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A Lost Reference Point: How Placing Our Identities in the State Has Facilitated Social Polarization Among Americans

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by

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ABSTRACT

We are living in a moment of societal breakdown, as America is increasingly plagued with fractious polarization along political and cultural lines. The potential causes of this are complex and exist within a broad spectrum of possibilities, with the potential solutions being even more contentious. However, it is my contention that identity is the central issue here. As people begin to place their identities in a religious devotion to the liberal state as opposed to a transcendent ideal, once simple, agreed-upon premises become harsh divides, and polarization ensues. To fully evaluate how this has happened, and thus how it may be solved, I am going to turn to the thinkers that helped form our modern conception of the state, identity, religion, natural law, and human nature. I will include analyses of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, and Rawls. With their insights, I will evaluate how we got to the position we are in today, and how liberalism has led to the destruction of transcendent morality and human nature. From there I will weigh various alternatives to modern liberalism, ultimately offering a solution based on incremental, local change rooted in transcendent morality and true tolerance.

Keywords: Polarization, transcendence, immanence, identity, Liberalism, and religion

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, ostensibly to an even greater extent in the post-Trump world, polarization has become a staple of American political discourse. American society is inundated with coverage of the "opposing" side's immediate and cataclysmic threat to our democracy. Political disagreements ruin Thanksgiving dinners, romantic relationships, and potential job prospects. Congress remains bitterly divided, at least from the perspective of the general public, and election season is an increasingly fraught and stressful time. It is clear that there is more going on than civil political disagreement.

In the opening chapter of a recent book, *A Time to Build*, political analyst Yuval Levin describes our current situation as a "social crisis," stemming from a mood of rage and despair that has compounded into "the realm of culture…as various forms of identity politics, on both the Left and the Right, undermine the foundations of unity. Even our ability to carry on frank conversations has been degraded lately by a loss of trust and common ground. People often behave as though they cannot hold a set of facts and premises in common," (Levin 2020, 11-12). Levin is describing what political scientists have coined, "affective polarization," (Iyengar et al. 2012, 130). Also called social polarization, this refers to the loathing of members of the opposing party not necessarily due to any specific policy discrepancy, but simply the dint of their political identity. Policy disagreements will always exist in a pluralistic society, but social polarization in America extends well beyond that. Many American partisans begin from the premise that those who disagree with them must be operating in bad faith, creating an immediate air of suspicion that stifles good faith debates. While most would acknowledge these symptoms, at least to an extent, the cause of them is much less clear.

Polarization is a complex phenomenon with several plausible and even simultaneous explanations. Levin continues by arguing that the breakdown of institutions is the cause of polarization, as well as the general malaise found in American culture. Without institutions to operate within, people have severed their connections to each other, driving Americans further apart (Levin 2020, 39). Some see polarization as primarily a class issue, with economic inequality as the crucial driver. Proponents of this idea often see the most consequential cultural divide arising from the wealthy systematically oppressing the lower classes for their own gain. Others see polarization as media-invented, with the rage machine intended to drive Americans apart for the sake of ratings. While these explanations have their place, my argument focuses on a more abstract reframing of individual identity and the loss of traditional religious adherence as drivers of polarization. Moral authorities in America have moved from a transcendent authority, and a community based on this authority, to the immanent authority of the state, manifesting in the form of a political ideology, party, or messianic leader. This move has facilitated social polarization among Americans, as identities have increasingly become defined by this world as opposed to the next one. We in America have erected a Tower of Babel through our establishment of the modern state as a point of worship. Placing this tower, in the form of the state, above God has had real consequences. The building of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament caused the people's language to be confused, eliminating their ability to communicate (Gen. 11:1-9). I believe a similar consequence has taken hold in American life.

Defining Terms

Identity Politics

Briefly, I would like to define some terms that I will rely on throughout this essay. I have already defined social polarization as the ailment I am attempting to find a solution to. Another term I refer to throughout this essay is *identity politics*, a term thrown around a lot in American politics. In short, identity politics is the formation of allegiances based on certain characteristics, usually race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, in opposition to more dominant identity groups and with the goal of rectifying perceived or historic injustices. Political theorist Mark Mitchell, who I will draw from extensively later in this essay, explains that "identity politics is a plausible response by those individuals who perceive they have been left behind—economically, socially, or politically…seeking an alternative…some retreat into identity groups and seek status by means of grievance," (Mitchell 2018, 19). While identity politics has traditionally manifested itself on the Left, a form of reactionary identity politics has emerged on the Right. This is essentially the idea that predominately white men see themselves as victims of the Left's identity politics, so they attempt to push back with their own race-based identitarianism. This reaction can explain some of the increase in white supremacism in certain corners of the alt-right (Mitchell 2018, 19).

Transcendence and Immanence

At a fundamental level, my argument relies on a return to *transcendent* religion, and a departure from *immanent* religion. I expand upon this distinction in the next chapter and beyond, but it may be helpful to define these terms here as well. The true difference between the transcendent and the immanent is what Steven Smith calls the "location of

the sacred" (Smith 2018, 109). In a transcendent religion, the sacred exists outside of time and space, and maintains the world from outside its metaphysical boundaries. Conversely, immanent religiosity places the sacred *within* the world itself where the sacred can "consecrate the world from within," (Smith 2018, 111). It is important to understand that "transcendent vs. immanent" is not *necessarily* the same as "supernatural vs. temporal." In his book, *Pagans and Christians in the City*, Smith compares Judeo-Christian religiosity to pagan religion. At least in the eyes of their adherents, the pagan gods were supernatural, yet they still existed within time and space and on the same metaphysical plane as those who worshipped them. Therefore, in immanent religion the *world itself* is made sacred as opposed to the *next world* being sanctified by a transcendent deity. That is not to say that transcendent deities are unconcerned with the immanent. Many Christians believe God is deeply involved with the business of this world. However, there exists a further plane of existence which ensures that adherents to transcendent religion never feel fully at home on Earth.

Liberalism

Underlying the immanent worship of the liberal state is the ideology of *liberalism* itself. In the final chapter of this essay I flesh out liberalism extensively, but I will mention a distinction here that should be considered throughout. First off, liberalism represents freedom from tradition and from established, potentially arbitrary norms. Mitchell explains that "the very word 'liberalism' derives from the Latin *liber*, 'free.' Ours is an age where individual freedom is cherished and any impediment to that freedom is seen as an affront to be demolished," (Mitchell 2018, 2). However, the modern liberal can often be placed in two different camps. There are *classical* liberals

and more *progressive-minded* liberals. Mitchell refers to these as first and second wave liberalism. While adherents to both forms hold the same underlying philosophy of freedom from the strictures of tradition, classical liberals still recognize a common virtue that binds the people together. As we will see, liberalism has become untethered from virtue with the arrival of the second wave of liberalism, the ramifications of which are a major theme throughout.

Essay Roadmap

In the following essay, I will begin with the creation of the liberal state and its promise of a reason-based society. This society establishes moral authority using reason, making religious, and thus transcendent authority contradictory. I will draw primarily from Benjamin Wiker and David Koyzis to explain how the liberal state has flourished, with brief summaries of the contributions of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Spinoza. From here I will begin my discussion of latent religious predispositions, as well as how the state religion manifests itself. When the liberal state makes itself the primary moral arbiter, identity becomes inextricably linked with politics. Therefore, political affiliation turns into an integral part of one's individual identity. This may include Christians and non-Christians, as some Evangelicals continue identify closely with political figures like Donald Trump, while some liberals let their political ideology define their identity. Politics has become an immanent religion that Americans continue to identify with.

This is where Carl Trueman's *expressive individualism* comes in, and how it has come to dominate American culture. Here, I will define expressive individualism, and draw on Trueman's analysis of Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin. Using his

analysis, I will show how these thinkers paved the way for human nature to become mutable. When the individual's inner sense of self becomes their most important identity, and that self is inseparable from politics, anyone with opposing political views may be viewed as a threat to one's basic sense of who they are. Therefore, social polarization in the political and cultural realms will continue to thrive.

Next, I will look at the paradox of tolerance in the liberal world, using the ideas of John Rawls to show the misguided and seemingly illiberal nature of liberal tolerance. I will also cover what we are to do with the so-called *intolerant* in a hyper-tolerant society. Finally, I will evaluate post-liberal alternatives, and how they could facilitate a return of a transcendent reference point, thus redefining our fundamental identities independent from our politics, and thwarting the polarization that plagues our nation.

CHAPTER II: THE SECULAR MORAL ORDER

In order to understand why so many have oriented their religious impulses toward the state, it is important to first establish the creation of the modern state as a religious institution. When taken at face value, the liberal state appears to be a neutral framework upon which society can be built. The Enlightenment thinkers posited that through our natural reason, we can order society in the most tolerant and inclusive formation. It is therefore unnecessary to rely on previous religious morality when we can rely on our reason. In fact, Professor Benjamin Wiker explains that modern liberal thinking began with "a desire to be *free from* the burden of Christianity," (Wiker 2013, 15). Prior to the modern state in the West, people got their morals from their religion (namely Christianity), so one of the roles of the church was to promulgate religious morality. The liberal state, however, has usurped that role from the church and created its own version of morality that many have adopted instead. That is not to say that Christian morality before the liberal state was a utopia of uprightness. Years of religious violence led many to believe a state-based morality was necessary to resolve these conflicts.

Before Constantine converted to Christianity, leading to the Holy Roman Empire, a strict (for all intents and purposes) *separation of church and state* was established along immanent and transcendent lines. Wiker explains that the "great divide between the temporal and the eternal," was the "very deepest source of the distinction between church and state," (Wiker 2013, 51). The original, most fundamental version of the church desired focused attention on the transcendent. This kept the church from becoming too worldly, and from being corrupted into serving political ends by being too ingrained in the state. To put it simply, "the church is mainly concerned about the ultimate fate of the

immortal soul in the next world," (Wiker 2013, 52). Having this institution focused on the transcendent kept Christians more focused on the next world as well, something that I will discuss in later sections.

Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Spinoza

The separation of church and state as described above is not what we consider in our modern interpretation of the separation of church and state, however. Wiker builds a timeline of the creation of the secular state, beginning with Niccolò Machiavelli, who was revolutionary in the creation of the state as we know it. Writing in the sixteenth century, he was central to the "concept of an abstract 'state' that is independent of both ruler and ruled," by using "the term *stato* to refer both to the prince's powers and position and to an abstract apparatus above prince and people," (Cavanaugh 2011, 10). Wiker claims Machiavelli also introduced the *liberal notion* of the separation of the church from the state. Instead of having the church independent of the state, because the two had different roles and powers, Machiavelli wanted a purely secular state by *subtraction* of the church. Machiavelli's "very purpose in inventing the state was to exclude the church from any cultural, moral, or political power or influence," (Wiker 2013, 104). Like the Roman pagans, Machiavelli saw the Christian's meek morality as weak and limiting. His infamous prince could not be "bound by the invisible chains of a morality linked to some supernatural destiny," (Wiker 2013, 107). Machiavelli rejected the idea that there was a *next world* to which morality must be linked. Instead, he believed the prince must do anything in his power to serve the here and now. This redefinition of morality has had ramifications on modern secular liberalism. Machiavelli may not have been in favor of

representative government as we have today, but his ideas about the secularization of the state have persisted. Secularization that "[affirms] the secular state from below rather than judge it from above," (Wiker 2013, 120) remains a feature of the modern liberal state.

Hobbes continued the liberalization of the state with the moral relativism of his state of nature. Hobbes is widely considered the first state of nature theorist, a theory fundamental to the formation of Western government. Professor Jethro Lieberman connects Hobbes to the scientific revolution which was occurring alongside Hobbes' writing. Scientists post-Galileo began to resolve "the whole of any phenomenon into its elements and then looked for laws that governed them." Hobbes took this same approach, dissolving the political community "into what he conceived to be its elements, disconnected individuals, possessing natural rights, living in an isolated…'state of nature,'" (Lieberman 2012, 20). It is important to note Hobbes' belief that individuals have natural rights in their original condition, because later we will learn how that belief has been dispelled by subsequent thinkers.

Within the Hobbesian state of nature men are fundamentally equal, free from any overarching guiding principle outside of the individual drive for survival. Therefore, there exists no divine moral standard of good and evil. Instead, everyone has the liberty to "decide for himself what he shall seek as desirable, and hence call good," (Wiker 2013, 129). The original condition is completely morally relativistic, so while Hobbes believed in natural rights, he is writing from the Machiavellian perspective that morality is not predetermined by God.

Of course, Hobbes does not expect man to live in a morally relative state of nature forever. He believed the state of nature was a "state of general warfare," (Koyzis 2003, 50) with everyone doing whatever they feel is necessary for survival (a view not shared by all state of nature theorists). To quell this barbarity, Hobbes then gives a sovereign ruler the right to define good and evil in order to escape the brutal state of nature. This morality is not based on a divine mandate, but on what the sovereign thinks will protect the people. Therefore, *right* and *wrong*, is only what the sovereign determines it to be, and as long as it doesn't harm anyone else, anything outside of this law is morally neutral. While this may not sound very liberal in our modern sense, David Koyzis describes Hobbes' sovereign ruler as "pre-liberal," or the "first-stage" in liberal development (Koyzis 2003, 53). He explains Hobbes' loose definition of freedom as the ability to do what you want, or more precisely the freedom to live in *security* outside the state of nature. As long as autocratic rule is better than the state of nature, the people will be free.

Like Machiavelli, Hobbes was an autocrat, but his moral relativism has infiltrated liberal society today. The ability to define morality has shifted from the Hobbesian aristocrat to the *individual themselves*. The state's new mandate is to protect the individual's right to define right and wrong, or even to allow them to define God for themselves. However, this "right or liberty ends up feeding the power of the secular state, in fact creating the secular state by the subtraction or absolute 'separation' of religion," (Wiker 2013, 139). In order to make religious and moral beliefs entirely privatized within the individual, the state has adopted secularism, or unbelief, as the *state religion*. As we

will see, people are increasingly subscribing to the secular state religion in lieu of traditional religious beliefs.

The final theorist I will discuss in my analysis of the creation of the liberal state is Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza's contribution to the secular state comes in his establishment of the secular church. Spinoza believed in the sacralization of the state itself, completely abolishing the distinction between church and state. Not in the form of oligarchy, however, but instead, Wiker describes it as, "the state *as* church, devoted to the worship of itself…defined precisely by liberation of this world from the next…of the state from a critical church standing outside and above it…of individuals from the demands of a morality defined by God" (Wiker 2013, 144). The state is tasked with the proliferation of the public good in all its forms. That is to say, public forms of religion must be regulated by the state. Philosopher Steven Nadler explains that, according to Spinoza, the outer worship of God, and the way religion is practiced, "falls within the public domain and, thus, within the sovereign's sphere of authority." Therefore, the state is to regulate the *official* interpretation of the Bible and how it is "to be translated in practice," as well as the "source of the authority of God's decrees in the state," (Nadler 2011, 202). In doing this, Spinoza fully removes religious leaders and the church from their place of authority in favor of the secular state.

Spinoza was a pantheist, claiming *all matter* is God, as opposed to the Christian monotheism that identifies God as a single, heavenly creator. Therefore, if God is anything and everything, every person should have the right to determine for themselves what God is. This necessitates "a state defined by no one's belief, that is to say, a state defined by *unbelief*," (Wiker 2013, 158), in a continuation of the Hobbesian secular state.

Spinoza was indifferent to personal beliefs about religion, but any *outward expression* of this belief was to be regulated by the state. If the state's chief goal is to ensure every person has the right to define God for themselves inwardly, a secular state must be embraced. To ensure this right is bestowed equally, "secularism becomes the state religion, the state belief system, the state worldview," (Wiker 2013, 163). The liberal church, stripped of dogma and the power of transcendent authority, goes on to support the liberal state, as they hold the same moral aims. Transcendent authority is set aside once again, in favor of the secular authority of the state.

These theorists paved the way for the secular liberalism we see today. Machiavelli's immanent morality dismissed Christian morality as a timid obstruction to effective rule. Hobbes took this rejection and added a level of moral relativism, in which every individual in the state of nature possesses the right to define morality for themselves. Outside of the state of nature, Hobbes gives this right to the sovereign in his enforcement of the law. Spinoza continued this moral relativistic tradition with his secular state religion. When the individual is given the ability to define not just morality, but God himself, the state must regulate that in some way. In doing this, the liberal state has adopted secularism as the state religion.

CHAPTER III: ADHERING TO THE STATE RELIGION

Even if one accepts the premise that the liberal state has adopted secularism as a kind of state religion, it remains to be seen whether the people will adhere to the secular religion that has been established. Just because a religion exists, does not mean that one must adhere to it. In fact, there are millions of people in America and elsewhere that do not subscribe to a particular religion. However, I contend that humans are religious creatures, engrained with innate religious predispositions, and that many of those that worship the state do so subconsciously.

Latent Religiosity

There remains a substantial philosophical debate over latent religious predispositions. However, there is clinical, sociological, and philosophical evidence that no person can be wholly secular, with even the most irreligious person containing religious impulses. Famed psychiatrist Viktor Frankl found in his clinical research that religious inclinations are often suppressed, but "a religious sense is existent and present in each and every person, albeit buried…in the unconscious," (Smith 2018, 44). This is similar to the argument made by sociologist Christian Smith, who sees all humans as believers, in that, "all of our knowledge…is situated within particularistic knowledge systems that are ultimately based on beliefs and assumptions that are nonuniversal and incapable of being independently and objectively verified," (Smith 2003, 55). Therefore, according to Smith, the only difference between a religious person and a secular person (both of whom are believers) is that religious people, "are governed by a moral order(s) grounded in some superemperical reality," while the moral order governing nonreligious

or secular people is, “grounded in some ordering reality that is not superemperical but immanent (or at least that they presume to be so),” (Smith 2003, 101). If this is the case, people must place this religious impulse somewhere, whether they recognize it or not.

Perhaps surprisingly, even the famed opponent of Christianity Jean-Jacques Rousseau understood the inevitability of religion in society, as well as in people’s hearts. Political theorist Mark Mitchell explains that “Rousseau understood that the question is not *if* humans will worship but, rather, *what* they will worship?” (Mitchell 2018, 209). Rousseau famously advocated for a “civil religion” in opposition to Christianity. This civil religion has similarities to the state religion set out by the theorists above, following the “general will” of the people. For Hobbes, the sovereign made the laws and thus handed down morality to the people. For Rousseau, “the will of the sovereign is merely the general will,” (Mitchell 2018, 209), but the same rules apply. The civil religion is meant to take power away from a transcendent authority, and “consolidate the power of the state,” (Mitchell 2018, 208). This then gives the state the authority to pass on morality to the citizens; a morality that has one key prohibition: intolerance (more on that later). A form of Rousseau’s civil religion has infiltrated America today. Christianity is not dead, of course, it is even thriving in certain areas of the country. But the issue of state worship is not strictly a Christian vs. Non-Christian one. The Left may be more in favor of radical liberalism, but religious Evangelicals also place significant religious adherence toward the authorities of the liberal state. While it may look different on the Right and the Left, the deification of the state, or members of the state, is bipartisan and wide-ranging.

It is fairly obvious that one’s morality is closely associated with identity. Or, at least, one’s morality informs how one is to identify. Therefore, if the state defines what is

moral, one's identity will become influenced by the state. Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh addresses this, in discussing the longing for unity in America today. He explains that "in Christian thought, the gathering of the many into one is not accomplished by an act of binding one to another. In the body of Christ, the many are gathered into one by means of each one's participation in the head of the body, who is Christ. The body of Christ has a transcendent reference." However, in a liberal society in which this transcendent reference has been destroyed in favor of liberal secularism, "it can only be that the nation-state becomes an end in itself, a kind of transcendent reference needed to bind the many to each other," (Cavanaugh 2011, 47). Under the Machiavellian rubric, the state remains free from the shackles of transcendent authority, yet it is still what binds the members of a pluralistic polity. The state, therefore, grows stronger when the transcendent reference points are diminished. When Spinoza claims that everyone should be able to define morality for themselves, a common devotion becomes nearly impossible, so "in the absence of shared ends, devotion to the nation-state as the end in itself becomes ever more urgent," (Cavanaugh 2011, 53). However, devotion to the state does not bring unity. The state cannot supplant the transcendent reference of a divine authority with secular liberalism because pluralism will still endure. The *state* represents different things to different people, and gods will be made of these entities.

Manifestations of State Worship

Thanks to the movement of morality from the transcendent to the immanent discussed in the previous section, many have accordingly moved their religious impulses towards the state. In a left-wing example of state worship, Ben Wiker quotes some of the

intense messianic language associated with Barack Obama after his inauguration, with many on the Left seeing him as a demigod of sorts, capable of helping us evolve into the next phase of civilization (Wiker 2013, 5-6). This may seem like a surface level example, but seeing our politicians as proverbial deities, as opposed to flawed policymakers, is a perceptible illustration of how the state religion has taken hold of so many. This vapid devotion to a single leader may be even more concerning on the Right, with the rise of Donald Trump. Professor Kristin Kobes Du Mez describes the Evangelical support for Trump as "the culmination of evangelicals' embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad," (Kobes Du Mez 2020, 3). The staunch loyalty many evangelicals have towards Trump represents their view of him as a "vengeful warrior Christ," (Kobes Du Mez 2020, 3), capable of saving the soul of the nation by any means necessary. They see the meek "family values, turn the other cheek," brand of Christianity as failing and instead believe that a strong male savior is needed. Unexpected similarities can be drawn between Machiavelli and the Trump-supporting modern-day Evangelical. As described above, Machiavelli believed Christian morality was weak and thus needed to be overthrown, in order not to clash with the Prince's priorities for the here and now. Similarly, some Evangelicals defensively justify Trump's clear character flaws, putting aside their morality for what they see as the greater good.

Political commentator David French expounds upon this, explaining that during the 1998 impeachment battle of Bill Clinton, to as recently as a 2011 poll, Evangelicals were the most likely religious subgroup to condemn character flaws in leaders, and to believe that leaders who commit personal immoral acts cannot fulfill their professional

duties ethically. Amazingly, "by 2016, Evangelicals had flipped. They outraced secular Americans to be the religious group *most* likely to accept an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life," (French 2020, 77). The ends justify the means, even when the means include a steadfast rejection of Biblical morality and an unrelenting devotion to a member of the state. Trump may have been a "populist outsider," but ultimately, he still represented the liberal state. Therefore, as the Evangelical church was swept up by a brash TV celebrity, believing his no-nonsense masculinity would be the Messiah of a broken nation, in reality, they were just shifting their identity from the transcendent reference point back toward the immanent authority of the state.

In devotion to the liberal state, there is more that people worship than individual politicians or the parties they represent. There is the worship of sexual freedom, or even freedom in general, worship of the environment, personal fulfillment, equality, and so-called tolerance. The list is endless, but "since all of these new worships funnel their aspirations through the state, the state itself becomes the object of worship," (Wiker 2013, 300). Just as Cavanaugh explained above, the reference point for inevitable religious impulses must be the one thing we all share: the state. We are then united in a state that has adopted its own form of morality and is free from any reference point of its own.

CHAPTER IV: IDENTITY, SELF AND THE DEATH OF HUMAN NATURE

We have seen how some people have placed their latent religious inclinations in some form of the liberal state, which in and of itself could carry some difficulties for political unity. However, the movement toward secular state religion becomes truly problematic when viewed in conjunction with another phenomenon in our society: the redefinition of identity and the self. In *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl Trueman details this redefinition at length, and the *expressive individualism* that has taken over modern thought. He takes this term from philosopher Charles Taylor, who explains that in expressive individualism, "each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires" (Trueman 2020, 46). Similar to Spinoza's pantheism, expressive individualism posits that everyone has a unique ability to define humanity. This is not to be done within the framework of a set of institutions but in *opposition* to existing institutions.

Expressive individualism has solidified itself in American culture, and has even been codified into our common law. As Justice Kennedy writes in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the Supreme Court decision upholding a women's right to obtain an abortion, "at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life," (*Planned Parenthood* v. *Casey* 1992). This is a perfect articulation of the subjective sense self-expression that has led to the death of objective human nature. We will see how this understanding of liberty came to be, and what the ramifications of this thinking are.

Rousseau

Justice Kennedy's understanding of liberty could have been taken directly out of the mind of Jean-Jacque Rousseau. While it is insurmountable for anyone to properly trace back the exact origins of modern man, Trueman focuses much of his attention on Rousseau. His ideas about morality run directly counter to that of the Christian ethic. At the most basic level, Rousseau believed that "it is society and the relations and conditions that society embodies that decisively shape and…decisively corrupt individuals" (Trueman 2020, 115). Christians believe man is born sinful and can only overcome this sin by redemption through Christ. It is clear which one of these two opposing ideals has permeated more into liberal thought. Society, tradition, institutions, and religion are all often thought of as corrupting agents in one's ultimate trek to reach personal fulfillment.

Rousseau saw the individual as "intrinsically good" and thus "at his best…when he acts in accordance with his nature" (Trueman 2020, 123). Not only does this run counter to the Christian ethic, but it also is a departure from the state of nature tradition set out by Hobbes. Political society for Christians is a "morally structured reality," but Hobbes and the state of nature theorists turned it into "something from which to escape," and finally Rousseau saw it as, "a condition from which we have unfortunately but irreversibly fallen," (Mitchell 2013, 207). True freedom for Rousseau means complete freedom from the strictures of society. If the individual is not living in accordance with his nature, he is not living authentically and is thus a slave. The makeup of the society is irrelevant to Rousseau, as the "freest" (in our sense of the word) society will still keep you in chains.

Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin

While Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Spinoza were opening up morality for the state to define, Rousseau was divorcing individual identity from intermediate institutions, thus creating a culture in which inner feelings are the most important part of one's identity. Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin furthered this enterprise with "the elimination of the notion that human nature is something that has authority over us as individuals" (Trueman 2020, 164). Rousseau emphasized living in accordance with your individual nature, yet these theorists underscore what Trueman regards as the "plasticity" (Trueman 2020, 164) of the modern human condition. Along with transcendent morality, human nature as an unchanging authority has been tossed aside. Trueman summarizes the impact of these three thinkers on our outlook on human nature and the creation of plastic people.

Like Machiavelli, Nietzsche rejected transcendent meaning in every sense. He also agreed with the Machiavellian assessment of Christianity, believing that it "represents the instincts of the weakest and most oppressed, and it embodies the very hatred of life and the living," (Trueman 2020, 173). In short, Nietzsche was revolted by Christian morality. He further rejected the entire moral order Christianity created. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen puts it this way: according to Nietzsche, "God had not created man in his image; rather *man* created an image of God in order to give life meaning, purpose, and a moral center" (Ratner-Rosenhagen 2012, 22). God himself is dead, and thus the transcendent purpose associated with God must die as well.

Nietzsche was equally critical of the Enlightenment thinkers, however, essentially believing they did not go far enough in their destruction of Christian morality. The Enlightenment served to create natural foundations for Christian morality, therefore

dispensing with the need for God. While God may be dead, they were still using the same moral framework that the religion had built. Nietzsche wanted them to go all the way, and deal with the true consequences of killing God. This means any understanding of the world having "intrinsic meaning," any knowledge or understanding of the universe we claim to have, including our current use of logic, must all be thrown out along with God (Trueman 2020, 169-170). We must dispense with our conception of human nature in favor of self-creation based upon our personal expression of what the *good life* constitutes. Personal satisfaction is the goal, not merely following a transcendent reference point, and not living in accordance with the laws of the universe. According to Nietzsche, these laws and this reference point do not exist. The newly formulated reference point, then, "is merely the myth of the liberated self, unconstrained by the gods of the past and insisting on the free expression of the individual," (Mitchell 2018, 206).

Marx established a similar elasticity narrative, yet through a materialistic and economic lens, as opposed to a psychological one. Marx saw everything from a materialistic framework, positing that human nature was fully dependent on economic conditions. He defined identity by class and by production, which "makes human nature a plastic thing, subject to historical change as the economic dynamics of society change," (Trueman 2020, 179). He believed religion was only a front for poor economic conditions, a false escape for the people in an unjust world (Trueman 2020, 182). Religion, ethics, and morality, all play a part in this façade. The elasticity comes from the revolutionizing of the means of production. If human nature reflected the economic context of the time, then the revolutionizing of this system would be the catalyst for a

change in human nature. To put it another way, human nature is not a steadfast truth but is entirely informed by the material conditions the people exist under.

Darwin's contribution to the elastic self is more straightforward than the other two thinkers. Darwin dismantled the transcendent reference point even further through his theories of natural selection and evolution. These theories removed the need to rely on a divine creator in order to explain the creation of man. They countered the Christian notion that western civilization was built on: that man was created in the image of God giving man eternal value and worth. Darwin's evolution equally opposed the Enlightenment view of human nature and natural rights that Nietzsche rejected. Instead, man was created through natural processes, a purely immanent process, thus allowing the immanent to flourish (Trueman 2020, 186-187).

Trueman continues his discussion with Sigmund Freud, the sexual self, and how sex became the most fundamental part of one's identity. He evaluates LGBT+ issues, and why they have become such a large part of our political discourse, as well as how these issues "are simply symptoms of a deeper revolution in what it means to be a self," (Trueman 2020, 384). However, in his conclusion he states that the "LGBT+ community is only one example of that revolution of selfhood…we are all part of that revolution, and there is no way to avoid it," (Trueman 2020, 385). The move from transcendence to immanence is not just happening at the state level but in the hearts and minds of every individual. People no longer feel tethered to a transcendent morality, or even to a secular human nature. Their identities are in flux, and in a world where politics has become a religion for so many, political identification has become their essential identity. Therefore, it can be drawn that for many, political affiliation is the most authentic

expression of who they are. This is problematic because of the nature of the modern self elucidated above. Within the Rousseauean framework of inner-self expression being our most authentic selves, “that which hinders my outward expression of my inner feelings—that challenges or attempts to falsify my psychological beliefs about myself and thus to disturb my sense of inner well-being—is by definition harmful and to be rejected,” (Trueman 2020, 49-50). Expressive individualism exacerbates the harm done by identity politics, as it follows that if someone identifies through the guise of the liberal state, any opponent to this political identity is an opponent to one’s basic self.

CHAPTER V: AN INTOLERANT TOLERANCE

Thus far, I have covered the creation of the modern secular state, and how it has become a point of worship. I have also discussed several ways in which devotion to the liberal state manifests among Americans. From there I described the modern conception of the self, and how individual identity has become mutable. Another theme I have alluded to throughout, but not entirely fleshed out, is that of tolerance, the next important aspect of the liberal self.

Intolerance could be seen as the basic reason for polarization in the first place. If one is intolerant of other views, one will naturally become polarized toward people who hold those views. However, tolerance is a complicated case in the modern liberal world. It represents the most critical virtue in the eyes of the liberal left, with bigotry being the gravest sin. We first found the great virtue of tolerance in our discussion of Spinoza, with the right of anyone to believe anything he wants, so long as they keep it to themselves and "do not disturb the peace," in the public square (Wiker 2013, 157). I also mentioned tolerance in reference to Rousseau, who also insisted on the vitality of tolerance. In his civil religion, "there is…no place for principled disagreement at a fundamental level," (Mitchell 2018, 209). Therefore, intolerance becomes the only sin recognized in Rousseau's civil religion, and religions that do not tolerate the actions, beliefs, and lifestyles of others must not be allowed to exist.

You will often hear that we need to be more accepting of "alternative lifestyles," including (but not limited to) any extravagant form of sexual self-expression. However, this creates a paradox. In a pluralistic society in which tolerance is the greatest virtue, what are we to do with the intolerant? Many liberal tolerance advocates would admit that

intolerant or "bigoted" behaviors should not be allowed, but is not the prohibition of these behaviors itself violative of the great tolerance doctrine? The irony here cannot be overlooked, as "a commitment to tolerance can supply a justification for the massive marginalization or sanctioning of people whose beliefs or practices disagree with those of 'tolerant' elites," (Smith 2018, 358-9). Under a broken system of tolerance in which some practices are not tolerated, someone has to decide what is and is not allowed. Whether these proclamations are coming from a tyrannical dictator or a tyrannical mob, it remains a dangerous proposition that will foster more polarization.

Political commentator David French explains that the modern conception of tolerance can be generally defined as "liking" marginalized groups. However, if you are simply *tolerating* these groups, that implies that there must be something wrong with them. According to Mitchell, "tolerance implies difference—and even a tacit affirmation of hierarchy—for one only tolerates what one disapproves of," (Mitchell 2018, 211). French then describes *true* tolerance as, "respect and kindness toward people who are out of *your* group," as opposed to "respect and kindness towards members of what others would define as an outgroup," (French 2020, 184). In order to truly tolerate something, you must admit you have an issue with a behavior, yet overlook and endure it anyway.

The goalposts have continued to move, as it is no longer acceptable to live consistently with true tolerance. The hierarchy of behaviors that true tolerance implies must be quashed in favor of strict equality. In practice, "tolerance must be replaced by approval, and approval must soon give way to celebration, which is to say that the liberal conception of the self eventually seeks to eliminate differences," (Mitchell 2018, 212). Liberal idealists may say that in this world of equality, polarization cannot thrive. In a

world in which all viewpoints are celebrated by everyone, our harsh divisions would fall away. However, the paradox arises once again. Mitchell describes it as follows:

> In the name of freedom and equality, the freedom of those who insist that not all choices are equal will be disregarded, but it becomes painfully clear at this point that, despite the protestations of the liberal ideologue, not all opinions are in fact equal and that the liberal does in fact embrace an array of substantial goods, albeit surreptitiously. Equality becomes merely a parody and freedom a charade, both in service of a self-righteous power by which the liberal order seeks to eliminate all contenders. Liberalism, in other words, consumes all rivals and then consumes itself (212).

The incoherence of liberal tolerance and equality cannot be reconciled. When taken to its logical extreme, liberalism becomes entirely illiberal.

The Fate of the Intolerant

In recent years, we have seen the ramifications illiberal tolerance combine with identity politics and expressive individualism on college campuses. In 2017, Evergreen State College, a small liberal arts college in Washington state became embroiled in controversy. This college had an annual "day of absence," where students and faculty of color had the option to leave campus as a group to discuss campus issues and use their absence to highlight their importance to the community. The idea is based on a play by Douglas Turner Ward in which all the black people in a racist Southern town in the 1960s disappear for a day, leading the town to realize how much they rely on the individuals they oppress. This had been going on for years at Evergreen with no reported pushback, until 2017 when the college decided to reverse the roles. Instead of the people of color leaving voluntarily, it was suggested that white students and faculty leave the campus for the day. A liberal evolutionary biology professor named Bret Weinstein took issue with

this change. In an email to his fellow faculty, he claimed that the original formation of the event "is a forceful call to consciousness, which is, of course, crippling to the logic of oppression," while this new direction "is a show of force, and an act of oppression in and of itself." He went on to say that "a student's right to speak—or to be—must never be based on skin color," (Jaschik 2018), and offered to host an event discussing racism from an evolutionary lens.

Unfortunately for Weinstein, and the campus in general, his statements were not deemed sufficiently tolerant. In fact, they were seen as a direct affront to the personal identity and therefore dignity of the students of Evergreen. Protests, threats, and calls for Weinstein's termination ensued, along with a campus shutdown, $10,000 of damage, and Weinstein's eventual resignation due to feeling unsafe on campus (Reilly 2017). While the merits of Weinstein's position can be debated, it is relatively clear that the blowback was not proportional to his statement. However, when you view his statement through the lens of expressive individualism, identity politics, and illiberal tolerance, it can be seen as an attack on people's basic identity.

Weinstein's case is one of many examples on college campuses in which group identities have been offended, often in the form of guest speakers being shouted down. There have been several instances of this in April of 2023 alone. At the University of Albany, conservative writer Ian Hawthorne's speech was unable to proceed, as students protesting his stance on transgenderism entered the auditorium and disrupted the talk (Alonso 2023). At Stanford Law School, a talk given by federal judge Kyle Duncan was "continuously interrupted and cut short due to the heated interactions between Duncan, the student protesters and the SLS Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion,"

(Reich 2023). This behavior has opened up a discourse on free speech implications that extend beyond the scope of this paper. Additionally, while this behavior is driven by a number of factors, it is apparent that these students see these speakers as a direct threat to their identity, to the point that even allowing them to speak is treated as threatening. Tolerance may not be granted to the intolerant.

Rawls

This is not to say that intolerance should be normalized, quite the opposite. Depolarization requires *true* tolerance to endure. This begs the question of how a return to religion could foster tolerance, as religion is certainly not known as the most tolerant institution. Religious orthodoxy may run counter to tolerance because, as Professor Stanley Fish says, "if you believe something you believe it to be true…you regard those who believe contrary things to be in error," (Fish 1997, 2258). Writing in the late 20th century, John Rawls also sought to solve the problem of polarization in a pluralistic society. His answer was "to distance the political community from divisive Truth by constructing a civic sphere from which transcendent religion and other potentially disruptive 'comprehensive doctrines' would be excluded," (Smith 2018, 350). Religious orthodoxy, or the uncompromising Truth, should be limited to the private sphere, with the civic sphere being regulated by immanent public reason. In other words, "the state is obligated to exclude from the public square all beliefs that might have the effect of tearing apart the body politic," (Koyzis 2003, 67), with the divisive beliefs being religious dogma. This argument is nearly identical to that of Rousseau's "tolerant" civil religion we discussed above. However, a respectful civic sphere regulated by reason has

not materialized. Instead, Rawls' public reason has excluded people's deepest convictions from the public square, thus strengthening the power of the liberal state as the moral arbiter even further. This has led to *more* divisiveness and polarization, not less. Shared public reason cannot exist when people's identities are wrapped up in political devotion.

CHAPTER VI: IF NOT LIBERALISM…THEN WHAT?

The questions remain, what does the fall of the Tower of Babel entail? Can liberalism as currently constituted accommodate the return of civility in public discourse? If liberalism does not have the capacity to facilitate this return, what are some alternative ideological frameworks? Here I will discuss the failures of liberalism, and flesh out some alternatives.

The Two Waves of Liberalism

Scholars have separated Liberalism into two distinct *waves*. We discussed first wave liberalism with the origins of the liberal state. As described by Hobbes, "the first wave of liberalism…began with a picture of autonomous individuals in a state of nature who join in an act of consent and thereby legitimate the exercise of power," (Mitchell 2018, 6). This is often what we think of when we consider the liberalism present in the American founding, or what has been coined *classical liberalism*. While classical liberals do still exist, the classical qualifier is needed when describing someone who subscribes to the tenets of first wave liberalism. This is because first wave liberalism has given way to second wave liberalism, and the second wave has come to dominate. The American founders (especially Adams) understood the importance of *virtue* when paired with the new liberal experiment. Mitchell explains that "moderate liberalism could be moderate because it was nourished by a rich soil of nonliberal elements inherited from the past and embodied in habits and practices that provided limits to the impulse to liberation," (Mitchell 2018, 7). However, the purest form of liberalism does not have these strictures, thus creating the more honest second wave liberalism. Mitchell explains that "liberalism

in its pure sense turns on the absolutely free and unencumbered choice of the autonomous individual," (Mitchell 2018, 7). This is what we saw with Trueman and the modern self. Liberalism has given way to atomistic individualism in which we are all free from any limits or strictures, yet the lack of limits has itself become a tyranny. In summation, Mitchell explains that:

> Second wave liberalism…may initially appear more theoretically consistent, but it eventually becomes absolutist and thereby undermines the very liberty it ostensibly seeks to champion. Liberalism, in other words, when it matures beyond its conflicted adolescent version, consumes itself. When fully mature, it gives birth to a grotesque and deformed offspring of insatiable appetite that at least some of the inventors of liberalism—namely Hobbes and Rousseau—intuited: illiberal liberalism (9).

As discussed in the previous section, this *illiberal liberalism* is the paradoxical framework by which *intolerant tolerance* was conceived. While this distinction has been examined at length throughout this essay, it is important to distinguish *explicitly* between first and second wave liberalism, because many scholars have advocated for a return to first wave liberalism. This is a potential solution to the power of the unified state as our only shared reference point, and thus the increase in extreme political polarization.

A Return to First Wave Liberalism

We will return to Mitchell's proposed solution in a moment, but for now I want to focus on the ideas of David French. French has grown increasingly concerned with the polarization present on both sides. His proposed solution is essentially a return to first wave liberalism, to "embrace pluralism," and the warnings against factions given by James Madison in Federalist No. 10 (French 2020, 33). Ideally, he would like to reunite

liberal values with virtue, asserting that America is evidence that, "when you wed liberal democracy to intact families, strong civic engagement, and virtues of self-discipline and self-restraint, you can unleash prosperity and innovation unlike anything the world has seen before," (French 2020, 180). He still believes in the liberal promise of the American founding, but admits that we have left the virtue component behind in favor of tribalism.

To begin this process, once again, French advocates for a return to the true tolerance described above (French 2020, 184). This solution is rather obvious. If you could wave your hand and force everyone to tolerate the choices of everyone else, polarization would naturally decrease, but is there a policy prescription that could effectuate this? In his recent book about restoring the brokenness of the United States, he states his policy proposal as a drastic reversal of the increasing centralized power in the United States government, and a return to federalism. Essentially, he advocates for allowing conservative states to govern as conservatively as they want, and progressive states to govern as progressively as they want (French 2020, 208). The only limits to this power being the rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. This would constrain the worst excesses of federalism that we have seen (namely slavery and Jim Crow), while allowing like-minded groups to build the communities they want. For example, California could choose to "secede from the federal regulatory leviathan. It can and should go its own way on health care, environmental regulations, and economic policy," but it *cannot*, "squelch opposition…stifle religious practice…deprive individuals of due process," (French, 2020 228-30) or any violate other rights afforded in the Constitution. This proposal represents a return to first wave liberalism. French still believes in checked liberalism, with the check ideally being personal virtue, but in terms

of policy, federalism being a sufficient check to radical illiberalism. Instead of fighting over deep-seated political (veering into religious) devotions, French wants Americans to embrace their divisions, thus lowering the temperature and pursuing true tolerance.

Alternatives to Liberalism

A return to first wave liberalism would be a net positive for the country's polarization crisis, but scholars like Mitchell are considering more wholesale solutions. In our current moment, a moderate return to first wave liberalism is perhaps more likely, but Mitchell (2018) explains that:

> Given the natural instability of first wave liberalism, it can only survive with a constant infusion of nonliberal ingredients. This more modest solution, despite its drawbacks, might be the best we can hope for, but in light of the crisis of liberalism we are now witnessing, the moment may be ripe to consider an alternative (220).

While a truly federalist, truly tolerant incarnation of liberalism would be better than second wave liberalism of today, we have seen this first wave move into the second wave before. It would take significant care to ensure that liberalism did not once again reach its logical extreme if it is even possible to prevent it at all.

Mitchell's proposed alternative to liberalism rests on a reformation of the conceptions of freedom and liberty. As we have discussed at length, *freedom*, in the liberal conception elucidated by the above liberal thinkers and theorists, "conceives of freedom as emancipation from all constraint; it is *freedom from*," while Mitchell advocates for the alternative, "*freedom to* do as one ought," (Mitchell 2018, 220). Therefore, freedom would no longer exist only within autonomous individuals doing

whatever they believe in their heart to be good. It is replaced by limited, or regulated, freedom, bound by the strictures of tradition and vocation.

Mitchell uses Edmund Burke's view of liberty as a roadmap. Burke understood the importance of individual liberty, and believed it could be defended without degenerating into liberalism. In order to effectuate this, limits must be put in place. For Burke, the biggest checks on liberalism are human nature, religion, and personal affection. We discussed the destruction of human nature through Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin, but Burke, "holds that there is a nature common to all humans, and one aspect of moral and social health is acknowledging and submitting to the limits of that common nature," (Mitchell 2018, 223). Within this nature, everyone has the ability to ascertain the eternal moral order present in all mankind. This is not done only through individual reason, however, but the *shared reason of past generations*. This is the natural law contention that Nietzsche summarily rejected; that man can use reason in conjunction with eternal Truth to discover the natural law. Eternal Truth, however, only exists within the framework of religion, Burke's next limit on liberalism. He believed that human nature is created by God, and naturally religious individuals need to, "recognize both that humans are creatures with a common nature and…that one facet of human nature is a sort of fallibility," (Mitchell 2018, 224). A central theme of this essay is that all humans are religious, though people place these religious impulses in increasingly disparate places. Burke would agree that placing religious impulses towards the transcendent acts as a limit to liberalism.

The final limit to liberalism, the one Burke is perhaps most famous for, is affection. Burke emphasizes the importance of reason, like other Enlightenment thinkers,

but he says that "we would do better to supplement our individual reason with the collective wisdom of human experience," (Mitchell 2018, 226). This collective wisdom is fostered beginning at the smallest extraction, and working its way up. *Affection* or *prejudice* to Burke is love of what he calls "little platoons." Essentially, "our loves begin with the small, the local, and the intimate, and extend outward from there," (Mitchell 2018, 226). From this love arises duties towards those whom you love, which, when properly ordered, will eventually lead to duties towards the state. This runs in contrast to the blind devotion to the liberal state we have seen, free from any intermediate institutions, duties, or traditions. Tradition itself is essential in Burke's framework, with liberty existing within a shared tradition to be passed down and inherited.

Burke's social liberty provides an effective guide to liberty free from autonomous individualism or identity politics, but what is Mitchell's practical solution? He maintains that "Modern conservatives," like David French, "who argue that returning to the original meaning of the U.S. Constitution will solve our many problems are misguided. That which provided the moral and political context for the Constitution has been dramatically altered," (Mitchell 2018, 231). Mitchell's proposed alternative to liberalism is what he calls "*humane localism*," (Mitchell 2018, 268). Within humane localism, substantial limits are placed on the individual's sense of autonomy. Power must be constrained through political limits, and liberty must be constrained through Burke's cultural limits. It also exists within "long-term commitments and a recognition of natural duties," (Mitchell 2018, 266), which further limits individual choice and mobility. Mitchell emphasizes the importance of pluralism, and appreciating differences. He ends his book with:

> humane localism is rooted in respect, not in homogeneity, in love of one's traditions, not hatred of other traditions, in a recognition that liberty is sustainable only with limits, and in the realization that human flourishing is best realized in the company of friends and neighbors sharing a common place in the world (268).

This would stifle the worst excesses of illiberal liberalism, as well as shut down the identity politics on both sides of the aisle. It is characterized by respect for others, but also a duty to your local community first and foremost.

While Mitchell diagnoses the incoherence of second wave liberalism, his alternative appears quasi-utopian. Humane localism would theoretically cure what ails us as a nation, but are there practical steps that allow us to reach it? Or does a successful alternative to liberalism exist solely in the theoretical realm? Political scientist Patrick Deneen agrees with Mitchell's account of liberalism. The title of his recent book *Why Liberalism Failed*, is evidence enough of this. Deneen believes that "the end of liberalism is in sight," (Deneen 2018, 180), either with the fruition of its mangled, *fully illiberal* form, or with its overthrow in favor of a new, even less desirable regime, whether authoritarianism or autocracy. Deneen's alternative also shares Mitchell's Burkean flavor of starting with local communities. However, Deneen provides a more substantial account than Mitchell. Essentially, he envisions what he calls a "counter-anticulture," in opposition to the failing liberalism. This counter-anticulture is developed first in families, where households become small economies. Within these firmly local economies, families must "develop practices and skills that are the basic sources of culture and a shared civil life," (Deneen 2018, 193). These are then abstracted to other households practicing a similar form of household economics, therefore personalizing a thoroughly

depersonalized modern economy. Finally, Deneen champions "greater political self-governance," (Deneen 2018, 194), which has gone by the wayside in recent years. Self-governance not in the form of voting in what will surely be labeled *the most important presidential election of your lifetime* every four years, but in using "local settings to solve problems" (Deneen 2018, 195).

Whether called humane localism, or something else, Mitchell would likely agree that "a viable postliberal theory will arise…out of the lessons learned within these communities," including, "human relationality, sociability, and the learned ability to sacrifice one's narrow personal interest not to abstract humanity, but for the sake of other humans," (Deneen 2018, 196). *However*, contrary to Mitchell, Deneen makes it clear at the close of his book that he is not interested in a new theory, but *better practices*. He wants a ground-up approach to reshaping liberalism, without any new "comprehensive theory," which he claims, "gave rise to liberalism and successor ideologies in the first place," (Deneen 2018, 196).

A Christian Nation

As an aspect of their arguments, French, Mitchell, and Deneen all promote a return to Christian or religious values in some form or another. Though, this does not represent the centrality of their alternatives. My contention throughout this essay has been that for America to soothe the polarization that plagues us, we must move back towards the *transcendent*, and begin to move our identities away from the *immanent*. This may be done at the individual level, and likely within families and local communities, Mitchell and Deneen would advocate for a transcendent worldview. There are, however,

systems that are more centered around transcendent authority. I will summarize a few of these, and then give my proposed alternative.

Christian nationalism has vaulted into the American lexicon over the last few years. The Left, and even factions of the Right, cringe at this term, and understandably so. The term Christian nationalism has several meanings, but it has been coopted and used to describe some reprehensible doctrines. Researcher Bradford Littlejohn gives a great summary of what Christian nationalism is, being sure to distinguish it from *white Christian nationalism*. Unfortunately, individuals on the radical right have created a "fierce and vocal movement…unashamed to combine aspects of…Christian support for nationalism…'Christian chosen-nation-ism'…and the idea of Christian magistracy…with white identitarianism, and baptize the whole as 'Christian,'" (Littlejohn 2022). This has arisen out of the same identity crisis that radical individualism stems from. Without other forms of traditional identity, Littlejohn explains, race is often all that remains. Race being the most important part of one's identity is equally (if not more) damaging as placing one's identity in the liberal state. White nationalism, including white Christian nationalism, has no place in the debate about reestablishing civility in America. If fully instituted after the fall of liberalism, white nationalism would be an example of a less desirable regime that Patrick Deneen was maligning.

Another form of Christian nationalism is what Littlejohn calls "Christian Chosen-Nation-ism," (Littlejohn 2022). This form often contains racial undertones as well, but it does not have to. Essentially, this is the idea that a given nation, akin to Israel in the Old Testament, is chosen by God to achieve his purposes. This has taken hold in a host of countries throughout history, but none more than America, as "Biblical themes, combined

with more secular forms of American exceptionalism and wild-eyed millenarian enthusiasm, have interwoven to create an idolatrous vision of America as 'the indispensable nation,' indispensable even to the establishment of God's kingdom," (Littlejohn 2022). This is the Christian nationalism we looked at when describing how state worship on the Right has manifested itself in the wake of Trump. To these adherents, America is a Christian nation, founded by God, and therefore it needs to return to its Christian roots by any means necessary. This includes ignoring the transgressions of their political messiah, or even storming the capitol, "in order to save his nation and avert a divine curse…convinced that he lives at one of the decisive moments of history," (Littlejohn 2022). Adherents of "Christian Chosen-Nation-ism" are correct in one sense: God is using the United States for his purposes. However, in a more real sense, they are misguided. God is using the United States in the same way he uses every civilization. Littlejohn emphasizes the "great difference between God's *providential* blessing and his *covenantal* blessing," (Littlejohn 2022). God has not entered into a covenant with the U.S. as he did with the ancient Israelites. He has not offered unique promises to the American people that must be upheld by any means necessary. Viewing America in this way is to stand above God, believing that you know more than Him. It is not a truly *Christian* framework, but a cultural one. It just so happens that people hide behind the guise of Christianity to fight for the traditionalist viewpoints that have been demeaned by the rest of society.

Opting to discard the baggage that comes with the term Christian nationalism, Littlejohn instead promotes what he calls *the Christian commonwealth*. This proposal begins in the cultural realm and then bleeds into politics. There essentially needs to be a

reshaping of the culture itself in a Christian direction. This begins in small familial units, similar to what Mitchell and Deneen suggest. Littlejohn admits that this is a slow and arduous process, like any of these solutions undoubtedly would be. First, we need to reestablish the idea of a commonwealth, "a society knit together by common ends and common object of love," (Littlejohn 2022) which moves into a moral commonwealth, and eventually a Christian commonwealth. Importantly, the commonwealth must be rooted in *positive values*. Identity politics on the Left and Right (including iterations of Christian Nationalism), are steeped in "fear of outsiders or desire to be as unlike them as possible," (Littlejohn 2022). Of course, this is no way to heal political division. Littlejohn takes the communitarian polity of humane localism and adds a distinctly Christian element. He claims America is a "Christian Nation," not in a covenantal way, but in the founding principles that make it run. Individuals, within the boundaries of strong communities, must "[root] their vision of public virtue in the Christian tradition," (Littlejohn 2022).

Steven Smith comes to a similar conclusion in describing how a Christian society could exist today. He focuses more heavily on the return of transcendent authority, as opposed to a strict top-down Christianity. In a modern society, pluralism will, and should, endure. In closing his book on transcendent authority versus modern paganism, Steven Smith (2018) explains how a Christian society could exist today:

> Unlike in some past instantiations, a central feature of any contemporary Christian society under conditions of modern pluralism is that it is unlikely to sponsor any official account of what transcendence is and requires—any official orthodoxy. The modern Christian society would be open to transcendence, and it would attempt to accommodate its citizens in their efforts to live in accordance with their understanding of

> transcendence. It would not declare or prescribe what the transcendent Truth is (378).

The important feature is not the orthodoxy, but the shifting towards a transcendent ideal, an ideal that may be different for anyone, and accommodates many forms of transcendent religion. We can retain true tolerance, but not in the paradoxical form that it exists in today. Of course, reaching a higher ideal is not an easy task, it is perhaps an impossible one, so therefore the "city would of necessity call upon the political skills and virtues, the creative efforts, the moral aspirations and imagination, the empathy, and the willingness to sacrifice of its citizens" (Smith 2018, 379). With a polity oriented towards higher ideals, culture war squabbles will fade into the background. Disagreements on the temporal will fall into insignificance compared to what is to come.

Final Thoughts

The central issue of this essay has been polarization, and the hatred that is increasingly levied towards those who think, live, or identify differently than us. This has been fostered, in part, by the increasing adherence to the religion of the state, which manifests itself differently in every person. A transcendent reference point has been lost in favor of a liberal state that has sold a damaged bill of goods to the populace, claiming that everyone can be free-floating autonomous individuals. Not only that everyone *can* do this, but it is a prerequisite to human happiness. I hope I have shown that this is a lie, and that liberal autonomy has failed.

Continuing construction of the Tower of Babel in the form of the liberal state is not a sufficient option; something must change. It is my contention that liberalism has

failed in that such harsh polarization is able the thrive within its structure, which supposedly champions tolerance and equality. Liberalism has caused *everything* to become political, resulting in the political identities that are dividing us. Widespread adherence to a transcendent authority is fundamentally at odds with the second wave liberalism we are living in. That being said, we cannot be too hasty or reactionary when establishing an alternative. It is just this reactionary nature that causes the divisions we are trying to solve. If society is broken, it can be satisfying to conjure up new theories of government to overhaul the broken system, but utopian world-building is not the answer to our current crisis. The answer is found within the alternatives above (omitting Christian nationalism in its racial and "chosen nation" configurations). I am not going to choose one alternative as the correct solution, but instead, identify their similarities to decipher what we must focus on.

These thinkers have different ideas about the future of liberalism, and the next steps of civilization, but the common thread through all of them is *localism*. A return of intermediate institutions would serve as a stopgap between the individual and the liberal state. Unfortunately, this cannot be done in a single presidential election like many Trump voters had hoped. Instead, it will take incremental, bottom-up change. Incrementalism is not an excuse for sitting on your hands, though. To the extent that swift change is appropriate, it must be effectuated first on the local level, eventually bleeding up to higher echelons of public life. Having intermediate institutions alone is not enough to change how modern identity is created. For this, we need to dismantle the immanent conception of self, in favor of transcendent authority.

The church, perhaps the most important intermediate institution outside of the family, is absolutely crucial in this pursuit. There is no political solution that can reinstate transcendence without the help of the church. The *only* solution, the only way French, Mitchell, Deneen, or Littlejohn will see their desired outcomes come to pass, is for the church to start cultivating the next generation. The church is losing young people, particularly young men, at a staggering rate. 2020 was the first time in Gallup's 50 years of tracking church membership among U.S. adults that it has dipped below 50%, and this downward trend is only steepening (Jones 2021). The church *must* begin to give young people a purpose in their lives, a direction to point to, and a community to grow in. Orthodoxy is not at issue here, but *transcendence*. People need adventures, and the church can provide them. It begins with getting them there and breaking down the barriers that have been put up between young people and the church. I am not going to pretend to be an expert on how exactly the church should recapture its appeal to the youth, but it needs to focus its attention back on young, directionless people. Despite the lie of individual autonomy being so heavily engrained in our society, people are still craving more. This is evidenced by a routine chapel service in February of 2023 at Asbury, a small Christian college in Kentucky. It began with twenty or so students lingering after the service to worship, and ended with thousands flocking to the campus in a modern day Great Awakening revival. A professor at Asbury explained that the students were "struck by what seemed to be a quiet but powerful sense of transcendence," (McCall 2023). These revivals, explicitly apolitical and led by members of Generation Z (Lyons 2023), are evidence enough that hope is not lost.

Finally, in order to reinstate transcendence and lose the polarization that ails us, true tolerance is needed. If we are to become more localized, we cannot allow that to make us more tribalized. Empathizing with and not hating those who oppose your values, even those who are thoroughly entrenched in their state-sponsored identity, may be the first step to opening *them* up to the idea of transcendence. It may take the removal of one brick at a time, but brick by brick, the Tower of Babel will fall.

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