number of strange parallels to the executions that conclude the Book of Esther. The coup de grâce, though, is a lesson about hidden codes in the Torah. 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,

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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 inscrutability, 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 *moshiach* comes?" he asked, sounding disappointed.

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

**IT IS THE CONDITION** of the religious moderate to live with ambiguities. It is the condition of the radical is to expunge them. One can be deeply religious, but still a moderate. It's only when pushing a religion to its extremes, twisting and dodging around potential contradictions, and following the results no matter where they lead, that one becomes a radical.

Plenty of people do just fine with the ambiguities. Each morning of Passover, my otherwise observant grandmother would sit down to a bowl of steaming oatmeal. Many Catholics go to mass, say the rosary, and use contraception. Plenty of Jews condemn violence, fight genocide, and chant passages of Torah rife with righteous bloodshed.

If you ask religious Jews about Amalek, 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 in those radical directions. It asks the questions that moderates are happy to leave unasked, forcing them 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 also an Orthodoxy with no place for ambiguities. It is an Orthodoxy that is ripe to radicalize.

In 2008, an organization called the Clarion Fund, founded "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 Islamophobic 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 Jihad*, with a similarly Islamophobic 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's New York offices (the Clarion Fund has since moved its address).



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 the director of the Heritage House, a hostel in Jerusalem that works closely with Aish. And, as the Discovery Seminar's material on Germans and Amalek makes clear, Aish is not opposed to violent commentary about large groups of people.

The Clarion Fund is not the only case of an Aish spin-off concealing its connection to the organization. JerusalemOnlineU, which offers web-based courses on Judaism for college credit, has also seemed eager to conceal its relationship with Aish, and with Orthodox Jewish outreach in general. JerusalemOnlineU was founded in 2009 by Raphael Shore, a former Aish employee, as a rebranding of Aish Café, an online course portal.

When *Tablet* magazine asked Shore why his program's promotional materials did not discuss any affiliation with Aish, Shore assured them that the website would soon acknowledge the connection. It took three more years, though, for JerusalemOnlineU to begin disclosing the connection.

It may seem strange that Aish should be so circumspect. But the role of an Orthodox outreach organization is precarious. By its very nature, Aish targets a demographic far more liberal than itself, both religiously and politically. Aish does well to adopt as moderate an image as possible. In the case of the Clarion Fund, that means concealing its connection to controversial political activism. In the case of JerusalemOnlineU, that means creating a spin-off that, for a long time, avoided any reference to Orthodox Judaism at all.

Despite its immoderate approach to religion and politics, Aish draws much of its financial support from the liberal Jewish world. On the Internet, Aish offers little information about its donors—and, as a religious organization, it is not required to disclose them. Judging by donor information at Aish headquarters, prominent backers include Canadian pharmaceutical magnate Leslie Dan (of Novopharm fame), someone named Steven Spielberg (probably he of *Jurassic Park* fame; the filmmaker has publicly endorsed Aish's work); Jordan Slone (a real estate mogul from Virginia), and Shelton Zuckerman (another real estate developer, from the Washington, D.C. area, and president of the Sixth and I Historic Synagogue, a non-denom-

inational Jewish community center there).

With its ultra-Orthodox roots and liberal Jewish donors, 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 a place 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. March is a quiet month; attendance at each class ranges from four people to 20, nearly all of them young men.

The Essentials Classes, Berger's in particular, expand on many points covered only briefly in the Discovery Seminar. These points may be reduced to three key ideas: The modern, Western world has a rotten core; there is a good chance that Gentiles will destroy Judaism through violence or, worse, assimilation; and, yes, God is there, and His ways make sense. If I had to identify a fourth point, it would be this: It might not hurt to vote Republican.

Berger goes after Reform Judaism with particular zeal. "Being modern means checking with everyone

else to see what goes," Berger says. Jewish reformers embody this principle. "Once the Gentile does it, that's what they do. When in 40 years people have marriages with their pets, then they'll do that too."

I come from a liberal, Reform Jewish household. Like other Reform Jews, I grew up understanding the Torah as a metaphor, the commandments as suggestions, and American culture as an unmitigated boon. I'm inclined to reject what Berger is saying. But it can be hard to find a response. Where is the unassailable Reform core? What do we have that will never change, no matter what everyone else does? To explain my positions, I can speak about universal ethics, try to trace the concept of human rights back to a biblical origin, present a novel interpretation of the Ten Commandments, develop a heuristic for selecting among the laws which I will keep and which I will not, defend the worth of non-Jewish culture, or return to the religious hostel in which I'm staying, where I've artfully concealed a book on postmodern Jewish theology under a blanket.

All Berger has to do is point at a Torah.

Berger would claim that the difference between us is one of eras: my modern Reform jumble versus his pure and timeless faith. That claim is suspect. There's not much in traditional Judaism quite like Aish, with its corporate headquarters, scientific lectures, and marketing mission. I doubt that my ultra-Orthodox acquaintances in Brooklyn would understand much of what goes on in a Discovery Seminar. Aish's closest relative is Chabad-Lubavitch, the Hasidic missionizing juggernaut. But despite the *shtetl* trappings, the Orthodox outreach model is about as traditional as frozen yogurt or the Peace Corps (a Kennedy Administration innovation, and an inspiration for Chabad's pioneering efforts, which in turn influenced Aish).


I'd say that the difference between Motty Berger and me has more to do with scale. Berger's form of Orthodoxy takes the world in broad sweeps: The Jews are *x*, the Gentiles are *y*, and the Amalekites are just plain bad. The Torah is binding in its entirety, and the tradition is a unified thing, to be accepted all or naught. Liberal Judaism, like other manifestations of liberal religion, approaches the world in pieces. We do not evaluate entire peoples, but the individuals who make them up. We take the Torah commandment by commandment, and evaluate the tradition part by part.

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

For young Jews traveling to Israel, the most welcoming 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 harmless. Many Jews hate to show any discord in *K'lal Yisrael*—the greater Jewish community—but when we direct money toward an organization like Aish, or even give it 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 the goal. It's important to know what kind of faith it is that you're helping to keep alive. 

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# Marilynne Robinson in Montgomery

By Briallen Hopper

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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?

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**M**ARILYNNE 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 scrabbling 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.

Illustration by Gaby D'Alessandro



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 reached into 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 cars drawn 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 Catholic and evangelical and had drifted away from both, sought and found a new spiritual home in his local Congregationalist church.

Even when she doesn't bring people back to church, Robinson's books can restore a kind of religious revelation that had seemed lost. In an essay on *Buzzfeed* called "Why I Read Marilynne Robinson," Anne Helen Petersen writes about how Robinson's novels allow her to set aside the "shame and alienation" of some of her evangelical experiences and remind her instead of "the religion I remember with fondness, both for its intellectual rigor and the righteousness of its teachings, which seem, at least in hindsight, the closest translations of the transgressive, progressive teachings of Jesus." Petersen 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. President Obama has named her as an important influence on his thought. And the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who calls *Lila* "unmistakably a Christian story," believes Robinson's fiction has profound public importance beyond the boundaries of Christendom: "Its moral acuity and insistence on what it means to allow the voiceless to speak give it a political and ethical weight well beyond any confessional limits." 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 pulpits 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 is a tough challenge, but insofar as it can be done, Robinson does it. In her Iowa trilogy (*Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*), she takes a classic, white, educated Calvinist vision of grace, a kind of loving and restrained Midwestern serenity, and opens it up. She shows how this deeply thought-out faith interacts with the disorienting extremes of slavery, racism, alcoholism, prison, poverty, illiteracy, and prostitution—extremes that are made manifest in the small town of Gilead through the experiences of damaged, outcast characters. Robinson's great theological achievement is to show us the predictable limits yet surprising expansiveness of this fatalistic faith, which she demonstrates in plots that trace the ways white, male ministers and their families rise to the occasion of grace, or don't, and in sentences that express a remarkable aesthetic vision that finds beauty and radiance in almost everything.

## 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.

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*Gilead* is narrated by the aging minister John Ames, and *Home* contains the same events told from the perspective of his best friend's daughter Glory Boughton. In *Lila*, a prequel, Robinson returns to an outsider perspective reminiscent of her long-ago first book *Housekeeping* to show the encounter with grace from the perspective of a woman on the margins, Lila Dahl. Though Lila eventually marries the middle-class Ames, she grows up as a migrant farmworker, raised by a beloved foster mother whom she loses to jail. Armed with wariness and a knife, Lila makes her desolate way through the fields and brothels of Missouri and Iowa, finally arriving in the sanctuary of Gilead. For a while Lila lives in a ruined cabin in the woods outside of town, haunting the church and parsonage and graveyard, craving baptism for reasons she can't understand, and teaching herself to write by copying Bible verses in a tablet. Eventually she and Ames begin an unlikely marriage that brings them unprecedented consolation, but also leaves Lila with unresolved desires to return to the wild world outside Gilead, to unbaptize herself and claim kinship with the lost people who live beyond the reach of religion.

In Lila's story, Robinson extends the reach of grace farther than she ever has before—stretching it across boundaries of literacy and class, and test-

ing it with extremes of evil and loss, and yet it survives, lovely and glowing. It's an extraordinary thing to read and very moving. In a recent interview in *The New York Times*, Robinson tells a story about Oseola McCarty, an African American laundress of Lila's generation who gained fame when, after a long and frugal 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 so read. And you think, 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 theological expertise 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 clasping 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 unsparing depictions of the isolated soul communing with itself or



nature or God, thrown into relief by moments of mercy when the excluded prodigal or prostitute is welcomed home. But this gracious welcome doesn't extend to everyone. The novels quietly perpetuate another kind of exclusion: the marginalization of embodied, literal community as a reliable source of solace and ethical vision. Though Ames has been a minister his whole life, he unsurprisingly admits that he prefers the church when it's empty: "After a while I did begin to wonder if I liked the church better with no people in it." (And, of course, he appreciates the empty church even more because he knows it's about to be torn down.) Glory's definition of church is likewise unpopulated except for the minister:

For her, church was an airy white room with tall windows looking out on God's good world, with God's good sunlight pouring in through those windows and falling across the pulpit where her father stood, straight and strong, parsing the broken heart of humankind and praising the loving heart of Christ. That was church.

In the hundreds of pages of these novels about ministers and their families, congregants and townspeople are barely mentioned. We know they are there because unseen people sometimes silently drop off pies and casseroles at the parsonage, tactfully refraining from ringing the bell.

I believe Robinson's deeply spiritual vision of loneliness, of ecstatic and resigned and despairing and meaningful disconnection, is part of what makes readers respond to her so rapturously in the Internet age. Her novels are a kind of digital Sabbath. As our inboxes overflow and our alerts and notifications multiply, her characters wait in vain for letters that don't come, and lose track of people they once knew, and fail to make it to the phone in time to hear the faraway voice of the one they love. Through it all, they ache and yearn for a word, a sign, an echo or trace of what they have lost, or what they know they are about to lose. Her books have to be historical novels; it is not an accident they are set between 60 and a 100 years ago. But despite or because of their temporal remove, they are apparently exactly what many of us want to read now. Her characters breathe an unclouded atmosphere that speaks to our discontents as denizens of a world swirling with ambient data.

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 by so many, and has taken on this role for herself both inside and outside her novels. And since she has been heralded as the best contemporary expression of public Christianity, it matters what she is leaving out or getting wrong.

As it happens, one of the things she gets wrong is the politics of race. In saying this I don't mean what



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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 inapplicable 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 obliviousness 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 endorses a racial standard as a valid one for assessing the seriousness of white American Christianity, and she shows us how her white characters fail to live up to it.

But even as Jack demonstrates the limits of his family’s racial vision, he inadvertently shows the limits of Robinson’s as well. When I was re-reading *Home* recently, I stumbled on a curious and troubling anachronism in the novel’s account of the Civil Rights Movement. In a dramatic passage, a TV broadcast of a brutal police crackdown on black protesters in Montgomery prompts a fraught racial conversation between Jack and his father and sister. The problem is that the events Robinson describes bear no resemblance to what actually happened in Montgomery in 1956. What really happened was a

yearlong bus boycott that was sparked by Rosa Parks, supported by a coalition of churches and community organizations, and sustained by tens of thousands of ordinary people: “the nameless cooks and maids who walked endless miles for a year to bring about the breach in the walls of segregation,” in the words of Montgomery activist Mary Fair Burks. Instead, Robinson erroneously represents “Montgomery” as a violent showdown between cops, dogs, and black children, much like what happened in Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham seven years later.

This strange substitution begins when Jack is standing on the sidewalk watching a TV in the window of the hardware store, transfixed by “the silently fulminating authorities and the Negro crowds.” He tells his sister it is “Montgomery,” and though this makes chronological sense since the novel is set in 1956, it is unclear how the image on the screen corresponds with a bus boycott. Later Jack watches the news with his father and sister at home:

On the screen white police with riot sticks were pushing and dragging black demonstrators. There were dogs.

His father said, “There’s no reason to let that sort of trouble upset you. In six months nobody will remember one thing about it.”

Jack said, “Some people will probably remember it.” ...

Police were pushing the black crowd back with dogs, turning fire hoses on them. Jack said, “Jesus Christ!”

His father shifted in his chair. “That kind of language has never been acceptable in this house.”

Jack said, “I—” as if he were about to say more. But he stopped himself. “Sorry.”

On the screen an official was declaring his intention to enforce the letter of the law. Jack said something under his breath, then glanced at his father.

Later Jack tries to explain his agitation to his sister Glory: “I shouldn’t have said what I did. But things keep getting worse—” She thinks he means his father’s health, but he clarifies: “No. No, I mean the dogs. The fire hoses. *Fire* hoses. There were *kids*—” Glory reassures him, “None of that will be a problem for you if you stay here.” He replies, “Oh Glory, it’s a problem. Believe me. It’s a problem.”

So: In a scene in which remembering “Montgomery” is equated with racial awareness, and

forgetting it is equated with racial obliviousness, Robinson “forgets” Montgomery, or at least remembers it as something very different. This is not just a slip-up about a name; it is a series of counterfactual descriptions. In 1963, when Birmingham cops attacked young people with dogs and water cannons, the images were considered so shocking and unprecedented that they appeared on the front page of newspapers around the country, and a couple years later in 1965 ABC interrupted a broadcast of *Judgment at Nuremberg* to show footage of white police in riot gear using billy clubs to beat black protesters on Bloody Sunday in Selma. But neither the police attacks nor the media events happened in 1956. As Jack would say: “Believe me. It’s a problem.” But what does it mean?

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 ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them.” Morrison sees white writers’ ubiquitous instrumental invocation of blackness as a “sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.” (Robinson’s potentially sinister imprecision is further blurred in Acocella’s *New Yorker* review: Acocella inaccurately refers to the Montgomery bus boycott as “the Montgomery riots” and calls the black people on TV “rioters.”)

I believe Morrison’s theory about white writers and blackness applies to *Gilead* and *Home*, but I

suspect Robinson’s propensity for “playing in the dark” is not the whole explanation of why she gets this history so wrong. I believe her failure to represent the real Montgomery is evidence of something else as well, something much closer to the core of her tragic, individualistic theology. I think it speaks to the perilous political tendencies of her particular version of Calvinism.

Unlike versions of Christianity which see suffering as something to be resisted or triumphed over, Calvinism tends to view both suffering and grace as 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 deepest sorrow in order to plumb all the meaning it will yield.

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 sighed “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 dearth. In the world's fall-  
 enness, they envision a paradise regained.

When you consider Robinson's deep disinterest  
 in embodied 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-  
 munity 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 chats with her nephew  
 about baseball, 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

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.

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, undemanding 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.

**I WILL FOREVER READ** all the fiction Robinson  
 writes. We who love her books read them because  
 they give us what we miss, a specter 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-  
 munity 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 sol-  
 itude. 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?



ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

**T**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 chimed 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 guaranteed under our constitution for all U.S. citizens regardless of race and class. It is not a gift. It is a right.

Without this shift pervading both our local and national conversations, we will have missed one fundamental lesson of “this whole Michael Brown thing.” 

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# Pope Francis Comes to Washington

By Leslie Woodcock Tentler

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Has any visiting head of state been accorded so warm an official welcome or generated such excitement across the partisan divide?

BIOETHICS  
CIVIL LIBERTIES  
CULTURE  
ELECTIONS  
FOREIGN POLICY  
LAW & ORDER  
MEDIA  
MONEY  
SCIENCE  
SEXUALITY &  
GENDER

**A**S RECENTLY AS THE 1950s, it was gospel in certain liberal circles that Catholicism was, to take a leaf from Ben Carson, “inconsistent with the Constitution.” Allegedly authoritarian in its ethos and structure, Catholicism was regarded by many liberal intellectuals—John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr among them—as a very real threat to American democracy. Passions had cooled by 1960, when public opposition to John Kennedy's candidacy on the grounds of his Catholicism was concentrated among conservative Protestants, historically a Republican constituency. But it was still necessary for Kennedy to assure the nation that his religion was a private matter. “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute,” he famously told the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. “I do not speak for my church on public matters—and my church does not speak for me.” Happily for America's first Catholic president—narrowly elected, it should be remembered—popes had not yet acquired a taste for foreign travel. (Paul VI was the first to come to the United States,



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. What-

Pope Francis waves to the crowd from the Speaker's Balcony at the U.S. Capitol on September 24, 2015.





that awaited the pope's arrival at the White House, bellowing through their bullhorns about the Antichrist. They seemed not only rude but impossibly 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 religious liberty and the religiously neutral state, liberating popes from what had become a pointless ritual battle against nineteenth-century liberalism. Catholic immigrants to the United States saw their children and, more frequently, their grandchildren 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 elections. And Catholics themselves proved to be adept at politics. Pope Francis, invited to address the Congress 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 success in this country ultimately rests on our national genius at assimilating widely diverse populations of immigrants. It was this genius, which Americans have periodically doubted, that Pope Francis invoked to such moving effect in his various Washington addresses.

The longest and presumably most consequential of those addresses was delivered to the joint meeting 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 calling 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 troubled 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

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.

Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and Trappist monk Thomas Merton—Francis proposed a “dialogue” with the Congress “through the historical memory of your people,” artfully avoiding 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 audience 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 foreigners”—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 immigrants, one might plausibly see the pope's heartfelt remarks on immigration as a plus for the Democrats. 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 Hispanic migration and the swelling population of refugees fleeing Africa and the Middle East, “but see them as persons.” Even Democrats are presumably unsure of the extent to which this particular counsel 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 immediately 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 courageous 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 legalized 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 the 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 homeless 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 knowledge 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 justification whatsoever, for lack of housing.” Calling God “Father” means that we are brothers and sisters, said the pope, who had previously referred to himself 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 people, 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 generally 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 be wholly wrong. But Francis articulated a vision of politics premised on so demanding 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 losses misses what was most important about this historic visit. 

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PREVIOUS SPREAD: DOUG MILLS/GETTY

# On Planned Parenthood, Beware of False Prophets

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

By Marie Griffith

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**T**HE 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'



In 1967 in New York City, Marcia Goldstein, publicity director of Planned Parenthood, holds up bus signs with birth control information.

H. WILLIAM TETLOW/FOX PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

recent interrogation by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee is a case in point of the grandstanding deemed necessary to assuage the far-right electorate.

The ire against Planned Parenthood, while now focused on abortion, goes back nearly a century and is rooted in a generations-old loathing of "the mother of birth control" herself, Margaret Sanger. Sanger's success in de-stigmatizing public talk about contraception and family planning (which she always disassociated from abortion, stressing that birth control access would reduce the abortion rate) and her dogged promotion of women's equal rights have made her a hero to many people and a villain to others. The organization that she founded, the American Birth Control League, is

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 about Margaret Sanger, who founded this place—a woman who Hillary Clinton by the way 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, Rabbis Louis Mann 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 woman 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 unredeemably 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 the 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


thrust obstacles 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 uninformed 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 short-term glory. The organization's leaders also like 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 healthcare 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's 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 mistruths 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. 

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By Yolanda Pierce

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# When Our Truths Are Ignored: Proslavery Theology's Legacy

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



Illustration by Angie Wang

FOR 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 slave narratives deal with both free and enslaved 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 Finkleman 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.


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.

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? 

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# Orlando: A Lament

On mourning in the aftermath of the  
Pulse Night Club shooting

By Mark D. Jordan

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**L**IKE MOST PEOPLE on the East Coast, I got the first news in the blur 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 crime implies about failures in policy or policing, what it foretells for the electorate or the national character, I want a day—a week, a month—to weep.

Earlier attacks have had this effect on me. When the bulletins arrived about the shooting of writers and artists at *Charlie Hebdo*, it was as if killers stalked 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 violation 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”

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 a 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 on Saturday night, in that ritual space, the usual congregants gathered. There were the star dancers, the ones who knew the floor’s textures and who could anticipate the scintillating changes of rhythm that would mark a Latin Night. There were doubtless straight women who came to dance where they felt safe. Old-timers who mostly watched, passing admiring or acerbic comments to friends (the equivalent of whispering in the pews). At least one person, I’m sure, fairly new to the clubs or to *la onda*, a little nervous, maybe bruised by harsh judgments at home or in church—there was someone at Pulse on Saturday night who stepped onto the dance floor in astonished relief at being free to move.



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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DARIO PIGNATELLI/GETTY IMAGES





Donald Trump visits a church in Las Vegas nine days before the 2016 election.

ESSAY  
BIOETHICS  
CIVIL LIBERTIES  
ELECTIONS  
FOREIGN POLICY  
LAW & ORDER  
MEDIA  
MONEY

By Mark Valeri

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# Donald Trump and the Evangelical Political Schism

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

CHIP SOMDEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

**D**URING THE REPUBLICAN National Convention in Cleveland, several high-profile evangelical leaders quietly expressed their support for Donald Trump, adding to the more fervent and public endorsement of other evangelicals such as Jerry Falwell, Jr., the president of Liberty University. Ralph Reed of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, activist Gary Bauer, and Penny Nance of Concerned Women for America each gave versions of the same argument in interviews: Despite his personal impieties and previous reticence to embrace conservative social causes, Trump stood as the only viable alternative to Hillary Clinton. Trump was no evangelical, they admitted, but he at least listened to them and offered the possibility of conservative Supreme Court appointments and a revision of IRS codes that prohibited churches from political advocacy. It was, as political endorsements go, modest. Trump's selection of Mike Pence, a vocal conservative evangelical, as his running mate did not appear to raise these leaders' attitude toward Trump to genuine excitement. It amounted to mere toleration for the GOP nominee coupled with disdain for Clinton.

The comments of these leaders reflect a year-long struggle among evangelicals to come to terms with Trump, whose personal style and political agendas have attracted some evangelicals and distressed others. In fact, the varied responses to his candidacy have revealed deep fractures within the Protestant evangelical community, so that it is now anachronistic to speak of an evangelical political coalition. There has never been, of course, a monolithic "evangelical" politics. We must admit from the start that the image of evangelicalism as a right-wing political faction is misleading. From Senator Mark Hatfield to President Jimmy Carter and activist Jim Wallis, many self-identified, white Protestant evangelicals have taken Christian teaching to mean support for progressive policies. Yet even if we bracket out the substantial range of left-leaning evangelical spokespersons and politicians, the remainder of the evangelical chorus sounds different than it did a decade ago.

What was once deemed to be a powerful Religious Right rested on the conviction that political leaders ought to conform legislation and policy to Christian moral teaching. During the last decades of

the twentieth century, the Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, Family Research Council, and other like-minded groups understood that teaching to sustain strongly conservative policies on matters such as the definition of marriage, the extent of public welfare, abortion, and the content of public education. The coalition behind this agenda and with it, the agenda itself, has disintegrated. Indeed, the narrative of religion and conservative national politics over the past year follows an arc of secularization. The GOP presidential nomination process has done what critics of the evangelical admixture of religion and politics could not do: compel many GOP-leaning evangelicals either to disassociate their theological convictions from politics or disavow any such thing as an evangelical political consensus.

Observers of the GOP nomination process began to note such changes among Republican evangelicals (we will call them merely "evangelicals" through the rest of this piece) during the first months of 2016. Polls indicated that evangelicals supported Trump over other candidates by a fair margin, even given the fact that three of Trump's competitors—Ben Carson, John Kasich, and Ted Cruz—were by any measure more explicitly evangelical and consistently conservative in their views. Even after Carson and Marco Rubio dropped out and Kasich failed to rally much support, leaving Cruz as the only viable alternative to Trump, the New York businessman garnered the bulk of the evangelical vote.

Trump's own church affiliation hardly fits the evangelical profile. His father introduced him to New York's Marble Collegiate Church, a congregation in the Reformed Church of America made famous by Norman Vincent Peale's positive thinking messages. Trump calls himself a Presbyterian but his personal religious story evokes more positive thinking than it does deep piety or theological awareness. In June, during a highly publicized, closed-door meeting with evangelical leaders, he affirmed his Christian identity in a tentative, awkward manner: "I've been a Christian, and I love Christianity and the evangelicals have been so incredibly supportive." Some Trump advocates such as James Dobson suggest that there may be a genuine born-again experience somewhere along Trump's way. Yet the businessman speaks in a language foreign to evangelicalism, all the while boasting that he will gladly absorb their political support.

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 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 Muslims contradict the very meaning of religious freedom so cherished by evangelicals and especially by Baptists. Other evangelical leaders joined Moore's declamations, 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 Boorstein 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 Suarez, 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—without 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 polit-

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ical 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 resolutely non-religious nature 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 treat Trump's positions 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, then, 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 many pundits and 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 Jesuit 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. 

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# Eric Metaxas's Bonhoeffer Delusions

By Charles Marsh

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

CIVIL LIBERTIES  
CULTURE  
ELECTIONS  
MEDIA  
SEXUALITY &  
GENDER

**W**E 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



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

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 truths: 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.

BEN HIDER/GETTY IMAGES

“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 “values” candidate, “because with all of his foibles, peccadilloes, and metaphorical warts, 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.

**WRITTEN WITH BUT** the 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 can take care of themselves; small government is the best government. Germans turned to Hitler to do the things that other people ought to be doing, and we in America are in danger of the same mistake. People who like big government don’t believe in God; they’re secularists and can be compared to the Nazis. We need Bonhoeffer’s voice today—Metaxas told an interviewer—“especially in view of the big government ethos of the Obama administration.”

With a literary background that includes a popular biography of the abolitionist William Wilberforce and the *VeggieTales* children’s series, Metaxas said that his purpose in writing the book was to save Bonhoeffer from the liberals, from the globalists, the humanists, and the pacifists. His Bonhoeffer was a born-again Christian who espoused traditional family values.

This is complete nonsense.

Bonhoeffer’s relationship to the tradition of Christian pacifism demands careful consideration.

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 forcibly denounces humanism, Metaxas blithely ignores Bonhoeffer’s abiding loyalty to the Western human-



Lutheran pastor and theologian  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an  
outspoken critic of the Nazi regime.

istic 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 Works*—reveal Bonhoeffer’s homoerotic 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 *Kirchenkampf*, 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 ethereal regions of “comprehensive” ideas and thus “avoid the murk 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



after its founding in 1920 had focused heavily on the rights of conscientious objectors and on the protection of resident aliens from deportation. After returning to Berlin, he told his older brother that Germany needed an ACLU of its own. And in the spring of 1931, Bonhoeffer took a road trip through the heart of the Jim Crow South, after which he wrote that he had heard the Gospel preached in “the church of the outcasts of America.” In these unfamiliar regions, among a nearly forgotten generation of American radicals and reformers, Bonhoeffer found the courage to reexamine every aspect of his vocation as theologian and pastor and to embark upon what he would call “the turning from the phraseological to the real.” No other thinker in the modern era crosses quite so many boundaries while yet remaining exuberantly—and one must always add—generously Christian. This is why his story has attracted both liberals and evangelicals, Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Jews, church-goers and secularists alike, people of all faiths. What all admire is Bonhoeffer’s indisputably authentic witness to the dignity of life.


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

“What is Christianity, or who is Christ for us today?”

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.

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. The Christian witness would be limited to prayer and righteous action. “All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.” Until the time when people will once again be able to speak the word of God “with power” and “ultimate honesty,” the “Christian cause will be a quiet and hidden one.”

If we are in a Bonhoeffer Moment, it is a moment that confronts us with a different demand: learning to participate in God’s created order, to trust in God’s promises to bless, linking arms with all those who care about the human condition, asking ourselves how the coming generation shall live. It is learning to struggle along with everyone else, speaking with “the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision” and our chastened ambitions, taking part in shared human struggle, and bearing witness to the peace that passes all understanding.

For in the social compulsions of Christian discipleship, Bonhoeffer said, “Christ takes everyone who really encounters him by the shoulder, turning them around to face their fellow human beings and the world.” The political implications of all this may remain forever strange to us, but there is no doubt that honest engagement of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life and thought moves us a long way from the harrowing worldview of Donald J. Trump. It moves us to behold the world anew in the light of the Cross and Resurrection. And that’s really good news. 

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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.

ESSAY  
CIVIL LIBERTIES  
ELECTIONS  
LAW & ORDER  
MEDIA

# An Atheist for President?

A mere whiff of irreligion can be a serious political encumbrance.

By Leigh Eric Schmidt

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**W**HEN DONALD TRUMP spoke to a group of evangelical leaders in New York early in the summer of 2016, he insinuated that Hillary Clinton’s Christian faith was an unknown quantity, that there was really no indication in her long public life of her being religious at all. The record, of course, could hardly be clearer on Clinton’s religious affiliation; she is a lifetime Methodist who has spoken repeatedly about the formative influence of her Protestant faith. This much we have certainly learned by now: Facts rarely get in the way of Trump’s fearmongering. If it pays to suggest that Barack Obama is a secret Muslim, then surely there is something to be gained from darkly implying that Clinton might just be a closeted unbeliever. After all, the two groups that polling has consistently shown to evoke the most distrust among Americans are Muslims and atheists.

In casting doubt on Clinton’s religious credentials before an evangelical audience, Trump was simply trying to fire up those Christian soldiers who already see her as an enemy to their social and political causes. But, the insinuation itself raises the larger question of whether there remains, in effect, a religious test for the nation’s highest office, notwithstanding the constitutional provision to the contrary. Could an atheist or avowed secularist be elected to the presidency—indeed, to any office of public trust—in a country still so reflexively God-affirming?

When Richard Nixon allowed in the presidential election of 1960 that the Roman Catholic faith of his rival, John F. Kennedy, should not be an issue, he did so in such a way that offered little consolation to the nonbeliever:

“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 as a howling atheist who would destroy the bibli-

cal and Christian foundations of the republic. For many American Christians, the election of Jefferson in 1800 was apocalyptic; the political and moral order was being entrusted to an infidel indifferent to whether his compatriots worshipped one god, twenty gods, or no god at all. To 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.

A century-plus later in 1908 rumors followed the Republican presidential nominee, William Howard Taft, that he had “no particular religious belief.” The Taft campaign countered the whispers of atheism by trumpeting Taft’s substantial Unitarian connections, admittedly small solace to evangelicals. His Cincinnati 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 religion 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 Penn—served for years as a member of the City Council in the 1850s despite his ungodly opinions being widely known in town. His “unflinching integrity” won out over ministerial criticisms and pious misgivings. Or, then there was the freethinker who won a county election in Petaluma, California, in 1862. His opponents circulated handbills identifying him as an atheist and infidel, both names in “big capital letters,” trying to convince local Christians to vote against him, yet in his case to no avail.

Far better known than local atheist triumphs were infamous secularist debacles. One such was the fate of the convicted blasphemer Abner Kneeland who, after years of legal trouble in Massachusetts 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 Democrats 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 deep, deep disgrace,” one New York correspondent reported aghast, “of being represented in the German 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 theism 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 non-belief 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. 

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# In the Age of Trump, Muslim Voters Mobilize

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

By Tiffany Stanley

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**E**QUIPPED WITH burner phones and laptops, the volunteers took their seats. A dozen voices echoed around the Muslim community space in Alexandria, Virginia, as they cold-called phone numbers from a database. “As-salamu Alaikum,” read the traditional Arabic greeting in their script.

“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,



Remaz Abdelgader was the phone bank manager for the Virginia chapter of Emerge USA, an organization promoting Muslim civic engagement.

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.

The American Muslim population is small but growing; by some estimates it counts for no more than one percent of the total U.S. population. But activists are pushing for a high turnout from Muslim voters in key swing states with sizeable Muslims populations, including Michigan, Florida, Ohio,

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 86 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. They include the socially conservative and the politically liberal, the native-born and the immigrant. For many first-generation Muslim Americans, their heritage spans the globe, from South Asia to the Middle East and North Africa. George W. Bush actively campaigned for Muslim voters, and he won their vote in 2000—a feat given that nearly a third of Muslims in the U.S. are African American, and reliably Democratic voters. Days after 9/11, Bush visited a mosque in Washington, and famously said, “The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That’s not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace.”

But post-9/11 wars and policies prompted Muslims voters to retreat from the GOP. According to Georgetown/Zogby polls, Muslim voters said they gave President Bush in 2000 at least an 11-point lead (42 percent to Al Gore’s 31 percent), but just before the 2004 election, his Muslim support dwindled to only 7 percent. Both John Kerry and President Obama won more than 70 percent of Muslim voters.

Now more than 70 percent of Muslim Americans plan to vote for Hillary Clinton, according to CAIR’s latest poll. And Trump’s anti-Islam rhetoric may pose threats beyond mere words. Since the current

**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.**

presidential campaign began, Islamophobia has been on the rise, and hate crimes against Muslims have spiked at rates not seen since just after 9/11, raising fears that anti-Muslim attacks may continue long after the election season ends.

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 Emerge 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 Bernie Sanders about Islamophobia. Sanders gave one of



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

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 Emerge USA’s Virginia chapter hired her to run its phone-banking operations.

Abdelgader was not the only former Sanders supporter at the September phone bank. In some ways, the volunteers were apathetic about Hillary Clinton. One laptop still sported a Bernie Sanders sticker. Another volunteer was an enthusiastic Sanders sup-

porter, and only reluctantly plans to vote for Clinton, an attitude that mirrored the candidate’s struggles with younger voters more generally.

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?

“Your 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 have 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’m voting.”

By the end of the afternoon, more than 300 calls had been made. Thousands more have been logged since the campaign began. Emerge 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, Mustafa’s older sister, made the most calls that day, tallying 51. Why did she volunteer? On her paper, she scribbled in all caps, “Because I don’t want Trump to win!” **REP**

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TIFFANY STANLEY





INTERVIEW  
BIOETHICS  
CIVIL LIBERTIES  
CULTURE  
EDUCATION  
ELECTIONS  
LAW & ORDER  
SEXUALITY &  
GENDER

# The Quest for Confident Pluralism

An Interview with John Inazu

By Gordon Haber

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Illustration by Gaby D'Alessandro

**T**HIS ELECTION EXPOSED America's fissures. It feels as if we are in the midst of a political and cultural civil war.

We are still grappling with the aftermath, the coarsening 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. Now, the only option is to look ahead, to see if there is a path forward, and if there is any way, now that the election is over, for red and blue to find common ground.

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.

**R&P: 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?**

**Jl:** 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.

**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. I'm in that sweet spot of criminal law and the right to protest. And then for my first two months in Virginia, all I did was think and write about Ferguson. After that, I thought I had set the process of writing *Confident Pluralism* back a few months. But then I realized how it could inform some of things I'm thinking about.

**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.**

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 it?" For example, in the discussion of race and law enforcement, there is almost an absolutism in both directions. On campus, it's all about protesters and minority communities and there doesn't seem to be room for dialogue. I'm listening in on both conversations. [In St. Louis] I met with local activists. And I have police officers among my family and friends. But then in the campus setting, there is an assumed consensus for an aim toward social justice, and if you're off the bandwagon, then you're not going to be welcome to air your discussions. You see this when certain speakers are disinvited. That's when we fail for the conversations even to be allowed to happen.

**Let's talk about the concepts underlying *Confident Pluralism*. You divide the book between "constitutional commitments" and "civic practices" or "civic aspirations." In the latter case, are they synonymous? 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 punted 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, 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 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 it's even 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. We used to have national figures, and even if they didn't rally everyone, enough people were interested in them and hearing them out. There are no voices like that around today. It's not clear to me in media or journalism who are the key people that are listened to. Or in religious communities,

Our entire history has been trying to hold together in the face of deep disagreements and deep fissures that cut into or crosscut demographics.

who are the Billy Grahams of today? In political communities, who are the senior statesmen of either parties? The collapse of this institutional authority across all different kinds of sectors and ideologies leads us to a new place in these disagreements, even if we've had them all along.

**Aside from distrust of authority, there is a distrust of expertise. Or even agreement on the meaning of the word "evidence." When you have someone like Donald Trump who lies every day, how does one counter this? How does one stress the civic aspirations you discuss in the face of what Saul Bellow called the "moronic inferno," this giant roar of disinformation?**

Right. That's a tough nut to crack. To complicate it even more, it would be easier in the current election cycle if we had one person telling lies and the other speaking truthfully. Certainly by any measure Trump is telling far more lies. But Clinton is telling clear lies as well. So where does one go for authority and truth? These are real challenges. This is not a solution, but one thing I advise, as a kind of baby step, is to mix up your social media feeds so you're listening to people you disagree with, even if you vehemently disagree with their policies or ideologies. So no matter what



# The social media tendency is to make issues uncomplicated and clear-cut.

event breaks, you're immediately seeing two different interpretations of it. The social media tendency is to make issues uncomplicated and clear-cut. But most issues in life are complicated and *not* clear-cut.

**It seems that with *Confident Pluralism* you're raising questions, rather than presenting a panacea.**

Correct. I am just trying to start a conversation. But there is an increased urgency to it all. The stakes have jumped. Both pieces, the constitutional commitments and civic aspirations, have only gotten more important given the saber rattling from both sides of the aisle.

**In general we're seeing a loss of faith in the political process.**

In my chapter, "Our Modest Unity," I'm saying that enough of us have to keep faith in the current political experiment, which includes those constitutional commitments. We have to wake up and say, "Whatever this is, it represents us." Because a growing concern—it's left and right, it's class-driven, it's racialized, it's urban vs. rural areas—is that there are deep segments of this country that are increasingly saying, "There's nothing in this for me." When you get larger sections of our country no longer thinking that they have a part in our political project, it makes things seem pretty bleak.

**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 that hopefulness. In many, not all, Christian circles, 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. **REP**

GORDON HABER *writes about religion and culture. His debut short story collection, Uggs for Gaza, is available from Dutch Kills Press.*

## ESSAY

CIVIL LIBERTIES  
ELECTIONS  
FOREIGN POLICY  
LAW & ORDER  
MEDIA  
MONEY

By Hugh Urban

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# The Theology of Stephen K. Bannon

A look inside his quasi-apocalyptic worldview

**WHITE 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

Sachs investor, he also became a documentary filmmaker in the early 2000s—and it is here that we see the first clear articulation of his religious ideas. The most striking example is his 2004 documentary celebrating Ronald Reagan, *In the Face of Evil*. Using historical footage of trench warfare, political unrest, and marching Nazis, the film opens with a frightening view of twentieth-century history, which begins with the devastation of World War I.

From the aftermath of this conflict, the narrator tells us, a terrible Evil emerged: “From this fever swamp rose a Beast, one that played upon man’s yearning for a utopian solution to its abject misery—a quasi-religious criminal, taking the form of a political Messiah.” This evil messiah is singular but has assumed multiple historical forms, according to the film, from Bolshevism and Communism to Nazism and the Soviet Union. “But always and everywhere,” the narrator intones, “regardless of its name or face, the goal remained the same: control of the state and power.”

Perhaps the most stunning moment in the film is the “Coda,” which ends with footage of the planes hitting the World Trade Towers on 9/11. These scenes are followed by various shots of Muslim women wearing *burqas* and Islamic terrorists in training. “The wolf is at the door,” we are warned, as we watch the rise of the “new Beast,” which is clearly represented as Islam.

The intensely negative image of Islam suggested at the end of the Reagan documentary was taken to new extremes in an outline for another film that Bannon proposed in 2007 (though never made). Bearing the title *Destroying the Great Satan*, the screenplay opened with the U.S. Capitol building topped by a flag bearing not the stars and stripes but instead a crescent and star, while the Muslim call to prayer played in the background. “On the screen in bold letters,” the proposed screenplay read, “the Islamic States of America.”

In other films, Bannon also combined this Good versus Evil binary with a specific narrative of global history. His 2010 film, *Generation Zero*, borrows heavily from the popular book, *The Fourth Turning*, written by amateur historians William Strauss and Neil Howe. The film outlines three major events in American history that will soon be followed by a fourth major event of immense, violent, and



radically transformative consequence. As Bannon explained during a speech at a Republican women’s conference in 2011, “We had the Revolution. We had the Civil War. We had the Great Depression and World War II. This is the great Fourth Turning in American history.” In his dire view, the “Judeo-Christian West is collapsing,” both because of the loss of traditional values and the threat of external forces, particularly Islamic extremism. The end result, he warns, will be nothing less than all-out war.

The focus on radical Islam and the sense of imminent disaster were soon carried over into Bannon’s next major career move as he assumed leadership of *Breitbart News* in 2012. Called by Bannon himself the “platform for the alt-right,” *Breitbart* during his time at the editorial helm consistently voiced an intensely negative, monolithic, and homogenized view of Islam. Even the most cursory review of *Breitbart* articles turns up flamboyantly Islamophobic articles, such as Pamela Geller’s piece, “How Migrants Devastate a Community,” Virginia Hale’s article, “Muslim Immigrants Secretly Hate Christians, Seek to Outbreed Them,” and Tom Tancredo’s

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 paints 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




against Islamic radicalism to earlier confrontations between Christian Europe and Islamic expansions into Austria and France from the eighth to the seventeenth centuries. Again, however, Bannon's rhetoric slips easily between identifying the enemy sometimes as "Islamic fascism" and other times simply as Islam generally.

So what, then, is the "theology of Stephen K. Bannon?" Ultimately, it is by no means a singular, coherent, theological system but rather a kind of *bricolage*—that is, a complex hybrid comprised of various, not always consistent, and sometimes contradictory ideas drawn from far-right nationalism, pseudo-historical narratives, Islamophobic fiction, and a deeply binary worldview. Its key elements, however, are fairly straightforward. Foremost among these are: first, a clear *theological* narrative of Good versus Evil, with America and "Judeo-Christianity" identified with the former and Islam with the latter; second, an *economic* narrative that aligns a particular form of capitalism closely with Christianity and maligns Islam for its lack of capitalist spirit; and finally, an *historical* narrative based on the idea of periodic, revolutionary turnings, with our own era seen as the most radical, catastrophic, and transformative moment in the unfolding of history's grand design.

In 2004, University of Chicago historian of religion Bruce Lincoln published an incisive article on "The Theology of George W. Bush" (originally printed in *Christian Century*), which identifies many of the same religious tropes that we see in Bannon's rhetoric. These tropes include a starkly binary worldview based on a conflict of Good and Evil, a vision of history guided by divine will, and an ideal of America as God's chosen agent in that history. Yet Bannon's theology differs from Bush's in a number of key ways. First, as Lincoln suggests, Bush's political discourse often relied on a kind of subtle "double-coding," in which specific Biblical references intended for an evangelical audience were embedded within more mundane political rhetoric. Bannon's discourse, conversely, has no particular subtlety or double coding, but is as blunt, ungroomed, and impolite as his own personal demeanor. Second, Bannon's rhetoric about Islam is much more openly hostile and universalizing than Bush's, making little effort to distinguish between terrorists and ordinary Muslims.

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: "Preemptive 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 "America first" as God's chosen and "totally unstoppable" nation. And we can also see Bannon's influence in Trump's intensely hostile rhetoric regarding Islam—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. 

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# Reinhold Niebuhr, Washington's Favorite Theologian

By Gene Zubovich

Published on  
April 25, 2017

He has experienced something of a renaissance since 9/11.

CULTURE  
EDUCATION  
ELECTIONS  
FOREIGN POLICY  
MEDIA

**R**EINHOLD NIEBUHR, it seems, is everyone's favorite theologian. Then-candidate Barack Obama told David Brooks in 2007 that Niebuhr was one of his "favorite philosophers." There is "serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain," Obama said. "And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction."

President Jimmy Carter said, "Niebuhr was always present in my mind in a very practical way, particularly when I became President and was facing the constant threat of a nuclear war, which would have destroyed the world." In his 2007 book, John McCain dedicated a chapter to Niebuhr. And presidents and senators are not alone. Since the conservative columnist David Brooks wrote in 2002 that "I'm amazed that Reinhold Niebuhr hasn't made a comeback since September 11," Niebuhr has experienced a revival among theologians, historians, public commentators, and politicians.

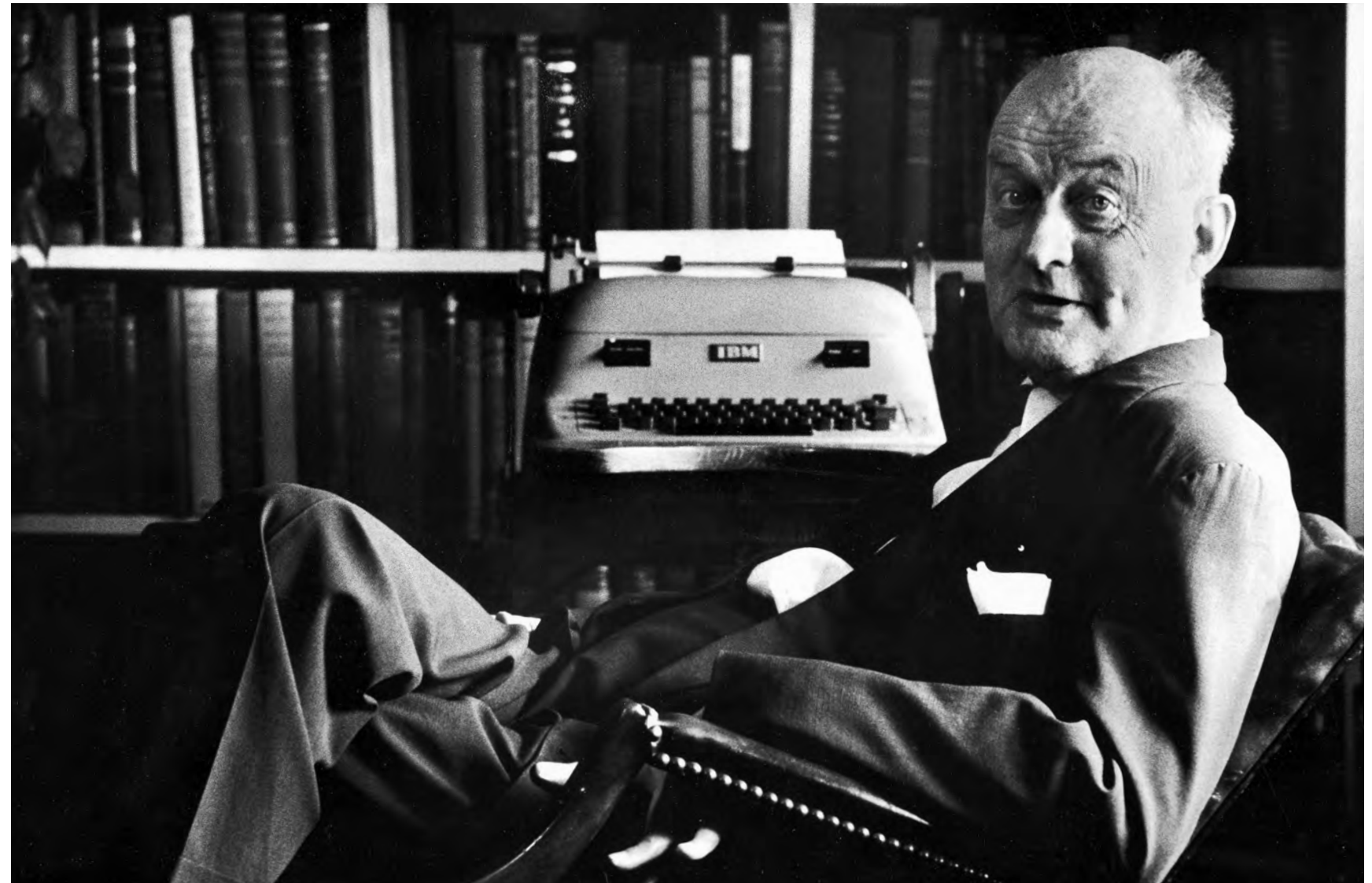
A new documentary called *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, tries to capture and explain why Niebuhr is experiencing something of a renaissance. It is directed by Martin Doblmeier, who has worked on dozens of faith-based films. (The John C. Danforth Center at Washington University 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.”

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 societ-

Reinhold Niebuhr sits in his office in 1955.



ies 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*,

ALFRED EISENSTADT/PIX INC./THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY

## 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 imperfectability 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 wily, 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 seminaries, 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?




James Comey appears before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

“If we're looking for a thread that unites almost all of our interviewees, they're all working with some form of power or influence,” said Jeremy Sabella, who is the author of a companion book to *An American Conscience*. “They're all trading in a certain type of power and influence. And Niebuhr is excellent on helping people think through the predicaments of working with that power and influence as badly flawed human beings who struggle with sin.”

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. Referencing 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. 

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MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY

# Where Do Pro-Life Feminists Belong?

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

By Ellen Duffer

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Activists demonstrate during the March For Life on January 27, 2017 in Washington, D.C.

**A**S 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



JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY

continue to harness this energy while simultaneously reaching out to pro-life voters? It's an interesting conundrum, 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



the treatment women with unplanned pregnancies receive within the community: “Blaming a woman for getting pregnant,” she said, “is 100 percent the wrong way to handle that situation.”

Christian feminists critiquing church communities are, of course, not new, but while the population of feminists at large is increasing, religious feminists are evolving too. In the 1950s and 1960s, evangelicals began to question the strict definition of biblical inerrancy, according to Pamela Cochran, a professor of theology at Loyola University in 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 homosexuality 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 (if false)

## Blaming a woman for getting pregnant is 100 percent the wrong way to handle that situation.

“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 Kobes 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 Swallow 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 woman 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 edu-

cation 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 acknowledgment 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 bridging their differences, they can achieve goals dear to feminists on all sides. 

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



# How the State Department Sidelined Religion

By Shaun Casey

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September 5, 2017

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

ELECTIONS  
FOREIGN POLICY

**I**N 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.



Illustration by Richie Pope



Despite eliminating our success and innovation, the office as I knew it is no more. Recently, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson wrote to Congress, announcing that he plans 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 failings 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 administration 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 highlights. 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 understand 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 historical contexts, interacting with myriad social and political dynamics. It is phenomenally complex, and policy makers are constantly tempted to follow 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 contacts and relationships with thousands of religious actors, organizations, and communities, meeting with any that wanted to meet with us, without endorsing any particular theological commitments 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 violent. 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 president's reprehensible defense of the perpetrators of violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, this represents a dark and disturbing repudiation of a core historic U.S. diplomatic commitment.

The RGA office worked on many issues. We provided support for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation, and for responding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We helped with peace efforts in Cypress, 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-conflict reconstruction in Iraq. We contributed to resolving hostage situations and opposing Female Genital Mutilation. We helped build deeper relations 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.

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In its first eight months, the current administration has systematically dismantled the historic American diplomatic capacity. We no longer have a fraction of the global influence and respect we once had. It is unprecedented in the modern presidency. Secretary Tillerson remains bunkered in his seventh-floor aerie, virtually cut off from any career expertise on his payroll. There is not a functioning 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 administration 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 secretary 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 coherent messages. Our embassies and posts overseas are unable to communicate our policies around the world because they do not have clear guidance 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 current 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 credible plan for the department, it will take more than a year for him to nominate, vet, and gain Senate



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.

approval for dozens of Senate confirmable positions. Which means the U.S. will not field a full team of diplomats until 2019 at the earliest.

We have enough data on the administration's approach to religion to be afraid of where it is heading. In terms of personnel, policy, and the complete absence of strategy, all the indicators point in a deeply troubling direction.

At the State Department, former Sarah Palin adviser and Trump campaign staffer Pam Pryor is something of a religion traffic cop who started at the department without a formal title or portfolio. The two nominees for ambassadorial positions related to religion, the ambassador to the Vatican

and the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, are Callista Gingrich (wife of Trump surrogate Newt Gingrich) and Governor Sam Brownback. Neither has academic training in religion nor diplomatic experience. The administration is clearly picking nominees related to religion based purely on political considerations and not on policy expertise.

The policy picture is even grimmer. The anti-Muslim rhetoric from the campaign has now crystalized into a rejection of the Obama administration's strategy of engaging the Muslim world on a broad global scale, leading instead to an embrace of "defeating radical Islamic terrorists."

Engagement with religious actors and communities has dissolved from the global, inclusive, strategy of the previous administration to an almost exclusively conservative Christian, primarily Protestant, engagement. The White House's repudiation of diplomatic engagement with Pope Francis is striking. The Muslim ban, the withdrawal from the Paris Climate agreement, and the rolling back of U.S. relations with Cuba, all signal a rejection of the central commitments of the Vatican's diplomacy.

AP PHOTO/PETROS KARADJIAS

## 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 compro-

mised 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. **REP**

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John C. Danforth Center on  
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