

**Christianity After the Religious Right**  
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James Luther Adams undertook to practice something he and others called “public theology,” which is an intellectual task that combined his vocations as a scholar, obligated to the criteria and idioms of the academy, and as a theologian, obligated to the criteria and idioms of the church. I too want to do both, and in this paper I want to exhibit how. The combination of these two vocations may vary from person to person, and indeed even within different interventions they may undertake. But most basically this piece formally exists as an attempt to think about the contribution of scholarly theological reflection for an extra-academic audience; this is, I think, squarely a task of “public theology.” And materially, it is concerned, as Adams always was, with the possibility of a prophetic orientation, a concern about American culture and the kinds of Christianity it can host and produce, and the prospects for a distinctively *liberal* religion in coming decades. In some ways all of these concerns come together in Adams’s deep and ever-growing fascination with Ernst Troeltsch. I too have found that Troeltsch’s work has grown increasingly important for me in my scholarship, and I am trying to convince younger scholars of the value of his work as well. It is hard going, as his combination of sociological insight and theological and doctrinal learning are not easily reproduced today. But still.

Such an ambition is embedded in my several vocations. I am a scholar in the “humanities”—prof of religious studies, not theology. I teach theology, but often at one remove from confessional indoctrination. I try to get my students to *feel the grip* of what I am offering them, across a variety of theological (and atheological) positions, in order to help them formulate in their own minds their own views of this. People sometimes express doubt that the humanities are about anything beyond themselves, that the humanities—and here my kind of scholarship about religion is squarely in the “humanities”—is self-referential, self-concerned, narcissistic. Admittedly, humanities scholars are very self-involved; you all know that as well as I do, if not better. (Then again, I’ve not noticed a much more profoundly agapic attitude among scientists, or social-scientists, or professors in the various professional fields—law, business, medicine, engineering.) But such scholars are not *only* self-involved; they are also interested in illuminating the world for others. In fact I think humanities scholars have as their central vocation as scholars an illuminative duty: our first job, sometimes our only job, is *to understand*. The technical forms of inquiry our disciplines have developed are meant to help us in that project. And our second job is

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to communicate that achieved understanding to others, to make it, in one way or another, public. That is something I try to do in this talk.

I am also a theologian. It should be pretty clear from all this. If you are a white evangelical, or a white conservative Roman Catholic, you might feel beleaguered by my analysis here. But please understand, I spend so much time talking about the religious right not because I think they are simply bad, but because I think they are real—that is, they offer a serious kind of moral and spiritual formation for many in our culture. Do not mistake critique with disrespect, let alone dismissal. For all their many failings and hypocrises, the people in these churches were and are at least trying to do something serious, and not relying on others to do it for them. The churches in which I am a member—Mainline churches—do not do enough of this. The Mainline never gave up on the hope that the culture could be a viable site of moral formation; they simply never critically examined their over-reliance on institutions other than themselves for the moral and spiritual formation of their members. Others' vices may be more centered around wrath or greed; ours is preeminently sloth. So my critiques of the Religious Right coexists with an equally severe self-critique of my own more favored flavors of Christianity.

With my understanding of my vocations thus clarified, I can move to the meat of my talk.

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A bit more than half a century ago, on April 4, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered in Memphis. Two months and two days later, on June 6, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was murdered in Los Angeles. Many people felt at the time that a certain future for America died with them. They weren't wrong. The world that both created and destroyed those two leaders is not the one we live in now. Our world is vastly different from theirs, and the difference is not simply, not even most deeply, a matter of technological advance.

It was hard to see, of course, this revolution happening in real time, in 1968. But revolution it was. Something spinal snapped in that year; history shifted in some way. While the social structures of 1968 had far more in common with the structures of 1958 than those of 1978, the ethos emerging from that year had much more in common with 1978 than 1958. Perhaps it was the crisis in confidence about the government, due to incompetence and chicanery, foreign and domestic. Perhaps it was the growing sense that people who knew their place were tired of knowing their place, and that there was no putting Humpty-Dumpty back together again. Perhaps it was just that men stopped wearing hats, and women started wearing pants. Multitudinous causes can be identified, but all who were alive will well agree that the US in 1970 felt very different than the US in

1966. From '68 forward, something new was being born. And it was durable. For what began in 1968 developed into the dominant religio-political constellation of coming years, making 1988 and 1998 and 2008 all seem of a piece. These are the years of the rise to dominance of the "Religious Right" in American Christianity, and to a large degree in American politics. It has been our world.

But today, this era is coming to an end. And perhaps these past few years were another historical hinge. Today feels increasingly discontinuous with what preceded it, and decisively so. Things, deep things, are changing, or have changed and we are beginning to recognize that. Amplifying this recognition, and specifying it, is my aim in this paper.

It is easy to be caught up in the noise of the present. It is tempting to fasten on the events of the day and miss the more profound changes happening beneath the surface. But deep tectonic pressures are always at work, aggravating strain year upon year, until a sudden shuddering shift happens, felt on the surface as an earthquake.

I think an earthquake is happening among us now. What does this change amount to, and what is coming next?

"It's tough to make predictions," Yogi Berra purportedly said, "especially about the future." I will try to avoid prediction and instead identify accomplished social and cultural facts about the place of religion in America, historically and today. Religion, institutional and individual, has played and continues to play a substantial role in our common life together. But the nature of that role is changing quickly, and in ways that will have quite substantial consequences both for the shape of our common life and for the modes of religiosity that will fund that life.

Here is my argument, in brief: For the past half century, the dominant form of Christianity in American public and private life has constituted what we call the "Religious Right." Almost all of us, religious and secular alike, were participating in, responding to, or reacting against it, publicly and privately. But that game has been played out, politically, culturally, and demographically. We stand at a hinge moment where the shape of American religious life, especially but not exclusively as it pertains to politics, will be discontinuous with the patterns and structures informing it in the past and even today. And all of us, believers and unbelievers alike, had better be ready.

In this talk, I want to address the strengths and the weaknesses of what the past few decades have wrought in American Christianity, analyze the good and bad consequences of what happened, and make some observations on what is happening now, and likely in the near future, on the basis of those consequences. I want to talk, that is, about the future of American Christianity *after* the "Religious Right." I will do this in two large steps. First, I will assess the religious right, what it did achieved and how it failed. Second, I will prophesy the future, exploring briefly what is to come: an immigrant church; a multicultural church; a polarized church; and a voluble but not articulate church, speaking

in an increasingly polarized and moralized environment. Finally I will make some proposals about how Christians, and perhaps others, should prepare themselves for coming years.

## **I. Where We've Been**

In 1968, just over 30 percent of the population belonged to Mainline churches. That figure is now below 15 percent. On the other hand, over most of those years, evangelicals held steady at roughly 25 percent of the population, though over the past decade it has begun to slip. How can we characterize the era we have all inhabited these past fifty years, the era of the Religious Right?

### **A. "Christian America"**

The Religious Right succeeded the Mainline, but it neither dethroned nor usurped it. The ML's end was either death by natural causes or by suicide; it was not a murder. The end was caused by tensions *internal* to it. But one could be forgiven for thinking that the Christianity that succeeded it was at least a suspect in the ML's demise, so palpable was the contempt that the later version has for the earlier. Yet ironically, the Religious Right was an innocent bystander to the ML's demise, and insofar as it replaced it, it has operated under very different terms. Understanding the essential separateness of these two Christianities is crucial for appreciating the nature of the Religious Right.

First of all, the two kinds of Christianity took very different roles in relation to the society as a whole. The Mainline—which David Hollinger has more accurately named "Ecumenical Protestantism"—aspired to be an umpire; the Religious Right, an interest group. In sociological terms, the fate of the Mainline was in part determined by its sense of vocation; it combined a Durkheimian obligation to sacralize the social order with a Weberian impulse to transform society ever more closely to align with its professed values. The mainline felt itself at home in the center of American culture in these decades, though it never lacked an uneasy conscience about that culture; imbued as it was with the morally formative energies of the Social Gospel, Mainline thinkers repeatedly offered powerful critiques of what we might call the "Propriety Gospel," the gospel of respectability and conformity, that was normative in mainstream social life. From H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America* through Will Herberg's *Protestant Catholic Jew*, to Gibson Winters's *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*—not to mention the entire corpus of Reinhold Niebuhr's overall body of writing in these decades—hegemonic thinkers expressed more than gentle unease with the hegemony they were purportedly protecting. This unease caused the Mainline to generate, encourage, and amplify movements of liberation which it took to be allies in its fundamental ethical vocation of social reform. Indeed, from the

1920s forward, the Mainline *itself* was transitional. In the 1960s and 70s, the tensions between these two imperatives, to curate and to reform, tore the Mainline apart.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the Religious Right never aimed at inclusion or mediation, but at confrontation and conversion. While the Religious Right is not exhaustively identified with Evangelical Protestantism—not least because that would ignore the presence of white Catholics who increasingly populated the Religious Right as well—it takes much of its social stance from some basic Evangelical postures. As the historian Andrew Walls has put it, “Historic evangelicalism is a religion of protest against a Christian society that is not Christian enough.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, because twentieth-century Evangelicalism emerged from the Fundamentalist-Modernist conflicts of the 1920s, the movement came to understand itself in deeply reactionary terms, properly speaking—that is to say, as more *against* things than *for* things. So there is a fundamental adversarial, anti-worldly tendency deep in the tradition, which the sociologist Christian Smith has identified as the need, in American Evangelicalism, to feel embattled to ensure that one is living out the Gospel promise.<sup>3</sup> (As we will see, this reflexive oppositionality plays an important role later.) It sees itself as beleaguered unless it is entirely victorious. Finally, historically Evangelicalism had not typically sought to transform social structures; instead, it sought individual commitment to individualistic Christianity, and it saw any energy directed at other aims to be a misuse of missional effort. They were against theological arguments for unions, against government assistance, against any attempt to use elite theology or popular faith to transform the social order. This is why I call this movement, not “evangelicals” nor even “evangelicals and catholics together,” but rather the “Religious Right”—because they became public not originally as a fundamentally *religious* movement at all, but essentially as a *political* movement. Both for longer-term theological reasons, and more short-term political ones, they were habituated to a position of opposition, a feature that will be important later.

At the same time, while they did constitute, between the 1920s and the 1970s, a separate and rival religious community to the Mainline, in fact they did not radically reject the culture as a whole, but rather remained deeply committed to an earlier version of mainstream culture. They didn’t like the hegemonic mainline, but their individualism rendered them sociologically toothless, so they could only complain in narrowly doctrinal or *ad hominem* terms. Indeed, while the midcentury Mainline struggled with its relationship to what I above called the “Propriety Gospel,” the Evangelicals actively endorsed it. White, patriarchal, bourgeois, and committed to the American nationalist contract, their basic civil

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<sup>1</sup> David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire* (Princeton University Press, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> p. 81 in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996)

<sup>3</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (University of Chicago Press, 1998)

morality was consonant with Mainline America's.<sup>4</sup> This was true until the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> The revolutions that began in that decade shocked evangelicals quite seriously, as they shocked the rest of so-called middle America, but while the revolutions tore apart the consensus theologies of the Mainline churches, for the churches that would come to be the Religious Right, these revolutions were seen less as disorienting and more as threatening.

Evangelicals responded to the perceived threats with alacrity. The original motives for the emergence of the Religious Right are complex, and still not well understood. Certainly some of the forces were theological, in that it definitely rejected the liberal theologies the ML professed. First, the Religious Right saw the ML's welcoming ecumenism as theologically indeterminate and unserious. Second, it saw the moral energies of egalitarian reform unleashed by the ML as a kind of "sorcerer's apprentice," producing a number of liberatory movements—especially those emphasizing racial integration and gender equality—that undermined their vision of a white patriarchal order. They recoiled from this in a double opposition: first, in direct resistance to these movements and second, through a process of theological delegitimization of those movements, which was aided by the latter secularizing history of those movements, because the movements do seem to move in post-Christian, non-Christian, even anti-Christian ways.

So the loss of the ML's hegemony and the rise of the Religious Right are not, I think, due primarily to theological disputes between conservative and liberal Christians.<sup>6</sup> Those disputes had been there all along. Rather, something other than differences in explicit religious belief set them off. What really prompted the change is glimpsed through seeing what the religious right's real fear was; it was of "losing culture" or "losing America." Effectively, the Religious Right wanted to keep "Christian America." To the outside they framed themselves as beleaguered, but they saw themselves as a "Moral Majority" mobilized for the political aim of fighting for a vision of America. Many good pieces by grieving evangelicals and ex-evangelicals have been penned in recent years about "what's gone

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<sup>4</sup> James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*; Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*; Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The struggle to shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017). Evangelicals marked by Biblicism, Atonement, Conversion, Strenuous effort/activism (articulated as *metanoia*). Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> The narrative of recoil from sexual libertinism, licentiousness, and abortion may have something to it, but it needs to be significantly complicated by concerns about threats to white supremacy (such as the Bob Jones tax case) and by right-wing funders who wanted to reinforce a patriarchal Christian nationalism that they feared would weaken America in the struggle with global communism. On this see Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God* (Basic Books, 2015); Philip Gorski, *American Covenant* (Princeton University Press 2017); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern cross: the beginnings of the Bible belt*, shows that in the South even the Methodists quickly made peace with slavery and patriarchy. Also Matthew Sutton's excellent *American Apocalypse* has other themes, but along the way (e.g., 133-135, 334-336) reminds us of the comfortable anti-black racism that has long been prominent. David Hollinger's recent *Protestants Abroad* also traces the difference between ecumenical and evangelical Protestants on the issue of race. Southern Baptists made the South turn to the GOP: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chrisladd/2017/03/27/pastors-not-politicians-turned-dixie-republican/#73dd8d62695f>

<sup>6</sup> This was always an essentially self-congratulatory story, but it has been shown to be wrong. Dean Kelley's "strict church" thesis is insightful, but too simple. (See Hout, Greely, Wilde, "Demographic Imperative" (2001)—majority of demographic change is family demographics)

wrong with the religious right.” But nothing has gone wrong with it. This was always the majority position. They have always been trying to Make America Great Again.

The Religious Right’s political mobilization was part of a larger cultural mobilization of conservative Christians as well. An appropriation of the symbolics of mainstream culture gave them a veneer of increased legitimacy; but the appropriation could only be superficial, lest by gaining America, they would lose their souls. Thus a certain kind of ecclesiological prophylactic encased their endorsement of mainstream culture. They appreciated the power of articulation, and through their years of exile during the Mainline’s hegemony, they managed to create a subculture, or counter-culture, with its own institutions of education, media, and hierarchy. This cultural mobilization was not primarily oppositional (though it had its intentionally oppositional actors), but rather creative and constructive, with ambitions to *real* creativity. The institutions created or reformed in this moment—the rejuvenation of places like Wheaton College, Calvin College, Fuller Seminary, and media forces like the *Christianity Today* world—are serious institutions. They generated a great deal of internal coherence and managed to produce an elite idiom of self-understanding that had an impressive degree of intellectual and existential coherence. Mid-cult writers like Francis Schaeffer and more properly intellectual thinkers like Alvin Plantinga, Mark Noll, and Nicholas Wolterstorff all contributed to the construction of a worldview (a word much used in this subculture) that was interesting and powerful.<sup>7</sup> But while this work was important in itself, it remained, for most Evangelicals, largely on the surface of their Christianity; just as had been the case with the Mainline thinkers’ ambivalences about majority culture, the majority of “ordinary” Evangelicals remained firmly committed to the cultural norms of their time.

Equally importantly, this conservative theological worldview had a *global* reach that was unprecedented for this community. Because of the widespread retreat of Mainline Protestant churches from the missional activities that had energized them in preceding centuries—a retreat caused by concerns about imperialism and racism—the evangelicals discovered that the “mission field” was left almost entirely unobstructed for them. They took to it with relish, and generated a network, a “global evangelical ecumene,” that had its own institutional forms (think the Lausanne movement). They also created a source of ongoing intellectual and cultural stimulation at home, as missionaries moved back and forth from the “mission field” and as the world came to the evangelicals in the form of visiting students, speakers, and eventually immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Christian evangelicals had thus created a reasonably vital subculture with its own sense of standards and purposes, and one that was

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<sup>7</sup> See Worthen, *Apostles of Reason* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> This is part of what David Hollinger’s *Protestants Abroad* (Princeton University Press, 2017) argues...

seriously engaged with others, at home and abroad. Their elites generated a theological vision of civic goods, a global theopolitical imagination, and offered their adherents a viable theology of culture. They saturated their everyday life with Christian symbols and rationales—not through secular institutions, but in important ways in distinction from them. All of this was an impressive achievement.

And yet, as Molly Worthen has pointed out, these forms of engagement remained fundamentally ambivalent towards “worldly” success: they were engaged with the surrounding “secular” or “liberal” culture, but never *too* engaged.<sup>9</sup> Envious of social legitimacy but unwilling wholly to endorse it, the culture they produced remained thick but insulated, more self-referential than other-involving. Even their global awareness was marked by a fundamental uncertainty and hesitancy about engagement, especially when compared with their Pentecostal near-siblings and Roman Catholic cousins, both of whom thought of themselves far less in fundamentally national terms.<sup>10</sup>

So given all this, has the Religious Right succeeded? Perhaps that is the wrong question. Surely theirs has been a partial victory, at least. This is clearest politically: certain possible futures for America that were available in 1968—alternative Mainline futures, alternative Evangelical futures—rapidly vanished. Decisions made by the GOP (most notably the “Southern Strategy”), by the Roman Catholic church’s magisterium (most notably 1968’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, and then the election of Pope John Paul II and his unusually long papacy), and by evangelicals (most notably the decision to double down on sex and gender) could have gone otherwise.<sup>11</sup> In the aftermath of those years, the US has been politically a more conservative country in the past 50 years than it might have been, and I would argue that the guiding power of the Religious Right is the central cause of that.<sup>12</sup>

But what about speaking religiously? What has been the consequence there? Recall that my aim is not to talk about politics, but about the effect of this era of American Christianity on the kinds of Christianity it encouraged in the US and the kinds of Christianity that are likely to follow in its wake. Here its consequences are less unitary; I’ll turn to them next.

## B. American Christianity

The Religious Right’s Christianity exists as a subcultural and oppositional structure that has enabled it to perform a kind of burlesque of engagement without risking a confrontation open to any genuine exposure. It generates a seriousness of concern with

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<sup>9</sup> Again, Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*

<sup>10</sup> **James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (Oxford University Press, 2010).**

<sup>11</sup> History of US political parties from New Deal to today: Matt Grossman and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> I say “more conservative” here not as a lament, but simply as a description.

its own internal coherence that is simultaneously laudatory and lamentable—laudatory because it does work to render its inner life integral and serious, lamentable because it does that with a continuous worry about “compromise,” “collaboration,” or “contamination” by outside forces. Here the theological tightness of its theology of culture turns out to be damaging: for what the original evangelical imagination cannot accommodate in its basic theological idiom, will fail to be metabolized within that imagination, and so must be expelled as theologically anathema. And this basic idiom is lamentably narrow, combining a simplistically individualist moralism, a glib sentimentalist psychology, and theologically inflexible and naïve soteriology, each of which hampers the capacity of the theology to approach anything like the lived complexity of an ordinary life in pluralistic late modern America.

Consider how its political imagination hampers an imagination of alternative possibilities for political negotiation and collaboration. By employing a fundamentally declensionist nostalgia for an era of a “real America,” the imagination commits adherents to a blindness about historical complexity, a too-pure pessimism about future prospects, and a sense that every fight has absolutely existential stakes. Because the religious right understands politics as a matter of *either* recovering goods that have been lost *or* protecting goods in danger of being lost, its vision of politics is fundamentally zero-sum, manifest in an over-emphasis on boundaries and lack of interest in coalitions. This rigid, narrow, and over-confident mode of fighting for public values has recently curdled into the cynicism we now see as supporting Trump at any cost, the latest version of the Babylonian captivity of too much of the church.<sup>13</sup>

To be clear, I do not mean to oppose a smug progressivism to a smug declinism. Self-righteousness is not the exclusive possession of the Right. Rather, I want to encourage a Christian vision of history that sees it as genuinely ambivalent, in *both* directions, past and future. East of Eden, and outside of Christ’s skin, Christians cannot identify any unambiguous phenomena. But ambiguity is not the night in which all cows are grey, and we must be honest: political egalitarianism and antibiotics are both good things, and we would not want to be without either of them. The alternative or compensatory resources on offer in this worldview, via minority appeals to Roman Catholic natural law or Kuyperian “sphere sovereignty” accounts, also arguably fail to account for the full ambiguity of history, but bracketing that claim, such appeals simply do not have significant purchase on the basic political imagination or energies of Christians in the Religious Right.

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Importance of boundaries and no interest in coalitions: Paul Lichterman, “Religion and the Construction of Civic Identity,” pp. 83-104 in *American Sociological Review* 73 (2008), esp. 94-6; see also Gerardo Marti and Michael O. Emerson, “The Rise of the Diversity Expert: How American Evangelicals Simultaneously Accentuate and Ignore Race,” pp. 179-99 in Steensland and Goff, *The New Evangelical Social Engagemen* (Oxford University Press, 2014). More here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/26/understanding-shifts-among-evangelicals-helps-explain-flakes-drop-in-support/>

Furthermore, as we already saw, this political imagination is based on an equally problematic sociological imagination, one marked most fundamentally by a radical individualism that cannot acknowledge social structures or institutions as basic, but which sees all as only individuals. Margaret Thatcher may have been the one who said “there is no such thing as society,” but the Religious Right has taught too many Christians to agree. While there are resources in Roman Catholic subsidiarity theology to suggest otherwise, the sad fact is that today there are more libertarians than socialists in American Roman Catholicism, which is unusual both for the US historically, and across the globe today. More fundamentally still, this has led to a deep unknowing of the fundamental whiteness of conservative American Christianity: More than 85% of evangelical congregations remain racially homogeneous (with more than 90% in a single racial group), in a way that most evangelicals continue to avoid acknowledging or discussing, though they *mention* it from time to time.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, there is a cultural impairment in a growing chasm between the language taught to the faithful and the lived realities of actual believers. As the semantics of conservative Christianity remained coherent, the semiotics—the capacity of the language to refer to realities in the world—stretched and finally snapped. Increasingly, the faithful are asked to not be “living in truth,” as Vaclav Havel put it: they simply are asked to believe things that are untrue. This began with blindness to white supremacy, but involves also a repeated insistence on gender and sex norms that are obviously out of whack with reality: women are not naturally followers, men are not naturally leaders, and the whole language of purity and shame that still governs much of this culture has done severe damage to generations of women and men. This crisis is most commonly felt in the questions of sex and gender roles, where huge generational differences mark evangelical and white Roman Catholic communities. Younger generations simply do not credit the arguments of older ones when it comes to gender equality, same-sex relations, and increasingly sexual ethics. Is this a failure of evangelization? Perhaps, but the cross-generational endurance of pro-life politics in younger conservative Christians suggests that they are simply unconvinced by the teachings they reject, while they find compelling the arguments against abortion. This doesn’t sound like defection from belief to me, but transformation of beliefs.

Meanwhile, the whiteness of these communities continues to be unscrutinized, and the young are aware of the profound disparity between what they see in their churches and what they experience in their schools, workplaces, and personal lives. The imaginary vision of a lily-white America of long-ago is simply not motivating younger generations of conservative Christians as it once did. And those who find ways to articulate the coherence

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<sup>14</sup> Historians of race and religion, such as Paul Harvey and Mark Noll, have identified a strand of deep “theological racism” in evangelicalism; see Noll, *God and Race in American Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2010), Edward Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ* (UNC Press, 2014).

of these younger believers' worldviews seem to have an easier time doing it outside of the fundamental individualistic theology of evangelicalism, moving to a rich subsidiarity-based Roman Catholicism, or an alternatively subcultural Eastern Orthodoxy, and in both cases finding a way to be conservatively Christian without being quite so politically reactionary (which is, speaking as a theologian more than an American citizen who happens to be a Democrat, to all appearances a viable way of being Christian.)

These theological impairments have demographic consequences as well, both inside and outside evangelical Christianity. Speaking internally, the percentage of Americans who are white evangelicals under 30 years of age is less than 8%. That is of a piece with other demographics: The number of white evangelical Protestants in the U.S. has declined dramatically since the millennium, falling from 23 percent in 2006 to 17 percent in 2016, just as the number of white Roman Catholics have declined precipitously as well.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, a crisis of generational disaffiliation faces evangelicals, amplified since 2016, as many younger people are leaving their churches over Trump.<sup>16</sup>

A greater irony still is found in the consequences of the Religious right for those outside their fold. For it seems that the efforts of self-proclaimed "evangelicals" have failed to evangelize much of the non-evangelical population—quite the opposite, in fact: The era of the dominance of the Religious Right is the era of the most sudden shift in popular opinion *against* Christianity that American society has ever seen. This is the fascinating phenomenon, well-known in sociology, of the so-called rise of the "nones," those who in polling data say they have no religious affiliation. From 1976 to 1994, the percentage of people saying they were of "no religion" varied in a small band, between 6 and 9 percent. Since then, the number has steadily increased so that the number in 2016 was 24%—from under one tenth to one quarter of the population in a single generation. While conservatives suggest this decline is due to liberals' flaky nihilism, in fact it seems not correlated with that at all. After all, it began not as a consequence of disdain towards a perceived looseness of the Mainline's liberalism, but as a recoil from the palpably reactionary theo-politics of the Religious Right, whose behavior seems to have led directly to younger generations' association of those churches, and by extension much of the rest of American Christianity, with right-wing politics in a way that has had substantial effects for religious affiliation among younger Americans.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Statistics are findable on: <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/> Catholics have suffered the largest losses over the past two decades, with 13% of Americans being *former* Catholics; see <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-3-demographic-profiles-of-religious-groups/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2017/1010/Amid-Evangelical-decline-growing-split-between-young-Christians-and-church-elders> and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/04/11/yes-many-voters-left-their-congregations-over-trump-so-what-else-is-new>

<sup>17</sup> Burge, *The Nones* (Eerdmans 2021). Michael Hout, Claude S. Fischer, "Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012," *Sociological Science*, October 13, 2014. DOI 10.15195/v1.a24 <https://sociologicalscience.com/articles-vol1-24-423/> . See also Paul A. Djupe, Jacob R.

So the alliance between conservative Christians and the GOP, whatever short-term political success it has had, has provoked a remarkable reaction among younger persons. For the first time in recorded American history, it has generated a very large cohort of voters for whom religion is literally nothing more than a pious cover for other interests, whether those interests are brutally material such as plutocracy, or other ideological interests, such as patriarchy and white supremacy.

This is a bad place for Christianity to be in, but it is where we are right now.

## II. Where We're Going

So this is the pass we've come to; this is the 81% of white evangelicals, and almost as many white Roman Catholics, who voted for Trump in 2016, and who supported him at even higher rates in 2020.<sup>18</sup> The Religious Right and, to be honest, much of white American Christianity feels so beleaguered that they accept and indeed support political actors and movements that others—including many traditional members of the GOP—find not only not Republican, but un-American, and maybe even anti-Christian. Their self-understanding is defensively uncurious about other points of view, and their descriptions of their own lives increasingly operate in languages that do not truthfully describe their own lives. They have cultivated a form of Christianity that blinds them to the facts of their own actual situation, and to alienate them from their fellow citizens, and their fellow citizens from them as well. It is conducive to a delusional smugness in their self-understanding, and a corrosive cynicism from others'.

These conditions have been growing gradually worse over the decades of the religious right's dominance, but they will come under increasing pressure in coming years. The reasons for this are threefold: first, the generational split among conservative Christians mentioned above; second, also mentioned above, the rise of the “nones” and the overall loss of goodwill towards conservative Christians among many who are either Christians who are not conservative or who are not Christians at all; and third—what I have not mentioned yet—the enormous demographic transitions currently affecting the United States.

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Neiheisel, and Kimberly H. Conger, “Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious? The Importance of Salient Controversy,” pp. 910–922 in *Political Research Quarterly* 2018, 71(4). Of course, these are heavily younger people (and because of the size of the millennial generation, it means that they weigh more largely than previous generations in demographic transformations of this sort). But the so-called “cohort effect” cannot explain this fully; for Americans of all generations have been disaffiliating from religion. The average age of a “none” in the 1970s was 29; today it is 36. and they are also disproportionately white people (also Asian-Americans, interestingly enough).

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/>

That we are undergoing a demographic transformation should be clear. Consider the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.<sup>19</sup> This is one of the least heralded and most consequential pieces of legislation in American history. By opening and re-orienting American immigration policy, it created effectively a second American revolution. Consider: The proportion of foreign-born Americans increased from less than five percent in 1970 to almost 14 percent in 2016, from 10 million to 45 million.<sup>21,22</sup> Furthermore, while earlier immigration waves were almost entirely European in origin, the new immigration has been global, with fully three quarters of immigrants coming from outside Europe. The effect of this on the US's demographics is revolutionary. In 1970, the racial demographics of America were largely what they had been since the Mexican-American war 120 years before—overwhelmingly white with a few marginalized minorities concentrated in select regions and cities. Fifty years later, in the 2020 census, more than 40 percent of the population will be racial minorities, distributed across the whole country.<sup>23</sup> Conservative and communitarian commentators are at least right about the magnitude of the change: this is a vast transformation. The project that the United States is now, at last, embarked upon—the forging from the many of one, *e pluribus unum*—is truly unprecedented.

Together, these facts will lead to a revolution in the situation of American Christianity. It is already leading to the decline of the Religious Right, and more broadly still, what Robert Jones has aptly named “White Christian America.” But Christianity will continue to flourish—not least because the majority of immigrants to the United States are Christian. But the kind of Christianity will be unlike any we have heretofore known.

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<sup>19</sup> For the story of the 1965 act, see Tom Gjelten, *A Nation of Nations: A Great American Immigration Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> One of the changes put in place by the triumph of a certain kind of liberal Protestant individualism is the increase in the new egalitarianism and inclusivism, and this clearly stands behind the other great change since the 1960s, namely the re-opening of the US's borders to immigration: civil rights, gender/sexuality (domestic egalitarianism; unrealized at the time), growth of immigration, and a new kind of immigration; trans-national egalitarianism—part of America's cold-war cosmopolitanism, vs. traditional settler nativism. None of these were intentionally secularizing forces; in many ways, just the opposite: revivalisms (this is Hollinger). And indeed immigration has kept America a much more religious nation than it would otherwise have been.

<sup>21</sup> Statistics here and elsewhere (unless noted) from Pew Research Center, “Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065: Views of Immigration's Impact on U.S. Society Mixed.” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, September 2015).

<sup>22</sup> In total, there have been 59 million immigrants since 1965, and without the opening of immigration in 1965, the US's population would not be 324 million, but 252 million—meaning the immigration flow is responsible for 72 million Americans, or a bit over a fifth of America. Immigrants and their U.S.-born children constitute more than 26% of the population today, and that percentage will rise to 36% by 2065.

<sup>23</sup> In 1965 America was 84% white, 11% African-American, and 4% Hispanic; in 2020 America was 58% white, 12% African-American or African, 19% Hispanic, and 6% Asian. See William Frey, “New 2020 census results show increased diversity countering decade-long declines in America's white and youth populations,” Brookings Institution, August 13, 2021 (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-2020-census-results-show-increased-diversity-countering-decade-long-declines-in-americas-white-and-youth-populations/>) See also Jennifer L. Hochschild, Vesla M. Weaver, and Traci R. Burch, *Creating a New Racial Order: How Immigration, Multiracialism, Genomics, and the Young Can Remake Race in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) – no guarantees about racial change, but there are powerful forces afoot.

First, it will be a *plural* church. There will be more *kinds* of Christianity, and many other religions beside it, than ever before. Far from the 1950s triptych of “Protestant Catholic and Jew”, or the past few decades’ even simpler binary of “conservative” vs. “liberal” religion, I suspect we will see a kaleidoscopic religious landscape. There will be no center, only a booming, buzzing confusion. This is very important—there will be no organizing structure to the religious marketplace, and so allegiances and alliances will be fragile, fungible, and fickle, in ways that, one might easily imagine, would impact the nature of the religious commitment that these communities will cultivate.

Second, and related to this, it will be increasingly an immigrant and therefore non-hegemonic church. The church will be increasingly marginalized, increasingly non-white. Indeed, for the first time, America will not have a majority white Christianity at the center of its public life.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the sheer numbers of white conservative Christians will ensure their presence, by simple inertia, in the culture for several decades. But they will be older and increasingly self-isolating. The younger church will be “brown” and marginal.<sup>25</sup> What will America be without a hegemonic Christian presence? What will the churches be, *after* hegemony?

Third, it will be a non-parishional, increasingly non-denominational, and “deterritorialized” church, one shifting from a logic of *place* to a logic of *choice*. Unlike the last millennium of Christianity, where Christian life was organized first by parishes and then by denominations, the new Christianity will not be structured by those features. People already do not go to church in the immediate vicinity of where they live, and denominations are becoming increasingly irrelevant to peoples’ church choices. And *choices* will increasingly matter. Whereas once you found yourself in a church already—or were simply positioned vis-à-vis an international, monolithic, ecclesial reality called the church—now the increasing voluntary and thus contingent nature of church attendance will be more common. (And explicit, almost consumer, “choice” is, again, a deeply fickle basis on which to build a life-orienting faith.) A generation ago, Robert Wuthnow called this the “restructuring” of American religion, but in fact it is rapidly becoming the *de*-structuring of American religion, as we move into the “gig economy of religion.”<sup>26</sup>

Fourth, the heightening of choice will further push congregants to affiliate with those who agree with them already, and that will put pressure on the churches to become *more* parochial, and more polarized. This is the irony of globalization. James Madison, in

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<sup>24</sup> Janelle S. Wong, *Immigrants, Evangelicals, and Politics in an Era of Demographic Change* (New York: Russell Sage, 2018): non-white evangelicals vote less, and are not in crucial swing states, so the evangelical political reality is still largely *white*-determined.

<sup>25</sup> What will happen to the Black church here? Will Eddie Glaude’s argument (in “The Black Church is Dying”) be shown to be right? Or will Raphael G. Warnock’s arguments in *The Divided Mind of the Black Church* (NYU Press 2014) be shown to be right? Unclear.

<sup>26</sup> McCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Penguin 2011), Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton 1988)

*Federalist* 10, saw space as the final and ultimate power that would hamper the rise of factions: the sheer fact that we must live with those close to us meant that we would have to moderate our animus towards them. (Thus the command to love the neighbor as yourself meant, love the one who is *near* to you, in Latin, *proxime*, as they are harder to avoid.) But again, place is less important; distance has gone away. Domestically and internationally, you can link up with people very specifically like you. Media sorting amplifies this fact, so that people live in echo chambers. To borrow from Danielle Allen’s book, we will find that we end up less and less talking to strangers. We can expect to find fewer and fewer common points of reference or shared expression of truth-claims, and growing dangers of intolerance.<sup>27</sup>

The consequences of all these material facts will be a voluble but not necessarily articulate church—one that is loud, to be sure, but not necessarily intelligible to others, or intelligent to itself. The energies impelling Christian speech, and the rationales for it, are not necessarily conducive to understanding, only brand distinction.

### ***The Theology of Pottery Barn***

In an increasingly secular and technocratic culture, modes of public culture become ways of differentiation for sub-group identity. “Thick” theological languages become important idiomatic markers of bounded identities for communities. Thus we get what I call “the theology of Pottery Barn,” where the more stone-washed, abraided, and authentic your theology or liturgy is, the more cultural cachet it delivers. I think the turn of white evangelicals to traditional Catholicism and eastern orthodoxy is part of this consumerist pattern. But these are *lateral* strategies of distinction, not vertical strategies of existential rootedness or orientation. They have very little to do with the kind of “sustaining conversations” that re-articulate the basic conceptual structure of the world as the community sees it, the kind of conversations that are needed for the language and the way of seeing the world to stay alive.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, these churches, with all their challenges, will be speaking into an environment that is simultaneously thoroughly moralized but yet also deeply cynical, significantly disciplined and regimented, but also overtly anti-institutional. It will be

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<sup>27</sup> Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers* (University of Chicago 2004).. **Portents of intolerance in west:** Pew’s most recent report shows an increase in Europe’s Government Retriktion’s Index from 1.7 to 2.8 between 2007 and 2018<sup>27</sup> (the GRI include measures such as “efforts by governments to ban particular faiths, prohibit conversions, limit preaching or give preferential treatment to one or more religious groups”).<sup>27</sup> The rise of Catholic nationalism in Poland is a particularly strong example of a successful movement to marry the church and state in Europe. However, even in France, where the national policy of *Laïcité* appears as one of the world’s most stringently secular policies concerning the presence of religion in modern life, has come under scrutiny for favoring France’s religious heritage. On the rise of “religious liberty” in the law: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/05/us/politics/supreme-court-religion.html?>

<sup>28</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Doubleday, 1967), 21–22; Callum Brown’s “discursive Christianity” in *The Death of Christian Britain* (Routledge 2009).

moralized and cynical because it will be partially “post-material” in its orientation; along with values related to securing healthcare, employment, retirement security and the like—values that had long driven politics in previous generations—the values most commonly mobilizing in the culture will also include not material but *immaterial* values, concerned with human flourishing in “post-material” ways, such as autonomy and self-expression.<sup>29</sup> Thus, groups will use their moral distinctiveness to set themselves apart from competitors. And yet the typical response to moralized tribalism and culture wars is accelerated cynicism, an ever-increasing sense that languages of value and significance are not in fact about what they purport to be about, so that discourse becomes hard to differentiate from duplicity at best, and what the philosopher Harry Frankfurt would call—a technical term, for him—“bullshit” at worst: not a language helping us to get a better grip on reality, but a language meant to signal to some audience that we needn't pay attention to reality anymore at all.<sup>30</sup>

### III. What is to be Done?

This will be the state of American Christianity in coming decades. Before concluding, I want to indulge my training in Christian theology and ethics a bit, to gesture at some habits that Christians might develop in order to inhabit and survive this situation.

Most fundamentally, the churches must find a way to affirm the reality of norms and ethical values, while still recognizing the larger cultural cynicism about norms. **FORESHADOWED?** They must recognize the fallibility and contingency of human norms, yet still affirm the moral seriousness that makes us inveterately normative creatures.

One way they may do so is to rehabilitate the older tradition of “Christian moral realism”—recognize two different kinds of disappointments. First, our aspirations outstrip our reach, and so while our moral ambitions are infinite, we ought not be surprised when they fail to fulfill what we thought was their promise. Apocalypticism and cynicism are related, and equally to be avoided. Second, this is not about the *end* of our moral ideals, but their origins; while they are irredeemably stained with the complex ambiguities of their generating contexts, this does not mean that they cannot reveal truths about the world. Our judgments of right and wrong should be *suspected* because they come from us, but they need not be *dismissed* because of that.

To flesh out this attitude, Christians will need to develop the classic virtues of faith, hope, and charity, in new ways. First they will have to have a great deal of self-knowledge, particularly in how they know features of themselves as *distinct* and *contingent*. This will involve humility, yes, but it is more about being aware of one's own particularity—gaining

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<sup>29</sup> Inglehart on Materialism, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

a “standpoint epistemology” and learning dialogically from others. Some of us will need to learn how better to listen, some will have to find ways to speak.<sup>31</sup> All of us will have to learn how to be more patient with our contingent and fallible humanity, and the humanity of others. This is a form of hopeful patience, or perhaps patient hope.

Second, they will need to be able to *stick* to things, to people, and to causes. They will need to cultivate fidelity, the capacity to be faithful. This does not mean fanaticism, but loyalty. Be committed—for better or worse, as it were. Expect long-term negotiations. Don’t be fickle. Have real commitments, and come to understand them, know them, be not afraid of when they are revealed as more particular, less “obvious” or “natural” than you thought; and be not afraid of others not sharing them. Do not live merely in the register of choice. Be not afraid, effectively. Allow fidelity to mark your attitude.

Third, they will have to show a loving courage in their actions and their stances, a capacity to be willing to speak out about their views, but to remain fallibilistically vulnerable to having them challenged, opposed, and even condemned. They will have to enact this verbally and via action. This will involve the integration of personal and political/structural/societal. It will require *real* “articulation”; they will have to say to themselves, “I am inquisitive about the world, not in order to know more, but to ignore less.” It will demand a courage to *listen*, non-defensively: To attend to the neighbor, genuinely to hear them, to let them offer the terms on which you begin to engage them. That is one way of describing love. It certainly captures some of the virtues required of Christians in the coming dispensation.

### **Conclusion. From Civil to Un-Civil Religion.**

I began this paper at a point in history fifty years in the past, and I have been moving ever since into the future; but now I want to conclude by shifting gears once again, and going back even further into history. Almost a hundred years ago, in June of 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon in First Presbyterian Church in New York City, entitled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” It was an epoch-making sermon, and the epoch it made was our own—the century of the Mainline and now the Religious Right, which as we have seen has defined itself as *not* the Mainline. But today, this age is ending. If we are to survive it, we must see what has been won and what has been lost in this era. Now, that is, we have to try to answer the question Fosdick put to us all, a century ago.

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<sup>31</sup> Import of *humility*: Humility opens us to new ideas, lures us out of a morbid self-consciousness, and gifts us with the ability to not expect ourselves to be perfect, all while being able to appreciate the strengths and contributions of others. Desire to learn, self-consciousness about one’s own perspective *as* a perspective and recognition of dangers/limitations; self-interest in engaging with others. More than just epistemic, an attitude of gracious reception, a self-conscious awareness of how you *need* others. Also about seeing others *as* others, which is crucial building block to empathy *towards* and compassion *for* them.

He wrote at a moment when much was up for grabs. The apocalyptic character of the First World War had shown everyone just what the stakes were for the decisions we made in momentary episodes of quiet. Many thought it was the closest we had come to the abyss since the Fall of the Roman Empire, but this time there were no healthy full-blooded barbarians to replenish the stock. European civilization had almost destroyed itself and dragged the rest of the world down with it.

Then again a host of anti-imperialist thinkers, from Gandhi to WEB DuBois, saw this moment as the first sign that the European imperialism that had marked the previous century might one day crack. The global racist and imperialist system that “the West” had produced was shown to be as fragile as a papier-maché colossus, where the glue was racist animus and brute physical force. They began to imagine a post imperial era, an age when the West would not set the tune to which the rest of the world had to dance.

That age has now begun. I believe in it; I want to advance it; I want to support it. I want to do these things as a Christian, in a Christian idiom. After all, this idiom, and this self understanding, I believe ought to be far more basic to me than my national identity. I believe that, as a Christian, it is my duty to help undo the oppressive structures that have kept so many dominated by so few, and enable all to exercise their full gifts as children of God, whether they know it or not. Christianity ought to help; but the conditions that might make it possible are, I have tried to argue, quite challenging.

Much remains up for grabs now. Fosdick’s question is still pressing. And it still remains unanswered. American Christianity will have to choose whether it will be a civil religion or an un-civil religion? Not *anti*-civil, just challenge the terms on which “civility” is built. This will be hard to do, esp around the notion of sovereignty...

We—all of us who are human, perhaps, those of us who are Christians, no doubt—remain ever tempted by defensiveness, by a fake blustery knowingness, by a shallow and cynical indifference to one another. The best Christians are never more than mediocre. But in their mediocrity are many lessons, if they and we have the grace to perceive them. For they can recognize that our weakness and vulnerability can become the source of our greatest strength; that our injuries can teach us real pity and compassion for others; our humiliation can instruct us in mercy; and our anger, in forgiveness.

If only we have the ears to hear. Opportunities will be provided to all of us to learn these virtues in coming years.