WHEN SACRED AND SECULAR MEET: MAPPING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY

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1. Introduction

While the separation of Church and State is considered fundamental to American democracy, there is an undeniable tension between this policy as an ideal to be perpetually reified in practice, and its application. The conceptual and historical framework of the Abrahamic faiths, by their very nature, both explicitly and implicitly resist the secularization that contemporary democracies represent. The modern emphasis on economic models of growth and development, especially following industrialization and globalization, are neither intrinsic to nor represented by the scriptural foundations of those religious systems. Similarly, modern social movements, and most notably those that align with pluralistic and progressive values, often negotiate an uneasy relationship with the societies envisioned by scriptural narratives. This is not to say that an ideal Christian society is entirely contradictory to, or incompatible with, a modern secular democracy; however, Christians of various denominations (as well as those belonging to other religious systems) are obliged to make complex, and at times harsh, decisions regarding how to resolve their identities as believers and citizens. In many cases, social tensions and divisions can be plotted along lines of religious identity, and to what extent that identity is prioritized and interpreted in relation to national identity.

The democratic project, still ongoing, was and is intended to reflect and represent the collective desires of a society for peace, stability, and the just rule of law; but when there are multiple societies vying for representation that do not agree with one another's visions, and to

such a foundational degree that a civil accord is made increasingly difficult, there arise tensions and conflicts that religion tends to exacerbate as much as ameliorate[1]. The modern democracy often requires everyone to say, "I am a citizen first and a Christian second," but, unsurprisingly, the reality is that many will say, "I am a citizen and *also* a Christian." We find that, embedded in the word "also" are a host of underlying tensions. It is our intention here to explore some of those tensions.

In order to do so, we must look at the issue in two ways: what in the character of Christianity (or Judeo-Christianity, inasmuch as the Torah and Old Testament are significant contributors) renders it resistant to the separation of Church and State; and secondly, what in contemporary society aggravates these tensions. It will be necessary, consequently, to move quickly between a historical and modern temporal context. While this may seem at odds with a more sequential approach favored by analytical research, our approach here is validated by virtue of the fact that Christians *perform* this bridging of past and present *all the time*! The Bible is, after all, a historical document, interpreted, reinterpreted, and applied by every Christian to his or her life in ways that transcend stable contextualization, and our approach here will mirror and reflect that performance accordingly.

Judeo-Christianity's emphasis on law, moral and ethical behavior, and community lends itself to political and civic discourse in ways that make it virtually impossible to extricate Christian values from a country founded predominantly by Christians. The right to practice religion and the absence of a national religion are more easily accomplished, but it is no surprise that many of the platforms, ideologies, and rhetorical strategies employed by elected representatives and prospective

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[1] Alexis de Tocqueville (1835: 16-17) writes: "The Christian nations of our age seem to me to present a most alarming spectacle (…) The first duty which is at this time imposed upon those who direct our affairs is to educate the democracy; to warm its faith, if that is possible; to purify its morals; to direct its energies; to substitute a knowledge of business for its inexperience, and an acquaintance with true interests for its blind propensities. (…) A new science of politics is indispensable to a new world. This, however, is what we think of least; launched in the middle of a rapid stream, we obstinately fix our eyes on the ruins which may still be described upon the shore we have left, whilst the current sweeps us along, and drives us back toward the gulf."

candidates in the United States are directly derived from value systems of a distinctly religious tenor[2].

Many of these values are fundamentally *social*, in the sense that they are meant to be applied and expressed among and between people. Social values are expected, once established and consistently practiced, to structure the society that surrounds and unites those who uphold and adhere to them. There may be differences between societies that do, but the underlying principles remain constant. "Do unto others," for example, considered one of the primary struts supporting Christian society, is clear enough to require little interpretation. Who, after all, would not want to be treated with compassion, kindness, and respect? Who would not want to be treated as an equal?

However, another common Christian sentiment, "turn the other cheek," is far more difficult to implement, even considering the historical context of Rome's occupation of Judea. Should African-Americans, for example, turn the other cheek to police brutality? Are the current protests sweeping across the United States a consequently "un-Christian" response to systemic racism and oppression? Does an African--American, or Native American protestor have to set aside his or her Christian identity in order to engage in the right to peacefully assemble against injustice[3]? Conversely, does an individual who participates in that structural oppression have a right to ask that his or her colored neighbor turn the other cheek?

It is important to remember that these oft-quoted phrase above do not exist in a vacuum. These two phrases are taken from a longer

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[2] Paul E. Sigmund (1987: 530-548) writes that "It would seem to be an impossible task to relate a tradition that is nearly 2000 years old to a set of political theories and institutions that only emerged in the late eighteenth century. Yet this is done all the time, by both the spokesmen for that tradition and by politicians and statesmen who are influenced by it."

[3] Michael Lackey (2009) writes on contemporary African Americans' relationship to the Biblical figure of Moses: "What we find among many African-American twentieth century writers is a more complicated and ambivalent attitude towards Moses. For instance, in a 1997 speech, Alice Walker acknowledges the black community's devotion to and appropriation of Moses: 'In the black church, we have loved and leaned on Moses, because he brought the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt. As enslaved and oppressed people, we have identified with him so completely that we have adopted his God' (297). But for Walker, this devotion to Moses is not a virtue; it is instead a major vice. The problem with Moses is that he believes in a God who does not love black people, which is why Walker, after explaining black devotion to Moses, concludes: 'It is fatal to love a God who does not love you' (297)."

passage that makes mention of false prophets and sinners, delivered by Jesus to his disciples and a gathering of people "from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon" (Luke 6:17). In the same chapter, Christ delivers the famous beatitudes as well as admonitions to nonviolence, generosity without expecting recompense, and other teachings that are similarly well-known to practicing Christians of all denominations. Indeed, a society built on and around these premises would be desirable and incompatible with most forms of monarchic, aristocratic, and feudal governance. It is understandable that many Christians would esteem democracy as the truest expression of these values. A government by the people and for the people, based on equality, liberty, and fairness, would represent the singularly greatest opportunity to remove the most historically egregious obstacles to creating a genuinely Christian society.

Unfortunately, as is always the case, things were, and are not so simple.

American democracy, undoubtedly a laudable social experiment and one that would usher in an age of democratic revolutions around the world, was established in the shadow of slavery and genocide. Amendments to the constitution would eventually ameliorate some of these injustices, but racial inequality, social injustice, and an embedded unwillingness to truly integrate across wide swaths of the population – particularly in rural areas – still undermine the principles that ostensibly informed the country's founders. There is a major difference, of course, between the United States – and any other progressive, democratic country – as a work in progress, and as an envisioned ideal. A cynic would say that the envisioned ideal can never be achieved; human beings are too fallible and contentious. A realist may argue that while perfection may be unattainable as such, a *harmonious* society is possible provided every stakeholder is willing to work and possibly comprise to maintain its integrity and provide for its perpetuity.

The ideal democratic society, as a worldly, *secular* collective, is not the same as the heavenly society derived from implied projections of the Biblical narrative. In the latter, every member of that society is necessarily a Christian; whether because of grace and/or good works

during their earthly lives, or because their virtues merited heavenly acceptance, at which point they would bear firsthand witness to the Glory of God. In the former, acceptance of theism or, more specifically, of Christ's divinity, is *not* a prerequisite, nor can ever be. If it were, it would constitute a theocracy, the very system under which the Israelite nation was initially established and, arguably, the same system that Christ himself supported[4].

To many, a Christian theocracy may be desirable, and there *are* ways in which a theocratic system is compatible with democracy; but the modern, secular democracy is not theocratical in nature, and in fact is designed to resist the possibility of this sort of amalgamation. Consequently, the extent to which Christian values (or indeed, the values of any belief system) can exert influence on the contemporary democratic state is limited and actively curtailed. In order for religious values to be applied, they must first be demonstrated as extricable from a doctrinal framework, and second, those who admonish the inclusion of these values must be willing to acknowledge a distance between their religious identities, and their identities as citizens and statesmen.

However, both this distance and extricability are often nebulous[5]. While it may be a simple matter to say that compassion, kindness, and tolerance are *both* Christian *and* secular, it is not so simple when social policies can be delineated in terms of an opposition between Christian doctrine and progressivism. One of the most evident

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[4] William L. Schutter (1981: 109-112) writes, "Contrary to what might have been anticipated in light of the catastrophes which followed, the exilic and post-exilic prophets never abandoned the dream of a reconstituted theocracy. Instead, they made it the heart and soul of their preaching as the epitome of God's fulfillment of all His covenant promises. (…) Jesus grew up in a society in which theocratic ideas were commanding ever-greater prominence and power at every level."

[5] John D. Inazu (2011: 595-599) writes: "For [Roger] Williams, the divide was crudely simplistic: the first table of the Decalogue corresponded to the realm of the Church in which man related to God, and the second table set forth the jurisdiction of the state in which man related to man. (…) The problem, of course, is that these simplistic divisions between the realm of church and state offer little practical guidance. (…) Consider, for example, some segments of the evangelic right who advocate a return to a historically implausible 'Christian America.' Among other things, these believers argue for a return of prayer in public schools, the posting of the Ten Commandments in courtrooms, and the display of nativity scenes on public property. Too often, [Roger Williams and William Penn] provide an insufficient account of liberty of conscience for those outside the church."

"hot-button" issues in the United States where such an opposition is apparent concerns abortion. The pro-life camp is distinctly religious in orientation, while the pro-choice camp is forced either to disavow that identity or find ways whereby a possible compromise can be reached. In many cases, this compromise is only reached at the *individual* level, as for example, one who refuses to disclaim a Christian identity and yet aligns with a pro-choice orientation; in other words, a "Christian progressive." There are many Christian conservatives who would deny that such an identity is not inherently contradictory, but all the same, there are *millions* of Christian democrats and progressives who make their own distinctions, of varying degrees, between the spirit and doctrine of the faith. Feminism and bodily autonomy may not have substantial precedents in Scriptures that were not explicitly concerned with gender equality, but Christ's teachings can be *extrapolated* to include and recognize social movements that simply did not exist or could not have been foreseen in the First Century and earlier.

People of all stripes and creeds can coexist; and there are *many* Christian values that align with social behaviors that can be practiced in a representative democracy, including charity and service[6]. Christ's teachings are difficult to reconcile, however, with the more virulent, neo-populist rhetorical platforms espoused by conservatives in the United States, particularly those that seem to license xenophobia, intolerance, and bigotry–and, more recently, blatant human rights violations. National sovereignty and the right of a country to police and regulate its borders are recognized, of course, but they should not extend to separating families, imprisoning children, or subjecting refugees to conditions that resemble the dungeons of the dark ages.

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[6] Arthur Cushman McGiffert (1919: 36-50) writes that "Christians must put an end to their old habit of dubbing all kindliness Christian, and must refrain from giving that august name to anything that falls short of the full measure of the genuine Christian principle. They must demand that Christian brotherhood express itself in justice as well as in kindliness, a justice that guards the rights and liberties of all men and nations, and assures to all the opportunity for self-expression, self-control, and a share in the duties and responsibilities of the whole human family."

Of course, Christian institutions, whether the Protestant mega-churches in the United States, or the predatory missions in Africa and elsewhere, or the Catholic Church with the scandal currently besieging it, have never historically been free from hypocrisy. Their ability to genuinely represent the virtues embodied in Christ have always been in question, and they have survived as institutions primarily because they create and maintain *spaces* that support Christian communities. In many rural communities, for example, the Church is the primary gathering place for members of a given congregation, facilitating social support networks that serve a vital function in collective and individual lives. However, it is inevitable that those same gathering places would be used to express political and ideological views, and it may even be the case where the priest or preacher not only encourages but participates in this sort of exchange[7]. The separation of Church and State is one sided, and rarely extends to the separation of church and politics.

There are key stress points that create active tensions between Christianity and representative democracy, despite the relative ease with which certain virtues can be effectively applied in a government allegedly by and for the people. These include the fact that while Christian values and virtues may be universal, their affiliation and association with the religion causes frictions that arise from two main points: the alignment between certain Christian denominations and conservativism, and also the complex history of Christianity itself, and particularly the role of Christianity during colonialism and the postcolonial period. While Christian missions have been successful in gathering converts throughout the developing world, it has not done so without resentment, especially in cases where native and indigenous traditions were forcibly suppressed or persecuted. In the United States, this resentment is apparent among Native American communities.

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[7] Tocqueville (1835: 337-338) remarks that he "met with wealthy New Englanders who abandoned the country in which they were born in order to lay the foundations of Christianity and of freedom on the banks of the Missouri, or in the prairies of Illinois. Thus, religious zeal is perpetually stimulated in the United States by the duties of patriotism. These men do not act from an exclusive consideration of the promises of a future life. (…) and if you converse with these missionaries of Christian civilization, you will be surprised to find how much value they set upon the goods of this world, and that you meet with a politician where you expected to find a priest."

Today, the increasing heterogeneity of contemporary populations, especially in the United States, make any claims to universality based on specifically religious values difficult to implement without challenge or dissent. The rise of atheists, agnostics, and individuals unaffiliated with an established or organized religion represent an increasing percentage of a largely urban demographic that likely will, within the next half-century, exert significant influence over the political process[8].

Lastly, there is an inevitable contention between religion as an instrument of power, influence, and control, and religion as a soteriological model emphasizing compassion, empathy, and equality. Ideological divisions in the United States are a doubly interesting case in point insofar as there are mirrored divisions between Christian organizations that are working to heal or mitigate these conflicts (by admonishing forgiveness, tolerance, etc.) and others that have aligned themselves with more incendiary platforms that, for all intents and purposes, are all but in *direct* contradiction to the accepted message and ideals embodied in Christ[9]. Civil reciprocity appears difficult to maintain, let alone compassionate reciprocity. Unfortunately, sectarian divisiveness among those who adhere to a similar set of basic tenets only magnifies a tendency towards encamped relativism. The equality of all human beings before God is rather hard to apply in practice when there are distressingly few models of genuine egalitarianism in politics; and again, the United States is an unfortunate example. From disproportionate rates of minority incarceration in a

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[8] According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2012: "The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling. The last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (…) as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation."

[9] McGiffert (1919: 39) writes: "Christianity began with a marked emphasis on love for others, and throughout Christian history love has remained a fundamental Christian virtue. To be sure its range was early narrowed, and love for the brethren usurped the place of love for all men. It was also crowded into a subordinate place by the growing emphasis on purity and unworldliness, so that in course of time the ideal Christian came to be the uncompromising ascetic rather than the loving and helpful neighbor and friend. (…) But unfortunately an essential element in brotherhood has been overlooked. The love for which the early Christians stood was love between equals, not between superiors and inferiors."

system that not only privatizes its prisons but cages more human beings than any other country, to the overwhelming influence of wealth on the political process, the Kingdom of God seems, at times, impossible to realize.

Any project that attempts to reorient Christian values in the political arena by reemphasizing the virtues that form the backbone of the faith will have to contend with an entangled network of associations, narratives, and underlying frictions. Indeed, the task may prove insurmountable against modern obstacles (many of which will be referred to below) unless one of the first transformations of the faith is consistently addressed: that of a small, localized movement into the faith of an empire.

2. The Roots of Religious Nation-Building: Revolution and Power

Historically, the Torah, specifically from Exodus through Deuteronomy, is in large part concerned with nation-building at a time in history when relatively few centralized civilizations existed. The prophets of Israel were primarily focused on admonishing the people to honor the covenant set down in the Books of Moses, a dispensation that would safeguard the integrity of a land-based nation that was not, at least initially, a monarchic state but rather a theocracy. Israel vested *absolute* power only in YHVH rather than a worldly sovereign. Consequently, the prophets of Israel, as *direct* representatives of God, were vested with an authority rivaling any king's, an element of Judaism that would justifiably engender unease in both Roman and Jewish leaders regarding a certain Galilean prophet.

Like the prophets before him, Christ was concerned with the integrity of the covenant between God and His People. *Unlike* the prophets before him, Christ's ministry engendered a movement that would ultimately break away from Judaism. Christ was repeatedly accused of flouting Jewish law, uniting both the Pharisees and Sadducees against him. The details of Christ's early life are matters of conjecture, but we can reasonably presume that he acted without the sanction of Jewish authorities, and that his popularity would have been seen as a

potentially dangerous element amidst a highly unstable geopolitical atmosphere[10].

The Pauline Epistles were directed towards community-building in the shadow of an empire, albeit one that would, over two centuries later, adopt the religion known as Christianity. At that point Christianity was arguably pulled away from its revolutionary roots and towards an inexorable association with *power* that continues to haunt the faith. One can argue whether or not Christianity would have gained the traction it did without Constantine's patronage, but at this point, the relationship between worldly authority and Christianity is indelible[11].

The ministry of Christ, while nonviolent in character, constituted a *direct* challenge to the dominant ideological and geopolitical paradigm of the region[12]. When Christianity itself became the religion of the Roman Empire and the various nation-states and kingdoms of Europe, there was a necessary and inevitable reorientation towards the preservation and perpetuation of the institutions and organizations that represented the *earthly* interests of the faith.

It is important to remember that Christianity began as an ideological revolution. This statement may prove contentious inasmuch as revolutions occur *against* an oppressor of some kind. The Gospels do provide sufficient evidence to justify interpreting Christ's ministry as constituting a threat to the *status quo* of his day, despite his unwillingness to directly challenge either Rome or the Jewish leaders. While he

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[10] Schutter (1981: 113-114) writes: "That Jesus could be right [regarding the unpredictable and decisive coming of the foretold Kingdom] was an unsettling prospect. (…) The effect upon Jesus' audience was to call into question their relationship to the Kingdom. He had undermined whatever complacency or confidence they might have had with the thought that precious time was slipping away in which they still had the opportunity to take some kind of decisive action before it was too late. Those, like the Essenes, Pharisees, and Zealots, who relied upon apocalyptic speculations and a renewed commitment to the Law as an adequate preparation for the Kingdom's coming, might dismiss Jesus' claim. For others, however, a real dilemma might develop which could lead to increasing anxiety. (…) The result was that he quickly had an audience for the rest of his teaching."

[11] McGiffert (1919: 36-50) writes that "the traditional neutrality of Christians and the Christian Church has been misplaced, that issue between autocracy and democracy is a moral, not only a political issue, and that Christianity is profoundly concerned in it, as it is in all moral issues."

[12] Schutter (1981: 121-222): "The transforming impact of Jesus' mission on behalf of the Kingdom's presence is especially striking in its political, economic, and social dimensions. For instance, in his version of theocracy there was no room for that coercion through the threat or use of violence. (…) Thus his decision not to adopt the stance of a conquering hero in the manner of a latter-day David constituted an attempt to subvert the dynamics of government founded and maintained by force, a quintessentially political act if there ever was one."

may not have openly advocated overthrowing the Roman occupation, or explicitly advocated reform, his role as a prophet represented a direct challenge to authorities that held a tenuous grip at best over the province, a grip that would be shaken only sixty years after Christ's crucifixion. As Reza Aslan writes in *Zealot*: "Jesus's assertion that the present order was about to be reversed, that the rich and powerful were going to be made poor and weak, that the twelve tribes of Israel would soon be reconstituted into a single nation and God made once again the sole ruler in Jerusalem; none of these provocative statements would have been well received in the Temple, where the high priest reigned, or the Antonia Fortress, where Rome governed." (Aslan, 2013)

Consequently, the faith's relationship with power, authority, and governance is fundamentally iconoclastic in nature, and consequently, its adoption in social, political, or national discourses as a dominant influence is an uneasy reversal, at best. That the oppressor in Christ's day (occupying the same position that Babylon did in the Old Testament), would become a Christian power following Constantine's strategic conversion was only the first step in Christianity's becoming a religion of power rather than a challenge to it. However, that being said, this reversal echoes a more foundational one: that of former Egyptian slaves establishing a military power in their own right, and conquering the land promised them by the Lord. Still, Israel became a new nation, unprecedented in the ancient world; it did not wed itself to a preexisting empire that encompassed a myriad of diverse peoples and tribes from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. Christianity's militarization during the Crusades, its role in colonialism from the 16th through the 20th Centuries, and its continued presence in the postcolonial world (less a Catholic or Orthodox effort and more commonly a Protestant Evangelical one), compound the tensions between Christ's ministry and the results of his efforts from the 4th Century even unto the present day, particularly because the Catholic Church and currently, many Protestant ministries, are hardly seen as entirely benevolent entities[13].

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[13] Chandra Mallampalli (2006: 10) writes, "Some are inclined to view the rapid expansion of Christianity as a reproduction of the American gospel abroad. This is most evident in the use of megacrusades and the growth of megachurches in places such as Nigeria, South Korea, and Brazil, as well as in the conflation of Protestantism with modernization, telecommunications, corporate dollars, and nationalism."

During the first waves of democratic revolution, Humanism would offer a means of separating ostensibly religious values from their doctrinal and historical roots. As society progressed away from the catalyst of the European Enlightenment and the legacy of the Church's dominance during the Medieval Period, distances between the gradually industrializing and urbanizing premodern world and the echoes of theocracy would grow, mitigated in the United States by the proliferation of Protestant churches, revivals, and the entwining roots of relatively insular communities and their primarily Christian identities. Still, even in small towns that host several faith denominations, identities are sometimes starkly drawn between sects; Lutherans and Baptists, Adventists and Methodists, Evangelicals and Catholics. The situation in Europe is obviously different, but in Western Europe as of 2018, "non-practicing" Christians outnumber those who attend Church regularly (Sahgal, 2018). However, I should point out that in Eastern Europe, significantly more people consider their Christian identities to be important to their lives, and believe with "absolute certainty" in the God of their faith[14]. The reasons for this divide are beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that the adoption of democracy during the second half of the 20th Century in Armenia, Georgia, Serbia, Greece, and other Eastern-Central European countries took place under radically different circumstances, involving radically different conceptualizations of national and ethnic identity, and consequently, radically different orientations towards Christianity.

That being said, a case may be made for a correlation between the relatively rough transitions into democracy that characterized modern Eastern-Central Europe, and the resurgence of Christianity in the context of reclaiming, reaffirming, reevaluating, and rejuvenating national and cultural identities[15]. In other words, to what extent are Christianity's iconoclastic roots being invoked in the region alongside, despite,

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[14] "Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views on Minorities, and Key Social Issues," *Pew Research Center*. 29 October 2018.
[15] Ina Merdjanova (2000: 250) writes, "The revival of religious and ethical issues may be discussed in reference to attempts to achieve religious transcendence of the segmented everyday experience of highly differentiated societies, and simultaneously to find alternatives in the face of the deeply threatening nature of the modernization process; attempts which lead to the linking of religion and politics. Despite the fact that religion and nationalism are based on different and even contradictory principles and values. (…) nationalism and religion very often build up strong alliances."

and possibly even as a challenge to the inexorable march of democratization and globalization?

There are key differences between Christian denominations, of course, despite their common ground in terms of accepting Christ's divinity and resurrection. That common ground is also the *foundation* of any Christian church or chapel, and the structures built atop these foundations are built the way any structure is: to stand and withstand, and to balance space and form. The space of a church allows the congregation to express their faith in a variety of ways that are necessarily constrained – both physically and metaphorically – by the overarching structure. One need only consider the architecture of traditional Cathedrals, with their transepts and naves, alcoves and soaring arches, to understand how the intersections between perception, behavior, space, and structure are engineered to emphasize certain expressions and attributes.

Jesus Christ in the Gospels occupies decidedly non-institutional spaces, however: deserts and houses, gardens and open fields. When he does enter sanctioned religious spaces, he does not always do so in a socially acceptable way[16]: "Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying or selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves" (Matthew 21:12). And earlier: "'Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the House of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread–which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here." (Matthew 12:3-6)

Naturally, the work of Christ's disciples, and Paul in particular, were geared towards creating a new Church, one defined by a dispensation that would better accord with God's Will, and that would honor Christ's martyrdom. Aslan writes: "Paul's conception of Christianity may have

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[16] Reza Aslan (2013: 99) writes that "the handful of encounters Jesus had with the priestly nobility and the learned elite of legal scholars (the scribes) who represent them is always portrayed by the gospels in the most hostile light. (…) It was not the merchants and money changers he was addressing as he raged through the Temple courtyard, overturning tables and breaking open cages. It was those who profited most heavily from the Temple's commerce, and who did so on the backs of poor Galileans like himself."

been heretical before 70 C.E. But afterward, his notion of a wholly new religion free from the authority of a Temple that no longer existed, unburdened by a law that no longer mattered, and divorced from a Judaism that had become a pariah was enthusiastically embraced by converts throughout the Roman Empire" (Aslan, 2013: 215). This new Church was expected to *resolve* the tension between Christ's iconoclastic role as revolutionary and his role as the founder of what would become a community in his name, between his often overt disregard for the failure of God's representatives and the broader inclusivity of his message to *all* peoples, at least to the peoples of the Near East and the Roman Empire. With the advent of Christian missions to every part of the globe, there is a sense that Christ's Church would thrive as his message was spread, that the community would prosper in tandem with the vibrant heterogeneity of the myriad peoples who chose to become a part of it. To the later missionaries and martyrs who undertook this effort, they were not only emulating the work of Christ's disciples, but offering nothing short of *salvation* to the world: an equality *within* the earthly body of Christ that united the heterogeneity of humankind with the homogeneity of our common identity as children of God.

Surely this Church and its work would be impregnable–but that Church, and all the churches that followed, from the Orthodox churches of the Near East and Eastern Europe, to the Catholic Churches of Western Europe and Latin America, to the many Protestant churches and chapels in North America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, are as much manmade organizations as they are considered representatives of the divine on Earth. As such, they are vulnerable and assailable as concentrations of power that can be corrupted, challenged, and held accountable for the inevitable mistakes made when men believe themselves the mouthpieces of God and assume the authority attendant upon that belief[17].

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[17] On this note, Thomas Jefferson (1813) addressed the following to John Adams: "In extracting the pure principles which [Jesus] taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to them. (…) We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the Amphibologisms into which they have been led by forgetting often, or not understanding, what had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions as his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves."

The role of Jesus as an iconoclast is not only present in the early centuries of Christianity, but again during the Protestant Reformation, when Christ's message would be reclaimed by those who felt that the Catholic Church had largely betrayed the spirit of his teachings[18]. This sentiment was, of course, carried into the fledgling United States, a bastion of religious freedom at a time when Protestants were being actively persecuted in Europe. Nor was this sentiment entirely abandoned; one finds it alive in well in a rhetoric of resistance (albeit often misguided) against forces that are perceived to threaten or undermine the ability of devout Christians to practice their faith in an age moving steadily away from formal religion.

Understandably, in the United States, where the majority of the population is Christian, and wherein, until recently, power, influence, and representation was concentrated among Caucasian peoples of European descent, certain minority groups would naturally see themselves as challenging a status quo that relegated them to the silent, impotent margins of society, a status, ironically, that the first Christian communities once experienced firsthand. This irony is not lost on many marginalized groups that consider the ideal of secular inclusivity preferable to the conditional and hypocritical inclusivity of many denominations[19].

Nonetheless, while those who identify as Christians may emphasize certain exclusivist elements of the doctrine, it is important to remember that they are in many cases *using* Christianity to reinforce *social* (and political) boundaries that are far from permeable. Inasmuch as faith is an important part of their ingroup identities, it is no surprise that they would modify or even distort that faith to support their worldviews. While different in terms of degree, the same tactics are employed by militants to justify extreme acts of violence that are only *seemingly*

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[18] Thomas Schirrmacher (2009: 73-86) writes: "The birth-hour of religious freedom – to exaggerate somewhat – represents therefore the struggle for freedom by Christian minorities against the Christian majority churches."

[19] Lackey (2009: 7) points out that, "the God-concept is, according to Hurston, a communal projection of ideologically driven humans, and as such it frequently becomes a political instrument that justifies subjugation and when necessary, violence. (…) [Hurston] realizes that the God-concept has been put to effective use in the West in order to dominate, subjugate, and violate vulnerable people."

based on religious belief. The rhetoric employed by those in the United States, for example, who decry immigrants as undesirable or danger-ous – even when those immigrants are themselves Christians, if not Protestants – is primarily fear-based, having little to do with the virtue of courage exemplified in Christ's willingness to martyr himself, or his disciples' willingness to continue his ministry in Judea and elsewhere.

To those who resist change and wish to preserve the *status quo*, Christ's role as an iconoclast may be downplayed in favor of his role as the Messiah who established a new social paradigm prefigured by his resurrection and the promised inevitability of his triumph. Those who accept his divinity accept also that *his work was accomplished*. All that remains is for the Good News to be disseminated to all peoples, so that all might equally partake in the new dispensation. In that sense, the integrity of the Christian community, begun with the disciples, broadened through Paul's work among the gentiles, strengthened by Rome's adoption of the faith, consolidated by the creation of the Church, and to many, empowered by the Protestant Reformation, must be preserved and defended against those who continue to persecute the Lord or spurn the covenant revealed by Jesus.

On the other hand, those who push for change and social reform may identify with Christ's iconoclastic role, seeing in his willingness to forge a new path to salvation a warrant not to defend, but to chal-lenge; not to submit to authority, but to circumvent it, albeit peacefully, inasmuch as Jesus did not condone violent resistance and upbraided his disciples when they considered it.

3. Contemporary Christian Identities and Politics

The term "identity politics" refers to a pattern of significant contempo-rary import: people of specific ethnic, sexual, social, and subcultural identities forming alliances and movements in order to challenge, usurp, reform, and/or make apparent systemic injustices; affirm or reaffirm distinct identities; gain recognition and social capital; and effect change on broader scales through activism, advocacy, protest, scholarship, and artistry. One need only look at the diversity of those who consider

themselves democrats in the United States presently. Since the rise of the republican Tea Party, the democratic party has all but fractured along progressive, centrist, and moderate lines that hardly present a unified front, even against a common "enemy." Within and between these lines are various identity groups that do not always or necessarily see eye-to--eye, despite a common belief in fundamental or overarching values (which, arguably, have become harder to delineate). If there *is* one particular value that is crucial to progressive platforms in the United States, it is the virtue of *tolerance*. Disparate and diverse groups should be at the very *least* tolerated (that is, *not* persecuted, condemned, or marginalized), and at best *included* in the political process (that is, given a voice). It is supposed, in contrast, that conservatives are characterized by *intolerance*, an unwillingness to recognize the validity of certain identities or accord certain groups a justified recompense for historical and contemporary injustices. Whether or not these perspectives are entirely accurate is unfortunately and often overwhelmed by an ideological divisiveness that hastens to draw or thicken lines between camps that are set as rivals to one another rather than as partners in an egalitarian process.

Many of these identity groups orient themselves *against* a "dominant" culture or narrative (i.e. racial minorities against white supremacy, or populists against globalists) and consequently assume a reactionary or even revolutionary character. Consider the Black Panthers during the American Civil Rights movement. In the United States especially, Christianity (particularly Protestant Christianity) is often situated not in the progressive or reformist camp (at least, not predominantly), but rather in the *conservative* camp…and the religion is, from the opposite perspective, at least, aligned with those who are seen as intolerant and therefore unsympathetic[20]. It should be pointed out that this perspective is less actual than it is *perceptual.* In reality, the picture is far more nuanced, particular among younger Christians.

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[20] Tocqueville (1835: 341-342) astutely points out that "As long as religion rests upon those sentiments which are the consolation of all affliction, it may attract the affections of mankind. But if it be mixed up with the bitter passions of the world, it may be constrained to defend allies whom its interests, and not the principle of love, have given to it; or to repel as antagonists men who are still attached to its own spirit, however opposed they may be to the powers with which it is allied. The Church cannot share the temporal power of the State without being the object of a portion of that animosity which the latter excites."

Obviously, intolerance is at odds with the ideals of Christianity, namely, as espousing compassion for all the children of God and inclusiveness in the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ did, after all, sacrifice himself to ensure the perpetual accessibility of the Kingdom. However, there is an *intrinsic* tension in Christianity between the dichotomous poles of inclusion and exclusion, whereby inclusivity is made *conditional* in some cases upon an acceptance of the tenets of the faith. In other words, if an individual does not accept that Christ is the Son of God, died and was resurrected, then he or she cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven and is consequently excluded from the soteriological dimensions of Christianity. This stance is not absolute, of course, and is more prevalent among certain Protestant denominations that esteem grace more important than good works, but the prevalence of this perspective creates a precedent for exclusion that has fomented a great deal of hostility between those who believe they are devout representatives of Christianity and those who feel excluded or condemned by them[21].

Christian inclusivity is doubly problematic when one considers the religion's role during the colonial period. The Spanish conquistadors in the 16th Century were "Catholic" (the quotation marks are meant to suggest the undeniable hypocrisy of those willing to commit genocide and yet identify as religious); those who separated Native American children from their families and outlawed their languages and traditional practices in the "New World" were also Christians; and those who perpetuated and defended the slave trade were also Christians. It is something of a historical irony that African-Americans would not only adopt, but vehemently maintain, their Christian identities. However, this is not so ironic when one takes into account that it is, and has been, possible to distinguish between Christ, Christianity, and Christian organizations.

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[21] Jodi O'Brien (2004: 186), writing about Queer Christian identities, points out that, "[Melissa] Wilcox chronicles the stories of LGBT Christians and their struggle to reconcile spirituality and sexuality. (…) Wilcox offers a theoretical interpretation situated in the concept of 'religious individualism' (Roof, 1999). (…) The way in which individual lesbians and gays reconcile their predicament is often a solitary process, one that reflects aspects of a culture of religious individualism rather than community and congregational support. (…) Individuals experience an awakening of both religiosity and homosexuality that is very personal and profound. This awakening ushers in a sense of contradiction and a desire to somehow reintegrate themselves into the system of meaning from which they now feel outcast."

One can believe in Christ, identify as a Christian, and yet eschew affiliation with a particular institution. One can also identify primarily with Christ, or even an aspect of Christ (such as the popular "Christ--consciousness") and distance oneself from the community of Christians; it is possible to hear the phrase "I believe in Christ, but I am not a Christian." Each degree of distance can be considered in a number of ways pertinent to our discussion here. When an individual identifies with all three (e.g. I am a Lutheran, or I am a Catholic), one tacitly or unequivocally accepts both the foundations *and* the structure. When an individual distances him/herself from an institutional affiliation, as do many "non-practicing" Christians, the result may be phrased in positive, neutral, or negative terms, viz., that s/he is free to choose *how* to be a Christian, and to what degree of investment; that s/he sees value in identifying as Christian, whether that value is personal, social, or both; and that s/he has not chosen, for whatever reason, to join or remain with a practicing community. The individual who identifies with Christ but does *not* identify as a Christian may seem an oddity, but in reality, this sort of identification is similar to the one who says "I believe in God, or a God, but not necessarily God as described in the Bible." Many of these individuals believe in a "higher power" (variously described) and may readily acknowledge that Christ's teachings are valid, or that he was a prophet, a spiritual master, and perhaps even the Son of God; and these same individuals may also point out that they either do not *need* an institution or a community to honor or uphold Christ's teachings or that the institutions and communities that exist have fallen short of the actual spirit of those teachings[22].

In terms of how these orientations intersect within a modern, pluralistic democracy, the individuals who do identify as practicing Christians of various denominations must find ways to reconcile the

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[22] Shane Sharp (2009: 270) writes that "previous scholars have documented two main responses by social actors to experiences of social entrapment. The first response is for social actors to remain symbolically entrapped in order to maintain their social identities. (…) The second response to symbolic entrapment is to disavow a social identity by the leaving the group to which one belongs and/or by categorizing oneself no longer as a member of that group. For instance, Ammerman (1987: 145) documents several cases where fundamentalists disavowed their religious identities after they divorced because of negative sanctions from congregation members and because of internal conflicts between fundamentalist beliefs about divorce and their actions."

secularity of that system with their faiths. It is no surprise that doing so is not always easy; after all, it is the government that is expected to do all the work of separating Church and State, not the citizenry. However, there are *many* points of convergence between social policy, law, and governance that overlap with the Judeo-Christian emphasis on society and, moreover, the aforementioned elements of any governmental model represent specific moral and ethical structures. A communist system, for example, may better represent the commandment against coveting one's neighbor's possessions, for example, than a capitalist system that allows, if not encourages, the hoarding and flaunting of wealth. At any rate, divisions within a society are inevitable when disparate groups envision conflicting trajectories of desirable social progress. They are also inevitable when those visions are based on contradictory interpretations – or misinterpretations – of religious values and doctrines. For individuals who believe that a particular society will ensure God's favor, both towards their personal and collective lives – a standard that informs the *entire* premise of the Old Testament – there is incentive to react rather strongly, to "take it personally," when the vision or possibility of that society is *seemingly* imperiled by policies and laws that appear to controvert a scriptural standard. Obviously, the worldly Kingdom of Heaven imagined in the First Century is not entirely applicable in a 21st Century context; nor is a purely theocratic model a socially acceptable form of governance in most of the developed world. Still, to the extent that scriptures – whether the Torah, Gospels, or Qur'an – still inform the beliefs and conceptual frameworks of those who adhere to the faiths based on those texts, there is bound to be discord between any society obliged to represent a pluralistic and multireligious constituency and those who wish it to reflect particular doctrinal, theological, and ideological values[23].

Those who do not claim adherence to a specific denomination or sect, but who still account themselves Christians, are not burdened by the same necessity to reconcile citizenship and worship. They can more

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[23] Inazu (2011: 599) writes: "While [Roger Williams and William Penn] would have rejected the compartmentalization of faith demanded by contemporary liberalism, they would also have recoiled at the efforts of some contemporary religious believers to tether a kind of religious orthodoxy to the power of the state."

freely adapt Christian virtues and values without the interpretive constraints that determine how and in what way those virtues and values ought to be applied. On the other hand, without the guidance of a more specific interpretive model, the integrity of values that are fundamentally Christian may be compromised in favor of more malleable versions that are more easily divorced from their original frameworks and contexts. Nonetheless, it may be preferable to retain even a set of malleable values that retain distinctly Christian imprints than adopt entirely secularized values that do not imply a continuity between faith and practice, or between the better parts of history and contemporaneity.

The increasing number of atheists, agnostics, and "nones" are also a point to consider. While the overall percentages of those who identify with these categories are still relatively small when compared to those who continue to identify with one belief system or another (especially in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Eastern-Central Europe, and Southeast Asia), they nonetheless represent a steadily advancing group in the United States, Western Europe, China, and in many urban centers around the world. To discount their effect on their countries, and on representative democracies, would be foolish. Moreover, their increased numbers have not gone unnoticed, and may be perceived as a direct threat by those who *strongly* identify as religious or Christian, specifically. Expectedly, anyone for whom it is important to live in a God--fearing society would resist, and possibly vehemently so, the prospect of living in a godless society.

4. A Difficult Separation

Modern secular and pluralistic democracies *can* (even if they have not yet) separate themselves entirely from religion, repurposing values that once belonged entirely to religious contexts towards worldly ends. Communism – particularly as expressed in the Chinese Cultural Revolution – explicitly and unapologetically wrenched suitable values and virtues away from religious frameworks and reoriented them towards the Party. The success of this effort may be rightly questioned, especially given the resurgence of Christianity in Eastern-Central Europe,

and the tenacity of religious communities in China, but the fact remains that there is an evident and modern precedent for this strategy. The United States, while actively enforcing the separation of Church and State, also expressly forbids the persecution of religious groups and identities, despite any claims that there is an ongoing "war on Christianity" underway[24]. However, at the same time, religious organizations must contend with the crosscurrents of various social movements that make their own weighty bids on people's time, energy, and attention, and that are equally, or more, immediate and relevant to many individuals' lives and experiences than religion. In heavily populated, urban environments, it has in many cases become a matter of choice and investment to retain a religious identity rather than a matter of course.

At the same time, in increasingly heterogeneous populations – which one finds not only in cities but in larger universities, as well – individuals who would not have chosen to associate with people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, and religious affiliations, are encouraged or obligated to do so. Other than establishing friendships with people whom they might otherwise have avoided or outright condemned, individuals are at the very least exposed to these differences. As a result, it is not so easy to vilify or demonize individuals that one is personally familiar with. Indeed, one finds the most intense levels of condemnation in areas of either limited interaction or extensive segregation. Simply *seeing* individuals that belong to a group one is uneasy with, or against, is not enough; without substantive, consistent interaction and cooperation, deeper communication and understanding is likely impossible.

The point is that pluralism places varied stresses on individuals and groups that range from being entirely unaccustomed to heterogeneity, to being familiar with it. Someone from New York City, for example,

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[24] Consider just one example among many of organizations that make this claim: "Never before in American history have Christians experienced the war on Christianity, of being hated for following Jesus Christ as they are today," and further on, "What Christians are experiencing today (…) is rebellion against God, and thus a hatred toward anything that points to God of His son Jesus (…) and by extension a hatred of Christ's followers." This gem is taken from an apocalyptic website entitled "The Jeremiah Project." There are others, of course, that make similar cases in varying degrees of virulence.

will likely have a very different reaction to the presence of immigrants, foreigners, and peoples of every faith, nationality, and tribe than an individual from rural North Dakota. The rural-urban (and especially *coastal* urban) divide in the United States is stark. From health and human services to infrastructure, access to cultural resources and exposure to diversity, these differences cannot be underestimated in terms of their impact on American democracy. One need only look at the voting map of the country to observe that the majority of republican conservatives are concentrated in "fly-over" states, the very same states, incidentally, wherein the number of people who cite the importance of religion in their daily lives is higher[25]. These numerical values, while quantitative rather than qualitative, create a number of associations that affect how people approach Christianity, and it appears, at cursory glance, that the faith is on the front lines of a partisan divide that cannot be mended (or at least not easily) simply by an appeal to shared values. It is not that people are disregarding compassion, kindness, or generosity; rather that they believe these values can be found elsewhere, in forms that do not lay claim to the same contextual baggage[26]. As we considered above, the actual picture is far more qualitatively nuanced: while certain swaths of the American people may be moving quickly away from religious affiliations, they are not necessarily leaving either Jesus or God behind, they are leaving the temples and churches.

To be sure, there are some who are no doubt looking forward to a "Post-Christian" landscape in the United States, no longer beholden to an Evangelical contingent that unashamedly champions blatantly un-Christian views, which brings us to another issue: the conflation of religious, social, and political rhetoric. These spheres of discourse are so intertwined that is not uncommon to find, in a single speech

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[25] According to Lipka (2015): "In the 2014 midterm elections, exit polls showed that those who attend worship services at least weekly voted for Republicans over Democrats for the House of Representatives by a 58%-to-40% margin. Meanwhile, those who never attend services lean heavily towards Democrats (63% vs. 36%)."

[26] Lackey (2009: 10) points out that "This idea that the God-construct is an anti-democratic, imperialistic invention explains why Hurston considers the figure of Moses a dangerous conceptual tool in the hands of political leaders. (…) Based on this account, instead of being the great liberator, Moses was actually a grand dictator, whose 'theocratic government' is based on a feeling of superiority that comes from knowing God and His 'Divine Plan.'"

delivered to an audience, points that express or reference Christianity, social policy, and the political process, without necessarily delineating distinctions between these references. Ideally, if the separation of Church and State is to be taken seriously, officials and representatives *should* clearly indicate where their religious identities and views end, and where their political responsibilities begin, and to what extent those two dimensions overlap. However, when people are advised, by both parties, to "vote with your conscience," that gives a rather clear license for people to juxtapose religious belief and political views[27].

That being said, both radical and conservative Evangelicals in the United States, whether republican or democrat, are generally believers in democracy even if they are starkly divided, at times, in terms of liberal progressivism or conservatism. The reason is plain: both liberals and conservatives feel that democracy affords them the voice, representation, and power to enact or resist social change in accordance with their religious views and identities[28].

The worldly and spiritual elements of Judeo-Christianity are themselves intertwined and difficult to separate. Those who occupy positions of power and influence, from statesmen to clergy, are confronted with the simple truth that certain communities can be easily manipulated by religion. This is natural: many people invest a great deal of psychological and emotional energy in their belief systems, binding them to their identities, sense of self-worth, relationship to others, and well-being. When one is actively trying to both live a good life and be admitted into Paradise, it is inevitable that s/he would feel intensely about everything that impacts both his/her earthly life and the fate of his/her soul; and one's social environment is at the top of that list. Those who feel that their social environment may be threatening to their

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[27] Tocqueville (1835: 492) observes that "Christianity has (…) retained a strong hold on the public mind in America (…) that its sway is not only that of a philosophical doctrine which has been adopted upon inquiry, but of a religion which is believed without discussion. (…) The Americans, having admitted the principal doctrines of the Christian religion without inquiry, are obliged to accept in like manner a great number of moral truths originating in it and connected with it. Hence the activity of individual analysis is restrained within narrow limits, and many of the most important human opinions are removed from the range of its influence."

[28] "If," Schirrmacher writes (2009: 84), "[…] one investigates the Christian ethics of Evangelical theologians (…), all of them, for multiple reasons, advocate democracy, and that not only as a pretense."

religious identities and, by extension, to the soteriological hopes offered by their belief systems, will change, in both subtle and explicit ways, the way they perceive and practice their faith. Militancy, fundamentalism, and apocalyptic rhetoric flourish in environments where individuals feel pressured or endangered by social and political forces. Granted, the number of individuals who are willing to engage in extremes of violence are relatively few, but they arise from an agitated gestalt that fuels and engenders increasingly radical expressions of belief[29]. This perceived, or real, hostility can come from rival belief systems (e.g. Buddhism and Islam in Myanmar), political systems, and social systems that actively and explicitly oppose a particular religion (or religion in general), or it can come from a process of gradual erosion, such as the one that is occurring in both the United States and Western Europe.

In many ways, although the situation is nowhere near as dire as those who anticipate the dawning of a "Post-Christian" age would suggest, Christianity is in some ways confronted with the classical Darwinist ultimatum: adapt or perish. This, of course, is not without its irony. The question is *not* whether or not Christianity is realistically in danger of succumbing to the inevitable paradigm shifts that attend the forward trajectory of social evolution. The question is how Christianity will respond to that trajectory. Given the current global political and ideological climate – the rise of neo-populism in Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States is just one feature of that tumultuous landscape – some have asked whether *democracy* can survive! The question itself may be hyperbolic, even despite the threat of autocracy, censorship, and the apparent willingness of many to sacrifice their privacy and rights for the promise of continued security and reassurances that their "way of life" will be maintained. Still, the danger of a modern surveillance state (already pioneered to dystopian effect by China), the development of technologies that will fundamentally change what it

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[29] Davidson and Harris write (2006: 49): "Jeffrey Hadden and Anson Shupe, authors of *Televangelism* (1998), a critical study of the merger of religion and modern telecommunications, tied [the beginnings of the rise of the new religious Right in the U.S.] directly to the rapid social change and disruption of social structures brought about by the onset of globalization. They argued that globalization is, in part, 'a common process of secularizing social change' and that it contains 'the very seeds of a reaction that brings religion back into the heart of concerns about public policy. The secular (…) is also the cause of resacralization (…) [which] often takes fundamentalistic forms.'"

means to be human, and the continued possibility of power concentrating in the boardrooms of international corporations rather than in governments or in national collectives, adds a degree of feasibility to that question. In the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, it may have seemed that modern, representative democracy represented the culmination of humankind's efforts to create a just and equitable system of governance free from the pitfalls of tyranny, concentrated wealth, and the whims of an empowered few.

That has not proven to be the case, at least entirely. However, there are many who insist that the fault lies not with democracy as such, but rather with *capitalism*: the *laissez-faire* free market that was supposed to harness innovation and competitiveness for the good of the many. That too has not proven to be the case. While the capitalist model was conceived in an age of unprecedented innovation, the reality is that, like the myth of unlimited economic growth, innovative growth is neither unlimited nor assured of an infinite upward trajectory. There are periods of recession and decline, investment and upsurge, and patterns that congeal and cohere in ways that limit the vibrant diversity that supports genuine, productive competition.

The union of representative democracy and capitalism in the United States is yet another source of friction when it comes to religion. Christianity, like other religions (and most notably Buddhism), cautions against materialism. The American system, wherein millions go into debt in order to obtain everything from an education to a reliable means of transport, and which has eschewed those portions of the Social Contract which encourage making provision for every citizen to avoid utter impoverishment, tends to create a general atmosphere of pressure and uncertainty that obliges most citizens to prioritize efforts to secure financial stability–while allowing large businesses to engage in practices utterly devoid of ethical consideration. When the rich keep getting richer, and poor keep getting poorer, and when the "American Dream" appears entirely inaccessible to millions, it may seem that Christ's advice to "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21) is becoming increasingly challenging to those who do not feel adequately represented by their democracy.

Ultimately, it may be argued that the Christianity used by autocrats and systems of power to manipulate the people is not true to the roots *or* spirit of the faith. It is simply a convenient tool, useful only for as long as it continues to enthrall those who put their trust in the individuals and organizations that invoke Christ's name to advance their agendas. Like the Ku Klux Klan and others, their pretense will work only for so long as people remain ignorant, fearful, and unwilling to accept the Otherness of those who are different.

4. Myriad Christianities

Democracy, like Christianity, thrives when people are educated. This may seem like a simple statement, but it is not. In the United States, those who identify as both religious and republican are most often those who do not possess an education higher than secondary school. Scientists, among the most educated people of today's world, are notoriously irreligious, particularly those in fields that tend to de-mystify the phenomenal world. Nor does it escape the notice of conservatives in the United States that progressive liberalism is concentrated in college and university halls. There is an anti-intellectual fervor in the country that should not be underestimated, however bizarre it may seem. On the most basic level, no one appreciates being slighted, and a blue-collar laborer without access to higher education, or without the means to take advantage of that access, may feel – and not unjustifiably so – that s/he has been "written off" by the intelligentsia. One need only pay attention to the political platforms at play since the elections of 2016 to understand why this perception occupies an active and influential position in the increasingly volatile exchange between the major parties. From the "rust belt" to the Great Plains, millions of individuals are struggling with poverty, unemployment, declining cities, addiction, high rates of suicide, and an overwhelming sense that society is essentially progressing without them, while still reaping the benefits of their labors.

Under these conditions, religion offers the refuge, consolation, and assurances that they cannot find elsewhere. It pays to ask whether, in

some ways, Christianity became democratic[30]. In other words, whether the expectations, desires and hopes of various congregations act on their respective churches in ways similar to the manner in which elected representatives are beholden to the will of their constituencies. Naturally, this is complicated by the pressure of big business, lobbyists, corruption, and so on, but the democratic political process still recognizes that the people have immense power over those appointed to govern them–a power earned during a period rife with revolutions and paved in the blood of dictators. The power of the people is checked, however, in ways that are becoming more insidious; not only through the classic method of pitting partisan interests against one another, and applying force to pressure points that cause dissent, or even by exacerbating wealth inequalities that cause conflict between the income--strata of society, but nowadays by using the tools made available by technology and social media. A steady campaign of disinformation is being waged, targeting the vulnerable by trapping them in "echo chambers" designed to reflect and magnify worldviews until the "Truth" becomes as relative and subjective as opinion.

Unfortunately, religion has been caught inside these echo chambers also[31]. Perhaps this can be attributed to the insularity of localized community churches, served by pastors that often come from those communities and consequently tend to be of the same mind as most of their

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[30] Tocqueville (1835: 507-511) writes: "It cannot be denied that Christianity itself has felt, to a certain extent, the influence which social and political conditions exercise on religious opinions. (…) Christianity did not lose sight of the leading general ideas which it had brought into the world. But it appeared, nevertheless, to lend itself, as much as was possible, to those new tendencies to which the fractional distribution of mankind has given birth (…) by respecting all democratic tendencies not absolutely contrary to herself, and by making use of several of them for her own purposes, religion sustains an advantageous struggle with that spirit of individual independence which is her most dangerous antagonist."

[31] Consider this observation by Peter Wehner (2020) concerning the current President of the United States, elected in 2016: "From what I can tell, in many cases Trump's most devoted evangelical supporters are blind to what they're doing, so in a sense they're not acting cynically or in bad faith, even as they are distorting reality. I have observed firsthand that if you point out facts that run counter to their narrative, some significant number of the president's supporters will eventually respond with indignation, feeling they have been wounded, disrespected, or unheard. The stronger the empirical case against what they believe, the more emotional energy they bring to their response. Underlying this is a deep sense of fear and the belief that they are facing an existential threat (…)."

congregation[32]. The question of whether or not certain denominations of Christianity have been democratized is also relevant in the sense that, in order to both retain and grow numbers, churches have had to adjust their strategies[33]; even as contemporary political candidates are utilizing social media platforms.

An important question to ask in this context is: how much can Christianity adapt without compromising its own integrity?

In order to begin even suggesting answers to this question, it is again important to distinguish between Christianity in terms of an individual or group's relationship to Christ, and the institutions and organizations that claim to facilitate those relationships. In every age of the world, from the age of emperors through the age of kings and nation-states, from the age of revolutions through the world wars, Christianity has occupied positions on every spectrum. It has been the tool of kings and peasants, high priests and village clergy, aristocrats and laborers. The modern secular democratic age is no different[34]. There are many variations of Christianity at play, and despite the essential unity of Christ's message, some of them are no more compatible with one another than the political parties that purport to represent them.

Today, there are Christianities that foment fear and feed off the uncertainties that attend a dizzying pace of change, and there are those

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[32] "The Evangelicals were, according to Marcia Pally, the 'backbone of the civic-democratic development' in the 18th and 19th Centuries in the USA, because they themselves were congregationally structured, and promoted communal development. They were anti-authoritarian and characterized by a strong individualism" (Schirrmacher, 2009: 81).

[33] In an article entitled "How Millennials are Redefining Christianity," Abby Rose Sugnet (2016) writes: "Brett McCracken (…) author of *Hipster Christianity: Where Church & Cool Collide*, believes millennials possess a more worshipful view of 'secular' culture and see God's goodness and beauty through good food, drinks, music, and films. (…) McCracken describes the Millennial Christian group as diverse but 'on the whole, they tend to be mindful of Christian stereotypes and distance themselves from that.' That takes form by 'expressing themselves in terms of the way they dress or the way they engage in pop culture because they don't want to be associated with the baggage which some people conceive as conservative,' McCracken says. 'They have this mindset that "I'm not one of those Christians."

[34] "Christian opinion," McGiffert (1919: 41-42) writes: "usually follows the prevailing opinion of the world at large. Seldom, to its shame be it said, has the Church ventured upon new paths until common sentiment has pronounced them safe."; and earlier: "In other days the Church would have defined Christian brotherhood solely in terms of benevolence. Now the Church is learning also to define it in terms of democracy, is learning that it is not real brotherhood unless there be in it liberty as well as love."

that can preserve the core of Christ's teachings and still provide unique inroads to those willing to engage in the profound spiritual communion his timeless message invites. There are Christianities that have been wed to political ideologies and platforms, contaminating the spirit of the faith with temporal concerns, and there are those that encourage good works in the world while reminding people that the Messiah transcends material entanglements. There are Christianities that discourage critical inquiry, reasoned skepticism, and discovery, and there are those that welcome the discoveries of science and acknowledge the mental faculties that God has provided to make those discoveries possible. There are Christianities that encourage critical thinking, introspection, courage, and tolerance. They may not always be represented best by institutions or organizations, temples or churches, but they exist all the same. Just as there were Christians who likely opposed the Crusades, and Christians who fought to abolish the slave trade, and Christians who do not subscribe to the wholesale decimation of indigenous cultures and traditions, there are churches that continue to embody the *best* aspects of the faith.

Contemporary, pluralistic democracy allows for those different Christianities to engage one another in civil discourse, allows them to participate in the push-and-pull, compromises, and syntheses that a vibrant and healthy system can support without fragmenting under the pressures of dissonance. At the same time, urbanization, technology, and social progressivism are rapidly defining the future's landscape, and Christianity remains a religion anchored to the past at a time when the rhetoric of "change" and "looking forward" is dominating the ideological marketplace.

However, being anchored to the past is not necessarily a bad thing! In fact, Christianity can provide a *continuity* reaching back through not only centuries of *earthly* history (which is, both unfortunately and inevitably, mired in less-than noble incidents and characters) but to a *transcendent* history reaching back towards the Creation and extending forward unto a time when the Spirit of humankind may break free of injustice, intolerance, bigotry and violence. Christianity shares the latter with the democratic ideal, if not always the former. Similarly, democracy presupposes that humankind has learned enough from the

mistakes of the past to avoid models of governance that too easily invite tyranny, oppression, and inequality[35].

If Christianity and democracy are to move forward together in harmony, each must make concessions. Christians must accept that coexistence in a pluralistic social environment necessitates avoiding the conflation of doctrine and spirit, as well as making conditional the practice of the virtues and values that Christ embodied. By the same token, democracy works best when people are educated; and that implies an education that is not skewed in favor of strengthening the consumerism and materialist positivism that disdains spirituality and faith, but rather one that is balanced and well-rounded enough to allow citizens to choose for themselves and amongst one another how to resolve and reconcile science and faith, spirit and flesh, earthly and divine.

Democracy, American or otherwise, has clearly not been perfected; nor has it proven invulnerable to humankind's oldest enemies: greed, entrenched power, manipulation, and tribalism. Nor has Christianity proved invulnerable to its own enemies, both within and without the institutions tasked with representing the faith. Americans often return to the Constitution when uncertain about how to safeguard their democracy, even as Christians return to the Bible; and both the Constitution and Bible are believed to retain the spirit of the ideas that produced them. Those ideas, while by no means the same, have this in common: that human beings should be free; that they should treat one another with respect and tolerance; and that people, despite their many differences, are of a common spirit that transcends the trappings of worldly materiality, and before which all are equal and entitled to an equality and justice unmarred by prejudice.

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[35] Eugene P. Heideman (1981: 86) writes, "The English speaking world since the age of the Reformation has accepted the basic position of the reformers that the state has been ordained by God to work with the sword for the purpose of law and order in a wicked world (…); under the pressure of Enlightenment thought and nineteenth century revivalists and evangelicals in the United States and England, governments became more interested in ameliorating the impoverished conditions of the rural and working classes. (…) By the second half of the twentieth century, Protestants were torn between their traditional emphasis on the sword and their recognition that a democratic state finds its true strength in the consent of the governed rather than in physical coercion. Increasingly, they accepted a 'secular' or an Enlightenment rationale as a basis for civil authority and tried to hold that rationale in some kind of harmony with their traditional theory of the 'sword.'"

Christianity and democracy are, in their truest forms, no threat to one another, but, as always, those who mislead and those who are misled can distort and imperil the natural communion between the sacred and secular. It falls to those who are neither blinded by faith nor by an antipathy towards it, to create spaces both inside and outside the temple where mystery and knowledge, civic duty and spirituality, can participate to create new possibilities capable of honorably withstanding the tides of time and change.

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