

ABSTRACT

A New Communion

Reimagining Progressive Liberalism as a Religious Phenomenon

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The scholarly conversation regarding the overlap between religious and political institutions is extraordinary in scope, but contemporary behaviors associated with American progressive liberalism and their relation to the rituals of the Christian tradition have received relatively little academic attention. This thesis compares communal phenomena such as origin mythology, “cancel culture,” “wokeism,” and Twitter to their counterparts within the Christian Church, including excommunication, revelation, and catechesis. The works of Carl Schmitt, Eric Voegelin, and Molly Brigid McGrath provide the style of examination that guides these comparisons. Through its investigation, this thesis functions as an insightful thought experiment to shape further academic inquiry into the nature of American political conflict and its potential solutions.

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A NEW COMMUNION
REIMAGINING PROGRESSIVE LIBERALISM AS A RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

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DEDICATION

For David Matthew

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Exploring the Question

The United States has a big politics problem, and it will not be fixed by debate. The nature of this problem is very grave and, should it remain unaddressed, will cause even deeper fissures among party lines in the coming decades. Scholars such as those from the Pew Research Center publish articles claiming that Americans “have rarely been as polarized as they are today,”¹ and thorough polling from various think tanks consistently demonstrates a growing population of Americans with waning trust in government. The Project on Government Oversight, a self-proclaimed “nonpartisan independent watchdog,” found that in Michigan and Ohio (typically identified as electoral swing states) over 70% of voters across the political spectrum were “very” or “extremely” concerned about corruption in the federal government.²

Of course, this statement of fact—or alarmist threat, depending on one’s level of optimism for the U.S.—has been trumpeted since the nation’s origin. America is no stranger to bleak projections of its own inevitable irrelevance and impending demise. America has consistently been analyzed as in a crisis of tense polarization in a great

¹ Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, November 13, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide>.

² Brandon Brockmyer, “Corruption Is Public Enemy Number 1,” *Project On Government Oversight*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2021/10/corruption-is-public-enemy-number-1>.

variety of political or economic circumstances. Thomas Paine wrote “The American Crisis” mere months into the Revolutionary War, Washington was deeply troubled by the possibility of political factionalism, and Jimmy Carter called national attention to a “crisis of confidence.”³ Indeed, it appears the United States, from its inception, has always been in crisis from one perspective or another. And yet, it remains, the Brett Favre of nation-states: always reported to be at its end, but always somehow still in the game.

In truth, a closer reading of the evidence reveals that all is not lost. The peer-reviewed journal *Psychological Science* reports a high degree of “false polarization”: the exaggerated presumption of disagreement among partisan groups that result in “grossly inaccurate” perceptions of polarization.⁴ The previously mentioned study from the Project On Government Oversight found that Republicans and Democrats have broad agreement on how to best fight government corruption,⁵ indicating that perhaps they agree on a common problem set (which allows for cross-party cooperation to address major issues).

Although the US weathers its crises more steadily than oft expected, its political health leaves much to be desired. The ideological divide between conservatives and progressives continues to grow, and the intensity of disagreement is snowballing from spirited protesting into significant increases in domestic political violence.⁶ Political

³ Kevin Mattson, “Examining Carter's 'Malaise Speech,' 30 Years Later” (NPR, July 12, 2009), <https://www.npr.org/2009/07/12/106508243/examining-carters-malaise-speech-30-years-later>.

⁴ John R. Chambers, Robert S. Baron, and Mary L. Inman, “Misperceptions in Intergroup Conflict,” *Psychological Science* (0956-7976) 17, no. 1 (January 2006): 38, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2005.01662.x.

⁵ Brockmyer, “Corruption Is Public Enemy Number 1.”

⁶ Rachel Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (October 2021): 160–76.

differences have ceased to be a preference and are becoming an identity. In a politically healthy nation, policy preference would not indicate one's values, but simply how one thinks problems ought to be addressed. This is not the case in modern America. Currently, identifying as Republican or Democratic belies more than one's proposed solution; political identity denotes the problem set that one believes society is facing. For example, many hotly debated topics come from a fundamental divide on the problem at hand. To a conservative, a controversy surrounding a drag queen reading hour at a local library indicates an erosion of public morality, traditional gender roles, and a stunning lack of personal shame. To a progressive, the controversy reveals an abundance of bigotry, the acceptance of tradition over personal choice, and a direct violation of freedom of expression. The issue does not begin at a policy level, or the proposed solution, but at what defines the "true problem" of the issue at hand.

This dichotomy means that political identity has moved beyond signaling a preference for technical solutions and has become indicative of one's deep moral concerns. Jonathan Haidt is well-known for his findings that political leaning is a strong indicator of the innate moral frameworks within a person. For liberals, two moral foundations (fairness/reciprocity and harm/care) soar far above all other paradigms, whereas conservatives tend to view the two as equal in value to ingroup/loyalty, purity/sanctity, and authority/respect paradigms.⁷ Political identity, from this framework

⁷ Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek, "Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (2009): pp. 1029-1046, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015141>.

of moral foundations, illuminates far more than preferences of method; rather, it denotes one's ultimate concerns.

Curiously, "ultimate concerns" is the very definition given by theologian Paul Tillich as to the basis of religion.⁸ Tillich writes that genuine faith is "the demand of total surrender to the subject of ultimate concern."⁹ One's faith, or the rule of life to which one submits oneself, directly reflects the things with which a person is most concerned. For some, that concern may be eternal life, or moral behavior, or oneness with the universe. Regardless of the concern, however, the orientation around that concern in a person's life comes to be known as "religion." Should this be true, identifying as conservative or liberal begins to take on a strange new shape. Although party lines often indicate what types of solutions are favored and who one will vote for during an election season, in a deeper sense political unity aligns a person with a community that shares fundamental concerns, from the origin of mankind to the purpose of human advancement. In other words, political identity becomes religious in nature.

While not immediately revolutionary, the question of whether political identity could better be understood as religious raises a host of important questions, among which is whether partisanship could be better understood as a religious phenomenon rather than a political one. If collective action and communal behaviors within political parties can be accurately reclassified as sacramental and liturgical behavior, then perhaps existing methods of interfaith cooperation can be creatively applied to ease political tensions and

⁸ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 1.

⁹ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 2-3.

prevent rising party radicalization within the United States. Before inquiring further, however, this thesis must be situated within the existing scholarly conversation.

The reclassification of politics as religion is not an idea original to this work. Rather, this thesis informs itself using relevant scholarship from the last century, especially of Eric Voegelin, Carl Schmitt, and Molly Brigid McGrath. Each scholar provides a particular insight to this thought experiment, so this section will briefly discuss their contributions to better contextualize this project.

Carl Schmitt

Carl Schmitt, a German political philosopher in the twentieth century, authored *Political Theology*, an essay on the concept of sovereignty in government and its relationship with religious authority.¹⁰ At the outset of the book, Schmitt defines sovereignty as “he who decides on the exception.”¹¹ The borderline case that requires discretion, according to Schmitt, will always point to the Being regarded as the ultimate arbiter. In religion, of course, the sovereign is often called God. However, Schmitt points out that political structures must look to fill this gap of the clearest higher power, because “in political reality there is no irresistible highest or greatest power that operates according to the certainty of natural law.”¹² The polity may fill this need for a “decider of the exception” with a formalized government role like a monarch, who clearly embodies the persona of the ultimate sovereign as the final word of the law. Schmitt claims that this

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

¹² Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 17.

is no coincidence: the concept of the monarch is analogous to the understanding of God under the Cartesian conception of the world.¹³ Even further, he argues that sociological inquiry into the concept of sovereignty can connect the historical-political status of a monarchy with the corresponding general state of consciousness characteristic of western Europeans, meaning the “juristic construction” of their reality aligns with their metaphysical conception or reality.¹⁴ Schmitt traces the Western conception of sovereignty with the plumbline of Western religious thought.

More important than Schmitt’s findings is his approach. In discussing political sovereignty, Schmitt does not focus on religion, but rather uses a philosophical approach generally geared toward theologians in order to track the evolution of thought on legal authority. Schmitt claims that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts”¹⁵—the very claim that this thesis examines, moving beyond modern theory and into contemporary politico-communal behaviors. Schmitt considers democracy as an attempt to liberate political relativism from miracles and dogma,¹⁶ and correlates the development of the nineteenth century’s concept of legitimacy with the Enlightenment’s elimination of theistic and transcendental conceptions of state politics.¹⁷ Schmitt uses *Political Theology* to examine the interplay between popular religious presumptions and how their changes impact political thought and vice versa.

¹³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.

¹⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 45-46.

¹⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 37.

¹⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 42.

¹⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 50.

Schmitt's work clearly demonstrates its value regarding the study of political behaviors that mimic religious doctrine. He writes that "every political idea in one way or another takes a position on the 'nature' of man and presupposes that he is either 'by nature good' or 'by nature evil.' This issue can only be clouded by pedagogic or economic explanations, but not evaded."¹⁸ According to Schmitt, political paradigms rely on the basic assumptions one makes about "ultimate concerns" (like the reality of mankind and its intrinsic nature)—the same kind of "ultimate concerns" that Tillich defines as the basis of religion. Schmitt's work establishes that the evolution of political philosophy can be rationally examined in light of shifts in religious thought, providing valuable insight into the reasoning and motivation of its community.

Eric Voegelin

Eric Voegelin was a German American philosopher, also from the twentieth century, who examined the evolution of social communities through their narratives. Voegelin's contribution to the scholarly conversation is heavily weighted toward cultural myths that interact with political philosophy. He observes that breakdowns in the cohesion of institutions and civilizations (all too common in the political strife of the early 1900s) lead to a loss of meaning, and this understanding of human existence and its meaning must be renegotiated under the new conditions of the world.¹⁹ In *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Voegelin's particular attention to the Greek model of mythological Homeric heroes as a guiding ideal led him to consider the co-option and

¹⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 56.

¹⁹ Eric Voegelin and Ellis Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2004), 7.

subversion of various myths and their interpretation as a reflection of evolving philosophies of history within a particular society.²⁰

Voegelin considers the Jewish folklore of the golem as an informative example of legend adaptation. Originally, the golem legend serves as a warning about the death that results as a punishment for usurping God's sacred creative power. However, Voegelin notes that when the narrative of the golem interacts with "will-to-power" political philosophy (a highly influential concept in the twentieth century), the legend begins to shift. Eventually, the golem legend began to take on a new meaning. The narrative was interpreted as a story about the death of God Himself when men seize God's creative power for themselves.²¹ Thus, where Schmitt demonstrates the influence of religious thought on political structures, Voegelin examines the impact of political philosophy on religious mythology—a critical relationship upon which this thesis builds.

Voegelin also applies his observations to modern Western culture. He notes that the ages of history are frequently interpreted through a Trinitarian model by the scholars of his time,²² dividing eras into three distinct portions of mankind's existence. Voegelin asserts that this enumeration "should further serve to suggest that a type of experience and symbolism that has been built up for centuries will hardly lose its dominant position in Western history overnight."²³ These symbols and religio-cultural structures used to define existence, like the Trinitarian model of a sovereign God, bleed into other parts of

²⁰ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 11.

²¹ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 40-43.

²² Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 69-71.

²³ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 71.

Western thought, such as philosophies of history. Voegelin even points out shifts in these narratives simultaneous to his time. He identifies the same “will-to-power” philosophy that Schmitt saw, observing that the will-to-power mindset overcame previous attitudes toward human existence, most commonly the humility of subordination in the “Chain of Being” (a traditional medieval Christian perspective).²⁴ Voegelin understood that the cultural legends, myths, and philosophy of history, which rely on the way humans view themselves in relation to the cosmos, were then altered for the sake of compatibility with this new “will-to-power” philosophy. This thesis builds from his observations on the interaction of mythology, legend, cultural narrative, and religious doctrine.

Voegelin’s contribution to the conversation also relates specifically to progressivism. In *Ersatz Religion*, Voegelin expounds upon the Christian concept of perfection, describing two major components to this conception: axiological and teleological. Both components link to progressivism, which involves a goal of perfection within the world.²⁵ He argues that within this progressive emphasis on forward movement “the goal itself need not be understood very precisely; it may consist of no more than the idealization of this or that aspect of the situation, considered valuable by the thinker in question.”²⁶ Given that this thesis considers progressivism’s philosophy of history through mythology and legend, Voegelin’s work is extraordinarily relevant to the academic discussion around progressivism and religious behavior.

²⁴ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 81.

²⁵ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 66.

²⁶ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 66-67.

Molly Brigid McGrath

Molly Brigid McGrath is a contemporary author whose work most closely resembles the method of this thesis. Her article “The Authority of the Sacred Victim” offers a new categorization to replace the vague, overused label of “identity” politics with the newer term “sacrificial” politics.²⁷ Effectively, she describes American political behaviors through concepts of sacredness and piety to better understand the social dynamics of left-wing American political philosophy.

McGrath describes several religious characteristics and mechanisms, translating them into the current political context. She considers piety, which “suspends the normal rules of prudence,”²⁸ within both the Christian tradition and woke progressivism, as both worldviews engender confusion and occasionally derision from outsiders in regards to the rationality of their constituents’ actions. McGrath also describes the appropriate avenues of sanctification before approaching the holy or sacred, noting the “clean up and kiss up” tendency²⁹—one that Christians might label as “veneration” or “worship.” She relates martyrdom to hate crime, sacred suffering to class oppression, and retribution for sacrilege to cancel culture (which is discussed at length in one chapter).³⁰ By relating these modern concepts to the Christian tradition, McGrath contributes to a new genre of political theology in contemporary America.

²⁷ McGrath, Molly Brigid. “The Authority of the Sacred Victim,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 37, no. 2 (2020).

²⁸ McGrath, Molly Brigid. “The Authority of the Sacred Victim,” 132.

²⁹ McGrath, “The Authority of the Sacred Victim,” 134.

³⁰ McGrath, “The Authority of the Sacred Victim,” 142.

McGrath also delineates people into the Sacred, Polluted, and Pious camps (categorizations reminiscent of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) within woke progressivism and thoroughly parses the dynamic relationships between these groups.³¹ After defining these categories, she applies them in a nuanced examination of suffering, sacrifice, and exaltation under new social mandates which value intersectionality, emphasize class struggle, and promote avatars of representation.³² McGrath uses her essay on "sacrificial politics" to provide a coherent interpretation of American socio-political relationships that many consider baffling. Of the three authors, this thesis adheres most to McGrath's style of analysis.

Where This Thesis Fits

Each political philosopher—Schmitt, Voegelin, and McGrath—engage with political philosophy, religious doctrine and behavior, and the extent of their interaction. Each approaches the issue from a different angle. Schmitt addresses authority and the implicit assumptions of political structures. Voegelin observes the transformation and co-option of mythology, legend, and cultural narrative to allow for or even promote specific political systems or agendas. McGrath looks at social dynamics through the lens of piety and sanctity, searching for an alternative interpretation to puzzling new cultural expectations of interactions based on identity and privilege. Each author provides unique insights and methods of inquiry that this thesis employs. None, however, extensively

³¹ McGrath, "The Authority of the Sacred Victim," 138.

³² McGrath, "The Authority of the Sacred Victim," 143-147.

discuss modern American progressive liberal behaviors, nor can they draw helpful conclusions about where that inquiry may lead.

This thesis seeks to further all three authors' scholarship by examining the Christian tradition, discovering whether American progressive liberalism can be said to mimic it with any degree of significance, and cautiously suggesting how this new insight can be used to inform a healthy and helpful understanding of American political conflict.

What is Progressive Liberalism?

Progressive liberalism emerged as a modern, left-wing iteration of classical liberalism which adapts to contemporary social theory. Political scientist Robert Adcock uses Woodrow Wilson's political writings from the 1880s to explain the emergence of this vein of liberalism. Wilson, Adcock claims, faults classical liberalism for merely protecting life, liberty, and property instead of pursuing its "ultimate standard of conduct," which is serving "social convenience and advancement."³³ Whereas classical liberalism has relatively fixed values of laissez-faire economics and individual liberty, a progressive liberal government adapts to the evolving moral standard of the society as it aspires "to aid the individual to the fullest and best possible realization of his individuality" through the creation of "the best and fairest opportunities."³⁴ In progressive liberalism, there are greater goods than providing equal protection of

³³ Robert Adcock, "Progressive Liberalism as a Political Vision: Woodrow Wilson's Political Science," *Liberalism and the Emergence of American Political Science: A Transatlantic Tale* (New York, 2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 16 Apr. 2014), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.baylor.edu/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199333622.003.0008>.

³⁴ Adcock, "Progressive Liberalism as a Political Vision."

individual liberty—this greater goal is equal accessibility to social goods and advancement.

Of course, it is extraordinarily complicated to define “equal accessibility,” as people are born into different situations that make social advancement more or less feasible. As Voegelin noted, the goals of a progressive liberal may be vaguely understood, not distinctly defined,³⁵ and determining what one deserves often results in overgeneralization. Identity politics (or what McGrath calls sacrificial politics)³⁶ can fall prey to this by using group identity and belonging as a proxy for lived experience. The ambiguities and inconsistencies from such overgeneralization result in constant academic and common debate regarding the merits and methods by which progressive liberalism’s goals are achieved. Frequent shifts in public opinion and its impact on the collective moral standard can cloud comparisons with more defined paradigms such as religious institutions and their doctrine, which makes this project more difficult. However, these real-time struggles also increase the visibility of these communal negotiations. The rituals and dogma emerging from these debates—publicly observable behaviors that I posit are linked to the progressive liberal worldview—can inform further inquiries for purposes of bipartisan cooperation, decreases in polarization, and heightened sociological understanding of the mechanisms and functions of religious and political communities within a contemporary American context.

The Goal of This Thesis

³⁵ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 66-67.

³⁶ McGrath, “The Authority of the Sacred Victim,” 132.

This thesis advances the conversation of political theology and religion by examining progressive liberalism within the U.S. and comparing it to doctrinal and ritual mechanisms of the Christian tradition. The scope of this thesis does not include conservatism, libertarianism, or other political orientations associated with American right-wing politics, not because they are areligious or insignificant, but because right-wing ties to religion are often more overt and explicitly connected to religious behaviors. Additionally, I elected to examine Christianity's communal behaviors because America's founding institutions are steeped in Christian rhetoric and heritage, making it a major cultural influence. Whether through embracing Christian doctrine or rejecting it, each generation in the United States must reckon with while considering their own ultimate concerns in comparison with those of America's founders. By superimposing trends from the progressive liberal worldview onto specific mechanisms of the Christian tradition, we can better understand the extent of the American political crisis, and thus be more prepared to solve it.

The following chapters approach this problem by pairing key characteristics or behaviors of progressive liberalism with traditional structures or rituals in the Christian Church, examining both their similarities and differences. I have chosen to forgo a typical thesis structure such as defining the terms in the first chapter, listing Christian traditions in the second, and comparing them to progressive liberalism in the third. Simply put, this convolutes the critical comparisons of the behaviors and overcomplicates the thesis. Because this work is more similar in nature to a thought experiment as opposed to an empirically driven lab thesis, I instead present several short chapters of direct comparisons with discussions of their applicability and limitations to a cohesive religious

framework. These chapters also contain contextualizing information as to what functions, religious or political, these behaviors serve, adding a layer of depth to the analysis.

Finally, I provide a chapter discussing the implications of my thesis, future studies that build upon its conclusions, and the applicability of this thought experiment to American political society.

CHAPTER TWO

Myth, Legend, and Philosophy of History

Exploring the Question

As creatures that recognize patterns, humans tend to build categories and structures that aid comprehension and further discovery. Taxonomy, geographic borders, and even horoscopes point to the almost compulsive drive for people to define, organize, classify, and predict. People want, and perhaps even need, patterns and structures within their lives. Whether or not they are fabricated is irrelevant; Voegelin wastes no time on determining the veracity of Homer.¹ Regardless of factual accuracy, worldviews typically depend on some underlying presupposition that allows for a comprehensible structure of existence.

Religion is no exception to this trend. Although they may take different forms, religious texts frequently employ a narrative that, beyond describing a factual interpretation of history, provides a moral framework with which to understand the human experience. These narratives often consist of myth and legend, and most significantly pertain to philosophies of history, including origin and eschatology. How does progressive liberalism use myth and legend? To what extent does the moral framework of the Christian tradition, through its employment of categorizing narratives, provide a template for American progressive liberalism's cultural identity? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by examining Christianity's creation myth, legendary

¹ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 11.

figures, and philosophy of history to compare it to progressive liberalism's philosophy of history.

Christian Myth

Christianity's origin narrative stems from the biblical creation myth. Myth, as I coin the term in this chapter, is not meant to relate to the truth value of a particular story (nor does legend, which we will examine later). Rather, a myth is a traditional or ancient set of stories that explain natural events or facts.² For Christians, this story is found in the early chapters of Genesis. Although potential moral lessons from this section abound, the most consequential conclusions to Christian doctrine are as follows: first, that there is an established arbiter of the world and its functions. In the work of creation, God exerted his sovereign power over creation in a controlled, intentional manner. This concept of sovereignty through the creation myth influences Christian theology on the omnipotence of God, His intentional design of creation (especially humanity), and the utility of intercession and prayer. Second, due to the Fall of Man in the subsequent chapters, the correct functioning of creation is inherently inhibited. Doctrine on the depravity of man and the problem of evil are addressed by this theme established in the Genesis narrative. Third, because humanity was created in the *Imago Dei* ("image of God"), each individual bears inherent worth regardless of ability, social status, or any other extrinsic feature. The *Imago Dei* mandates that dignity is extended to all persons and forms the basis of Christian social justice. Fourth, the consequences of separation from God are insurmountable from the human perspective. This frames the need for a solution from a

² Erin McKean, "Myth," in *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1124.

divine source—the focal point of the Christian Gospels—and the hopelessness of mankind left to its own devices, which establishes the need to adhere to devout Christian faith.

This creation myth draws Christians together because it provides an explanation for the most troubling questions of existence. Evil can be understood as a natural consequence of human action yet avoids a moral indictment of a divine power equipped with the power to prevent it. The creation myth offers a distinct problem (separation from God) that clearly defines the root of humanity’s hardships. It also provides a moral framework that focuses on the fundamental worth of human beings, which stems from the *Imago Dei*. Finally, it offers hope that, should the wrongs be made right, mankind—and more specifically, devout believers—could return to Eden. Although the narrative clearly implies that the solution is impossible through man, it also has been read by Christian thinkers as a prophetic illumination of the Gospels. Essentially, the creation myth describes the origin of humanity, the nature of God, and the source and solution to the ills of this world. Through this framing of human existence, Christians can categorize actions and responses to this narrative as right or wrong, which provides a comforting structure of moral direction in the face of existential uncertainty. Since this narrative, to whatever extent accepted as literal or metaphorical, is shared among Christian believers, it provides a strong communal identity, moral foundation, and collective vision of fundamental reality.

Christian Legends

While myth answers the “what” of human existence, culpability, and right response, legend illustrates the “how.” Legends, instead of centering around a cosmic

event, often focus on a (presumed) real person or specific circumstance in history.³

Unlike the grand scale of myths, legends are usually tied to a single individual or location, and where epics glorify a protagonist with supernatural abilities, legends focus on the relatability of the protagonist. A legend serves as a lesson for a life well lived (or, in some cases, poorly lived), making it an extremely useful tool within religious groups to measure and encourage righteousness. In the Christian religion, legends instruct the devout on their duty to God, the Church, and the world; Scripture is full of these examples. Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Ezra, and many others demonstrate virtue and nobility in their choices, which the Christian Church traditionally has considered to be examples of righteous living. Of course, Jesus is considered the ultimate figure of virtue to be emulated, but Christian theology clearly emphasizes the Christ's divinity as much as it emphasizes the Christ's humanity. Faithful believers strive to follow his example, but they journey to be like Christ, not to be Christ himself. Thus, it is likely more appropriate to categorize Jesus Christ as an epic hero rather than a legendary figure.

In Christianity, myths and legends work hand-in-hand to form and actuate a people group. Myths define existence and the source of evils faced by mankind, while legends provide templates to help one conquer, or at least suffer through, these evils in life to receive rewards for good behavior. In Genesis, the destruction of the harmonious relationship with God posits that the ills of the world come from a separation from divinity. Legends such as Ruth, then, demonstrate that even those unfamiliar with God can draw nearer to him and adopt a virtuous life full of dignity and honor. The prophet Samuel's legend shows how one might dedicate one's life to God and embrace a role of

² Adam Augustyn, ed., "Legend." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/art/legend-literature>.

servitude to God's chosen people. Abraham exhibits radical obedience to the voice of God, and Moses faithfully leads the Israelites under God's command for decades.

These legends, however, also contain warnings of the ever-pervasive influence of separation from God. Ruth must forsake all that she has ever known, as it is distant from God and His people.⁴ Samuel watches the people he has served stray from God and plead for a ruler that will bring great destruction.⁵ Abraham banishes his first-born son and the boy's mother.⁶ Moses, due to his errors and impatience, dies before reaching the Promised Land.⁷ Thus, the legends teach what devout Christians ought to model and warn of the dangers and vices Christians must avoid.

Christian Narratives

In the Bible, legendary figures and their perceived virtue is heavily reliant upon the structure and definition provided by the creation myth, but they also depend on a philosophy of history. People naturally orient their actions based on anticipated outcomes and the circumstances surrounding their choices. Thus, the actions of the legends reflect their expected "end" of history as well as its purported beginnings. Eschatology is the theology concerning mankind's death and destiny,⁸ making it a subcategory of Christian theology and a part of any philosophy of history. In the Christian tradition, eschatological doctrine also informs the lessons extracted from the legendary figures within Scripture. In

⁴ Ruth 1:15-17 (*Young's Literal Translation*).

⁵ 1 Sam. 8:5-20.

⁶ Gen. 21:14.

⁷ Deut. 34:1-8.

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), s.v. "Eschatology."

the Old Testament, many laws and sacrificial rituals are centered around limited restoration with God during life on Earth, and virtue is defined by adherence to this law. The New Testament, however, demands behavior dependent on an expectation of eternal life and heavenly rewards. Storing up “treasures in Heaven” is favored over accruing earthly riches.⁹ God’s blessings are portrayed less as temporary wealth during one’s life on earth and more as bejeweled crowns and honor in an eternal realm existing outside of time and space. Thus, dying nobly for the heavenly kingdom, although counterintuitive from a secular perspective, makes perfect sense in reference to the eschatological Christian trope of increased glory in martyrdom at the end of time. The majority of Christ’s apostles, key legendary figures from whom Christians take their cues, were brutally martyred. The intense suffering of the saints in the early Church, and even into the modern age in geographical regions that discourage Christianity, are used as templates of holiness and righteous dedication to God. Christians commonly believe that those who remain faithful in persecution will receive special recognition and reward at the end of time. Established expectations through narrative tropes, such as the veneration of martyrs during the end times, inform the behavior of believers within the Christian tradition, often encouraging action that appears absurd when divorced from the myth’s influence.

The Christian tradition very clearly relies on myth, legend, and a philosophy of history to perpetuate certain behaviors as the pinnacle of righteous living. Although Christian doctrine allows room for flexibility and does not require all types of encouraged behavior at all times—for instance, it does not presume all are to be martyrs or everyone

⁹ Matt. 6:20.

to be members of the clergy—it clearly provides a variety of specific potential methods of virtuous living. In other words, a devout Christian must not emulate every legend to be considered a faithful believer, and technically is not disqualified from the title of Christian by diverging from their examples, but choosing to embody the virtues of the legends is a far safer and more certain path toward a life pleasing to God in light of the Christian philosophy of history.

Progressive Myth

For a political orientation to rise to the level of doctrine, or even quasi-religious movement, its promoted narrative, through myth and legend, must be a significant, actuating component of the political worldview. Admittedly, progressive liberalism does not have canonical scripture to reference, nor does it have the history and structure of the Christian tradition. Indeed, the comparison between structures can quickly become complicated as the political identity of individuals within a movement exists on a spectrum. Thus, the goal of this chapter (in keeping with the full work) continues to be a broad comparison rather than a dive into minutiae. Progressive liberalism, although less structured than Christianity, also maintains a loose set of myths and legends that promote a particular worldview, as well as a distinctive philosophy of history that informs the interpretations of said narratives. The remainder of this chapter discusses these structures, while also comparing their similarities and differences to the structures of the Christian religion.

The significance of origin myths is extremely clear in the American progressive liberal movement. While Christians have the creation story, the fall of humanity, and original sin baked into the first few chapters of Genesis, the progressive liberal movement

has pushed for a new defining narrative of America's inception. Of course, the comparison is not precisely equal, because the Christian creation myth relates to the beginning of mankind, while the American Founding is the birth of a nation-state. That said, classical liberalism relies on the Founding as a major formative event in their intellectual tradition, so it is natural that progressive liberalism reckons with and reinterprets this event to make it compatible with its worldview.

The inception of the United States of America has traditionally been considered July 4, 1776. As a document with significant ideological, political, and moral messaging, the Declaration of Independence defined and structured a polity, just as Genesis did for the Christian Church. However, many progressive liberals are increasingly calling for a rejection of the Declaration of Independence as a false narrative. Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of the 1619 Project, wrote for the *New York Times* that “our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written.”¹⁰ The origin myth, in other words, did not adequately explain, reflect, and actuate the reality observed by enslaved Black people in the United States. The “consent of the governed” was never garnered, and clearly Southern colonies demonstrated that chattel slavery was an adept tool at alienating people from rights endowed by their Creator. Thus, they embrace a new origin story that emphasizes a very different narrative within American history.

How does this change the creation myth of America, and how does it impact the moral lessons extracted from this myth? Under the 1776 “myth,” America was founded

¹⁰ Nikole Hannah-Jones, “America Wasn’t a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One,” 1619 Project (*The New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>.

on noble principles of the unshakeable dignity and worth of all individuals. The 1619 “myth,” however, offers a darker, unsettling vision of reality: that the country’s first breath was drawn in the suffocating bowels of slave ships. Where Christians look to the creation myth and see disobedience to God as the cause of the Fall, progressive liberalism offers a different original sin baked into the DNA of the United States: oppression and exploitation of the Other. By “rediscovering” the true narrative of history, the 1619 Project reframes the creation myth of America to progressive liberals, offering a clearer vision of what ails the country, who is at fault, and what must be done to rectify these evils. Similar to the Christian tradition, progressive liberal “doctrine” is not uniform among different factions, nor has its mythology been uniformly adopted by all of its constituents. The 1619 Project and its reframing of American history, like the Christian creation myth, is not definitive proof of a unified belief system, but rather it illustrates the power of myth as a constructed framework which promotes progressive liberalism and its resulting moral agenda.

The 1619 myth aligns well with the progressive liberal philosophy of history. The answer is in the name— “progressives” definitionally believe that history is progressing. Rather than constant repetition or inward, tightening spirals, progressives believe that history has a perceivable movement. Most often, this “progression” is viewed as a moral evolution toward perfection.¹¹ In the beginning there was oppression, and in the end there will be a restoration of justice and the erasure of bigotry. Enlightenment on the never-ending ways we oppress one another is continuous, as hierarchy after hierarchy reveals itself. More potential freedoms are identified, and the lack of realized liberty is lamented.

¹¹ Eric Voegelin and Ellis Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2004), 66.

The end of history is reached when power imbalances are eliminated, and hierarchy instated by oppressors is no more. Notably, progressive liberalism's push for social justice may trace back to classical liberalism, which was steeped in religious values that proclaimed humanity's inherent dignity rooted in the Imago Dei. However, since both the Christian tradition and progressive liberalism reach back towards the Christian creation myth, a full parsing of social justice motivated by the Imago Dei is far beyond the capacity of this thesis. Therefore, it will mostly leave this similarity to the side in further discussions of social justice and philosophy of history.

The "liberalism" portion of progressive liberalism relates to the role of the government within this philosophy of history. Contrary to popular belief, "conservative" and "progressive" are not always contradictory; while "progressive" describes the movement of history, "conservative" denotes the belief that government frustrates that progress. Thus, a conservative progressive might look for other actors or believe that history does not require an actor to move it forward. On the other hand, progressive liberals favor the active role of government. Barack Obama frequently mentioned the "moral arc of the universe," but as many liberals (and eventually Obama himself) pointed out, "that moral arc doesn't bend toward justice all by itself."¹² Although the original "moral arc" rhetoric dates back to Martin Luther King, Obama used this quote in an explicitly progressive, liberal way. Progressive liberals, in keeping with their heritage from classical liberalism, see the government as a significant, if not primary, solvent for their "ultimate concerns": systemic oppression and social injustice.

¹² Jonathan Capehart, "That Moral Arc Doesn't Bend Toward Justice All by Itself," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, July 26, 2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2018/07/26/that-moral-arc-doesnt-bend-toward-justice-all-by-itself/>.

Although myths and their impact within progressive liberalism and Christianity are relatively easy to compare, scrutinizing the legends between the two paradigms is much more complicated. Part of this has to do with disagreement on evolving morality. Some Christian denominations (typically Pentecostal or Charismatic) hold to the theory of continuous revelation, which maintains that even in the modern age, God perpetually reveals new moral principles and truths about Himself. However, this is vigorously debated since it potentially undermines the sufficiency of Scripture and seemingly contradicts passages in the Bible that discuss its completeness. Even when the Apostle Paul discusses mysteries that are to be revealed in the future, they are clearly mysteries of human regeneration, not principles of God’s character.¹³ Few truly subscribe to continuous (sometimes referred to as “progressive”) revelation, and those who do likely accept it on a much smaller scale (for example, personal continuous revelation rather than corporate continuous revelation).

On the other hand, progressive liberalism, as previously discussed in this thesis, presumes that moral comprehension evolves. Ironically, this clashes with other portions of progressive liberal principles—retrospective judgment on historical figures, which is common in critiques of American figures, fails to account for the underdeveloped morality of past centuries from the perspective of progressivism. If one claims that plantation owners should have known slavery was atrocious, then they are held to the same standard of moral development as people are today. But if morality was truly less developed, then plantation owners may have less culpability than assigned to them by modern progressives. This chapter does not seek to determine the appropriate level of

¹³ 1 Cor. 15:51-55.

culpability among slaveholders, nor to debunk progressive liberalism on the basis of contradictions (as most worldviews have contradictions, or at least apparent contradictions). Simply, this point underscores the complexity of discerning the righteousness of past figures, and thus the challenges of comparing myth and legend between progressive liberalism and the Christian tradition.

Progressive Legend

The complicated progressive liberal view of moral evolution muddles the lessons drawn from legends. While the templates extracted from the legends of the Bible tend to be clear when overlaid with origin mythology and the surrounding philosophy of history, the looser structure of progressive liberalism paired with the ambiguous and often inconsistent understanding of moral culpability leads to constantly shifting interpretations of a legend. George Washington has often been considered a shining figure of honesty, integrity, and bravery, who fought against the nonrepresentative taxation of King George III. However, his ownership of plantation estate Mount Vernon and its exploitative labor facilitated his fall from grace in the progressive liberal framework, as the issue of slavery did for many Founding Fathers.

Martin Luther King's legacy experienced similar controversy decades after his death. One consequence of modern-day legends is that the moral lessons we draw from these polished stories are often contradicted by the hero's factual history. On one side of the American political aisle, MLK's fiery dissonance and civil disobedience is often understated for the sake of comfort. The narrative is muted to create a legend that perpetuates a narrative of polite disagreement, not a legend reflective of the broken Black bodies in Selma or the Federal Bureau of Investigation prying into MLK's personal

history for blackmail. On the other side of the aisle, however, that same uncovered history stirred enormous controversy in revealing a serial adulterer who may have purportedly encouraged violent sexual crime.¹⁴ Does this retract the “I Have a Dream” speech, or nullify the value of the Civil Rights Movement? Regardless of how one answers these questions, the arising conflicts between narrative and fact demonstrate the constant confusion of legend within progressive liberal doctrine, as any legacy is subject to scrutiny from every future generation, far beyond one’s ability to defend themselves or set the record straight.

Although progressive liberalism’s legends are far more flexible and subject to reversal than canonical legends of the Christian tradition, some certainly persist and adapt, in keeping with Voegelin’s observations about previous political ideologies.¹⁵ The strongest legends receive the most scrutiny, but some still emerge unscathed from critical eyes. Rosa Parks and Dorothy Day, for example, sustained their shining legacy from the same era as MLK. There are several potential responses to this difference, some optimistic and others pessimistic. One possibility is that both women had increased moral awareness on account of belonging to several marginalized categories. Both Parks and Day were Black women, meaning they faced significant obstacles for being Black and for being women, while MLK had certain opportunities afforded to him on account of being a man. Those who, like Parks and Day, experience multiple forms of oppression and

¹⁴ Tony Allen-Mills, “FBI Tapes Reveal Martin Luther King's Affairs 'with 40 Women'” (The Sunday Times, May 26, 2019), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/fbi-tapes-reveal-martin-luther-kings-affairs-with-40-women-058h7k9wd>; Donna Murch, “A Historian's Claims About Martin Luther King Are Shocking - And Irresponsible,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, June 8, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/08/martin-luther-king-david-garrow-essay-claims>.

¹⁵ Eric Voegelin and Ellis Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2004), 40-43.

marginalization may perhaps be more aware of privilege and exploitation, which might lead to a more refined sense of morality, causing them to avoid committing evil.

The more pessimistic argument would appeal to the fact that they had less opportunity to oppress, and their inability to oppress appears as virtuous unwillingness. Additionally, a naysayer may argue that progressive critiques of past legends extend more leeway to those who are less fortunate in the American social hierarchy, judging by a sliding scale in an “oppression Olympics.” However, the point of this chapter is that the reader’s political leanings and opinions on the causation of certain legends falling and others persisting are irrelevant. Even though the narratives of these legends shift far more than biblical legends, they are still championed as ways to live life. The proof is in the uproar—if these figures were only considered historical and not instructive, heated discourse on whether uncovering dirt was truth or slander would not exist. Nevertheless, a constant stream of discussion on whether MLK was problematic continues, and the frequent examination of social justice heroes and their holistic moral compass (rather than issues relevant to their specific advocacy) demonstrate the importance of these legends to the constituents of the progressive liberal worldview. Legends provide template and identity, and the battle for the legendary figures of progressive liberalism proves its significance within the broader framework of myth, legend, and philosophy of history.

Conclusion

If culture really is the story that we tell ourselves about ourselves (a paraphrase of anthropologist Clifford Geertz's definition within his collection of essays),¹⁶ then myth, legend, and philosophy of history are the very fabric of social reality. Their importance cannot be understated, and their role in Christianity and progressive liberalism is both powerful and fundamental. This chapter has explored their significance in the two respective frameworks, especially with origin myths and moralizing legends, in informing a compelling worldview. While many political and social paradigms can appear religious, this attachment to an overarching narrative demonstrates a deeper connection to religious behavior. Progressive liberalism mimics the behavior of organized religion, especially the traditional Christian Church, in using myth and legend to prescribe a moral foundation for where the world came from and where it is going.

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1973).

CHAPTER THREE

Excommunication and Cancel Culture

Exploring the Question

Excommunication is a key function of communal living. At first, this appears to be a contradiction: is exclusion really an important foundation for a cohesive community? What about religious and political groups that claim to accept all? How could excommunication then fit within a progressive worldview that champions inclusion and diversity? The key to understanding excommunication, its purpose, and its connection to American progressive liberalism is through the mechanism of cancel culture. This chapter explores the Judeo-Christian conception of excommunication and how cancel culture, far from a collective temper tantrum, seeks to serve the same legitimate function as excommunication.

What is Excommunication?

Excommunication is an act of religious censure against an individual originating from a religious body, a mechanism most commonly associated with the Roman Catholic Church.¹ Typically enacted by a bishop, excommunication prevents the individual from receiving certain or all sacraments, especially the Eucharist,² effectively cutting them off from the communal rituals and spiritual benefits of religious society. Other limits to sacramental participation exist, such as interdiction, the authoritative prevention of a

¹ *The Code of Canon Law, in English Translation* (London: Collins, 1983), 1311.

² *The Code of Canon Law*, 1331.

group or specific community from religious participation.³ Catholic Christians generally consider excommunication to be the most extreme penalty against a member of their religious community, as it completely bars them from significant participation with the community and from certain spiritual blessings and grace. Also, excommunication may limit the practical benefits of participation in the local church, such as social support, friendship, or a financial safety net.

As a grave censure, excommunication is usually reserved for severe transgressions. Although the Roman Catholic Church commands that only those baptized believers who have confessed and repented from their sins ought to partake in the Eucharistic feast,⁴ practical reinforcement of the repentance standard is often left to the individual receiving the host and the cup. These believers are made by the clergy to understand the gravity of unrepentant communion. However, there are some baptized members whose sins are so dire that even their participation in the ritual of the Eucharist endangers their religious community. For example, a known adulterer who continues in his sins while taking communion and professing to be a Catholic undermines the Roman Catholic Church's moral purity and reputation. To willingly provide the body and blood of Christ, as is Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist, to a clearly unchanged man would constitute an act of passive approval regarding the adulterer's actions. By extending a pure and intimate sacrament binding the sinful to the Savior, the clergy offering the host and cup would commit unacceptable profanity against the Holy Eucharist. Thus, the

³ *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), s.v. "Interdict."

⁴ *The Code of Canon Law*, 912.Victim," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 37, no. 2 (2020): 134.

Roman Catholic Church withholds the Eucharist from the adulterer who would pervert the bride of Christ.⁵ Through excommunication, proper authority in the form of the bishops or similar members of the clergy cast out impure and unrepentant sinners to preserve the sanctity of the religious community.

However, excommunication is not the true final word. The Roman Catholic *Code of Canon Law* states that excommunication is a type of medicinal censure⁶—one that ultimately ought to jolt the unrepentant sinner back into orthopraxy. Although the censure does not expire after a certain length of time, it can be reversed after the offender demonstrates clear signs of repentance through an alteration in sinful and rebellious behavior.⁷ This crucial detail reveals that excommunication not only preserves the community at hand, but also provides a chance at reconciliation for those who are cast out, so long as they adhere to the group’s moral standards. In other words, excommunication is not primarily about exclusion, but preservation and delineation. Through this mechanism, the religious community forces non-compliant members to either surrender their identity as a member or conform to their expected behaviors, keeping the group from straying too far from its moral mores.

The delineation of “in-groups” and “out-groups” is vital to the health of a community, and excommunication furthers this delineation by “sorting” those such as the adulterer into the out-group and reinforcing standards that differentiate the in-group. To continue the use of the serial adulterer as an illustration, consider his transgression. Many

⁵ *The Code of Canon Law*, 915.

⁶ *The Code of Canon Law*, 1312.

⁷ *The Code of Canon Law*, 1358.

give into sexual temptations, but to publicly continue in adultery undermines the sanctity of covenantal marriage (a Christian sacrament) and fundamentally rejects the appropriate boundaries of sex as prescribed by the Christian interpretation of Scripture. Anything other than direct rejection undermines the spiritual legitimacy and “holiness” (here understood as the characteristic of being set apart) of the community. In the eyes of outsiders, not to mention the potential judgment of God, the distinction between the holy and the heathen diminishes at the sight of blatant impurity within a supposedly pure community. Thus, casting out those who challenge the fundamental beliefs and practices of the group (like the adulterer who profanes the marriage bed) maintains the group’s sanctity and fortifies the clear definition of the “in-group” as opposed to those who dwell in outer darkness.

Excommunication in the Christian Tradition

An excellent example of excommunication as preservation and delineation occurs in the Christian Old Testament. Joshua 7 tells the story of Achan, an Israelite of the tribe of Judah.⁸ Achan was involved in the fall of Jericho, and despite God’s direct command to burn the entire city’s contents, Achan looted a house. He proceeded to hide the gold, silver, and expensive garment that he stole under his tent in an attempt to conceal his sin. Meanwhile, a small force of Israelites went out to battle against the people of Ai but suffered a humiliating defeat against a small enemy. God responded to Joshua, the leader of the Israelites, that He had withdrawn his guidance and favor because the people’s covenant was broken. Eventually, the Israelites discovered Achan’s transgression. They

⁸ Josh. 7:1-26.

cast Achan, his family, and his possessions out from the camp, and burned their bodies after stoning them.

This story, while ruthless, clearly demonstrates the function of excommunication. By failing to adhere to the community's moral strictures, Achan directly endangered the Israelites by provoking God's wrath. As a result, three dozen Israelite soldiers were killed and the battle was lost. One man's sin negatively impacted the entire community. To preserve the group's covenantal relationship with God—their source of salvation from Egyptian oppressors and strength as the conquerors of Canaan—Joshua cast Achan out and then called for his death.⁹ Through his swift and unyielding action, Joshua wielded his authority as a spiritual leader to the community and reinforced the importance of the Israelites' "in-group" characteristic: their undying devotion to God, by which they maintain a special relationship with divinity. By "excommunicating" Achan, Joshua preserved the community from many dangers by maintaining the purity of the community, as well as bolstering its sense of identity as a righteous people committed to complete obedience to God.

Excommunication carries over into the Christian New Testament as well, where its medicinal qualities are best displayed. St. Paul pleads with a local church in 1 Corinthians 5 to cast out a man engaging in sordid affairs, so that later the man's soul would be saved.¹⁰ In 2 Corinthians 2, St. Paul urges the congregation to reaffirm their love for a sinner that grieved them.¹¹ Though these two instances may not be related, and

⁹ Josh. 7:25.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 5:5.

¹¹ 2 Cor. 2:5-11.

the sorrowful penitent in the second letter to the church as Corinth is not explicitly identified as the shameful sinner, these two passages nevertheless illustrate how even harsh censures can ultimately result in greater harmony within the community.

Of course, the parallels between biblical examples and the current Roman Catholic model of censure are not exact; excommunication in modern times does not typically culminate in stoning or death, and the defining “in-group” characteristics have changed from the time of Joshua to the Christian Church. However, as a story that Roman Catholic doctrine uses to inform their identity as a holy people, Joshua 7 provides a clear example of the mechanism of exclusion for the benefit of the community, and the letters to the Corinthian church offer a template of reconciliation through excommunication. Although excommunication and cancel culture are not equivalent in all ways, the two practices address the same method of exclusion to enable oriented communities. To understand this parallel, we must now look to cancel culture as a modern phenomenon.

What Is Cancel Culture?

Although “cancel culture” sounds as if it describes a mentality, group identity, or comprehensive way of life (as “culture” often suggests), it more consistently describes a particular process of censure. For example, we don’t say that someone was a “victim of Chinese culture” if they were exiled from the People’s Republic of China, nor do we say that someone whom United States voters refuse to elect to government, such as a failed Congressional candidate, was a victim of American culture. But we do say that an academic was a victim of cancel culture. This describes how he or she experienced significant resistance, not the specific beliefs of the group that canceled the academic.

Instead of denoting a culture (an integrated system of values and behaviors), the use of “cancel culture” describes what this undefined group does rather than what it is. Cancel culture does not describe a system of traditions, behaviors, and values, but an abstracted actor of retribution upon a wayward sinner.

What happens when someone is “canceled,” and how is it similar to excommunication? At its core, cancelation is a punitive response to sacrilege,¹² which often takes shape in an increasingly digital world as deplatforming. Literal exile rarely exists within cancelation, as the canceling community typically lacks political sovereignty, but the canceling collective can “cast out” the offending party by trumpeting their perceived moral failings to the world. This projection of outrage pressures other people to accept and support this cancelation with the threat of also being considered morally lacking. Much like the delineation and preservation exemplified in Joshua 7, cancelation serves as an example to the community through the repercussions of deplatforming (loss of audience, revenue, reputation, public respect, financial gains, and career opportunities), as well as a preservation of the values of the community and a purgation of any heretical ideology that could impinge upon the natural order of the world as perceived by progressives.

This purgation points to the deeper connection between excommunication and cancel culture as more than similar methods of exclusion. The heart of excommunication is its focus on communal purity for the sake of survival, against which blasphemers pose a genuine threat.¹³ Particularly in Joshua 7, the major concern was rightness with God, as

¹² McGrath, “The Authority of the Sacred Victim,” 140.

¹³ McGrath, “The Authority of the Sacred Victim,” 140

any disconnect directly led to the demise of the entire society. This is precisely the same concern for progressives addressed by cancelation. Conservatives may be tempted to dismiss these concerns as shallow or fanciful, but setting aside these complaints, recall progressive liberalism’s philosophy of history. By its very nature, it considers the essence of mankind to be moving forward, both temporally and morally, into greater eras of increased enlightenment.¹⁴ With its bent toward social welfare policy and state intervention,¹⁵ alongside a deep distrust of traditional hierarchies and power dynamics, progressive liberalism considers the arc of human history to bend toward social advancement and radical equality for all. However, sometimes this “moral arc” must be manipulated—by policy, social pressure, or the “right teachings” of social justice. Thus, anyone who plays an antagonistic role via political opposition, public denouncement, or academic noncompliance directly frustrates the true end of mankind.

Differences between Excommunication and Cancel Culture

Progressive liberalism’s exclusionary mechanism of cancel culture is difficult to compare with the Christian tradition’s exclusionary mechanism of excommunication. Both political and religious worldviews can contain nearly infinite shades of doctrinal disagreement. However, in the case of progressive liberalism, those who perpetuate it are not one consistent constituency (or congregation, in religious language), but a revolving door of loyalists to specific causes or beliefs, with great variety in doctrine, focus, and goals. The discrepancies between the Christian tradition and progressive liberalism,

¹⁴ Voegelin and Sandoz, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 67.

¹⁵ “Progressive Left,” U.S. Politics & Policy (Pew Research Center, November 17, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/progressive-left/>.

which often stem from this lack of centralization of authority and foundational beliefs, create notable differences in sovereignty, enforcement, and intensity.

As a much more decentralized community with leaders accountable to a vaguely defined public, as opposed to a (generally) unimpeachable hierarchy with clear lines of authority as in the Roman Catholic Church, progressive liberalism struggles to delineate and maintain clear understandings of right and wrong. This is entirely predictable given its paradigm of continual moral evolution and increasingly correct thinking. For example, that which was laudable and virtuous twenty years ago, like proclaiming “I don’t see color,” is now considered by many progressives to be an unacceptable erasure of diversity.¹⁶ Those who identify as progressives divide into many camps, which often oppose each other in the search for correct doctrine. “TERFs” (trans-excluding radical feminists) are shunned by transgender activists, and Asians decrying university admittance policies clash with supporters of affirmative action.¹⁷ Determining the particular “orthodoxy” of those who perceive themselves as progressive liberals (a key factor of in-group/out-group distinction) is nearly impossible, because the standards of righteousness are subject to constant change.

The decentralization of moral sovereignty and the evolving moral standard also complicates the exclusionary process of cancel culture. While excommunication projects an authoritative proclamation of banishment or exile that stems from a legitimate position

¹⁶ Dana Brownlee, “Dear White People: When You Say You 'Don't See Color,' This Is What We Really Hear,” (Forbes Magazine, October 12, 2022), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danabrownlee/2022/06/19/dear-white-people-when-you-say-you-dont-see-color-this-is-what-we-really-hear/?sh=2879e70926d6>.

¹⁷ Harmeet Kaur, “How Asian Americans Fit into the Affirmative Action Debate” (Cable News Network, November 3, 2022), <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/03/us/affirmative-action-asian-americans-qa-ccc/index.html>.

of divinely authorized power (from the perspective of Christian doctrine), the intensity of a cancelation stems from the number of resisters opposing the wayward sinner—resisters who may or may not fall prey to infighting. While excommunication, as a medicinal censure, can be reversed under certain circumstances, cancel culture has no final sovereign that can decide upon the exception: that is, those who can be restored back to right standing. As a result, there is not a truly clear path back from cancelation, thus increasing the natural intensity of cancelation and its effects.

Additionally, while excommunication is often decisive and reflects a binary shift from involvement to dissociation, cancelation occurs in degrees of intensity. For example, J.K. Rowling, a self-proclaimed “TERF,” received notable backlash for her claims that legitimizing male-to-female transgendered persons undermines the reality of the female experience and its hardships.¹⁸ However, two things worked in her favor and countered the intensity of cancelation: first, her stance divided those prone to cancelation into two camps. While most progressive liberals would unite around a less divisive statement—say, for example, that Derek Chauvin was responsible for the needless death of George Floyd—those who championed transgender rights found themselves faced with progressive liberals who spoke of the oppressions and disadvantages that biological women face, such as being tokenized and stereotyped by biological males who desire to participate in the public sector as a woman. Additionally, Rowling had the advantage of status. As the author of the preeminent young adult book series in the world, Rowling had the money, fame, and endearment of several generations, which likely softened the blow

¹⁸ Jenny Gross, “Daniel Radcliffe Criticizes J.K. Rowling's Anti-Transgender Tweets” (The New York Times, June 7, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/07/arts/Jk-Rowling-controversy.html>.

by detracting numbers from the push for cancelation. Others prone to cancelation, however, do not share Rowling's fate or fortune.

Another complicating factor that differentiates excommunication from cancel culture is the broad non-agreement in a version or even possibility of an afterlife. While most Christians tend to believe in an afterlife where things are made right by an authoritative, morally legitimate power, progressive liberalism as a political orientation does not speak to any post-Earth experiences. Plenty of left-wing Americans, in fact, do not believe in any afterlife at all,¹⁹ meaning that they conceive of no higher power, moral or otherwise, that corrects the injustices of the world after death. Thus, with the political paradigm's lack of answer for post-Earth justice, humanity must battle these evils entirely on its own, often clashing with other factions of its own kind. The lack of an omnipotent, moderating divinity, as well as an extended afterlife to enjoy the fruits of this justice, can intensify cancelation. After all, with only a handful of decades in this lifetime, a person must further the progress of mankind and find a way to enjoy this progress while they still live: a feat made ever more daunting by the changing goalposts of salvific enlightenment.

The difference between excommunication and cancel culture in regards to enforcement and degree of exclusion is accounted for by the differences between a structured religious institution and decentralized socio-political community. Whereas the Church has traditional structures of authority with the legitimate power to protect the community, the democratic values underpinning progressive liberalism in the United

¹⁹ "Views on the Afterlife: Majority of U.S. Adults Say They Believe in Heaven, Hell," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, November 23, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/>.

States promote an equality of authority, which naturally diffuses the strength of possible cancelations. The difference between the “dichotomy” versus “spectrum” style of exclusionary mechanisms exists due to the gap between divine right and social right.

Conclusion

The heart of both exclusionary mechanisms—excommunication and cancel culture—is the same. To preserve the many, the few are sacrificed on account of their own faulty behavior. Communities are shielded, and even thrive, on account of this exclusion, which delineates between sinners and saints, as well as preserving the sanctity and salvific status of the group. Although adapted to their congregation of sorts, both excommunication and cancel culture guard the precious pathway to the “saving grace” of mankind in the minds of its adherents.

CHAPTER FOUR

Catechesis and Twitter

Exploring the Question

Thus far, I have made two comparisons of mechanisms within the Christian tradition also shared by American progressive liberalism. The first comparison in Chapter Two discussed the methods used to cultivate community vision and values. The second comparison in Chapter Three examined the processes of delineation and sanctification. These functions are all crucial for a cohesive community, but all are dependent on how right thinking and doctrine is established and perpetuated. How does the Christian tradition approach teaching and instruction, and are there any aspects of the American progressive liberal context that align with the Christian method? This thesis strives to address this question by examining the ritual of catechesis and comparing it with the social media platform Twitter.

What is Catechesis?

Catechesis, like excommunication, serves as another mechanism of delineation that reinforces group identity and doctrine. The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology states “catechesis... might describe any kind of religious instruction, but the term is used classically of the teaching given to new Christian converts, especially in the context of baptism.”¹ New members of the early Christian Church were taught to

¹ Davidson, Ivor J. "Catechesis," in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and et. al. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/cupdet/catechesis/0?institutionId=720>.

memorize and recite statements of doctrine, such as the Nicene and Apostolic Creed, in order to enter into the community of the faithful through Trinitarian baptism. By embracing orthodox belief, the converts signaled their intent to mold themselves into acceptable members of the Church. While excommunication delineates the true believer from the initiate, the process of catechesis transforms the initiate, shaping them into a true believer.

The term “catechesis” originates from the Greek word *katēkheō*. Although the word came to mean teaching (due to the continued usage regarding religious instruction), the word *katēkheō* is translated literally as “to sound back.” The prefix *katá*, a directional preposition, combines with the verb *ēcheō*—from which we derive the English word “echo”—to effect a vision of a doubly-strong echoing back. Consider a man peering into a cave. He speaks, projecting his voice into the cave, and within the dark void his words begin to reverberate. His voice fills up the empty space and returns to him as he stands at the mouth of the cave. This is the process of catechesis.

Although the concept of catechesis extended to religious teaching in general, and thus embraced a broader swathe of instructive practices, this chapter focuses on the traditional ritual most closely aligned to its etymological roots, as detailed in St. Hippolytus’ *Treatise on Apostolic Tradition*.² In the ritual of catechesis, the priest or member of the clergy makes a scripted statement or asks a question, typically from a text reviewed by authoritative voices within the denomination or sect; such a text functions as a trustworthy source on distinguishing right and wrong belief. In response to the priest’s statement, prospective converts recite the provided answer—either memorized or

² Gregory Hippolytus, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*, edited by Gregory Dix and Henry Chadwick (London: Alban Press, 1992), 32-38.

provided as written liturgy—“sounding back” the truth of the Divine as revealed by Christian Scripture. Just as the man speaks into the cave, the priest declares a statement or asks a question that paves a way for the revelation of God, speaking into the void of human ignorance. The catechumens, in a unified answer, then respond with the truth of God gleaned from Scripture, echoing the words often written and repeated by countless Christians throughout many generations. Thus, the truth and grace of the Divine, often illustrated as light in the darkness of human incomprehension, fills the void of ignorance just as the cave filling with an echo.

The “echo,” in addition to filling the void of ignorance, serves as a reflection of identity among the catechumens, or those being catechized. In participating and professing this doctrine, the catechumens elect to join a community of believers. Catechesis bolsters the Church’s growth in number and deepens the strength of shared doctrine and faith, while also delineating the eager converts from the heathens: a fundamental necessity in the health and continuation of the community of saints.

This process of catechesis, when extracted from its ecclesiastical roots, is extremely common within social media. Because catechesis typically appears as verbal communication and instruction, text-based platforms such as Twitter are most comparable to this spiritual ritual. Although Elon Musk’s Twitter takeover has introduced uncertainty into the continuation of the status quo and even the consistent functioning of the platform, this thesis exclusively compares catechesis with the model of pre-takeover Twitter.

What Exactly Is Twitter, Anyway?

Twitter has long functioned as a microblogging platform. Users publish thoughts, responses, and quips to the world in under 300 characters, while also viewing the microblogs of other users. Each user's unique account profile lists a record of their published microblogs, known as "tweets." The platform offers "like" and "retweet" options to promote and repost the microblogs of others and allows users to "follow" the microblogs of users they appreciate or hope to keep tabs on. Twitter offers a blue checkmark to "verified" users, often indicating the legitimacy of the account, which can be determined based on the real identity of a public figure (e.g., not a spoof or fake account of a celebrity or politician) or as an indication of the user's considerable following, popularity, and influence on the platform (e.g., user "dril").

As a social media platform, Twitter exerts considerable influence on American public life. Political candidates, news sources, and the neighbor two doors down all receive the same shot at "airtime" for their tweets, which simulates an idealized version of the public square in a free, democratic society. Its method of distributing the thoughts and opinions of its users melds perfectly with the American ethos of freedom of opportunity and expression.

Although Twitter masquerades as a paragon of this "public square" ideal, it fails to truly embrace this ethos for a few reasons. First, by providing verification to certain celebrities or public thinkers, it artificially elevates certain opinions over others. In a true "marketplace of ideas," opinions would not be evaluated based upon the reputation of the thinker. The verification provides an authority bias—even if the authority has no expertise. The blue checkmark engenders this authority bias, which snowballs into

increasing levels of engagement and followers as Twitter increases the visibility of accounts that capture the most attention. Second, this issue is compounded by user curation. Each user chooses to follow the microblogs of other users. Although users can be exposed to other accounts through retweets or tweets marked by Twitter’s algorithm as “relevant” (a problematic mechanism in itself, as it favors opinions that produce engagement above others),³ users primarily interact with self-selected accounts that they choose to follow. While public square debates promote certain ideas amidst many voiced opinions, Twitter’s microblogging model encourages users select inputs rather than varied opinions to weigh with nuance. Third, Twitter allows for limited free speech, not absolute free speech. Twitter has faced lots of controversy in the past several years for its crackdown on conspiracy theories and hate speech, with many users criticizing the tactics as politically motivated, or targeting those opposed to ideologies held by leaders in Silicon Valley.⁴ These three factors undermine the “marketplace of ideas” value.

To be fair, Twitter did not claim to promote absolute free speech. Nor is this any indictment of the platform, as the scope of this thesis does not allow for the moral assessment of powerful, non-governmental corporations and their responsibility in promoting constitutional or American ideals. Twitter is driven by profit, and it ought not surprise users that their activity is monitored to produce increasing engagement by all parties on the platform, regardless of whether the engagement enriches the users’ quality of life. However, it is important to understand that these factors do not foster flourishing

³ Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*, (New York, 2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, September 22 2016): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190498511.001.0001>.

⁴ Jonathan Turley, “Twitter Discloses Another Possible Government Censorship Effort” (The Hill, March 4, 2023), <https://thehill.com/opinion/judiciary/3883931-twitter-discloses-another-possible-government-censorship-effort/>.

discourse but are more inclined to produce a dogmatic “echo” chamber. In reality, Twitter is not so much a paragon of free speech as a social mechanism of reinforcing specific modes of thought and belief.

How Twitter Compares to Catechesis

Naturally, Twitter is not a perfect duplicate of catechesis. Although clergy members are often distinguished by vestments, staffs, or especially fancy hats, the authoritative source on Twitter is frequently designated by the blue verification checkmark. The checkmark, of course, does not make the figure a true expert, but simply reflects the general sense of relevance in the public sector. For example, Bill Nye the Science Guy is a nostalgic figure, beloved by many. His primary influence is through his television programming for children, but his tweets on politics, public health, and climate change—content entirely outside of his expertise—receive a considerable platform of almost 6 million followers and countless more exposures to other Twitter users. Thus, a distinctive difference between Christian catechesis and Twitter is that while clergy members are at least supposed to teach exclusively on religious matters (in which they have been trained through seminary), verified Twitter accounts receive an indiscriminate platform for their personal opinions, regardless of their expertise and its relevance to their statements. Another difference is that the authority figures within a religious tradition are typically in agreement on major doctrinal concerns, whereas Twitter has many conflicting voices. However, the algorithmic bent toward certain political content, the slanted user base that typically supports left-wing rhetoric, and the feedback loop caused by these two

factors regularly interacting with one another all increase the visibility of left-leaning commentary.⁵

That said, both verified Twitter accounts and clergy members use their audience to project personal messages about right thinking and doctrine. Although some tweets include silly, personal microblogs, many public Twitter accounts are rife with political rhetoric and direct, confrontational messaging about “ultimate concerns,” such as the meaning of representation, the importance of diversity, institutional discrimination, and the value of human life. Many of these fiery tweets go viral through the retweets of millions of Twitter users, whose reposts announce implicit approval, adding to their legitimacy. After a verified Twitter account publishes a tweet that goes viral, this message is “echoed back” by the retweets. The void of an empty digital feed becomes filled by scores of responses to this message; compounded by (at least) scores of daily viral tweets, this process leads to hundreds of ideologically rich messages sent to millions of Americans every single day. Just as the catechism fills the void of human ignorance, so Twitter attempts to fill the void of human boredom. Just as the catechumens “echo back” biblical precepts, Twitter engagement generates an intensification of these messages and their impact on the digital world.

Naturally, some of these tweets that “blow up” go viral because they stir up great outrage—a desirable reaction in the eyes of those attempting to increase obsessive engagement on their social media platform. Algorithmic preference toward “wrong thinking” results in three things. First, the increased visibility and digital interaction

⁵ John Bowden, “Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey: I 'Fully Admit' Our Bias Is 'More Left-Leaning'” (The Hill, August 18, 2018), <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/402495-twitter-ceo-jack-dorsey-i-fully-admit-our-bias-is-more-left-leaning/>.

benefits Twitter as a business because it generates likes, retweets, and other engagement that is useful in generating revenue. Second, the tweets that are considered egregious are elevated to a level where mass outrage can do significant damage to personal and professional reputation, which occasionally leads to cancelation. Just as catechesis (teaching and transformation) and excommunication (delineation and sanctification) go hand in hand, so do Twitter and cancel culture. Third, this public exhibition of “right” and “wrong” thinking, as well as the consequences of voicing the wrong opinion publicly, discourages Twitter users from supporting the offenders for fear of reprisal. The last two effects, which occur on almost all social media platforms, significantly contribute to the growth and strength of left-wing political thought. Thus, political frameworks such as progressive liberalism benefit significantly from the catechizing effects of Twitter.

To be clear, this is not a detailed analysis or critique of Twitter’s political bent. Any personal opinion risks introducing bias, and my commentary on the impact of Twitter’s leanings is not valuable enough to run such a risk. Nor am I particularly interested as to what causes its leftward political tendencies.⁶ The point of this examination lies within this catechetical concept of tweets “echoing back” and revealing dogmatic messaging, not whether this messaging is correct or faulty. While catechesis reflects the doctrinal beliefs and concerns of a particular congregation or denomination, Twitter’s promoted content illustrates the thoughts and preoccupations of a progressive, liberal society.

⁶ Stefan Wojcik and Adam Hughes, “Sizing up Twitter Users,” Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, April 24, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/04/24/sizing-up-twitter-users/>.

CHAPTER FIVE

Revelation and Wokeism

Exploring the Question

This thesis has already looked at mechanisms that strengthen the foundations of the Christian tradition and the corresponding rituals within progressive liberalism. The narrative of Christian Scriptures, excommunication, and catechesis all provide direction and structure for the Christian Church and its constituents. However, this work has yet to address the primary method of growing the Christian Church beyond its foundations, which will now be remedied. How does the Christian tradition conceive of avenues of growth and continuation into new generations? How do conversion and evangelism relate to revelation, and how does progressive liberalism adapt these concepts? This chapter seeks to compare revelation to progressive liberalism's counterpart: wokeism. By comparing wokeism with the Christian Church's concept of revelation in the domains of conversion and evangelism, this chapter supports the thesis that progressive liberalism significantly mimics aspects of the Christian tradition.

The Christian Concept of Revelation

To compare revelation and wokeism, one must understand revelation from a Christian standpoint. Christian theology considers revelation to be both the process of disclosure from the Divine as well as the revealed content itself.¹ Not all truths are revelation; traditionally, Christian philosophers have distinguished between “truths of

¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), s.v. “Revelation.”

reason”—evident truths grasped by way of our natural faculties of reason—and “truths of revelation,” which are only knowable through faith.²

Since revelatory truths rely on the faith of a constituent, they generally reside within a pre-existing framework of accepted truths about the cosmos. Believers already have buy-in; they embrace the necessary leap of faith to accept the revelation as authoritatively (though not observably) true, according to the assumptions and truths of reason they have already accepted as reality. In other words, revelatory truth does not have to make sense. In fact, because it definitionally exists beyond rational inquiry, the listener might even expect an utterance unaccountable to coherent thought. Naming an interpretation of reality as revelation, therefore, is an extremely powerful tool, because it presupposes that its subject matter is fundamentally unhindered by observable principles of reason. Faithful constituents are thus vulnerable to extreme or radical appeals based on non-rational revelations.

The Progressive Concept of Revelation

As a worldview, progressive liberalism also has truths of reason and truths of revelation. Most of its predecessor’s political doctrine (classical liberalism) was based on truths of reason, such as the foundational presumption that human beings have inherent (or at least endowed) rights to life and liberty. Of course, whether or not one can truly reach this conclusion through reason is not the point. Rather, it is significant that classical liberalism believed these rights were self-evident, or perhaps could determine this based on other “self-evident” truths, like the existence of a Creator that endows inalienable rights.

² *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “Revelation.”

Other claims that legitimize the progressive liberal worldview, should they lack clear and compelling evidence or rationality, require a revelation. However, because progressive liberalism focuses on political paradigms rather than spiritual realities, revelation does not explicitly involve a sense of divinity. Progressive liberalism's version of revelation, stemming from a political paradigm, logically revolves around the nature of socio-political reality instead of the nature of divine truths. The revelation of progressive liberalism speaks to mankind as it truly is rather than the truth of extraterrestrial matters. The parallel to the Christian tradition's concept of revelation is not the subject matter, but the effect: that the constituent opens their eyes to "true reality," leading to enlightenment.

This enlightenment is often likened to the act of awakening after stumbling around with closed eyes, and thus has been labeled as "wokeness." Becoming woke, similar to experience of many Old Testament prophets, gives clarity to the true evil at work and the cosmic struggle for justice. Whereas in the Bible, this clarity reveals the nature of the Divine and the spiritual powers at play, wokeness reveals the effects of the original sin from the perspective of progressive liberalism (as discussed in Chapter Two), and how marginalization and oppression pervade practically every aspect of living.³ As is consistent with its progressive liberal context, "wokeism" often perceives the government or ruling political entity as the gatekeeper to social justice. Although the government cannot mandate goodwill between racial groups, it can employ social policy such as affirmative action to counteract disparate treatment. From the woke perspective, it is not only true that the government is responsible for the economic distance between a median income white family and median income non-white family due to its previous

³ McGrath, "The Authority of the Sacred Victim," 132-152.

discrimination; it is equally true that the government is capable and equipped to be the primary responder to remedy this oppression by balancing the scales. To be clear, this thesis is not in any way discounting the impact of institutional discrimination within the United States. It simply claims that wokeism is similar to biblical revelation, as both open one's eyes to true reality, reinforce the origin and philosophy of history of the particular worldview, and encourage a particular response to said revelation.⁴ Both biblical revelation and wokeism call for conversion, which this chapter will now examine.

Conversion

Within the Christian tradition, conversion stems from revelation. Conversion is measured differently within different denominations of the Christian tradition. In more traditional denominations, conversion is formalized, requiring an extended commitment to affirming the catechism, memorizing and reciting creeds, and being baptized to properly receive the Eucharist. These denominations often adopt a strong distinction between salvation and conversion. In more modern denominations, conversion and salvation have become intertwined, as the ritualistic aspects of religious conversion have faded out of Church culture. Baptism, which was the primary signal of conversion in the early Church, is now considered an outward sign that reaffirms one's previous conversion through the acceptance of salvation through Christ. Thus, it can be difficult to provide a unified, specific definition of conversion in the Christian faith. However, regardless of the length and ritual of the process itself, conversion can be understood as two necessary alignment shifts. First, the convert transforms from a sinful heathen into a practicing

⁴ McGrath, Molly Brigid. "The Authority of the Sacred Victim," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 37, no. 2 (2020).

orthodox believer in a righteous relationship with the Divine. Second, the convert moves from the out-group beyond the Church into a faithful member in good standing within the Christian Church. Conversion cannot be separated from these two functions.

Wokeism works similarly in that it requires the acceptance of specific beliefs and a general narrative regarding oppression and the “right side of history.” Like revelation, it relies heavily on the previous acceptance of “truths of reason” and capitalizes on the believer’s buy-in to reinforce the overall mythology of the progressive liberal worldview. At its core, wokeism is a diagnosis of what is wrong with the world and a location of the true struggle of humanity. Wokeism provides an authoritative response to unanswerable questions, such as what truly ails humankind. It names oppression and injustice as the woes of the world, or even its original sin, and perceives the struggle against oppressive hierarchy as the epic, righteous battle humanity must wage against true evil. In providing a definitive yet unprovable answer to unknowable things, it mimics revelation. The synergy of “truths of reason” and “truths of revelation” pushes the convert from a passive participant in the social order into an active advocate for the oppressed. This adoption of political orthodoxy mimics the conversion of Christian believers. However, this comparison of revelation is incomplete by simply examining conversion. The final step of revelation must also be examined: the compelled response to revelation, which is evangelism.

Evangelism

Evangelism is rarely conceived of as related to mythology, eschatology, and prophecy, but all these categories are united by one fundamental characteristic: they all stem from revelation. Mythology and eschatology are derived from the implications of

these lessons. Where one begins affects where they will go (origin), and that for which one strives reveals what they envision as the world's culmination (eschatology).

Prophecy, however, is most obviously associated with evangelism. After all, prophecy is a proclamation of that which God reveals, and at its base level, evangelism is the sharing of the “gospel,” or good news: that God has revealed Himself to humanity as the incarnate Christ. Just as prophets were compelled to speak the revelation of God in the Old Testament—sometimes being quite literally compelled, as in the case of Balaam—so are those in possession of the revelation of the Incarnation compelled to share the Gospel to those who have not yet heard. Evangelism is the compelled response to revelation.

In both the Christian tradition and the progressive liberal worldview, evangelism is based on the presumption of ignorance. For Christians, salvation and a restored relationship with God both stem from the moment of repentance and conversion (again, when this precise moment occurs is debated). Thus, the state of a nonbeliever presumes an ignorance of God—at the very least, the lack of a true knowledge of and personal relationship with the Divine. Additionally, Christian Scripture clarifies in 1 Corinthians 2 that God's wisdom is “hidden”; those without the Spirit of God consider His revelations “foolishness,” while those who understand His revelations only grasp them through His Spirit.⁵ Thus, the reasoning goes, if non-believers are confronted with the Gospel and refuse, they have simply not received the truth from the Spirit of God. Even in their education through evangelism, they remain ignorant. If non-believers opened their eyes (or, as some denominations of Christianity claim, if God opened their eyes), then they

⁵ 1 Cor. 2:7-15.

could not help but see true reality, grasp the revelation of God, and act in accordance with its implications (as interpreted by the Christian tradition).

Wokeism operates similarly. Assume for a moment that the equivalent for non-believers in the progressive liberal paradigm is a politically conservative white man. How does such a man become an ally to the progressive liberal cause? The answer is found not in persuasion, but illumination. Becoming woke necessitates a type of revelation. The very foundation of “wokeness” assumes that all bigotry and discrimination originates exclusively from ignorance, whether innocent or willful—the problem is not simply a different conclusion from the same evidence, wokeism implies, but a lack of sufficient knowledge.

Innocent ignorance can supposedly be remedied through education and dialogue, as exemplified in the current debate around schooling. Critical Race Theory is a hot-button issue and a frequently misinterpreted phrase, but at its core it demonstrates something very crucial: the progressive liberal worldview—which, as previously noted, often considers inequality and power imbalance to be oppressive—considers education to be a key missing piece in the strategy to evangelize. In other words, the problem is accidental ignorance. The sheer power of enlightenment, especially if the illumination includes a particular philosophy of history, is enough to provide ample motivation to subscribe to progressive liberal doctrine, much like Christian doctrine teaches that the immutable power of divine revelation demands a response to the Holy Spirit. Evangelism in Christianity and progressive liberalism assumes that, in large part, knowledge of true reality is enough to effect personal change.

Willful ignorance, however, can defy explanation within both paradigms. After all, just like many Christians struggle to find some way to explain a lack of acceptance of God's salvation ("it must not be their time" or "turning away from the faith means they never really accepted the Holy Spirit at all"), those treating progressive liberalism as a religious worldview must intuit an explanation for those who, upon hearing the good news of deconstructed gender roles, or of total racial equality, intentionally refuse it and double down on their lives of anti-wokeness. What could explain this rejection of revelation? An outside observer may grasp that, simply put, the nonbeliever does not find the evidence or argument to be compelling. However, refusal baffles many progressive liberals, demonstrating the implicit assumption that enlightenment, the personal reception of woke revelation, is the gateway to true reality. The incredulity, in other words, belies the weight assigned to wokeism's principles. The sharing of this revelation through evangelism, and the presumption that this enlightenment necessitates a change of heart, mimics a common attitude toward revelation with the Christian Church.

Conclusion

This chapter compared wokeism in progressive liberalism to the concept of revelation within the Christian tradition by examining the context and content of revelatory truths, as well as two responses to revelation: conversion and evangelism. Although these comparisons do not prove that one worldview is a direct parrot of another, it does contribute to the overarching claim of this thesis: that in many significant ways, progressive liberalism can be mapped onto the doctrinal beliefs and ritual behaviors of the Christian Church, revealing similarities between the two paradigms that speak to the gravity and importance that both worldviews hold over their constituents.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

How This Approach Furthers the Conversation

If this thesis had the chance to make a single critique about itself, or a meta-analysis of its most frustrating conundrum, it would be that selecting a comparison of group behaviors between religious and political identities does not result in a quantitative conclusion. Even though religion and politics are inseparable from the community in which they exist, the variety of beliefs and behaviors between individuals in that community are practically impossible to systematically categorize. Without the capacity to know each person's motivations (for instance, why they practice the ritual of catechesis or the circumstances under which they retweet a controversial post), we cannot truly determine what qualifies as a clash of ultimate concerns versus a disagreement on political mechanisms to the same desired end. Even if skilled sociologists dedicated themselves to this issue, no method of bias reduction could counteract the blindness that participants have toward their own true motivations. In other words, an empirically provable thesis is impossible.

Naturally, this begs the question: why would anyone aware of this topic's fundamental flaw choose to pursue a years-long inquiry into an unanswerable question? Of course, I have significantly invested in an academic pursuit of philosophy, so I have grown accustomed to voluntarily discussing unanswerable questions, but the reason behind this thesis goes far deeper than simply identifying a topic as unprovable. Attaining certainty is useful. However, quite often in matters of ultimate concern, there is great

value not in discovering an answer, but in learning to ask a better question. The art of inquiry undergirds any true liberal arts education, and this thesis was constructed to recognize and embrace this method of thinking about complicated topics of great significance.

The chapters in this thesis discuss a variety of ways that American progressive liberalism, especially in its social mechanisms and rituals, mimic those of the Christian tradition. But how does this benefit the current scholarship surrounding politics, or religion? To what extent can a thought experiment about the rituals of an American political paradigm offer value to further research? This answer, at least, is simple: this thought experiment begins an absolutely vital conversation by producing four more major questions. The conclusion of this thesis discusses these four questions and how pursuing these questions can significantly benefit the problem stated in the introduction: the increasing political divide in the United States.

(1) Is Religion Being Replaced?

The first question to be examined is whether Americans are replacing religion with secularity. From a numerical standpoint, this seems to be straightforward. Fewer people than ever living within the United States identify as religious, and although the number of those who identify as spiritual is steadier than many pastors from the pulpit might say, these individuals crucially identify more with personal practice than organized religion.¹ Although this information is worthy of study, greater intrigue (based on the interest of this thesis) is rooted not in general abandonment of organized religion, but

¹ “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, November 18, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

how political communities adjust to the decline of major community institutions. It is possible that as the Christian Church and its power as an organized religion fade from their previous zenith in American public life, nothing will rise to take its place. A gradual decline may prevent a power vacuum that another institution seizes to capture the attention and zeal of the people. However, considering the findings of this thesis, another explanation seems more likely. Perhaps, during the descent of the Christian tradition's influence on the American people, the habits and social rituals ingrained in American society detached (albeit incompletely) from the Christian Church. Although the doctrinal tenets shifted, the structures baked into American life contain semblances of these rituals. The orientation around zeal for ultimate moral concerns, the right to protest (or evangelize), and the accountability of even esteemed and powerful figures to the public (through cancel culture and excommunication) are now key components of progressive liberalism when they once were expressions of religious loyalty.

Political scientists and sociologists ought to soberly consider the implications of a left-leaning political worldview that employs religious behavior, especially when traditional Christian doctrine is more often associated with right-wing politics. If the American political divide is to be addressed effectively, we cannot understand the issue as a disagreement on political means, but religious ends. Accurate identification of the true nature of the political divide—that it runs deeper than varying solutions—is the first step to any meaningful solutions to the polarity in modern American politics.

(2) Is Religion a Primary Need or a Secondary Solution?

The second question spurred by this thesis falls beyond American politics and into a religious or philosophical level of inquiry about human nature. While the first question

is about whether political affiliation in the United States is replacing religious affiliation, the second probes deeper: is religion the original means, or simply a different one? Those who identify as Christian may be tempted to argue that the Christian Church is a more meaningful institution than progressive liberalism simply because one predates the other. However, their argument would be weak because it relies on an appeal to the virtuosity of age to favor the Christian tradition. This temptation must be resisted in order to answer this question. Is progressive liberalism usurping religion, or is it reinventing it? The answer depends entirely on what need or needs religion supposedly meets. Is progressive liberalism filling a religion-shaped hole? Does it loosely imitate a vital function of human society that Americans cast aside? Or is religion simply a means of addressing a deeper and unmet need? If one determines that progressive liberalism is usurping religion, then they are far more likely to advocate for a return to religious institutions as an anchoring point of public life. However, if progressive liberalism is interpreted as a reinvention of religion that addresses undeniable social needs (in-group/out-group distinction, communal identity, shared beliefs), then the basic components of necessary institutions can be reimaged in a great variety of structures that have nothing at all to do with the Christian tradition or organized religion.

Addressing this question would require increased scholarly scrutiny on the analysis this thesis has offered, as well as other areas of overlap between religion and political identity. Are the functions named in this thesis a way for progressive liberalism to try patching a hole left by the removal of religion in the public sector, or are progressive liberalism and religion two different methods of responding to one fundamental problem or human need? Exploring this question would better define

whether progressive liberalism, in comparison with the Christian tradition, is a faint abstraction or an enlightened innovation.

(3) Do These Findings Legitimize Political Fervor?

The third question prompted by the findings in this thesis provides a chance at hope amidst a dreary forecast of American polarization: could the religious aspect of progressive liberalism provide legitimacy to each side in the eyes of the other political party? After all, if the temptation for religious conservatives is to place their concerns in a position of moral primacy or superiority simply because they consider their political beliefs to be an extension of their religious convictions, what new humility and potential dialogue could emerge from recognizing the religious aspects of progressive liberalism? In navigating complex issues of personal identity and ultimate concerns, one must avoid using one's own experience to inform thinking while simultaneously denying the lived experience of another and how it impacts the other person. If the Christian Church strives to seek the good of all and recognize the dignity of human beings, conservative Christians must address left-wing political agendas that stem from ultimate concerns with great care. Although some Christians may view certain policies as counterproductive or a particular protest as misplaced, they must recognize that progressive liberal convictions can stem from genuine passion, not petulance. By treating the moral questions at hand as serious concerns from people employing their rational capacities instead of as temper-tantrum-throwing toddlers, conservatives can better extend respect and dignity to progressive liberals, which creates space for increased understanding and collaboration across the aisle.

This same concept can be applied in reverse. The current divide in America not only allows conservatives to mock liberals, but for those who reject organized religion to mock those who embrace a religious tradition or institution. Many state that they respect those who practice a religion, but their reaction to being classified as religious themselves is telling. Of course, mere toleration is perfectly allowable under law, but the reaction one has to being called religious, as an individual that identifies as non-religious, can serve as a barometer to that individual's true feelings regarding religion and its integration within politics.

(4) Can This Aid the American Public?

The final question provides the most direction of the four in terms of immediate practicality. The question asks the following: if progressive liberalism in some ways functions as a religion, could mechanisms of cooperation typically employed by interreligious groups positively impact the American political divide? The United States is home to many unique religious institutions and a growing diversity of practicing individuals. These religions work together in some areas of ultimate concern (e.g., poverty and food insecurity) while disagreeing on others (e.g., abortion and gender policies). This remarkable feat is no accident—cooperative initiatives have been carefully guided by interfaith leaders of many religions and political positions. Can the peacemaking, negotiation, and conflict resolution tactics regarding ultimate concern be translated into another area where ultimate concerns manifest? An affirmative answer could greatly improve the effectiveness of unification efforts. Perhaps, with further inquiry, study, and applied expertise, solutions sourced from interfaith efforts can be reworked to mend the American partisan divide. However, this direction can only be

pursued after evaluating the similarities and differences between political and religious doctrine, just as they have been studied in this thesis. As an overlapping source of moral mandate for both the Christian tradition and progressive liberalism, the Imago Dei (which unfortunately was set aside for reasons of length, complexity, and focus) would be a rich area of necessary inquiry. Without this examination, there can be no applicable follow-up questions with direct relevance to the health of American politics.

These four questions draw from fields far beyond political philosophy and into studies of theology, religion, sociology, conflict analysis, and peacemaking. However, the nuances of these questions are only discoverable after scrutinizing the similarity between progressive liberalism and religious behavior. This thesis performed that labor, comparing significant social behaviors and narratives of progressive liberalism with the rituals and structures of the Christian tradition. Without this initial study, the four questions of great importance cannot be thoroughly understood, and although those four questions are far out of the author's capacity to answer, this thesis pushes the conversations surrounding this issue into a further pursuit of "better questions." The frustrating fact of scholarship surrounding behaviors, impulses, habits, and motivations is that a certain conclusion is constantly elusive, but the pursuit of answers often reveals useful avenues of research, like these four questions. And in that light, this work rests.

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