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Cross Purposes

Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy

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Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Haven and London

For the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other. . . . In France I had seen the spirits of religion and of freedom almost always marching in opposite directions. In America I found them intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

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PROLOGUE

The Dumbest Thing I Ever Wrote

Dear Mark—

In hindsight, there should have been a Neil Simon play about us. Heck, maybe there was.

What an odd couple we were! I, a scrawny Jew from Phoenix; you a tall, broad-shouldered Christian from Chicago. I, a lefty Naderite who railed against the evils of monopolistic corporate power; you, a *National Review* reader who thrilled to the presidential aspirations of George H. W. Bush. (To this day, you are the only person I have ever met in whom Bush Sr. evoked rapturous enthusiasm.)

But we did have something in common. On our college housing forms that summer, we had both checked "classical" under "music preference." That was enough to bring us together as freshman roommates.

Even so, I found a way to be contentious. You rooted for your hometown team—the Chicago Symphony and its famous conductor, Sir Georg Solti. I was no fan of Maestro Solti, whom I nicknamed the Hungarian Butcher. Even worse, I complained that the vaunted Chicago brass played too loud. It's a wonder we didn't come to blows.

Then there was that other difference. The Big Difference.

You were what in those days certain students called, very unkindly, God Squad. (Prejudice against religion is nothing new, on campus or off.) You attended church services on Sundays while I slept in. You not only talked the talk, you walked the walk. I tried to be respectful of you as a person but didn't hide my lack of respect for the Christian religion. Not yet out of my teens, I was what was known as a militant atheist, a confrontational unbeliever.

I had my reasons. From age five or so, I had known that I was different from other boys because I felt magnetically attracted to handsome boys and muscular men. Though I would not find a name for my obsession until age 25, I knew that Christianity was hostile to someone like me. One reason I denied the truth about myself for so long was the discrimination I feared from Christians who relied on the authority of the Bible to hate me. In my youth, I could not spin the AM radio dial on a Sunday morning without hearing some preacher denounce the sinfulness, decadence, and danger of homosexuality. Christianity did not seem very compassionate to me.

I was different in another way, too. In second grade, I began seven years of Hebrew school—after-school religious classes—two or three days a week, and I attended Jewish sleepaway camp every summer. My parents were not pious but thought I should know my tradition. I was bar mitzvahed and knew the prayers. Yet early on, I knew I did not believe in God, *could* not believe in God. I can't tell you how I knew; I just *knew* that the idea of a big father in the sky who creates the entire universe yet attends minutely to man's everyday affairs makes no sense, and that the tales in the Bible could not possibly be true to life. If the tales *were* true, they showed God and his followers doing some rotten and senseless things. For a time, in camp the summer before high school, I tried believing. I donned tefillin twice a day, said the brachot, and tried to fit in. When that had no

effect, I gave up on faith (though not on Judaism; that identity is written in my blood).

By the time we met, I believed the world would be better off without religion—especially Christianity. I saw the church as cruel and hypocritical and had arrived at college armed to argue the point. I had imbibed the writings of Bertrand Russell. Though "Why I Am Not a Christian" was his most famous anti-religious essay, my personal favorite was "Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?" (The answer: "It helped in early days to fix the calendar, and it caused Egyptian priests to chronicle eclipses with such care that in time they became able to predict them. These two services I am prepared to acknowledge, but I do not know of any others.")

So that was the moment when Destiny, in the form of the university housing office, threw us together. I was prepared to confront Christianity, but I was not prepared for *you*. Within the first couple of weeks, I realized you were . . . different.

You did not proselytize but shone by example, exhibiting gentleness and courtesy to all you met. Unlike many of the Christians I had heard preaching and posturing on the radio, you seemed confident and secure in your faith. When I teased or goaded you, you would chuckle, not bristle. Though your politics were conservative—you were a devoted participant in the campus Conservative Party—you never let politics preempt kindness. Once, when a gay rights petition circulated on campus, you were among the first to sign, saying it was God's place, not yours, to judge. You treated me with forbearance (what I would later recognize as *grace*) and did the same for others. Much later, years after you had taken degrees at Yale and Oxford and General Theological Seminary, ascended to the Anglican priesthood, become the Reverend Dr. Mark A. McIntosh, and authored more books on theology and Christian mysticism than I could count, one of your former classmates recalled that

even in your seminary days you had had a mystical aura. Looking back, I see I had picked up on that.

You were not a saint, to be sure. But you were something the 18-year-old version of me found oxymoronic: a good Christian.

I didn't convert. I didn't change my mind. You were the portal, though, to a change of heart. Once I had seen what Christianity could be, it became a subject of curiosity for me, instead of contempt—something I had to know more about. I imagined that one day I might even write about it.

Later in life, with your example before me, I came to cherish close Christian friends, some of them—such as the late Pastor Tim Keller, the co-dedicatee of this book—among the wisest and deepest people I have known. I came to see that the confrontational, contemptuous style of my youthful atheism, and later of the so-called New Atheists, had it backwards. Yes, religion can be stupid; but people make religion stupid, not the other way around.

In the years after our student days, my politics evolved in your direction. Ralph Nader and Bertrand Russell were replaced in my pantheon by John Locke and James Madison, William James and C. S. Peirce, George Orwell and Karl Popper. My view of spirituality evolved, too. I came to see that people who believe in God have an ability I lack. They receive frequencies I can't detect, which give their worlds a dimensionality, a layer of meaning, that my world lacks. This does not make their view—*your* view—better or truer than mine. But I am not defensive about likening my atheism to color blindness, because faith is a part of the human experience in which I do not share.

My career in journalism led me deeply into politics and government. For a long time, I barely gave religion a thought. It seemed to have receded into the background of American life, except when the latest priestly or pastoral scandal flamed

into view. Newspapers didn't cover religion much, except in the Sunday church pages which no one I knew read.

When I did dip into religion, my view was superficial. In 2003, for *The Atlantic*, I joyfully celebrated what I called *apatheism*, which I defined as not caring very much one way or the other about religion. Because religion is a source of social divisiveness and volatility, I predicted that apatheism would tone down friction and represented "nothing less than a major civilizational advance." It was, I gloated, "the product of a determined cultural effort to discipline the religious mindset, and often of an equally determined personal effort to master the spiritual passions. It is not a lapse. It is an achievement."

Ahem. Let's just say that's not how things turned out. Instead we live in a society which, on both left and right, has imported religious zeal into secular politics and exported politics into religion, bringing partisan polarization and animosity to levels unseen since the Civil War.

That crisis is the subject of this book. The first chapter concerns what I call *Thin Christianity*. The question it asks is: why should secular Americans, including many who feel they have a beef with organized religion, care about the state of Christian America? To put it another way: what happens to our liberal democracy if American Christianity is no longer able, or no longer willing, to perform the functions on which our constitutional order depends? The alarming answer is that the crisis for Christianity has turned out to be a crisis for democracy.

The second chapter takes up *Sharp Christianity*. The question it turns to is: what happens to American liberal democracy when a prevalent strain of Christianity becomes not only secularized but politicized, partisan, confrontational, and divisive? The answer: the liberalism on which both the Constitution and modern American Christianity depend is gravely

weakened, setting off a dangerous spiral of mutual degradation. In contradistinction with so-called post-liberals, I maintain that American Protestantism's current crisis is the fault not primarily of a hostile secular world, but of tragic decisions made by Christians themselves.

The third chapter considers an alternative path, which I call *Thick Christianity*. Is it possible, despite what's alleged by both Christian critics of liberal democracy and secular critics of Christianity, for Christianity to align itself with constitutional pluralism—not just strategically, but theologically and spiritually? Can we envision a rapprochement rooted in the deepest traditions and teachings of Jesus? For a hopeful answer, we will look, perhaps unexpectedly, to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and then consider the prospects for a new entente which honors both Jesus and James Madison.

So, Mark, please accept this book as penitence for the dumbest thing I ever wrote—and maybe also for the dumb things I said to you. I hope, in these pages, to be part of the solution at a moment when American Christianity is in crisis, and when its crisis is mine, too.

1

Thin Christianity

Faith's Crisis, Democracy's Peril

Christianity and democracy are dangerously out of alignment

Some Americans may recall when a leading public figure impiously claimed to rival Jesus's fame. No, not Donald Trump, though he did do that. This was in 1966, when John Lennon, a member of the Beatles, told a journalist, "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I know I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now. I don't know which will go first—rock and roll or Christianity."

The remark was first published in London's *Evening Standard* without incident. But when it was reprinted in an American teen magazine, Tommy Charles, a talk-show host with Alabama's WAQY Radio (pronounced "wacky radio"), seized upon it. He launched an impromptu "Ban the Beatles" campaign, which took off, igniting record-burnings, outraged sermons, a denunciation by the Pope, and death threats against the Beatles from the likes of the KKK. As the band scrambled to save bookings, Lennon went before the press to apologize, which calmed things down. Still, fears for the band's safety, exacerbated by a scare when an explosion disrupted a concert (it

turned out to be a cherry bomb), contributed to their decision to stop touring.

The Beatles are still popular. So is Jesus. In the decade following Lennon's remark, evangelicalism experienced a resurgence, becoming the culturally dominant strain of Christianity in the United States.

The burden of this book, however, is that Lennon was not entirely wrong. Something *has* happened to American Christianity—something which has made it less able, less willing, or less able *and* less willing to support the liberal democracy of which it is part. This change, as more than a few Christians argue, has become a crisis for American Christianity. It is also a crisis for American democracy.

The Great Dechurching

Crisis? Consider the facts. While not "vanished," Christianity has certainly shrunk. Barna Group, an independent research organization, reports that only 25 percent of Americans are "practicing Christians" (as defined by self-identification, church attendance, and prioritizing faith), down by almost half since 2000. Gallup reports that in 2021, U.S. church membership fell below 50 percent for the first time. Over the past twenty-five years, "about 40 million adults in America today used to go to church but no longer do, which accounts for around 16 percent of our adult population," write Jim Davis and Michael Graham in their 2023 book *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* They note that almost half of Americans attend church less than once a year, versus 17 percent in 1972. Given that most social trends happen fairly slowly, the rate at which the United States is dechurching is startling. According to the Pew Research Center, one of the country's preeminent polling organizations, the percentage identifying as Christian fell by 15 percentage points between 2007 and 2021—about a percent a year. "This is not a gradual shift," write Davis and Graham; "it is a jolting one."

Churches, too, are caving in—especially smaller ones. Davis and Graham write that at least 86 close (on net) every week. Research by Faith Communities Today, reported in *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview,* finds that the average church congregation shrank from 137 members at the turn of the century to less than half of that by 2020—a decline so great that their ability to maintain basic programs is in doubt. The sociologist Scott Thumma has predicted that the country will lose 30 to 40 percent of its congregations in the next 20 years.

I could spend the rest of this chapter reeling off similar statistics. John Lennon, call your office.

Within that trend is nested another. For some time, it appeared that Christian devotional energy was shifting away from moderate ecumenical denominations while white evangelical churches thrived, but that is no longer true.* According to the Pew Religion and Public Life Survey and the Public Religion Research Institute, the number of white evangelicals in the United States has declined from almost a fourth of the population in 2006 to barely more than an eighth in 2022—the

*How to define evangelicalism—theologically, culturally, politically, or all three—is a contested question which I will not try to tackle here. Like many pollsters and scholars, I assume people are evangelical if they say they are. Evangelical identifiers include, among others, many Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, members of the Presbyterian Church in America, and members of nondenominational churches.

year when their numbers dropped *below* those of white mainline Protestants. In a panel discussion hosted by Religion News Service in 2022, Bob Smietana, a national reporter for that organization and the author of the 2022 book *Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters,* said, "There used to be this idea that conservative churches would grow and liberal churches would shrink. Well, now they're *all* shrinking. Especially if you're mostly white."

Meanwhile, the share of Americans professing to participate in "no religion" has increased at eye-watering speed. According to Gallup polling, the percentage of "nones," the religiously unaffiliated, was in the 3 percent range from 1948 to 1970; rose but remained below 10 percent from 1971 to 2001; and then skyrocketed to above 20 percent by 2021. "Nones" now account for as large a share of the population as all white Protestants combined. The percentage of Americans saying religion is "very important" to them declined from 62 percent in 1998 to only 39 percent in 2023, according to polling by the *Wall Street Journal* and the University of Chicago's NORC research center.

Christianity is not about to disappear, nor will it cease being America's predominant religious tradition; John Lennon was not *that* right. Many of those who stop attending church or disaffiliate with it remain under its influence. In his book *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America,* Stephen Bullivant notes that "an *ex*-Christian nation is not simply the same as a *non*-Christian one. A culture that used to be Christian, just like a person who used to be one, carries much of the past along with it."

Yet even that muscle memory of Christianity will fade as more children and grandchildren of "nones" grow up without inherited knowledge of Christianity. So far, generational succession has driven unswervingly toward disaffiliation. "Nones" skew young: two-thirds of them are aged 18 to 44, according to Bullivant. In 2022, Pew found that only about half of Americans in their twenties identified as Christian, versus three-fourths or more of people in their mid-fifties and older. Statistics like those led the Public Religion Research Institute's Robert P. Jones to write, in his 2016 book *The End of White Christian America,* "These numbers point to one undeniable conclusion: white Protestant Christians—both mainline and evangelical—are aging and quickly losing ground as a proportion of the population." His conclusion: "White Christian America's heyday has passed."

Within those declining totals are other signs of distress. According to Barna, in 2022, 42 percent of pastors said they had considered quitting in the past year—an increase of nine percentage points over a year earlier. Stress, loneliness, and "current political divisions" were the top three reasons. My own conversations with pastors suggest that Barna's figure is very plausible. One pastor told me he had almost quit four times in the past few years. Referring to parishioners who bring the culture wars with them to church, he said, "These guys are a special kind of relentless." Pastors complain—so often that it has become a mantra—that they get their congregants for two hours a week, whereas cable news gets them for twelve.

The term *crisis* does not seem exaggerated.

Nietzsche's Prophecy

Today, a group of so-called "post-liberals"—led by religious conservatives such as Sohrab Ahmari, Patrick Deneen, Yoram Hazony, and Adrian Vermeule—look at the crisis of Christianity and know just what to blame: liberalism.

I should pause to clarify how I mean *liberalism,* here and throughout these pages. I don't mean the center-left progres-

sivism which the term often signifies in contemporary American politics ("George McGovern was a liberal Democrat"). I mean the modern tradition of freedom, toleration, minority rights, and the rule of law on which the American republic was founded. Some people use the term *classical liberalism,* but I want to indicate something even broader: the tradition, dating back to the seventeenth century, which grounds *ethics* in the proposition that all humans are created free and equal; *politics* in the proposition that the people are sovereign and government's powers are limited and consensual; and *authority* in the proposition that everyone follows the same rules and enjoys the same rights. Liberal regimes regard individuals, not groups, as the fundamental bearers of rights and responsibilities. To make public decisions when differences arise, they deploy public debate and open-ended, decentralized, rules-based processes.

Modern liberal societies rely on three linked social systems: liberal democracy to make political choices; market capitalism to make economic choices; and science and other forms of open critical exchange to make epistemic choices (that is, decisions about truth and knowledge). A hallmark of liberal social systems is that the same rules apply to all, regardless of identity or tribe. In principle, anyone can vote in an election, trade in a market, or replicate an experiment. For liberals, the answer to the question "Who's in charge here?" should normally be: *no one in particular.* Although liberal regimes have often failed to live up to their ideals, they have generally improved over time. And by transcending tribe, renouncing authoritarianism, and substituting rules for rulers, liberal social orders can coordinate human activity among hundreds of millions of strangers, across nations and continents, without central control or direction—something no other social system can do.

In secular liberalism, however, post-liberals see something darker: an aggressively godless, consumerist, hyper-individualistic, and self-absorbed culture which dissolves faith and tradition—inherently, not just incidentally. In Chapter 2, I will explain why I think they are wrong. If Christians want to know why they are losing adherents and influence, they should look in the mirror. Yet there are important grains of truth in the post-liberal perspective. To give it its due, we can reach back to the most scathing and influential critic of both Christianity *and* secular liberalism, the prophet who imagined more than a century ago where we might seem to be today.

Just to lay my cards on the table, I should confess that I regard Friedrich Nietzsche with distaste. I find little by way of coherence in his works and nothing by way of empirical rigor. His generalizations are wild, his hyperbole reckless, his contradictions rampant, and his elitism noxious. Yet the almost hallucinatory power of his rhetoric and his genius for the startling aperçu reach across 150 years and grab our throats. And where secular liberalism is concerned, he did see it coming.

Unlike today's post-liberals, Nietzsche is hostile to both religion and traditional morals. He makes no bones about his contempt for Christian teaching, which he believes sanctifies shame, conformism, mediocrity, passivity, and other attributes which stunt ambition, creativity, and achievement. "Christianity . . . crushed and shattered man completely," he writes in *Human, All Too Human.* "Assuming that he believes at all, the everyday Christian is a pitiful figure, a man who really cannot count up to three, and who besides, precisely because of his mental incompetence, would not deserve such a punishment as Christianity promises him."* If Nietzsche were running a modern ad campaign, he might borrow the U.S. Army's slo-

* *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits,* trans. Marion Faber with Stephen Lehmann (University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 85 and 86.

gan: *Be all you can be!* We must rise to the heights of our potential, find greatness and follow where it leads, or at least the greatest of us must reach those heights. To do so, we must shed the vulgar servility and bovine stupefaction which Christianity inculcates.

And yet . . . Nietzsche acknowledges that Christianity, while morally disfiguring and "arising from an *error*," does provide a source of values, something which secularism is hard put to do. "When religious ideas are destroyed one is troubled by an uncomfortable emptiness and deprivation," he writes in *The Gay Science*. "Christianity, it seems to me, is still needed by most people in old Europe even today."

Or rather, Christianity *did* provide a source of values; but today, he famously declares, God is dead, "and we have killed him." By "we" he means the modern secular order and ideas like liberalism and Marxism, which undercut the authority and enchantment of religion. He regards deicide as a seminal event, a turning point in human development ("there has never been a greater deed"), because while Christianity's decline may leave ordinary people adrift and aimless, it clears space for a bold, visionary few—of whom Nietzsche is himself the exemplar. These gifted moral visionaries are able to rise above bourgeois conformism, create their own moral frames, and share those frames with humanity, such that "whoever is born after us . . . will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."*

To my modern liberal eye, this is self-aggrandizing and sophomoric rubbish, and reckless to boot. Although Nietzsche did not propound a politics, one readily sees how his teachings open the door to political illiberalism and even the outright fascism of, for example, his sister, an ardent Nazi. His slogan-

* *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Random House, 1974), at Nos. 196, 287, and 181.

eering about supermen and slave morality and the death of god was tailor-made to be twisted into a political program of domination and a morality of might-makes-right.

Still, one must acknowledge merit in Nietzsche's diagnosis. In today's America, we see evidence everywhere of the inadequacy of secular liberalism to provide meaning, exaltation, spirituality, transcendence, and morality anchored in more than the self. As America has secularized over the past 50 years, cynicism about politics, disdain for institutions, and discontent with public life have risen. The aforementioned *WSJ*/NORC survey showed that as the percentage of Americans saying religion is very important to them has declined, so have the percentages of those characterizing patriotism, community involvement, and having children as very important. What value tested by the pollsters *rose* in importance over the period? Just one: "Making money."

Alt-Religion

Unlike the conservative post-liberals, I find much to celebrate in twenty-first-century America's values. Back when I celebrated "apatheism," I supposed that as organized religious participation declined, Americans might find other sources of values, perhaps better ones. And to a remarkable extent, they have done so. As a homosexual American, I owe my marriage—and the astonishing liberation I have enjoyed during my lifetime—to the advance of enlightened secular values. None of what I am about to say is intended to negate the very real social and moral progress which secular culture has achieved—or to deny the long record of religiously inspired cruelty and bigotry. I am not on board with those who hanker for a time when "morality," "faith," and "tradition" gave cover to oppression, superstition, and dogma.

That said, it has become pretty evident that secularism has not been able to fill what has been called the "God-shaped hole" in American life. Because the quest for spirituality and meaning is deeply human, it is insistent. We need commitments to something larger than ourselves, communities rooted in more than transactional gains, truths which transcend time and place, and missions worth sacrificing for; and if we do not find them in institutionalized religion, we will look elsewhere. In her 2020 book *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World,* Tara Isabella Burton catalogs some of the secular movements which have arisen as vehicles for spiritual fervor: wellness culture, occultism, wicca, radical social justice ("wokeness"), the New Age, techno-utopianism, the alt-right, and more. Q-Anon, MAGA's cultic cousin, comes complete with its own prophet, eschatology, and redemptive mission—all twisted into a grimacing, politicized caricature of religion. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, many observers have noticed the quasi-religious nature of wokeness. The linguist John McWhorter even rejects the "quasi": "I do not mean that these people's ideology is 'like' a religion," he writes in *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America;* "I mean that it actually *is* a religion. An anthropologist would see no difference in type between Pentecostalism and this new form of antiracism."

These "bespoke religions," as Burton calls them, are invested with spiritual and moral significance, but they lack institutional bases and theological anchors, and their adherents "reject authority, institution, creed, and moral universalism. They value intuition, personal feeling, and experiences. They demand to rewrite their own scripts." She adds that "much of the responsibility for that shift belongs to [religious] institutions themselves. Traditional religions, traditional political hierarchies, and traditional understandings of society have been unwilling or unable to offer compellingly meaningful accounts of the world, provide their members with purpose, foster sustainable communities, or put forth evocative rituals."

Secular movements have their benefits; I am not here to condemn them. But it turns out that none of them is capable of replacing the great religions where anchoring moral codes, maintaining durable communities, and transmitting values are concerned. As Jessica Grose wrote in the *New York Times* in 2023, paraphrasing the sociologist Phil Zuckerman, "A soccer team can't provide spiritual solace in the face of death, it probably doesn't have a weekly charitable call and there's no sense of connection to a heritage that goes back generations."

Secular pseudo-religions also do not seem to replicate the positive effects of the real thing. "Social scientists have produced a mountain of evidence that religion is good for you," write John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge in their 2009 book *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World.* Organized religious participation correlates with greater happiness and well-being, longer life, stronger immune systems and lower blood pressure, lower crime and drug use, and greater civic engagement. Most people cannot reap the same benefits at home. "It is the communal forms of religious participation, rather than merely private practices, that most powerfully affect health," notes Tyler J. VanderWeele of Harvard's School of Public Health. Other research suggests that the decline of religious participation may be an important factor in the alarming rise in the United States of deaths of despair.

It turns out that Nietzsche was right: love religion or hate it, its communal functions are very hard to replace. Where he went wrong was in assuming that self-actualization and self-elevation could substitute for religion, even among elites. A

country of 350 million would-be *Übermenschen* cannot thrive. And so, writes Brink Lindsey, of the Niskanen Center, in his Substack blog, *The Permanent Problem*,

> the sunny view of organized religion's retreat as humanity's intellectual advance really can't be sustained. We are not seeing the decline of supernaturalism so much as its privatization or atomization. Belief in the fantastic has escaped from its traditional repositories, where it served to bind us into communities founded on a shared sense of the sacred, and now exists as a disconnected jumble, accessible as a purely individual consumer choice to guide one's personal search for meaning. What the sociologist Peter Berger called the "sacred canopy" has shattered and fallen to earth; we pick up shards here or there, on our own or in small groups, and whatever we manage to build with them is necessarily more fleeting and less inclusive than what we experienced before.

What My Younger Self Missed

What did I get wrong, then, in my "apatheistic" past? My younger self acknowledged the social benefits of religious participation but imagined that other institutions and pursuits could substitute, an assumption which proved wrong as an empirical matter.

My younger self also took the stability of both democracy and Christianity too much for granted. Like many of us in the aftermath of the Cold War, I was too ready to indulge in liberal-democratic triumphalism, forgetting how hard it is to build and maintain the value structures which support democracy. We have since learned, painfully, what any Iraqi or Afghan can tell you: air-dropping elections and constitutions on

a morally unprepared society does not work. At the same time, I didn't foresee the extent to which mainline Protestantism would collapse as a source of public values, and I certainly didn't foresee the extent to which evangelical Protestantism would turn resentful, confrontational, and authoritarian.

In hindsight, too, I did not appreciate the implicit bargain between American democracy and American Christianity. I would have said that the basic deal was to leave each other alone—"wall of separation" and all that. Their only bargain, I thought, was to make no bargain; to the greatest extent possible, religion and government should tend to their separate businesses and not interfere with each other.

Although there is much merit in mutual non-intervention, I should have paid more attention to the American Founders who, while opposing the admixture of religion with government, warned that republicanism would rely in part on religious underpinnings. John Adams, for instance, famously wrote: "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Adams was more of a virtuecrat than some of the other Founders, but even the freethinker Thomas Jefferson said he considered "ethics, *as well as religion,* as supplements to law in the government of man" (my italics).

The Founders did not expect Christianity or any other religion to have greater loyalty to the Constitution than to God. They famously rejected the establishment of a state religion or any other explicit state-church alliance, believing that entanglement would harm both parties. Religion's job is not to *support* republican government. They did, however, generally believe

that religion—Christianity, for all intents and purposes—was important for *stabilizing* republican government, because it teaches virtue and thereby makes Americans more governable. In his 2007 book *Christianity and American Democracy,* Hugh Heclo summarizes the view of early America's greatest observer, Alexis de Tocqueville:

> Tocqueville has no doubt that the tendency of democracy to unleash passions for physical pleasure, to push individuals toward a short-sighted, brutish materialism, is fully on display in America. His claim is that it is therefore all the more important that religious beliefs counter these democratic tendencies by drawing attention to man's immortal soul and elevating his affections and mere natural reason toward what is majestic, pure, and eternal. Without the active presence of spiritual conceptions in society—the recognition that an integral part of each person is implicated in realities beyond this material world—human beings in the democratic age are in great danger of becoming degraded into something less than fully human.

By the same token, the Founders did not believe that only the religious (or only Christians) can be good citizens in a republic, or that the government must be Christian formally or in its character. Nor were they naïve about religion's purity or reliability; like other contending factions, churches can be self-serving and need to be restrained by proper institutional arrangements. As Adams warned, "Religion, superstition, oaths, education, laws, all give way before passions, interest, and power, which can be resisted only by passions, interest, and power." Rather, the Founders were making the same point the conservative thinker George F. Will made in 1984 in his classic book

Statecraft as Soulcraft: the businesses of making public laws and shaping public morals are inevitably interwoven, implying that politics and religion cannot simply be strangers to one another, even if they try—which they shouldn't.

In the modern United States, however, the consensus among liberals has moved toward further separation—cultural as well as formal—between church and state. And, yes, very often democracy and Christianity *should* leave each other alone. The greater danger lies in too much entanglement, not too little. It is neither necessary nor desirable for church and state to be *allied;* at least in the American context, blurring their separate responsibilities would compromise their independence, legitimacy, and effectiveness. In the United States, a state religion is a bad idea, as are efforts to write religious observance (Sabbath closings, for example) into law.

Even so, Tocqueville and the Founders were not wrong: it is important for Christianity and democracy to be reasonably well *aligned.* Neither can thrive if they are at cross purposes. I did not fully appreciate that in 2003, and I think too few Americans on both sides of the line, secular and religious, appreciate it today.

Four Existential Questions

Now I wish to make a stronger claim. It is a claim I would have vehemently rejected in my youth, but one which I owe to my regular and deep engagement these past few years with friends in the religious world. My claim is not just that secular liberalism and religious faith are *instrumentally* interdependent but that each is *intrinsically* reliant on the other to build a morally and epistemically complete and coherent account of the world. In other words, the structure of the moral and epistemic uni-

verses is such that both ways of thought are incomplete *even in principle.* Although they are always in tension and sometimes in outright conflict, neither by itself will ever be able to satisfy human needs to cope with the world.

I believe there are four questions to which most individuals seek answers in order to feel complete as moral beings. Most people also feel more comfortable belonging to groups which furnish or at least encourage *shared* answers. Of course, there are other important questions, too; the four I have in mind are not all-encompassing; nor do most people go around worrying about them while getting the kids to school or fixing the car. But all of them require some kind of social account if we are to believe we live in a morally coherent world; and all of them concern us individually to some degree, even if we rarely sit down and cogitate about them. As a handy mnemonic, I think of them as four M's.

Mortality. How can life have meaning if all it leads to, ultimately, is death?
Morality. What is the ultimate basis for belief in, and understanding of, right and wrong?
Murder. Why is the world so full of suffering, injustice, and violence?
Miracles. How can we explain the world without recourse to magic—thus reliably, systematically, and adjudicably?

Again, I do not claim that each of these questions preoccupies every individual. By temperament, some people think about them a lot, others not at all; some are bothered by one question but not another. Personally, I have never had a problem with mortality. Since childhood, I have felt quite content believing I am a soulless clump of cells which will self-destruct.

Philosophers and societies, however, cannot shirk the four M's; of necessity, they have struggled with them for millennia. The reason I raise them in the present context—the existential interdependence of secularism and spirituality—is that secularism can cope with only two of them, and spiritualism only with the other two.

Mortality and Morality

We cope with the fact of death by pushing it to the background of everyday life, yet it remains existentially terrifying—not just because of the physical reality of death but also because of the nihilism it implies. Death seems to negate all human accomplishment, all meaning. If we come to nothing in the end, why does anything we do matter? Why devote ourselves to the next generation? Why even bother getting through the day? Purely secular thinking can explain how humans evolved, how we fit in with the (much) larger universe, and how we differ from other creatures. Perhaps someday it will explain the mysteries of consciousness and selfhood. But it cannot give us a reason for being here or explain why we are worth caring about, or why (or even whether) a human life matters more than any other cluster of chemically active molecules. In his 2023 book *Facing Death: Spirituality, Science, and Surrender at the End of Life,* Brad Stuart, a doctor with long experience giving hospice care and treating terminal patients, expressed the challenge acerbically:

> Here's a brief factual summary of the current status of the human race from a strictly scientific viewpoint: humans are the product of a random process that has no cause. All our loves, hopes, and fears are the result of chance combinations of organic molecules. No individual act of heroic imagination, valiant action, or inspired striving

will last beyond the grave, except for the fading memories of survivors who won't last long themselves. All the products of human genius are destined to vanish in the frigid death of an expanding universe. How uplifting.

Speaking as a scientific materialist, I can aim answers *around* questions of human purpose, to their left and right, but I cannot strike them directly. I can say that it is better for us to behave *as if* our lives are special and meaningful; that we are constructed so that believing otherwise is not really possible unless we're mentally unwell or on an acid trip. I can even say there is something ineffably mysterious and beautiful about human life which scientific, materialistic descriptions cannot capture, although perhaps poetry and art can. Yet I cannot provide meaning and purpose which transcend oblivion.

Is that a problem? As I've said, not very much for me. I feel exactly the same way as Richard Feynman, the American physicist, who said, "I think it's much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong. . . . I don't feel frightened by not knowing things, by being lost in the mysterious universe without having any purpose—which is the way it really is, as far as I can tell." But I am weird! Purely secular thinking about death will never satisfy the large majority of people. Most rely on some version of faith to rescue them from the bleak nihilism of mortality. Most believe we are here for a reason; that our souls or essential beings transcend death; that the universe was up to something special when it breathed life into us. As William James argues in his seminal 1896 essay "The Will to Believe," people have a perfect right to believe that we exist for a reason, even if that reason is not scientifically provable. We are, of course, not entitled to believe whatever we please—that 2 + 2 = 5, or that the world was created in six days, or any other illogical or empirically false proposition; but in

those moral and spiritual areas which science cannot reach, we are just as entitled to accept the guidance of faith as to reject it. There is even a hypothesis that humans could not have made the evolutionary leap to intelligence had we not at the same time evolved religion to ease the otherwise unbearable knowledge of death. For all we know, *Homo sapiens* may have outcompeted other hominid species partly because we developed spiritualism to cope with the dread of mortality—whereas perhaps they did not.*

For a scientific materialist, anchoring morality poses a similar problem. To be more than expressions of personal taste, and to bind us even when no one is looking or when we can act with impunity, moral propositions—the Ten Commandments, the rules we learn in kindergarten, and all the rest—must have some external validity. Although we may never agree on *particular* moral precepts or on the specific source of their validity, it also cannot be adequate to define right and wrong in purely relativistic or aesthetic terms, such that there are no moral universals at all. The foundational problem posed by Plato in *The Republic*—why is there any unconditional reason to be good or just, or any reason to believe there is such a thing as goodness or justice?—requires an answer if we are to live with ourselves or (especially) with others in a non-sociopathic way.

Secular philosophers have worked very hard on Plato's problem. The logical positivists, such as A. J. Ayer, tried to define it out of existence by denying that moral claims have any meaning, so that the statement "murder is wrong" is just an emotional or aesthetic exclamation, an expression of distaste, no more rational than "Murder . . . *ugh!*" Unfortunately, positivism threw the baby out with the bathwater by denying the

*See Ajit Varki and Danny Brower, *Denial: Self-Deception, False Beliefs, and the Origin of the Human Mind* (Twelve, 2013).

possibility of moral reasoning, which leaves us worse off than ever. Another approach is observational. Certain moral traits seem wired into a healthy human psychology; certain moral tenets are common across human societies. Doesn't that make morality fundamental in some sense? Yes, but only in an empirical sense. To say a moral belief is ubiquitous is not to say it is right. Like slavery in the premodern world, it may be ubiquitous yet very wrong.

Titanic intellects like David Hume, Adam Smith, Charles Darwin, and Émile Durkheim—and their intellectual descendants, like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris—have used scientific and naturalistic approaches to give us insights into the nature and evolution of human morals; but they anchor morality in ourselves and our societies, not in something transcendent. They may explain why I do not steal even if I can get away with it (sociability is necessary for survival, etc.), but they do not explain why I *must* not. They can say, correctly, that we will have happier lives if we think and act *as if* moral principles were universal and transcendent, but they cannot claim that any particular moral code *is* universal or transcendent.

Yet another approach is to yield to relativism: there is no absolute warrant for morality, and we just need to live with that—and anyway, religion, far from being reliably uplifting, often justifies the worst kind of immorality (slavery, again); so in the end, relativism is as functional as faith, perhaps more so. My own variant of relativism is that, even without access to absolute moral truths, moral *learning*—the objective advance of moral knowledge—is possible through reasoned criticism. We can say that the proposition "slavery is wrong" has been tested and justified by centuries of argument and evidence, in the same way that any other well-established proposition has been tested and justified—not with perfect certainty but with the confirmation of many lines of evidence and argument. From

my secular, materialistic point of view, there is no absolute moral code inscribed in the stars, or at least there is none which is accessible to our imperfect minds; but that is true of all knowledge. Even without certainty, we still make moral progress in a systematic, non-arbitrary way, advancing our understanding of the moral world much as we advance our understanding of the material world—directionally *toward* truth, even if we never perfectly reach that goal. From the point of view of most people and most societies, however, relativism, even with my tweaks, is not adequate for strong, positive belief about good and evil. Escaping relativism and the moral chaos it can imply is the whole point.

So there is a lot of spaghetti which we on the secular side can throw against the wall by way of explaining why life has meaning and how moral claims are warranted. Having thrown it all, however, I am obliged to confess that purely secular thinking can get some distance toward putting mortality and morality on a solid footing, but it cannot get all the way there. It cannot answer the question, "If there is no transcendent moral order anchored in a purposive universe—something like God-given laws—why must we not be nihilistic and despairing sociopaths?"

Now, speaking as an atheist and a scientific materialist, I do not believe religions actually answer that question. Instead, they rely on a cheat, which they call God. They assume their conclusion by simply *asserting* the existence of a transcendent spiritual and moral order. They invent God and then claim he solves the problem. To me, that is not a solution; it is what philosophers call bootstrapping, a form of circularity. The Christians who believe the Bible is the last word on morality—and, not coincidentally, that *they* are the last word on interpreting the Bible—are every bit as relativistic as I am; it's just that I admit it and they don't.

That is neither here nor there. I am not important. What *is* important is that the religious framing of morality and mortality is plausible and acceptable to humans in a way nihilism and relativism are not and never will be. For most people, the idea that the universe is intended and ordered by God demonstrably provides transcendent meaning and moral grounding which scientific materialism demonstrably does not. I end up agreeing with Paul Nedelisky and James Davison Hunter in their book *Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality.* God may be (as I believe) a philosophical shortcut, but he gets you there—and I don't.

Murder and Miracles

But now we come to the other side of the equation, the other two M's. And here the religious side falls short.

In much the same way that secular philosophers have wrestled—nobly, insightfully, yet ultimately unsuccessfully—with the problem of morality, religious philosophers have wrestled with the problem of theodicy, often summarized as, "Why would a good God allow evil?"

My own atheistic view is that if something like God really existed, I would have to be against it. Not because God condemns us all to death; immortality sounds like a nightmare to me. But why, during life, torture us with diseases like the one which made my father—fully cognizant—choke on his own saliva? Why the cancer which took my friend Patricia's husband when their daughter was only a year old? Why the excruciating, chronic shingles which caused my friend Warren to lose hope and hang himself? Why typhoid, malaria, smallpox, and countless other diseases? Why the volcano which erased an entire city of 30,000 in Martinique in 1902? Why the

tsunami which wiped out almost a quarter million souls in 2004? Does God really need to be so profligate a sadist? "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport."

The standard free-will argument, that God had to introduce evil into the world so that people could choose good, gets no traction against disease and natural disasters. Yet even more troubling is the problem of murder. When I was in college, a friend went out for a run and never came home. She was raped and murdered. I was shaken and angry then and remain shaken and angry today. Exercising free will was all well and good from the criminal's point of view, but why did God empower the murderer to exercise his free will by extinguishing hers? A caring God could easily have designed humans to feel far more averse to killing and harming others. He could have made us far more sensitive to the wounds we inflict and still have left us with meaningful choices. Instead, he created a world in which the Holocaust could happen; then he stood by when it did happen, and so did the millions who used their free will to choose complicity or turn a blind eye, mostly escaping accountability. One must ask oneself what kind of God would purchase the free will of Nazis at the price of six million Jewish lives. The claim that free will somehow justifies murder died at Auschwitz.

Confronted with that problem, God's defenders frequently retreat into mysticism. "We can't know why God does what he does and allows what he allows, but we should nonetheless assume he has a plan and it is good, because he is good." Obviously, this is no answer at all; it is merely a refusal to confront the question. To apply moral reasoning to our fellow humans while excusing God from all critical appraisal is to turn off our brains and license a capricious, sometimes monstrous divinity. It is, in the end, a dodge which excuses all kinds of violence and suffering as part of God's ineffable, unknowable plan. The

universe cannot make moral sense if we accept the proposition that anything is okay if God does it.

A reason (one of many) I loved the late, great evangelical pastor and apologist Tim Keller is that he was candid about the problem of evil. He said theodicy is like a bucket. He could fill it with all the explanations and arguments he could think of, yet he could not make the bucket more than three-fourths full. Of course, atheists and materialists have no trouble accounting for the fact that bad things happen to good people, because we do not presume that the universe is fundamentally good. Instead, we dedicate ourselves to making it better. Similarly, we can cope with the fourth of the M's, miracles—an intractable and fundamental problem for religion.

In "Of Miracles" (Chapter 10 of his 1748 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*), David Hume demolishes the possibility of miracles with a series of arguments which have never been successfully answered. Without saying so, Hume, an atheist, takes dead aim at the resurrection. By their very nature, he reasons, miracles violate the laws of nature; else they would not be miraculous. That means "there must . . . be a uniform experience against every miraculous event." In other words, to believe a miracle happened is to believe in what prior experience and known physical laws say is impossible. Moreover, Hume continues, there are always explanations which *are* consistent with experience and laws of nature; for example, that the supposedly miraculous event was misreported or misinterpreted, or faked, or never happened at all. Or perhaps there is some other explanation which is not yet known. If we hear of a miraculous event, therefore, it is *always* more rational to go with an explanation which experience shows to be possible than to bypass the possible and seize upon the impossible. Belief in the supernatural is exciting, Hume acknowledges: "The passion of surprise and wonder arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events." But it can never be rationally justified, because any naturalistic explanation, however unlikely, is inherently more likely than any supernatural one.

Hume's argument, while sometimes framed as probabilistic, is really epistemic. The problem with magical thinking is not that "It's a miracle!" is merely an unlikely explanation for some event but that it is not an explanation at all. Rather, it is a negation of explanation. It waves aside all known regularities about the universe and admits any claim, however fanciful. If a shaman tells me she made it rain by placating angry spirits, I *must* disbelieve her: not because her account is improbable or even impossible, but because her account, if accepted, immediately makes nonsense of everything we know about meteorology, which in turn makes nonsense of everything we know about thermodynamics and chemistry and physics and even math and logic. If you assume even one miracle, then you can assume any number, and science becomes a game of Calvinball, a game without rules, where anyone can assert anything and chaos reigns. Worst of all, we are thrown into a world of incommensurable supernatural claims which no regular or rational process can adjudicate: a world of warring revelations and violent conflicts over competing supernatural dogmas—in other words, all of human history until the scientific revolution. The founding innovation of the scientific revolution was to demand explanations which are empirical, impersonal, replicable, and therefore socially adjudicable—thus placing magical thinking, including religious thinking, firmly out of bounds. In that way, belief in God, if God has any supernatural character, breaks the universe.

Obviously, many scientists are religious. They may believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead, but they do not look to exorcism to treat cancer. They somehow manage to

accept supernaturalism in one part of life while rejecting it in another—an inconsistency I cannot accept, but so be it. My point here is not that you can't be a good scientist and also a good Christian; only that if you want a coherent, reliable, and socially adjudicable account of the material world, religious thinking cannot get you there. Pray and believe as your faith dictates, but when you are doing your scientific work, you must set aside your supernatural ideas and explanations and follow the rules of discovery and demonstration which I have elsewhere called the Constitution of Knowledge: rules which require us to treat only regular and replicable claims as objectively true. Even in principle, there is no theistic or spiritual path to a coherent, broadly shared, reliable, and progressively improving account of reality—no path, that is, to what we call *objective knowledge.*

The Cultural Trade Deficit

And so we wind up with two quite different modes of thinking, both inherently incomplete. A satisfactory account of the world requires both. A regime which subordinates one to the other, whether theocratic or Communistic, cannot be healthy or fully human.

Now, I want to draw some lines around my claims. I do not claim that only religious people can have strong, decent, and firmly anchored moral convictions. I do not claim that only secular people can have a firm grasp of objective reality. I do not claim that liberal democracy can't flourish amid secularization; Scandinavia and Japan (for example) show that it can, at least in high-trust, relatively homogeneous societies. What I do claim is that the four M's imply a certain division of labor—especially in America, which has traditionally relied on religion for so much of its cultural and spiritual infrastructure. The

secular and religious worlds need not love each other or even quite understand each other, and at times they will be exasperated with each other. But they had better not actively undermine each other. Instead, they must foster conditions under which they can coexist.

Sometimes Christian America and secular America can rub along merely by leaving each other alone. But sometimes they come into conflict; and when they do, they have positive obligations to make room for each other. In other words, separation of church and state may fulfill the *legal* demands of our pluralist constitutional order; but from a moral and civic point of view, Christianity and secular liberalism are accountable not just to God and the Constitution respectively, but *to each other*. Their bargain requires that the Constitution be interpreted in a way which is consistent with the well-being of law-abiding faith communities, and that God's word be interpreted in a way which is consistent with the well-being of democratic pluralism. The bargain is implicit, but America depends upon it nonetheless.

The United States has been generally good at upholding this implicit bargain. America's demonstration that a country can be both devout and diverse, secular and spiritual, has been a historic achievement and a gift to the world. At least until recently, no other country or culture has accomplished it so well.

But the religious side has been less and less able to uphold its end of the bargain. That is what I mean by *thin* religion: too thin to provide meaning and morals to the culture and thus to reliably support democratic society. A result is what I think of as a cultural trade deficit.

Cultural trade deficit? Look at it this way. Secular liberalism certainly promotes important values: tolerance, lawfulness, civic responsibility, equality, and so forth. But they are primarily procedural values, which orient us to follow certain rules. The

legitimacy of those rules must come largely from outside of secular liberalism itself (as, again, the Founders emphasized)—and, in practice, this has meant relying on Christianity to support the civic virtues. So we secular atheists rely on Christianity to maintain a positive cultural balance of trade: we need it to export more moral values and spiritual authority to the surrounding culture than it imports. If, instead, the church is in cultural deficit—if it becomes a net importer of values from the secular world—then it becomes morally derivative instead of morally formative. Rather than shaping secular values, it merely reflects them, and thus melts into the society around it. It becomes a consumer good, a lifestyle choice, or just another channel for politics—SoulCycle without the sweat, partisanship without the bunting and balloons.

You needn't take my word for it; Christians have been sounding alarms about the cultural trade deficit for years. "The church must stand against the way politics has become a religion, and religion has become politics," wrote Russell Moore in 2016, when he headed the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Others have warned of a dangerously diminished capacity to model Christian values for the culture. In 2017, Mark Labberton, then the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, said, "The church is in one of its deepest moments of crisis. Not because of some election result, but because of what has been exposed to be the poverty of the American church, in its capacity to be able to see and love and serve and engage in ways in which we simply failed to do."

"It's Destroying Hope"

And so where are we? David A. Hollinger puts it pithily in his 2022 book *Christianity's American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular.* "The United States confronts a remarkable paradox," he writes: "*an increasingly secular society saddled with an increasingly religious politics.*"

At the turn of this century, I would have said that if Thin Christianity was bad for the church, that was no business of mine. I was smug about secularization ("apatheism"). As the country sank into chronic anomie and discontent, however, and as the public turned to dysfunctional and sometimes dangerous alternatives to religion, I began bending an ear to warnings that Christianity's crisis is democracy's, too. I came to realize that in American civic life, Christianity is a load-bearing wall. When it buckles, all the institutions around it come under stress, and some of them buckle, too. "Just as religion is damaged when the churches see themselves as political movements," wrote Joseph Bottum in the journal *First Things* in 2008, "so politics is damaged when political platforms act as though they were religions." Many others since then have repeated the warning. "If you're asking politics to solve your sense of moral purpose and character and meaning," said the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks in an online interview with Moore in 2022, "you're asking more of politics than it can bear."

On a winter day in 2022 I had the opportunity to ask Spencer Cox, the governor of Utah, about the challenges of governing. Cox is a conciliator by nature. As a newly appointed lieutenant governor in 2016, he took it upon himself to speak to an LGBT crowd holding vigil in Salt Lake City after the massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, took 49 lives. Instead of making vague expressions of sympathy, he owned up to his own past insensitivity to LGBT classmates and acquaintances: "I regret not treating them with the kindness, dignity, and respect—the love—that they deserved. For that, I sincerely and humbly apologize." Running for governor as a Republican in 2020, he cut a political ad with his Democratic opponent,

Chris Peterson, in which they attested to their shared values and promised to support the election's outcome. As chair of the National Governors Association in 2023, he launched a national initiative aimed at using governors' bully pulpits and convening power to encourage healthier disagreement.

"It's an unbelievably strong headwind," he told me, when I asked about governing in today's climate. Speaking of politics and media, he said: "The misalignment of incentives within those worlds, the algorithms and outrage cycles with social media and cable news, is incredibly degrading. It's destroying hope."

Then he turned to religion and the social connections it fosters. As people disaffiliate from faith, he said, "far too often we're replacing those connections with politics. Politics becomes our religion in many cases, and that harms our community and our souls. It makes governing inclusively much more difficult. My job would be so much easier if I woke up every morning and did whatever Fox News says that day."

That is the connection I missed two decades ago. Like it or not, the church's crisis is not only the church's business; it is Governor Cox's business, and indeed *my* business. Whether Christianity upholds its bargain with God is for God, not me, to say; but at present, as Americans abandon it in droves, it does not seem able to uphold its bargain with democracy.

We need to ask why. Is secular liberalism destroying religion, as liberalism's critics maintain? Does liberalism inevitably dissolve transcendent values in what Brink Lindsey calls an "acid bath of romantic hyper-individualism"?

Not all Christian voices think so. Recall what Russell Moore said in 2016: "The church must stand against the way politics has become a religion, and religion has become politics." And notice the subject of his sentence: *the church* must stand. Instead, it took a different direction.

2

Sharp Christianity

The Church of Fear

"Flight 93" evangelicalism betrays the church and the Constitution

Still bleary-eyed one morning in a hotel restaurant, I plop my breakfast plate down at a random table and strike up a conversation with the stranger sitting next to me. Since I am attending a conference on religion and civic life, I'm not surprised when he introduces himself as an evangelical pastor. I'll call him Mark. His church is Baptist, located in an oil town in west Texas. His congregants number about a hundred. Eighty percent are white, though the surrounding community is mostly Hispanic. "I love these people," he says of his parishioners. Yet when I ask if he has considered quitting the pastorate within the past year, he replies without hesitation. "*Absolutely.*"

Why? He uses a phrase which comes up several times in our conversation: *battlefield mindset.* His parishioners take an aggressive tone, one which reflects anger, fear: *Christianity is under attack and we have to do something about it.* They bring to church the divisive cultural issues they hear about on Fox News, such as critical race theory—even though, he tells me, many don't understand what that is.