fully, a whole lot of Christians are unhappy with it. We may wonder if dismayed pastors and battle-weary parishioners—the "church within the church"—can find a better path. For there *are* better paths: ones which integrate scriptural teachings and liberal values, which align spiritual formation with civic virtue, and which, far from being pie in the sky, are flourishing right now.

3
Thick Christianity
The Gospel of Compromise
There are many ways to reconcile Jesus with James Madison

In November 2021, an elderly man, thin and with a dignified demeanor leavened by an impish smile, traveled from Salt Lake City to the University of Virginia with an urgent message. Wasting little time on pleasantries, he launched straight into his theme. "I love this country, which I believe was established with the blessings of God. I love its Constitution, whose principles I believe were divinely inspired. I am, therefore, distressed at the way we are handling the national issues that divide us."

In expressing his distress, he was not speaking merely for himself. This was Dallin Oaks, first counselor in the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Then almost 90, he had been a successful lawyer, a justice of the Utah state supreme court, and president of Brigham Young University. Called to the First Presidency in 2018, he was next in line to succeed Russell M. Nelson, the church's president and prophet; and he had become the public voice of the church's civic theology.

A civic theology posits that God expects his people to act

in certain ways, and to follow his commandments, not only in our personal lives but in our civic lives. In that respect, it operates in the same space as Christian nationalism—though what Oaks proposed was antithetical to Christian nationalism and far more profound and promising. When I first read the text of his speech, I felt a frisson. Here was something I had been looking for in my own advocacy of religious liberty and liberal pluralism because it elegantly linked the two.

Oaks's brief began where James Madison and the U.S. Constitution also begin: with the inescapable reality of disagreement and faction. "We have always had to work through serious political conflicts," Oaks said, "but today too many approach that task as if their preferred outcome must entirely prevail over all others, even in our pluralistic society. We need to work for a better way—a way to resolve differences without compromising core values."

Liberalism is a permanent process of public negotiation. Oaks argued that religious communities cannot exempt themselves from democratic deliberation; they must participate in it and abide by the results according to "the principle of honoring both divine and mortal laws." In other words, religious liberty is essential, but people of faith cannot simply enjoy it and walk away. It comes with obligations. "Rendering to Caesar in good faith," said Oaks, "requires religious persons and associations to acknowledge what their government does for them and to be faithful in fulfilling the reciprocal responsibilities they owe to the government and their fellow citizens."

But what are those responsibilities, and how are they to be carried out on occasions when God's law and man's law might conflict? Oaks's example was a clash between antidiscrimination laws requiring merchants and adoption agencies to serve same-sex weddings and couples, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, religious businesses and nonprofits whose faith

commitments forbid participation in what they see as sin. Some Christians and their legal allies are quick to strike a confrontational posture when a conflict arises—or even when a conflict does *not* arise, as when, not long ago, a website designer sued successfully to refuse service to same-sex weddings despite not having been asked to serve one. Oaks took a different tack. "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints suggests that a way can be found to reconcile divine and human law—through patience, negotiation, and mutual accommodation, without judicial fiat or other official coercion."

In other words, the first order of the day is not to claim supremacy for either religious or secular law, or to declare an existential clash, but to look—together—for ways to mitigate conflict. Oaks cited two examples, one a political negotiation between the church and Congress in the early twentieth century, the second a recent compromise in Utah which I will describe a little later. "The right relationship between religious freedom and nondiscrimination," he said, "is best achieved by respecting each other enough to negotiate in good faith and by caring for each other enough that the freedom and protection we seek is not for ourselves alone." Like Madison, he placed good-faith negotiation at the very center of the Constitution's meaning, quoting another church official who said, "When we use our religious freedom to bring people together in unity and love, we are defending and preserving religious liberty and the Constitution in a most profound way."

Significantly, Oaks argued that seeking unity through patience, negotiation, and mutual accommodation is not merely a stratagem for getting along with others; it is a charge from God. In remarks to the faithful earlier that year at the church's general conference (a semi-annual global gathering), he said, "Being subject to presidents or rulers of course poses no obstacle to our opposing individual laws or policies. It does require

that we exercise our influence civilly and peacefully within the framework of our constitutions and applicable laws. On contested issues, we should seek to moderate and unify."

In Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints scripture, the U.S. Constitution is specifically named as divinely inspired; and in church doctrine, the Constitution's underlying principles were decreed by God not only for Americans but for all God's children. "I see divine inspiration in the vital purpose of the entire Constitution," Oaks told the general conference. "We are to be governed by *law* and not by *individuals,* and our loyalty is to *the Constitution* and its principles and processes, not to any *office holder.* In this way, all persons are to be equal before the law." (Italics are in the original.)

This doctrine places the church under certain obligations. In a speech in Rome in 2022, Oaks said, "Speaking from a religious perspective, I maintain that followers of Jesus Christ have a duty to seek harmony and peace." This duty pertains not just to seeking harmony and peace in one's own church and family and local community; it is a *civic* commandment, a requirement to approach politics and public debate in a particular way. As Oaks wrote in an article in the scholarly journal *Judicature* in 2023, "*We should not expect or seek total dominance for our own positions.*"

Here the italics are mine, because this is more than a tactical injunction to obey the law in order to stay out of jail, and more than "render unto Caesar" boilerplate. Oaks argues for an alignment between God's moral constitution and Madison's political one. Speaking for the church, he sees patience, negotiation, and compromise not as means to some end, to be jettisoned if the results are unsatisfying, but as social and spiritual ends unto themselves. At the risk of exaggerating or oversimplifying (but only a little), one could put what he is saying this way: *Never dominate, always negotiate—because that is God's plan.*

Why is it God's plan? In a moment, I will explore the church's civic theology in more detail, en route to arguing that it has something to teach both Christianity and liberalism. But first, a quick recap of how we arrived in the realm of Latter-day Saint theology.

In the previous chapters, I argued that neither secular liberalism nor religion can independently deliver all the moral goods people require; but American liberalism and American Christianity are pulling apart, largely (though of course not entirely) because of tragically misguided choices made by many white evangelicals. The result is a crisis for both Christianity and democracy.

This chapter considers pathways toward a positive realignment in which the Christian and secular worlds become more mutually supportive, helping each other uphold the Founders' vision instead of drifting apart into mutual incomprehension. I find reason for hope. Influential religious figures have discovered the hole where a biblically based, pro-democratic civic theology should be and are striving to fill it. Some of them are evangelicals, others not; most are Christian, but one could take inspiration from a rabbi I know who has integrated core American texts into his congregation's Torah study (a concept he and his synagogue are bringing to other congregations). But for today's most intellectually complete and pragmatically proven vision of a distinctively scriptural pluralism, we should travel to Utah.

Countercultural Compromises

My awareness of something interesting afoot in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (as the church now prefers to be called) came in March 2015, with the announcement of what seemed like a miracle in Utah. Seemingly out of nowhere, at a

press conference in Salt Lake City, conservative state legislators, leaders of the state's LGBT rights community, and senior representatives of the church announced agreement on legislation extending nondiscrimination protections to LGBT Utahns while also providing targeted exemptions for religious organizations. The bill, SB 296, passed the conservative legislature with overwhelming support.

Madison put compromise at the heart of the Constitution because he correctly understood compromise to be more than a mechanical, difference-splitting approach to managing conflict. While it can sometimes be mere difference-splitting, compromise is more often a creative, generative, pro-social endeavor in its own right. If the parties in a disagreement deadlock, they gather more information, bring in new factions and voices, imagine innovations and workarounds. The result is often better than what anyone started with. And the legislative outcome is not the only product; just as important are the relationships built during negotiations, the habits of collaboration formed, and the feelings of goodwill and fellowship which arise among previously antagonistic groups. Simply by having to interact and do business, the parties to a negotiation develop the civic habits of peaceful coexistence and unlearn the habits of domination and distrust.

That happened in Utah. "To me the process here may be even more important than the legislation," Troy Williams, the executive director of Equality Utah, the state's main LGBT group, told me. "When I sit down with folks, I'll never see them as an enemy or opponent. I'll see them as future ally, even if we're not there yet." When I asked him to name the downsides of SB 296 from the point of view of Utah's LGBT community, he couldn't think of a single one. "The culture has changed here in Utah," he said. "In every possible way, Utah is now a safer and more welcoming state for the LGBTQ community." When

I asked if the same change would have happened without SB 296, he replied with a firm no. "It changed the dynamic forever in the legislature. I've watched so many legislators open up their hearts in this process."* Capitalizing on the channels of communication and trust they had built, conservative legislators and Equality Utah were able to collaborate on subsequent hot-button issues such as gay conversion therapy.

The compromise of 2015 did not come out of nowhere. In 2008, the church had gone all-in to back California's Proposition 8, which added a ban on same-sex marriage to the state's constitution (ending a brief period in which same-sex marriage had been legalized by the state's supreme court). The church called upon its members in California to contribute and canvass in support of the initiative; it even had local leaders read a statement over every Latter-day Saint pulpit in California, asking members to "do all you can to support the proposed constitutional amendment by donating of your means and time to assure that marriage in California is legally defined as being between a man and a woman." Although Proposition 8 won at the ballot box, the church's heavy-handed involvement—which may have been decisive—caused an uproar whose fury shocked and chastened the church's leadership. Quietly, the church opened lines of communication with the LGBT community in Utah. Eyebrows went up in 2009 when the church threw its support behind Salt Lake City's ban on anti-gay discrimination in housing and employment. That led to several years of quiet, intense conversations between the church and the LGBT community, initially aimed at listening and learning, then turning more substantive. SB 296 was only the visible tip of a larger, mostly submerged negotiation.

*Jonathan Rauch, "Meeting in the Middle on Religious and LGBTQ Rights," *Deseret News*, May 5, 2021.

I was (and still am) a devoted advocate of both LGBT equality, especially marriage, and religious liberty. I believed there was room and need to negotiate pathways around conflicts. For me, SB 296 was inspirational. And indeed, it inspired similar efforts in other states, as well as negotiations between a center-right LGBT group called the American Unity Fund and a coalition of religious groups (including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) leading to a proposed federal compromise called the Fairness for All Act. None of those efforts bore fruit—until, unexpectedly, they did.

In 2022, concurring with the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision overturning the *Roe v. Wade* abortion ruling, Justice Clarence Thomas included language suggesting that same-sex marriage, legalized by the court in 2015, might be next on the chopping block. In Congress, House Democrats responded with the Respect for Marriage Act, a bill establishing same-sex marriage in federal law. Seeing an opportunity, the Fairness for All coalition in the Senate added some significant religious liberty protections. By strongly stating that the federal government will not treat opposition to same-sex marriage as the equivalent of racism, and that the government will not use federal instruments like contracts and tax breaks to coerce acceptance of same-sex marriage, the bill squarely addressed the religious community's two biggest fears. It passed with bipartisan support—and with the support of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which did not endorse the same-sex marriage provisions but worked to get the bill enacted and praised its religious liberty provisions as "historic and commendable."

One needs to step back and appreciate why all this matters. Socially, the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are conservative. Marriage is between one man and one woman; homosexuality is a sin, and a person who

practices it unrepentantly cannot be a church member. For the most part, conservative Protestants and Catholics who share this view have assumed that America's laws should reflect God's laws. *Reflect* does not mean *copy* or *embody*. But because, for example, the Bible (purportedly) says that homosexuality is an abomination, conservative Christians have supported laws criminalizing consensual homosexual intimacy ("sodomy"). To such conservatives, it makes no sense to oppose same-sex marriage as sinful and unbiblical while supporting a law enshrining that very thing.

One Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officer recalled to me a conversation he had with a Roman Catholic archbishop who was perplexed by the church's willingness to compromise on LGBT issues. In its 2019 guide *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops calls participation in political life "a moral obligation" and emphasizes a long list of policy positions Catholics should support. *Compromise* is mentioned only three times in its 53 pages, and always in a negative context (as in, "We cannot compromise basic principles or moral teaching"). "We should work with others to advance our moral principles," the bishops say, but that injunction is instrumental, a means to an end, not an end in itself. One Catholic commentator told me, "I think that Catholic teaching recognizes that compromise is legitimate on the application of principles to legislation, but the bishops are simply not interested in compromising on these [moral] issues."

It was no surprise, then, that the bishops stridently opposed the Respect for Marriage Act, saying that the church "will always uphold the unique meaning of marriage as a lifelong, exclusive union of one man and one woman." Similarly, Andrew Walker of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary voiced the prevalent view among evangelicals when he wrote on

Twitter: "Even if the Respect for Marriage Act had incredible religious liberty protections (it doesn't), it still violates a basic principle of moral construction related to public policy: Law should always reflect truth. It is thus wrong to tell a lie about what marriage is." In other words, the only morally acceptable compromise involving same-sex marriage is *no* compromise.

So why was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints defending my legal right to marry a man and, beyond that, endorsing compromise as a good in and of itself? When I asked Dallin Oaks, he acknowledged tactical considerations. "We're doctrinally against it," he told me, meaning same-sex marriage, "but we believe in living under the Constitution and laws of the United States. So we don't think we give up very much by having Congress enact something that's already the law under the Supreme Court, and what we gain in the Respect for Marriage Act as amended is important enough. What we lose by codifying something that already exists is insignificant."

Okay, fair enough. But there had to be more to it than shrewd maneuvering. The church could have sat on the sidelines, saying and doing nothing to help the bill pass, or it could have joined with many other conservative religious groups in demanding protection for religious liberty *without* protection for marriage equality—a purist posture which would have been cost-free. Yet here was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints actively supporting a compromise contravening a core doctrine, when doing so was *not* cost-free.

Oaks, when we spoke about it, was well aware that the church's conciliatory approach is conspicuously countercultural in the conservative religious world. The search for a way in the middle "means we've left some evangelicals behind and we don't have the Catholic support that we usually have, and our position does not track well with conservative Republicans. So there are quite a few points of strain on that." He professed not

to care about other churches' reactions ("I'm only concerned about what I said being right"), and he seemed quite cheerful about coloring outside the lines. He told me,

> I have a professional lifetime interest in the Constitution of the United States, and how it could never have been adopted without compromise among groups that feel differently on powerful issues but found a way to realize that if they would give up on things that were less important they could achieve a common goal that's most important of all. I think that's an approach that has become less and less feasible during my lifetime. A different approach seems to be dominant in government and much public thinking, including among many religious people of different denominations. As I've prayerfully pondered and tried to see what God would have us do and what is good for our nation, I came to the position that I expressed in the lecture in Virginia.

Why might God require the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to take an approach which is, by the standards of conservative Christianity, distinctly countercultural, not to mention unpopular and, in the view of many, unbiblical? The answer goes deep.

A Thick and Strong Church

Before approaching that answer, I need to make five prefatory points. The first is that, for all the admiration I will express in the paragraphs which follow, I am by no means a fan of all elements of the church and its theology. I find its teachings about homosexuality, in particular, repugnant and harmful, and its teachings about gender roles discriminatory and archaic. But

the depth of our differences is precisely what makes the church's ideas about pluralism so compelling.

The second point is that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints takes conservative views on social issues which resemble those of conservative evangelicals. Moreover, in the United States the two traditions have similar demographic profiles: largely white and disproportionately Republican. Those similarities make it all the more significant that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has consciously chosen to reject the Church of Fear. Demographics and ideology, it turns out, do not dictate theology. We learn from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that Christians can *choose* their civic posture. They are not merely buffeted hither and yon by outside cultural winds and secular pressures. They are not necessarily forced into an oppositional, confrontational stance by their conservative views.

A third observation: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not a "thin" religion. It has not blended into the cultural zeitgeist or watered down its requirements. Just the opposite; it is one of America's most prominent examples of a *thick* faith, one which is both demanding and enfolding, combining high personal investment with high communal returns. "Let us here observe," said Joseph Smith, the church's founder, "that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation."

It is instructive to dilate for a moment on just how "thick"—how demanding—the church is. In their high-school years, church members are expected to attend a program of weekday religious instruction called Seminary. (This frequently happens before school, although in Utah and some other places it can be accomplished through released time.) "Young people in the church make a tremendous sacrifice for that," Clark Gilbert, the church's education commissioner, told me, recalling how he used to wake up at 6 a.m. every day. High schoolers are also expected to attend at least one session of a one-week summer camp, which, Gilbert said, focuses in large part on "how do you hang on to your faith in a world that imposes a different perspective on you?" There is also a weekly evening youth program, plus an hour of Sunday school weekly at church. Plus the church encourages nightly scripture study with family. "We're not going to just have the church teach our kids," Gilbert said. "Part of the way adults stay strong is we're expected to teach ourselves and teach at home."

Not every church member does all those things, of course (are there enough hours in the day?), but they do a lot. Referring to the 10,000 hours of training supposedly required for proficiency in a skill or sport, Gilbert said, "We hit the 10,000 hours by the time we graduate high school."

After high school, in university, many go on to additional studies, called Institute, for several hours a week. As they leave their teens, about 40 percent take two years for missionary work, an experience which, in my interviews with them, former missionaries uniformly described as life-changing. Thus prepared, when church members reach the world of work they are called to all kinds of volunteer assignments, ranging from teaching Sunday school to organizing charitable programs. The church relies on lay members to serve as clergy (called bishops), usually for five-year terms. One bishop—a professional with a demanding day job—estimated putting in 15 hours a week at the church, unpaid. Those without a specific calling are expected to volunteer several hours a week, for example by teaching in youth programs or distributing food to the needy.

If I were to single out one aspect as characteristic of the church's "thickness"—its wraparound, high-touch social technology for keeping members committed and connected—I

would choose a program the church refers to as *ministering brothers and sisters.* Most church members, perhaps 70 percent, are assigned responsibility, with a partner, to look after a family—one or more of whose members, in turn, will act as ministering brother or sister to another family. Ministering duties are not spelled out specifically, but in normal times the ministering pair would check in with their family once a month or so for a scripture lesson or an update. If there's a crisis, engagement becomes more intense. Gilbert recalls that when his house burned down, the ministering sister showed up at 10 p.m. to help. "In our church," he told me, only half-jokingly, "we assign friends."

I recount all of that by way of giving a feel for the strong demands the church makes, and the strong bonds it creates. Which leads me to a fourth observation: the church is healthy. Vibrant, in fact. Worldwide, it is growing. In the United States, its growth seems to have leveled off after a period of robust expansion. Accurate counts are hard to come by because not all those listed as members on church rolls are active, but in a 2019 study the church demographer Stephen Cranney estimated the rate of attrition in the United States to be more or less offset by the rate of conversion.* This makes a distinct contrast with the shrinkage of the mainline and evangelical denominations.

Finally, despite its misstep in 2008, the church has made a conscious choice not to dabble in partisan politics. It specifically forbids political preaching. The church leadership has rejected pleas, from inside and outside, to involve itself in issues like immigration and the environment. Some members, I was told, itch to see the church wade into the culture wars; but

*Stephen Cranney, "Who Is Leaving the Church?" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, No. 1 (2019).

church officials I spoke with, including not only higher-ups in Salt Lake City but also ordinary bishops (i.e., local lay pastors), said that if a bishop or other ecclesiastical authority ventured into partisan politics, he would be promptly counseled and corrected. Sunday school and Seminary instruction, which I observed, stick to exposition of the church's four sacred texts, taught on the same weekly schedule around the world, so that a student could move from Maryland to Manila without missing a verse. In the worship services and educational sessions I observed, I saw no hint of politics, even by implication.

Taking those observations together, we may pause to note something meaningful. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints achieved all of what I just mentioned without secularizing; without blending into the surrounding culture; without relinquishing its exacting requirements; and without yielding to demands that it embrace partisan politics and preach the culture wars. True, it has adapted in a variety of ways: obvious examples include banning polygamy and accepting African Americans into the priesthood. (Hope springs eternal for revelations about homosexuality and women.) But no one who even dips a toe in its waters thinks the church has lost its cultural distinctiveness or its theological moorings. To the contrary, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stands as one of our country's most prominent examples of a thick church—one which demands much of its adherents and offers much back to them.

All of this, taken together, poses quite a problem for "post-liberal" critics of the classical liberal tradition. According to them, it should not be possible for a traditionalist, conservative church to embrace negotiation and mutual accommodation amid today's consumeristic, individualistic, homogenizing culture while also preserving its values and its distinctiveness. If the post-liberal critique were true, the Church of Jesus Christ

of Latter-day Saints should have been assimilated long ago by the relentlessly liberal Borg. Its members should be clamoring for a low-maintenance, unchallenging experience, and its leaders should be yielding to the pressures of social media and the sexual revolution. Resistance is futile, right?

In fact, the church helps us understand why aligning with liberal pluralism is not part of the problem for American Christianity; it is part of the solution.

"Nits Will Make Lice"

Latter-day Saints' attitudes toward pluralism, law, and religious freedom date back to the founding of the church. From the beginning, the church was persecuted, often savagely. Like the Jews, the Saints were driven from one place to the next by pogrom and government persecution. Missouri's governor ordered them expelled from the state or, if need be, "exterminated." (An original copy of the governor's extermination order is on display at the church history museum in Salt Lake City. It makes for a chilling read.) Joseph Smith, the church's founder, was martyred along with his brother. Many others were killed, uprooted, and otherwise ethnically cleansed. In the Haun's Mill massacre, as the University of Utah historian Paul Reeve told me, three boys attempting to hide were murdered by attackers who said, in justification, "Nits will make lice."

That history is not ancient: its scars remain. Reeve startled me by mentioning that one of those three murdered boys was his relative. Dallin Oaks told me that his great aunt, whom he knew as a boy, was jailed for contempt of court in a polygamy case. Perhaps the most obvious and frequently made point about the modern church's attitude toward democracy is that the memory of persecution has bred sensitivity to the importance of religious freedom and pluralism—as well as a compulsion to prevent the Constitution's First Amendment guarantee from ever again being traduced as it so egregiously was in their case.

Joseph Smith's commitment to religious pluralism no doubt stemmed in part from the persecution he and his followers experienced; yet his writings on the subject transcend their historical moment, evincing a conviction which seems spiritual and even visionary. In the eleventh of his thirteen articles of faith, he says, "We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may." And in 1843 he said:

> The Saints can testify whether I am willing to lay down my life for my brethren. If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a "Mormon," I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves.

In 1843, defending Roman Catholics was not exactly popular in the United States, but Smith followed his word with deeds. When the church settled in Nauvoo, Illinois, the city council, led by mayor Joseph Smith, passed a sweeping religious-liberty ordinance: "Be it ordained by the City Council of the city of Nauvoo, that the Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Latter-Day-Saints, Quakers, Episcopalians, Universalists, Unitarians, Mohammedans, and all other religious sects, and denominations, whatever, shall have free toleration, and

equal privileges, in this city."* Dismayed by the U.S. government's refusal to enforce the church's civil rights, Smith went so far as to commission a Council of Fifty to propose constitutional revisions requiring "the armies of the government" to enforce "principles of liberty" for all people, not just the Protestant majority—and, notes Reeve, in his essay "The Council of Fifty and the Search for Religious Liberty," Smith "included as members of the Council of Fifty those of other faiths or of no faith as an explicit demonstration of his views." Reeve writes:

> For Joseph Smith, it was not enough to merely tolerate people of other faiths or of no faith. Religious bigotry had no place in his worldview. He stated, "God cannot save or damn a man only on the principle that every man acts, chooses and worships for himself; hence the importance of thrusting from us every spirit of bigotry and intolerance toward a mans [*sic*] religious sentiments, that spirit which has drenched the earth with blood." He called [on] the council to witness that "the principles of intollerance [*sic*] and bigotry never had a place in this kingdom, nor in my breast, and that he is even then ready to die rather than yield to such things."

Smith even made federal enforcement of religious liberty the central plank of his 1844 presidential candidacy (which triggered the tragic chain of events leading to his murder).

In the modern church, to paraphrase Faulkner, the past is not dead; it's not even the past. When I visited Salt Lake City for interviews with church officials and members, I was ambushed by an unexpected sense of recognition and kinship. As

*Not all of the council's actions were liberal; it condemned a dissident newspaper as a public nuisance and destroyed its presses.

a Jew, I grew up immersed in a narrative of persecution, flight, exile, vulnerability, and vigilance. The Latter-day Saints have their own story of flight and exile: according to Smith's revelation, the church's earthly Zion is Jackson County, Missouri, not Salt Lake City. Like the Jews, the Latter-day Saints were driven out of their promised land and their plan for a great temple there is today unfulfilled. I feel an immense pride in America's pluralism and tolerance while remaining conscious—as a Jew and also as a homosexual—of my status as a minority and an outsider. I experience the United States as my own country; yet more (I suspect) than my white Protestant friends, I feel that my sense of belonging to America does not translate into a sense that America belongs to me. I understand exactly what a Latter-day Saint who works in a church education program meant when he said, matter-of-factly, "We get persecuted, but so what?" Religious bigotry remains a fact of life for his church and perhaps always will, but he refuses to be defined by it. (That's how I feel about antisemitism and homophobia.) When he emphasized the importance of looking forward and doing good in the world rather than nursing grievance, I saw a stark contrast with the Church of Fear, which is livid with aggrievement. The Latter-day Saint attitude, like the Jewish attitude, is that we may be blessed with safety and influence here in America, but we can never feel *entitled* to them. We cannot "lose our country" because it is not ours to lose; rather, we are here to share it.

When I asked Dallin Oaks about the influence of the church's history as a persecuted minority, he gave a complicated answer. "That can never escape the consciousness of anyone who knows the church's history of persecution, and most of the church leadership has that in their pedigree charts. You can't escape those memories." But, he added, "to say they motivate the church's position [today] I think is wrong." He said

the church looks ahead to the future and its mission of building a global membership. There, again, was the line I heard also from the rank and file: be aware of the past, be informed by it, but do not be defined or aggrieved by it.

A sociologist who maintains that the church's civic posture is shaped by its history would certainly be correct, but only up to a point. To take religion seriously, one must take religious doctrine seriously. One must move from history and sociology to theology. And when one examines the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one finds a surprise. The Book of Mormon converges with the Book of Madison.

A Godly Pluralism

Here I am on thin ice again—even thinner than in the last chapter, when I tried to explain Christianity to Christians. I am even more the amateur when it comes to explaining Latter-day Saint doctrine. The case I am about to make leans on the work of Terryl Givens, a respected theologian and intellectual historian of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is buttressed by interviews and conversations with church officials and scholars. But it is not intended to be an authoritative statement of doctrine. Instead, it is an outsider's effort to understand specific aspects of a complex and singular teaching, and to place them within my own secular framework in hopes of learning from them.

In my conversations with leaders and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the concept of *agency* came up far more often than any other doctrinal idea. "Nothing is quite so core as agency is to Mormonism," Kathleen Flake, a professor of Mormon studies at the University of Virginia, told me. I heard it invoked in all kinds of contexts. For example, when I asked Rusty Bowers, a former speaker of

the Arizona state House of Representatives and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, why he had championed a version of the Utah compromise in Arizona, despite knowing it lacked the votes to pass, he went straight to agency. Church scripture, he told me, "strongly speaks about the absolute necessity of the expression of free conscience. If we believe that, why don't we allow that?" He elaborated that "as children of God we cannot be forced to follow him. It has to be a willful offering of the heart."

What is *agency*, and what does it have to do with legislative politics about LGBT rights in Arizona? Well . . . it begins in the Garden of Eden.

Following the teaching of Saint Augustine and many subsequent saints and sages, most Christians believe that Eve and Adam sinned by defying God's command not to eat the fruit of knowledge, and that the punishment was their expulsion from paradise and humanity's eternal burdens of mortality and original sin. In my Jewish education, I was taught a similar story of Edenic disobedience and punishment, though without the doctrine of original sin. I will confess that, from the time I first heard that interpretation, it has puzzled me. If God had not wanted Eve to eat the fruit, why did he make it available? Why did he also put a tempter in her path? Most fundamentally, I thought, Eve and Adam had made a praiseworthy choice. Humans before the Fall were cattle, nourished and fed but also naked and naïve, without knowledge of good and evil and thus lacking moral sense, humanity's defining trait. How can it be right to choose to be like sheep and cows? Isn't our capacity for moral reasoning a gift, not a curse?

Taking those questions on board, Latter-day Saint theology breaks with the doctrine of original sin. God warned that eating the fruit of knowledge would have grave consequences but deliberately provided the option. Eve's choice to accept

those consequences was part of God's plan and therefore not sinful or wicked, but courageous. As Dallin Oaks wrote in 1993, "Some Christians condemn Eve for her act, concluding that she and her daughters are somehow flawed by it. Not the Latter-day Saints! Informed by revelation, we celebrate Eve's act and honor her wisdom and courage in the great episode called the Fall." God gave humans the capacity for moral awareness and choice, and in seizing the opportunity instead of rejecting it, we became more like God. "Humankind and God now share a common moral awareness, a common capacity to judge between right and wrong, a common capacity for love," write Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens in *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life*. "Instead of deploring Eve's and Adam's transgression, one might find in it a cause for rejoicing."

From the idea that the first couple's decision was not sinful, it follows that there is no original sin. Of course, humans have a *propensity* to sin; life is full of temptations and our own natures tempt and mislead us. But we do not *inherit* sinfulness; we are born innocent. As our lives unfold, we draw closer to God or farther from God through the choices we make. "At Eve's courageous instigation," write the Givenses, she and Adam "opt to lose paradise, hoping to eventually regain heaven—but transformed and ennobled by the schoolhouse of experience that comprises mortality. For this kind of education, nothing short of total immersion in a world of choice and consequence will suffice, and sin is one of those consequences. . . . Only by choosing the good and experiencing its fruit do we learn to savor and embrace the good." We *learn* goodness by confronting choices in the world and choosing well; and in the process of learning goodness, we become more like God.

Now, in some respects, the Latter-day Saints' emphasis on choice sounds like the conventional Christian doctrine of

free will. After all, there is no virtue in doing right if we do not also have the ability to do wrong. So is agency just free will under a different name? Not quite. Free will entails the *capacity* to make moral or immoral choices. But in order to learn from life's schooling, we must have more than just the capacity to make moral or immoral choices; *we must also have morally consequential choices to make*—and inevitably, we will make some flawed and even wrong choices. "Moral agency is predicated on a causal connection between choice and consequence," Terryl Givens writes, in *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought*. "Given the freedom to choose, individuals must be granted the fruits of their choices, good or ill, or such freedom would be only a shadow of genuine agency."

The implication, then, is that we are not born guilty, but merely inadequate. We are not fallen but unformed. Life is not a process of moral repair or atonement under the oppressive curse of original sin; it is a process of moral development under the tutelage of experience. And we cannot develop morally unless we confront all kinds of choices, not just pre-approved ones—thus allowing us to exert *agency*. Efforts to protect us from bad choices by restricting agency may be well intentioned, but they deprive us of the opportunity to learn from our errors and inadequacies, stunting our moral development and ultimately thwarting our godlike potential.

Moreover, according to the church, the doctrine of agency applies to all persons, not only members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The doctrine is universal. *Everyone* must be able to make decisions according to the dictates of judgment and conscience. This is our human inheritance from the time of creation. As Joseph Smith taught in a speech in 1840, "I believe that a man is a moral, responsible, free agent."

From here it is but a short step to Madisonian pluralism. "*First*," writes Oaks in his *Judicature* article, "we learn that God

grants us moral agency and, consequently, we are not only free to choose and to act according to our choices, but we are also accountable to God for those choices. *Second,* the most desirable political condition for the exercise of agency is maximum freedom for persons to act personally without tyrannical dictate."

Of course, some choices will come into conflict. We can't exert unfettered agency without sometimes causing harm to others or violating others' agency. The church and the Constitution (a divinely inspired document, remember) prescribe the same remedy. "Where there is genuine conflict, one constitutional right should not be invoked to try to cancel another constitutional right," Oaks said at UVA. "Both need to be balanced legally and negotiated politically in a way that upholds both essential rights to the greatest extent possible."

Note the phrase "balanced legally and negotiated politically." In a diverse society, a sustainable and just balance will not be found abstractly or doctrinally or legalistically, nor will it be found if only one side has a vote. Finding balance requires "patience, negotiation, and mutual accommodation." It requires active political interaction. Which requires, in turn, a particular civic mindset. We now see the theological underpinnings for Oaks's dictum: *We should not expect or seek total dominance for our own positions.* If I impose my will politically to limit your agency, I have deprived you of a pathway toward godliness; and so I have sinned.

Here we have something quite impressive: a fully formed, coherent scriptural foundation for Madisonian pluralism. It is the polar antithesis of Christian nationalism and it rejects and repudiates Christian dominionism. So why might Arizona House speaker Bowers commit himself to compromising on LGBT rights, despite believing that homosexual behavior violates God's law? Why might the church support the Utah compromise and the Respect for Marriage Act? Because those measures protect the church's ability to teach and practice its doctrines about marriage and sexuality within its own institutions, while also protecting, in the larger society, people's ability to make their own choices about marriage and sexuality. Thus can "patience, negotiation, and mutual accommodation" advance religious freedom and personal freedom in tandem, increasing the net sum of agency and advancing the moral development of individuals and society. Which is liberal doctrine in a nutshell!

I am not claiming that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints always endorses libertarian public policies (Utah is one of only two states where all forms of gambling are illegal), or that the church is never hypocritical or domineering. Nor am I claiming that the church's doctrines and practices magically resolve tensions between faith groups and secular society. I *am* arguing that American liberals—and, still more important, American Christians—should pay attention to what the church has laid before us: a civic theology which aligns scriptural and constitutional values, not merely as a matter of expediency but as an intrinsic element of God's plan.

The church here provides as dramatic a contrast as you could imagine with the civic theology of Christian nationalism and its offshoots. It provides an account of Christian citizenship which is not defensive, fearful, or self-isolating, but which embraces the messy, frustrating process of negotiation as bringing Americans closer to God. It renounces as unscriptural the zero-sum, Flight 93 mentality, in which only one side can triumph and everything depends on winning the next election. It rejects any effort to model politics on warfare, any desire to drink the other side's tears. It also rejects the radical version of progressivism which would impose secular law on religious life, regardless of religious practices and objections. Instead,

it supports a balanced, negotiated approach in which the two sides meet as equals and make room for each other. In that respect, it provides for accountability to both God and the Constitution.

If you are a secular progressive who wants to withdraw all government grants and contracts from (say) Brigham Young University unless it allows same-sex couples into its married dorms, you will not like this approach. Nor will you like it if you are a post-liberal or Christian nationalist who wants to rewrite law to reflect religious principles like Sunday closing or contraceptive bans. But your alternative strategy of trying to dominate or destroy the other side will be less successful and more divisive; and ultimately, your insistence on purism will weaken the social fabric on which your faith's freedom and agency ultimately depend.

Theology Matters

I don't need to be psychic to anticipate the next question. All of that theology is interesting, but is it applicable beyond the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Can American evangelicals take anything from it? No other church shares the Latter-day Saints' theology, scripture, or hierarchy. When I tried to persuade a Southern Baptist minister that the Fall was a good thing, I didn't get to first base. If evangelicals need to convert to Latter-day Sainthood in order to embrace pluralism, we're stuck.

Fortunately, one need not replicate the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' theology in order to learn from it. The Latter-day Saints' example allows us to make some hopeful observations, none of which requires agreement with their theology.

First, it shows that a pluralistic civic theology is possible

in America today. The post-liberals are wrong to claim that liberalism is inherently antithetical to conservative and communitarian varieties of Christianity. The Church of Fear is wrong to insist on a divisive, oppositional attitude toward politics. You need not surrender your religious faith or identity in order to embrace Madison's constitutional pluralism. You need not regard compromise as defeat and opponents as enemies. Better still, tearing down the wall of separation between personal and public Christian values strengthens both. Seeking to "moderate and unify" in civic life is both pious and public-spirited.

Second, the church's example also demonstrates that Christian civic pluralism is practical. You can apply it to public policy, get actual deals done, and come out ahead. You can obtain more of what you need through patience, negotiation, and mutual accommodation than by rioting in the Capitol or hollering about Flight 93 elections. While it is true that the fruits of the spirit should not be judged on the basis of whether they "work," they often *do* work. And not just for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Others who participated in the negotiations leading to the Fairness for All proposal and the Respect for Marriage Act included the Seventh-day Adventist World Church, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, and the (Jewish) Orthodox Union. None of those faith groups supports same-sex marriage as a religious matter or is theologically progressive; but all saw their mission in pluralism, not purism.

Third, while other Christian traditions differ from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on theological particulars (and, it should be noted, some evangelicals do not regard Latter-day Saints as Christians), a church which makes an effort to notice and foreground the liberal elements of

Christian teaching has plenty to work with. I dwelled on Latter-day Saint teachings about agency and moral development not for their own sake but to demonstrate that the church's theology drives its approach to politics, not the other way around. The church is not compromising or deforming its doctrines to conform with contemporary exigencies; rather, it is teaching and modeling core doctrines which serve God *and* help us live together. And—the operative point—*evangelicals can do this, too.* As I argued in the previous chapter, core tenets of Christianity align with Madisonian pluralism. There are plenty of doctrinal pathways which evangelicals can take to pluralism. In recent years, evangelical illiberalism has been driven not by the dictates of scripture but by ignoring many of those dictates, or applying them selectively and inconsistently. After its Proposition 8 debacle in 2008, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has foregrounded those elements of its faith which harmonize with America's constitutional order. There is no reason evangelicals and other Christians could not make the same choice on the basis of their own theology. I am asking evangelicals to emulate what the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints *does,* not what it *believes.*

Fourth, you can't beat something with nothing. The Church of Fear is more pagan than Christian; it wins its adherents by exploiting some of the darkest elements of human psychology; but it is emotionally compelling and widely present—in politics, in conservative and Christian media, and in the pews. Pastors, understandably bewildered by it, may prefer to ask parishioners to turn away from social media and toward the Bible, but the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints shows that more is needed: an emotionally positive, doctrinally coherent, institutionally promoted civic theology which models a Christlike way to do politics.

The church is not monolithic. Some Latter-day Saints

hanker for a sharp-edged, aggressive cultural tone while others pray for a relaxation of conservative strictures on homosexuality and other cultural matters. Yet if I had a dollar for every time a church member, high or low, mentioned the doctrine of agency and the importance of free conscience, I could have just about paid my plane fare to Utah. This doctrinal grounding matters. Among other things, it helps explain why Latter-day Saints, for all their demographic and ideological similarity to white evangelicals, have taken a dimmer view of Trump. (According to data from national exit polls, Latter-day Saints and white evangelicals voted overwhelmingly and in lockstep for the Republican presidential candidates in 2004, 2008, and 2012; but then they diverged, with the Latter-day Saints' support for Trump falling 20 points below white evangelicals' support in 2016, and nine points below in 2020. A poll in 2023 showed that fewer than half of church members approved of him, versus two-thirds of white evangelicals.*)

I am not saying—I hope this is clear—that the measure of a civic theology is whether it impels people to support or oppose a particular person or party. Rather, I am making a broader point: theology matters. Doctrine matters. Like it or not, Christian nationalism and the Church of Fear promote a strong message which today saturates conservative evangelical culture. One pastor summarized it this way: *We need to fight, we need to win.* Pushing back requires a more compelling story—and a more Christian story.

In August 2023, the *New York Times* quoted Representative Brian Mast, a Republican from Florida, as saying: "I want

* Daniel A. Cox, "Mormons and White Evangelicals Are Divided over Trump," American Enterprise Institute, December 3, 2019; Samuel Benson, "Will Trump Have a Latter-day Saint Voter Problem Yet Again?" *Deseret News,* September 7, 2023.

my president to be the biggest American chest thumper out there. If you cross him, he will slit your throat, and I get that out of President Trump." I don't know Mr. Mast's religious leanings (though news reports said he had attended an evangelical church), but I do know that a proper Christian civic theology—something Jesus might recognize—would help inoculate us all against bloodthirsty rhetoric and gladiatorial politics.

Tear Down That Wall!

Now for the part authors hate and readers fear (or is it the other way around?): the "what is to be done?" part. I approach that question gingerly and humbly, knowing that Christians may not be eager to hear how an atheistic homosexual Jew thinks they should practice their faith. Fortunately, new paths for Christianity are being mapped and explored by the people whose voices really matter on this question—Christians.

Before we go there, a quick review of where we've been.

First, American Christianity is in crisis. Both of its major streams, the ecumenical and the evangelical, have "thinned," that is, secularized, albeit in very different ways. Neither is as capable of providing meaning and moral grounding as it once was or today needs to be, and secular alternatives like science and SoulCycle cannot, even in principle, fill the void.

Second, like it or not, Christianity's crisis is democracy's crisis, too. Even in our secular, liberal society, Christianity is a load-bearing wall; its failure places dangerous stress on democratic institutions.

Third, despite the claims of post-liberals, Christianity's crisis was not an inevitable result of liberal hyper-individualism or secular cultural aggression; it has been driven primarily by tragic choices made by Christians themselves. Many church members erected a wall of separation between the values they

champion in their private lives and the values they express in politics, and they allowed themselves to be seduced by a politicized and un-Christlike Church of Fear.

Fourth, because core Christian principles track closely with core liberal principles, they can be brought into alignment in ways which strengthen both. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is proving right now, in the real world, that a conservative church can embrace practical pluralism as spiritually exalted and scripturally sound, without watering down the church's doctrine or distinctiveness.

So where does that leave us? What *is* to be done?

Unfortunately, as hard as this is for a Brookings Institution policy wonk to admit, moving Christianity to a healthier place is not in the realm of six-point policy programs. It is in the realm of Christian revival and spiritual formation. As more than one interviewee told me, working to change political behavior is important, but it only treats symptoms. Political dysfunction is a manifestation of the need for civic *discipleship*, the work of aligning hearts more closely with Christ in the public realm. That work requires at least two elements: teaching by pastors, and a civic theology they can teach.

However diminished their authority in the age of cable news and conflict entrepreneurs, pastors remain in every way the point of the evangelical spear. Many are dismayed by the direction their most politicized congregants have taken. But they have been unsure what to do about it. For one thing, their jobs are often insecure. They cannot afford to drive away congregants or split their churches, so they need to tread carefully. For another, they are justifiably reluctant to risk dividing their congregations even further by addressing politics from the pulpit. Many hope, instead, to wait out the Church of Fear. Perhaps the political environment will change, certain divisive politicians will pass from the scene, and radicalized congregants will

grow weary of carrying the culture wars into church and email-bombing their pastors every Monday morning. Andrew Hanauer, the founder of the One America Movement, an evangelical group devoted to reducing toxic polarization in churches and society, told me, "There's hope among pastors that this nightmare of the last four or five years may lead the church to be leaner and more of an underdog, which is what it was when it was born, and less of an entity that's focused on holding on to political power."

Finally, civic theology—at least of any Madisonian stripe—has not figured strongly in seminary teaching and pastoral training. Pastors know what to say about faith, grief, love, and charity. But what should they say about the comment made by Donald Trump, Jr., that "turning the other cheek has gotten us nothing"? Or Simon Kennedy's "The church needs to face this hard truth: the world has shifted and therefore the age of conciliatory cultural engagement is over. No longer will being nice and relevant cut it"? Or Ron DeSantis's "And on the eighth day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, 'I need a protector.' So God made a fighter"? Here the doctrine is not so clear.

The good news I can bring is that the crisis of the Trump era has brought a widening recognition among Christians that waiting and hoping and perhaps even praying are not enough. They see that the wall of separation between personal and civic spiritual formation must come down, and that the task of demolition requires a new kind of discipleship. "You can't say, 'I'm a gentle person except when I'm involved in politics,'" as Michael Wear, the president and founder of the new Center for Christianity and Public Life, put it to me.

Wear has a distinguished career as an evangelical consultant, author, and adviser to politicians (including President Obama). His new center represents something of a departure,

an effort to address the spiritual formation crisis directly. He described two streams of work, one providing education and fellowships to Christian professionals and civic leaders, the other framing arguments and ideas to spark the public imagination. Hanauer's group, the One America Movement, educates pastors on how to reduce toxic polarization in their churches and connects them with each other so they will feel less isolated or overwhelmed. It gathers pastors for workshops, retreats, and Zoom events; explains the science and theology of polarization; and provides videos, youth-group curricula, and sermon ideas.

Another effort, called The After Party and founded by Curtis Chang, David French, and Russell Moore, seeks to plug the civic-theology gap directly, by equipping pastors and congregational study groups with a scripturally based alternative to the Church of Fear. The After Party's video curriculum, according to its website, "does the complex—but absolutely necessary—theological work of reframing Christian political identity from today's divisive partisan options. Whereas the partisan identity defines political engagement in the 'what' of ideologies, policies, parties, and politicians, The After Party redefines Christian politics around a biblical emphasis on the 'how' of virtues like mercy, humility, and justice."

There are other, similar efforts. How much influence they will have is an open question. Yet the people driving these programs are prominent (if in some cases controversial) voices in the evangelical world, and they reflect a need pastors expressed to me again and again. Just ending the deer-in-the-headlights situation for pastors—when, as Chang put it, "they just hear from the most extreme members of their congregations, so they remain silent and try to white-knuckle through political seasons"—would constitute an important step.

Whatever the fate of The After Party as a particular proj-

ect, the thinking behind it is a good example of how a constructive Christian civic theology might take shape; indeed, already is taking shape. Chang, a former pulpit pastor now affiliated with Duke Divinity School and Fuller Theological Seminary, took me through the logic.

Several years ago, he said, he had come to worry that the larger culture's hyper-individualism had seeped into the evangelical world. The church had slipped "into a very utilitarian view of institutions, that they're meant to give us what we need or want, and if they don't, they're broken. I thought that was deeply problematic for a number of reasons." One reason made itself evident on January 6, 2021. "I watched that on TV aghast," he said. He was struck not just by the rioters' displays of Christian symbolism but by "the hyper-instrumental view that these Christians storming the Capitol had of Congress: it wasn't giving us what we want, so we'll just throw it out like a broken tool. I believe the Bible contains a narrative in which human institutions are also made in the image of God; institutions are simply humans in the collective form, mirroring the image of God. In their own way institutions are human, in a collective sense, and so in their own way deserve dignity, worth, and intrinsic value."

On January 6, another thought occurred to him: *Where are the Christian adults to take care of our foundational institutions?* The nihilistic mayhem suggested they "have either been asleep on the watch and have allowed the foundations to crack and crumble, or they have actually wielded the wrecking ball. I could no longer assume there were adults who were going to take care of these big foundational issues." The narrative of care and grace which the church preaches toward individuals "completely goes out the window" where institutions are concerned. "We have no narrative that makes sense of flawed, broken, sinful institutions, so we just treat them as evil." Without

grace toward institutions and a story of how they can be improved and redeemed, nihilism, cynicism, and chaos are only a short step away—as January 6 made clear.

And how to cultivate an ethos of care and stewardship for civic institutions? Begin in churches, Chang told me, because they are the home of evangelicalism and the far right is actively recruiting there. In 2016, MAGA's appeal to evangelicals came as a shock, but "in 2020, there was practically nothing done to equip local churches to have a different approach to politics that was more Jesus-centered. The individual pastors are left to themselves, and they're paralyzed, because they're not equipped." The After Party seeks to fill that gap by developing and teaching a Christlike civic theology.

The reasoning Chang follows to connect personal spiritual formation to civic spiritual formation—to connect Christian ideals with politics and public institutions—is not the same as the theology used by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; but a family resemblance is not hard to see. Both proffer Christian accounts of why God wants us to care for each other lovingly in the civic sphere, not just the personal sphere; both reject the ethos of permanent warfare, perpetual fear, and us-versus-them; both charge Christians, *as* Christians, with stewardship of the Constitution and its core values of sharing the country and being peacemakers.

If there is to be a rapprochement between the attitudes of white evangelicalism and the institutions of liberal democracy, it will need to be along those lines. And notice: whether paths away from the Church of Fear and toward a Christlike civic theology take the route suggested by Curtis Chang, the route suggested by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or some other route altogether, the result will not be to make Christianity more secular, more thin, more sharp. It will be to make Christianity more like itself.

Lessons for Liberals

I need to recognize, before closing, a lacuna in my argument. Having presumptuously scolded Christians for failing to uphold their side of the bargain with liberal democracy, I have yet to say what secular liberals need to do to uphold our side of the deal. The answer is: *more*. I don't think secularism is primarily responsible for Christianity's infirmities; but I do think it could and should be more helpful within the confines of the Constitution's commitment not to promote religion.

As I said in the last chapter, the charge that America is legally or governmentally hostile to Christianity is inaccurate. The current Supreme Court is the friendliest to religion in history. It zealously protects religious prerogatives to hire clergy without interference, to receive government dollars without strings, to preserve freedom of conscience in commercial interactions, even to spend taxpayer dollars at religious schools—something earlier courts balked at. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which requires the law to keep well clear of unnecessary impositions on religious belief and practice, stands strong more than 30 years after its nearly unanimous passage. The Respect for Marriage Act, which I discussed earlier, represents a further landmark. In it, Congress—with unanimous Democratic support—prohibited any use of federal dollars and contracts to coerce recognition of same-sex marriage, and it wrote into law the proposition that traditional and religious views of marriage "are held by reasonable and sincere people based on decent and honorable religious or philosophical premises." In other words, the nation's supreme political body definitively repudiated the view, held by many secular progressives, that religious opposition to same-sex marriage should be treated like racial discrimination. Though the Respect for Marriage Act was mostly lost in the news shuffle at the time, it represented a

historic de-escalation in the culture war, entirely in the spirit of Madisonian accommodation. No doubt some religious conservatives would prefer even stronger carve-outs. But it is fair to say that in the legal and political realms, American democracy is keeping its founding promise of religious freedom at least as well as it ever has.

In the realm of culture, however, things are less clear. Public confidence in organized religion, as for other institutions, has fallen sharply. Cultural institutions in media and education, while perhaps friendlier to religious worldviews than a generation ago, still struggle to include and understand Christians. The alliances which progressive activists and ecumenical Christians formed in the 1950s and 1960s on issues like civil rights and poverty have attenuated; today's progressives, with their often rigid and sometimes intolerant views on abortion, sexuality, gender, and social justice, have too often let their attitudes toward Christianity be defined by fear of conservative evangelicals. One Democratic presidential administration after another has proved tone-deaf to religious concerns. In a depressingly recurrent pattern, Democratic White Houses promise to cultivate faith-based constituencies but then ignore, marginalize, or sacrifice them. Christian friends of mine who have worked inside Democratic administrations say the problem has less to do with animus than obliviousness; most politically active Democrats, especially younger ones, grew up in secular families and have secular friends and secular educations. They may mean no harm to Christianity, but they lack the vocabulary and intellectual equipment to receive religious wavelengths.

Liberal ideology, too, has drifted toward rigid church-state separation—not just legally but culturally and attitudinally. The major "wall of separation" decisions of the Warren and Burger courts instilled the idea that any mixing of government and religion is intolerable. While the current Supreme Court has

(rightly, in my view) pulled back from separatist absolutism, a cultural residue of intolerance persists. As someone who has been persecuted in the name of Jesus Christ because of my sexual orientation, I understand where Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Freedom From Religion Foundation are coming from; I am against religious establishment. The government should not officially prefer any particular religion, or prefer religiosity over non-religiosity. I don't think a public school should open the day with a prayer even if the prayer is nondenominational, because I know from experience how uncomfortable and excluded this makes unbelieving and minority students feel. The country is rapidly diversifying along religious as well as other lines, and calls by post-liberals for the government to throw a life preserver to Christianity are as outdated as they are impractical.

Yet efforts by secular groups and activists to police the landscape for religious incursions into the public sector seem to me equally misguided and counterproductive. Too often, my secular friends are inclined to regard faith-based concerns as trivial, superstitious, or bigoted. While I see the Bible as human-created and therefore flawed, it is a foundation of American moral culture and will remain so; it should be taught as foundational and treated with respect, even when criticized. I believe the reading of scripture as condemning loving, committed homosexual relationships is hermeneutically and morally mistaken, for reasons well explained by people like Matthew Vines and James Brownson; but I do recognize that a sincere reading of scripture, even a sincere *mis*reading, is not necessarily the same thing as homophobia and can be accompanied by goodwill. When I encounter Christians who disapprove of my homosexuality but mean me no harm and aren't hypocritical, I try to respond with persuasion, not condemnation. And although I regard supernaturalism as no basis for moral claims,

that does not entail rejecting the Bible as a source of moral teaching. I have heard sermons, Christian and Jewish, whose exacting biblical exegesis left me feeling closer to truth. Too often, secular Americans have acted as if allergic to religious teaching. We should never, ever, pass a law because someone thinks Jesus said to; yet our laws might be better if we more often asked what Jesus might have said about them.

And too many secular Americans, perhaps through ignorance of religion and American history, see accommodating faith as a zero-sum game in which religion's gain is equality's loss. They seem unaware that religious freedom is *the* founding principle of the United States; that the First Amendment specifically carves out religious observance as a distinct and privileged category, not just as one of many competing claims; that our laws (including the landmark civil rights laws of the 1960s) have long included religious accommodations and exemptions, usually without controversy. When my LGBT friends demand that their weddings be served by *every* business, no matter the enterprise's size, location, or faith, they may see enforcement of customers' civil rights, but I see doctrinaire totalism. If a balance can be struck allowing the large majority of LGBT couples to obtain wedding services while exempting a modest number of mostly small businesses, that is not a win for one side and a loss for the other; it is a win for both, because it de-escalates the tensions which tear the fabric of pluralism. In that respect, the LGBT community, and secular Americans generally, have a lot to learn from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In a diverse country full of moral disagreement, a disposition toward "patience, negotiation, and mutual accommodation" is a win-win proposition.

How might the country be different, I wonder, if more students from secular backgrounds were exposed to comparative religion courses which respectfully examined the Bible and

its sources alongside other religious traditions? How much might the culture wars be pacified if secular liberals were eager rather than reluctant to find accommodations with faith-based communities? How much more truly inclusive would workplaces and universities be if people of faith were routinely included in diversity and inclusion efforts, and if anti-religious bigotry were rejected as firmly as other biases? How much better informed might news coverage and other media products be if religious perspectives were reliably sought out and knowledgeably covered, and if newsrooms included more reporters who were openly devout? How much better informed might unbelievers be if we cultivated Christian friends, approached their faith with open-hearted curiosity, and perhaps now and then accompanied them to church? And how much deeper and truer would liberalism itself be if secular liberals more fully recognized how much our democracy leans on faith traditions?

You, reader, are as good a judge as I. My own thought for liberals, however, is that it is not enough to be tolerant or accepting of religion. We should be *welcoming*. We should even, perhaps, *cherish* religion.

I am not saying we liberals should endorse a religion or uncritically embrace its teachings. (Very few openly gay people or atheists would say that!) I am saying there is a great deal in faith traditions, emphatically including Christianity, which we can admire; and when we disagree with a faith tradition, we should do so respectfully and give it a second or even third hearing; and when we criticize faith, we should do so in a spirit of humility, recognizing that the great faith traditions have been around a lot longer than liberalism.

And we should remember that, however transformative liberalism has been as an engine of economic, scientific, and social advancement, it is not self-sufficient. We secular liberals

can't make it on our own. We must do what we can to help our religious friends help us.

Make Christianity Peculiar Again

When worried evangelicals talk about the politicization and paganization of the church, they naturally express frustration and dismay. Yet some of them, such as Karen Swallow Prior and Russell Moore, also express hope. "We're in a place of disruption and loss," Moore said in a 2023 podcast interview with the journalist Jon Ward. "That is always the way God works in terms of creating something new. The primary thing is to say to people, don't panic about the sense of homelessness that you feel. Don't panic about the kind of bewilderment that you feel. That actually can be a sign of grace."*

In another 2023 interview, with the podcaster Charlie Sykes, Moore rejected the idea that the church can solve its crisis by returning to the status quo ante.

> Instead, I think what you have happening is people who really didn't know they were on the same team are realizing they are. New kinds of collaborations are coming out of that in church planning movements, mission strategies, and all kinds of ways. So it's not going to be the same kind of cohesive movement; it's going to be different. But in history, that's always how it happens. John and Charles Wesley don't take over the Church of England, they step out and start something new. And I don't think we're

* Jon Ward, "How Russell Moore Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace the Apocalypse," July 21, 2023, available at toppodcast.com/podcast_feeds/the-long-game/.

going to have a big battle for the soul of evangelicalism and somebody's going to win and somebody's going to lose. I think instead you just have a splintering.*

Out of that splintering, he said, will come seeds of regeneration. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that new ways to connect Christianity and democracy will arise.

To fertilize the soil for that sort of change, one element of spiritual formation seems especially important—a mindset which I can claim, as a trifecta minority, to understand. One finds it among Jews, homosexuals, and atheists as well as within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Christians sometimes call it an *exilic* mindset. I might call it *minoritarian*.

Now, white evangelicals are well aware that, as Robert P. Jones puts it in his book *The End of White Christian America*, "White Christian America's heyday has passed." They know that the white Protestant population is aging and not being replenished, that white evangelicals' share of the population has dropped sharply, and that only a miracle could turn things around. In that sense, they are keenly aware of minority status. The open question, a question on which the outlook for American democracy depends, is how they adjust: whether they hunker down within the Church of Fear, nursing grievances and a sense of embattlement and betrayal—or, as Jon Ward writes in his 2023 book *Testimony*, they instead become "a Christian community that lays down its love of dominance and getting its own way and embraces the idea of being a minority. . . . That kind of thinking would make conservative white evangelicals much better neighbors."

In a visionary lecture at Fuller Theological Seminary in

* Charlie Sykes, "Russell Moore: 'Losing Our Religion,'" *The Bulwark*, July 28, 2023.

2017, Mark Labberton, then the seminary's president, explained that Christianity is a religion of exile, not dominion. Christianity is intended to be peculiar, not ordinary; countercultural, not consumerist. "The church would be more faithful, more distinctly Christ's people, if we actually understood that we don't live in the promised land; we live in exile," he said. Instead, "what seems to define a great deal of the American church is fear. . . . What if the crisis of this moment is actually a deep invitation to a new way of understanding our location? Our identity? Our living, breathing experiences of what this can mean?" He continued: "Today may we be faithful exiles. For it's that that will reveal the reality of the love of God who knows and sees people in exile, to restore and remake them to be the light and salt that can do as exiles what only we can do."*

I understand how challenging the exilic mindset can be. In the 1980s, gay people watched many Christian congregations turn their backs on AIDS patients, some even saying God sent the plague to punish us. There has never been a safer, more welcoming country for Jews, yet even in the United States we have seen mass murder at a synagogue and parades of menacing men chanting "Jews will not replace us!"—and then, in street rallies and on college campuses after Hamas went to war with Israel, chants of "From the river to the sea!" Although neo-Nazis are thankfully fringe elements, Jews still grow up with a sense of being outsiders looking in. We always will.

I treasure feeling like an outsider, although the exilic mindset is admittedly an acquired taste. If you offered to let me rerun my life as a heterosexual white Protestant who saw my values reflected all around me and never needed to think about being persecuted or stigmatized, I would reject the deal.

* Labberton's talk can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGUf5cuRWoU.

Injustice is only visible from society's margin, and doing what I can to contend against it has been my life's greatest privilege. I can testify that the exilic life, while sometimes frustrating or challenging or dangerous, is a blessing, not a curse; a source of redemption more than oppression; a call to humility and compassion.

Can conservative white Protestantism make its peace with exilic life? Can it realign with America's liberal tradition? I think so; I hope so. I take hope from Russell Moore's comment, in his interview with Ward, that every Christian gets a vote. "I don't think," he said, "that those big, market-driven, entrepreneurial measures, which really led us into this crisis, are going to get us out of it. You can't fix the movement, whatever that is. You can't fix the church. You can't fix the country. But what you can do is dissent in ways of saying, 'I don't have to conform myself to that.' And when you have small groups of people who can see and can model a different way, that's how every change happens that's meaningful."

In researching this book, I met many Christians who have modeled a different, countercultural, *peculiar* way. One of them is Rusty Bowers, the former Arizona House speaker. Though he is a conservative Republican, he stood up against MAGA's effort to reverse the 2020 election in Arizona. Under intense pressure from then-President Trump and Trump's lawyer and henchman Rudy Giuliani, he told them, "You are asking me to do something against my oath and I will not break my oath." Then he testified bravely before the January 6 Committee on Capitol Hill; his reward was to be censured by the state Republican Party and defeated in a state Senate primary.

I cannot do better than to quote the last words of my interview with him. As our conversation closed, I asked how he was keeping busy after politics. He replied that he was working on an initiative to encourage compromise and civility, "and

then a resurgence of patriotism. I do believe there's faith, and I do believe there's hope. And without hope, there is nothing; there is rapid decline. We choose to have hope to make faith work."

EPILOGUE

A Parting Message

Dear Mark—

After college, we drifted apart. You married Anne, your college sweetheart, became one of the world's leading scholars of mystical Christianity, fathered two children. I came out as gay, built a career in journalism, threw myself into the cause of same-sex marriage, and found a husband. We vaguely kept track of one another and saw each other at college reunions. In photos, you aged not at all: still tall and broad and the picture of health. I assumed we could always catch up later, as one does.

One day I received an email from Anne. Did I know you had ALS?

My heart sank to a dark place. I knew too much about amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly called Lou Gehrig's disease. My father had died of a neurological ailment, one which, like ALS, rendered his body a shell and did not respond to treatment. That such a fate would befall you, of all people, seemed like an act of heavenly spite.

During the pandemic, we connected on Zoom. Then, when travel reopened, I and a mutual college friend traveled to Chicago. Anne greeted us and showed us to the garden in back

of the house. It was a place of flowers and bees, dazzling and colorful on a sunny autumn day, incongruously bright amid the gloom of our mission. I confess I was afraid of what I might encounter. But we did not find a bitter or angry or depressed man.

You were wheelchair bound, unable to move your body, drawing oxygen through a straw slung over your shoulder, attended by a full-time aide. Thank goodness, you had been spared, so far, the final stage of ALS, the inability to speak and communicate, the dreaded condition of being locked in. You were even finishing a book, thanks to dictation software and graduate students, and had another in the pipeline.

You told us you had researched assorted diseases and concluded that, among all of them, ALS was the one you least wanted to have. And yet your tone was wry, not harsh. Even in extremis, your faith seemed undiminished. I think that was the moment when, in all my life, I most acutely felt my own shallowness and spiritual poverty. I cannot understand why, if there is a God, he sends such terrible scourges to afflict his most devoted servants. But seeing your lack of anger, I tried to shelve my own. I saw how your trust in God gave you courage and grace amid an unbearable ordeal. That was, to me, a more powerful witness on behalf of the Christian faith than any words or argument could have borne.

You tired quickly; speech was a struggle; we left after an hour so as not to wear you out. I departed fearing what would come next, a fear you shared. You knew that ALS was coming for your power of speech, that you would be silenced and shut in, unable to write and communicate; you hoped nature would take its course before that happened.

Only a few weeks later, I received word from Anne. After lunch, you had retired to read and passed peacefully. You got your wish, a mercy you had more than earned.

I don't believe in an afterlife or eternal soul. That solace is not available to me. Still, Tim Keller once told me that God hears the prayers of atheists. If that's the case, I pray you're reading this.

But Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony brass *were* overrated.

Notes on Sources

A small book on a big topic necessarily stands on the shoulders of giants. I could not have written this volume without drawing upon the work of many insightful scholars, journalists, and experts. In general, I have cited key sources in the text. Here I provide more detail on works consulted.

Liberalism and its critics. Three classic texts have framed my understanding of the debate about modern liberalism. One is Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, 1981; third edition 2007), which accuses post-Enlightenment individualism of fostering moral disarray. A second is George F. Will's *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (Simon & Schuster, 1984), which argues that liberal government necessarily molds morals and cannot coherently claim neutrality. In response to those and other arguments, William Galston's *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge, 1991) argues compellingly that liberalism properly understood is neither neutral nor "thin" but value-rich and morally demanding (even if liberals themselves often fail to notice this).

Among today's conservative critics of liberalism, several prominent theorists assert that liberalism is self-undermining and must be supplanted or at least supplemented by governance

based on religiously grounded "common good" principles. Patrick J. Deneen's case is in *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale, 2018) and *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (Sentinel, 2023). Adrian Vermeule, who, like Deneen, brings a Catholic perspective, argues for "common-good constitutionalism" in an article in *The Atlantic,* "Beyond Originalism" (March 31, 2020). Yoram Hazony brings a non-Christian (but pro-Christian) perspective on post-liberalism in *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (Regnery, 2022). For historical context on theoretical challenges to liberalism from the right, see Matthew Rose, *A World After Liberalism: Five Thinkers Who Inspired the Radical Right* (Yale, 2021). Simon McCarthy-Jones's *Freethinking: Protecting Freedom of Thought Amidst the New Battle for the Mind* (Oneworld, 2023) contains an astute encapsulation and analysis of the post-liberal viewpoint.

Thoughtful rejoinders to post-liberalism defend liberalism while recognizing its imperfections and considering ways to improve it. Francis Fukuyama's compact yet ambitious *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022) makes a good point of entry. I draw on various articles by the liberal theorist Peter Berkowitz, notably his five-part series "Anti-Liberal Zealotry" in the online publication *RealClear Policy* (September 14–28, 2018). Berkowitz's review of Hazony's book, "Redefining Conservatism to Remake America," in the online *Washington Free Beacon* (May 29, 2022), is similarly compelling. In his Substack blog *The Permanent Problem,* Brink Lindsey examines the crises of liberalism, capitalism, and modernity, thinking in refreshingly creative directions. Michael Walzer summarizes his critique of post-liberalism in his conversation with Yascha Mounk for the online journal *Persuasion* ("Michael Walzer on Liberalism and Its Critics," July 8, 2023; available on YouTube), further elaborated in his article "Notes on a Dangerous Mistake" in *Liberties* journal (Winter

2024). David Corey, in his meticulously argued review of Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed,* shows how post-liberalism's overbroad claims undercut its sometimes astute observations ("Against the Deformations of Liberalism," *American Affairs,* undated, americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/02/against-the-deformations-of-liberalism).

Christianity and secularism. Science has a lot to say about the development and sociology of religion; for a panoramic overview, see Robert Wright's *The Evolution of God* (Little, Brown, 2009). Christian Smith provides a valuable account of religion's distinguishing characteristics and functions in *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (Princeton, 2017). Hugh Heclo's *Christianity and American Democracy* (Harvard, 2007) approaches classic status on its titular subject. A book which deserves to attain classic status is Robert Tracy McKenzie's *We the Fallen People: The Founders and the Future of American Democracy* (InterVarsity, 2021), a bracing critique of America's abandonment of the Founders' Christianity-inflected realism about human nature. An account of populism's influence on American Christianity is Nathan O. Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* (Yale, 1989).

The turn toward secularism within the United States and abroad has received much attention. For a theorized analysis of the (literal) disenchantment which has followed from secularism, Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Harvard, 2007) is a touchstone, if anything more relevant today than when first published. Also seminal is Joseph Bottum's *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (Random House, 2014), which argues that the decline of mainline Protestantism has discombobulated America's politics and culture. Ross Douthat explores similar themes, and foretells today's dysfunctions, in *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (Free Press, 2012). More optimistic about the durability and

health of Christianity, and religion in general, are Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell's *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster, 2010) and John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge's *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World* (Penguin, 2009). Both are somewhat dated but still repay attention.

Religious trends and practices. For statistical profiles of religious belief and practice, copious research published by the Public Religion Research Institute, such as the regular Census of American Religion, is indispensable. The same is true of opinion research by the Pew Research Center, available online at the center's "religion" topic page. Ryan Burge, in his Substack blog *Graphs About Religion,* provides detailed statistical analysis of trends. Among narrative analyses of the decline of Christian observance and the rise of ex-Christians and "nones" (Americans who are not affiliated with any organized religion) are Robert P. Jones's *The End of White Christian America* (Simon & Schuster, 2016); Stephen Bullivant's *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America* (Oxford, 2022); and Jim Davis and Michael Graham's *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (with Ryan P. Burge; Zondervan, 2023). Bob Smietana's *Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters* (Worthy Books, 2022) focuses on change at the congregational level, especially the downsizing of Protestant churches.

Evidence has accumulated that religious participation is healthy for individuals and communities, and that the decline in religious participation may have harmful effects. Useful accounts are found in Tyler J. VanderWeele, "Religion and Health: A Synthesis," from M. J. Balboni and J. R. Peteet, eds., *Spirituality and Religion within the Culture of Medicine: From Evidence to Practice* (Oxford, 2017); and Tyler Giles, Daniel M. Hungerman, and Tamar Oostrom, "Opiates of the Masses? Deaths of Despair and the Decline of American Religion" (National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2023). Challenging the notion that choosing a faith is a matter of convenience like shopping, Laurence R. Iannaccone shows that stricter, more demanding forms of religious observance provide more personal and social value ("Why Strict Churches Are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology,* March 1994, and "Introduction to the Economics of Religion," *Journal of Economic Literature,* September 1998). Tara Isabella Burton's richly reported *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (PublicAffairs, 2020) demonstrates that secular pseudo-religions and personal-development movements are poor substitutes for more traditional forms of religious observance.

White evangelicalism in the United States. The term "evangelical"—indeed, the concept itself—is capacious and often confusing. Thomas S. Kidd's *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (Yale, 2019) is a good brief introduction to the movement from the first Great Awakening to the Trump era. For a deeply reported narrative history, see Frances FitzGerald's *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (Simon & Schuster, 2017). In his 2023 book *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism,* Tim Alberta combines reporting with personal history to paint a sympathetic yet worried (and worrying) account of contemporary white evangelicalism (HarperCollins). From an evangelical viewpoint, the Barna Group and Alpha USA provide insights and data in *Reviving Evangelicalism: Current Realities That Demand a New Vision for Sharing Faith* (Barna, 2019).

Not being Christian, much less evangelical, I lean on analysts and critics of white evangelicalism who are in, or at least of, the movement. The voluminous writings and interviews of Russell Moore provide essential inspiration for this book. I have

drawn on an assortment of his articles and podcasts, as cited in the main text, plus his book *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelical America* (Sentinel, 2023). Moore's criticisms of the movement, while sometimes scorching, come from a place of love. The same is true of columns and interviews by David French, which have appeared in the *New York Times, The Dispatch,* and other outlets—and which, like Moore's work, have provided indispensable guidance. In *Christianity's American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular* (Princeton, 2022), David A. Hollinger recounts how white evangelicalism and Republican partisanship exchanged their DNA. In *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (W.W. Norton, 2020), Kristin Kobes Du Mez argues that gender traditionalism and an ethos of "militant masculinity" redefined the movement. No discussion of evangelicalism's evangelical critics is complete without mention of Mark A. Noll's bombshell 1994 book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, republished with new material in 2022). For more-personal accounts of crisis in the white evangelical world, see Jon Ward's *Testimony: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Failed a Generation* (Brazos, 2023) and Christine Rosen's *My Fundamentalist Education: A Memoir of a Divine Girlhood* (PublicAffairs, 2005). Both memoirs are intimate, conscientious, and sometimes anguished.

Christian nationalism. Although the phenomenon of Christian nationalism is difficult to pin down, considerable polling and analysis have deepened scholarly understanding. Perhaps the most comprehensive opinion research comes from the Public Religion Research Institute, notably its 2023 *American Values Survey* and its report *A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture* (February 8, 2023). Several books have

defined and examined the phenomenon from both U.S. and international perspectives. In *The Godless Crusade: Religion, Populism and Right-Wing Identity Politics in the West* (Cambridge, 2023), Tobias Cremer observes Christian nationalism in France, Germany, and the United States and finds that it is a secular, not religious, movement. Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry reach the same conclusion in *The Flag + the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford, 2022)—as does Rogers Brubaker in his 2017 article "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective" (in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40:8).

Many analysts agree that Christian nationalism, at least in its more potent forms, is inconsistent with liberal democracy. Paul D. Miller makes this case in *The Religion of American Greatness: What's Wrong with Christian Nationalism* (InterVarsity, 2022). David P. Gushee defines and unpacks what he calls "authoritarian reactionary Christianity" in *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies* (Eerdmans, 2023). In an interview on Jon Ward's "The Long Game" podcast (February 17, 2023), Matthew D. Taylor provides a disturbing account of the "New Apostolic Reformation" movement and its radicalizing effects (available at toppodcast.com/podcast_feeds/the-long-game/). The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and Christians Against Christian Nationalism explore links between Christian supremacists and far-right extremism in their report *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021, Insurrection* (undated; issued February 9, 2022).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A valuable analysis of the church's unique structural and social characteristics is contained in Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace,* cited above. On the church's history, I draw upon Mi-

chael J. Lee and R. Jarrod Atchison, *We Are Not One People: Secession and Separatism in American Politics Since 1776* (Oxford, 2022), as well as valuable articles by W. Paul Reeve: "The Council of Fifty and the Search for Religious Liberty," in Matthew J. Grow and R. Eric Smith, eds., *The Council of Fifty: What the Records Reveal about Mormon History* (Brigham Young University, 2017); and "The Mormon Church in Utah," in Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* (Oxford, 2015).

For authoritative accounts of church teaching on agency, choice, and sin, I draw upon Terryl L. Givens's *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford, 2015), as well as Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Ensign Peak, 2012). The speeches and writings of Dallin Oaks of the church's First Presidency (cited in the text) are canonical on the church's understanding of pluralism and make constitutional arguments which are impressive in their own right.

Civic theology. James Alison's richly insightful interview with Andrew Sullivan on the fundamentals of Christianity is available at andrewsullivan.substack.com/p/james-alison-on-christianity. For a thoughtful and soulful perspective on Christ-like political engagement, see Michael Wear's *The Spirit of Our Politics: Spiritual Formation and the Renovation of Public Life* (Zondervan, 2024). Years after it was delivered on June 9, 2017, Mark Labberton's address at Fuller Theological Seminary, "Beauty in Exile" (available on YouTube), remains relevant and, indeed, beautiful.

My epigraph is from George Lawrence's translation of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (volume 1, part 2, chapter 9; ed. J. P. Meyer, Doubleday, 1969).

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