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Christian Nationalism Is an Oxymoron

Patrick Anderson, editor

Almost anything said to be the basis for the establishment of the United States of America or the purpose of the Christian church in American society can be found to be true sometime in our history or somewhere in our country.

Some of the people who came to the American shores in the 16th and 17th centuries came from places where religious freedom was outlawed by a Protestant European government which endorsed a preferred state-approved church. Think Massachusetts Bay Colony. Others came through the Southwest beginning in the 15th century under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church and selected Catholic nations. Think Portugal and Spain. They sought to subjugate indigenous people into the Catholic church, to find and claim lands and fortune. Think gold, enslavement, and dominating colonialism.

A great number of others who made up the original 13 colonies were not motivated to migrate to America by religious reasons or to make fame and fortune, but rather to secure a more prosperous life through opportunities not open to them in their home countries. Some were slavers and slaves. Some were tradesmen and adventuresome individuals. Many were motivated by religious separatism sentiments (think Puritans and Quakers), but a pious or religious purpose for people coming to America is certainly not the only reason people came here.

We must remember that the early Americans were not unified initially by the ideals of America's founding. Our nation was "founded" in the 18th century by "founding fathers" who led a revolution against England's domination and drafted the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution of the United States of America*, the two documents most historians consider to be America's most important founding documents, but which were nonexistent until the last years of the 18th century.

Today's Americans, especially religious Americans, celebrate mythical ideas of America's founding such as the Thanksgiving Season story which depicts Puritans' arrival at Plymouth Rock and the short-lived fictional lovefest between the European strangers and indigenous people living along the Northeastern coast of America. It took only about 50 years for that imagined relationship to evolve into enslavement and domination of the original native Americans by the progeny of the Puritans.

The White Christian Nationalism which is so visible in America today is built upon a fundamental lie: that America was founded by Christians for Christians. They believe that Christianity, particularly their version of Christianity, should have elevated status and indeed dominate every facet of our society. While it is true that most of America's "founding fathers" were publicly, or at least nominally Christians, there were significant exceptions. They valued religious liberty, not Christian domination. The religious liberty they were seeking was far different from the state-supported churches some of their forebears had fled.

We were founded to be a nation where all Americans would be free to practice their faith as they saw fit or to observe no faith at all.That is the belief I was taught from my youth

While this new "American experiment" was not modeled on church-state nations, comfort with the closely wedded church-state nations abroad did exist in the early years of this new nation. Indeed, nine of the 13 colonies had a state-supported church; but within 15 years, nearly all state churches in the colonies had ended and religious liberty in America began.

We were founded to be a nation where all Americans would be free to practice their faith as they saw fit or to observe no faith at all. That is the belief I was taught from my youth—both in my Baptist church and in the public schools which I attended. Yet today, there is a growing group of people — once on the fringe, but now in elected offices, courts and agencies across American government — who seek Christian domination. They want their version of Christianity to be the law of the land and given preferred treatment. House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., even has a Christian nationalist flag hanging at the entrance to his Capitol office.

This concept of Christianity and the attendant desire

for America to be a Christian theocracy is, ironically, antithetical to the life and teachings of Jesus, particularly the emphasis of Jesus on love, compassion and justice for all. Jesus did not promote a nation-centered religion. Indeed, Jesus of Nazareth never sought to dominate, coerce or control others. He did not seek preferential treatment for himself or his followers. The last thing Jesus wanted was the mantle of earthly kingship. In the wilderness temptation we read in Matthew 4:7-10:

> ***8*** *Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.* ***9*** *"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."* ***10*** *Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"*

For me, this harkens back to the first of the 10 Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before Me." Nothing and nobody are equal to God. When the conjunctive "*and"* is placed alongside God (as in "God *and* country"), the magnitude of this commandment is violated. When Christians elevate political allegiance to be equivalent to or above the cause of Christ, they are effectively placing the nation-state in the place of God or alongside God. Loyalty to country is not equivalent to loyalty to Jesus. The church is not called to build an earthly empire, but to represent a heavenly kingdom, one that transcends all borders, ethnicities and political affiliations. Christian nationalism, by contrast, binds our faith to worldly power structures, diluting the universality of the Gospel and creating idolatry out of nationalism.

Nationalism is not the same thing as patriotism. American patriotism is an adherence to the ideals of the United States as expressed in our founding documents. Christian nationalism, on the other hand, seeks to merge Christian and American identities to the exclusion of the First Amendment's separation of church and state mandate which says:

> *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*

Christian nationalists demand Christianity be privileged by the state and implies that to be a good American, one must be a good Christian and *vice versa*. The Christian nationalist would define what it means to be a good Christian and a good American. They insist on their own abridged version of Christianity as the exemplar for all Americans and Christians.

Christian nationalism is about exclusion. It runs against Jesus' inclusion of all people which we find notably in the "Great Commission" in which Jesus sends the disciples out to *all* nations, and in "Parable of The Good Samaritan" in which Jesus emphasizes that it is the "hated outsider" Samaritan who bound up the wounds of the robbery victim left for dead on the side of the road, not the respected religious leaders who passed him by, who was a beloved neighbor.

White Christian nationalism distorts the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That Gospel is not about advancing a particular nation's political agenda or empowering authoritarian regimes to impose a limited, unchristian belief system through law and force. While I recognize this most recent iteration of Satan's temptation for Jesus to assume ownership of the kingdoms of this world, I also recognize that the allure of the temptation of this belief system has always been part and parcel of the family of God. Jesus rejected it. But the temptation to establish a "Christian" nation with laws enforcing an authoritarian set of beliefs has been and continues to be a feature of the American experiment.

The impetus toward White Christian nationalism most commonly arises during times of social unrest, economic uncertainty, large-scale immigration, war and technological changes. Politicians use times like these to call for a nonsensical "return to our Christian roots." We are in such a time. A large number of the Christian church family truly believe that Donald Trump is a sincerely devout Christian, and they have trusted leaders like Franklin Graham who attests to his bona fides. Many others recognize that he is not devout, and perhaps not even a Christian; but he will fight for their kind of Christianity they see as under attack, as Gorski says "They prefer a president with the fight over a president with the faith."

Without doubt I consider "Christian" and "nationalism" to be mutually exclusive terms; but I acknowledge that a wide swath of my fellow church family members identify themselves as both Christian and American nationalists. We sing the same songs, pray the same prayers, read the same Bible, receive the same sermons, recognize the same symbols of Christianity, and share the same rituals of our faith.

But we really do not share the same faith. America's great experiment allows each person to live out faith on each person's own terms where there is "no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." ■

Can an Atheist Save the American Church?

By Alan Bean

David Brooks once remarked that when he let it be known he considered himself a religious seeker, he was bombarded with helpful books. He received more than 700 unsolicited volumes from evangelical readers, he says, "and only 500 of them were *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis."

This remark comes to mind when I consider the odd case of Jonathan Rauch.

Rauch is a public intellectual who has written for highbrow publications like *The Atlantic* and *The Economist* and currently serves as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He also is a gay man who led the fight for same-sex marriage, an avowed atheist and a Jew who likes to hang out with Never Trump evangelicals like Russell Moore, David French, Peter Wehner, Curtis Chang, Francis Collins, Mark Labberton and, until his death in 2022, the late Tim Keller.

I'm sure Rauch has received several copies of *Mere Christianity* from his evangelical friends. He remains unconvinced.

C.S. Lewis Christians

I like to call Moore, French, et al, "C.S. Lewis Christians." By American standards, Lewis never was a proper evangelical. His God was the source of beauty and joy. The key features of Christian morality, he believed, could be found in all the great religions of the world. Like his mentor, George MacDonald, Lewis downplayed the traditional doctrine of hell and damnation.

In little books like *A Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Screwtape Letters, The Great Divorce,* his Narnia children's books and works of science fiction like *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis recast the grand Christian narrative in novel ways. Originally published in 1952, *Mere Christianity* has sold more than three million copies — just since 2000.

Lewis appealed to American evangelicals because he was an Oxford professor who, after a series of long conversations with J.R.R. Tolkien, traded in his atheism for Christian faith.

Rauch, by contrast, doesn't believe Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus performed miracles or that Jesus was raised from the dead.

But Rauch loves Jesus all the same. Or rather, he loves the core teaching attributed to Jesus in the Christian Gospels. He thinks Jesus got it right.

Jesus and democracy

In his recent book *Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy*, Rauch reduces the core teaching of Jesus to three bullet points: Don't be afraid, imitate Jesus, forgive each other. Asked to summarize his argument, Rauch invariably begins with a 2003 *Atlantic* essay in which he celebrated the rapid secularization of America. This was, he now says, "the dumbest thing I ever wrote."

In America, Rauch now believes, Christianity has served as a "load-bearing wall." Unfortunately, the Christian church is collapsing as an institution, and American democracy is collapsing with it.

In his recent book Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy, Rauch reduces the core teaching of Jesus to three bullet points: Don't be afraid, imitate Jesus, forgive each other.

The Founding Fathers of American-style democracy realized political debate and sound public policy were no substitute for a broad-based moral consensus. Healthy churches, Rauch says, functioned as training grounds for republican virtue by applying the core teaching of Jesus to every phase of life.

In a political setting, "Don't be afraid," means losing an election isn't the end of the world. You dust yourself off and give it another go. You realize the nation will survive whether or not your party is in power.

"Imitate Jesus" means treating every American citizen as a person of infinite worth, not as a means to an end. It means measuring your moral stature by the way you treat society's most marginalized and vulnerable members.

"Forgive one another" translates into working cooperatively and respectfully with people who think you're an idiot. You don't set out to annihilate the

opposition, and you certainly don't try to overturn the result of an election.

A call for thick Christianity

Rauch blames the demise of white Protestant Christianity on the "thin Christianity" of the Protestant mainline denominations, and the "sharp Christianity" adopted by the evangelical tradition.

After 1950, thin Christianity stopped talking about the centrality of Jesus, public virtue, the life to come and the great biblical drama of sin, judgment and redemption. Sharp Christianity feeds on fear and resentment and wields Christianity like a cudgel. Thin Christians and sharp Christians, Rauch believes, have swapped the teachings of Jesus for mirror-image versions of secular politics.

Rauch wants to see a "thicker" version of Christianity. He wants Christians to become more like Jesus. More loving. More forgiving. More merciful. More believable. We don't need churches to tell people how to vote, he says, but we do need to teach Christians how to comport themselves in the political arena.

Strange bedfellows

If Roach sounds a lot like Never Trump evangelicals such as Moore, French, Keller and Wehner it's likely because he has spent the last few years listening to them. He likes them, and they like him.

Which is odd, when you think about it. Unreconstructed American white evangelicals shouldn't be palling around with an unrepentant gay Jewish atheist, should they?

It wasn't so long ago that the Ku Klux Klan spoke for mainstream American evangelicals.

It wasn't so long ago that homosexuality was considered too dreadful a sin to be mentioned in polite society.

And it wasn't that long ago that mainstream evangelical Christians were denouncing Jews as Christ-killers who used communism, Hollywood and the big banks to control world events.

And since Jesus Christ was the only path to salvation (John 14:6), atheism was a one-way ticket to hell.

But Never Trump evangelicals like David French, Russell Moore, Curtis Chang, or Peter Wehner don't appear to be hanging out with Rauch out of a concern for his soul. They genuinely like the guy.

Can atheists follow Jesus?

If Rauch builds his personal and political vision around the teachings of Jesus, doesn't that make him a Christian? Rauch doesn't think so. He wishes he could believe in God, miracles and the coming kingdom of heaven. But it's as if he lacks the God gene.

That said, the C.S. Lewis Christians I have identified are much closer to Rauch, politically and spiritually, than they are to fellow evangelicals like Franklin Graham, Paula White or Robert Jeffress. It is likely, in fact, that Jesus-loving atheists like Rauch are better able to identify and affirm the core message of Jesus than most orthodox Christians.

When inerrancy silences Jesus

If American Christians want to retain their place in the evangelical tribe, they must affirm the dogma of biblical inerrancy. Reject that teaching and the evangelical tribe will reject you. You go along to get along.

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy is also prized by bullies and would-be tyrants for equally pragmatic reasons. If you believe men should dominate women, white people should dominate people of color, LGBTQ people should be driven to the margins of civic life or only Christians should govern society, the Bible is awash in promising prooftexts.

If you believe men should dominate women, white people should dominate people of color, LGBTQ people should be driven to the margins of civic life or only Christians should govern society, the Bible is awash in promising prooftexts.

Jesus-loving atheists like Rauch respond to the core teachings of Jesus without being distracted by dogma or institutional dynamics. Orthodox believers, by contrast, are tempted to downplay the sheer radicality of their own gospel.

Only Jesus remains

This tension between continuity and discontinuity animates the story of the transfiguration in which Moses and Elijah consult with Jesus on a mountaintop. Moses and Elijah represent the two primary components of the Hebrew Scriptures — the Law and the Prophets. Jesus is portrayed as the culmination and fulfilment of these ancient traditions.

But then a cloud descends on the three men and the voice of God thunders from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, listen to him."

And when the cloud lifts, only Jesus remains.

Redemptive violence in the Bible

The transfiguration story grounds the Christian gospel in the Law and the Prophets; but it also highlights the singularity of Jesus. Jesus rejected what scholars call "the myth of redemptive violence." He taught his disciples to turn the other cheek, to forgive their enemies, to love the sinner and the outcast.

By contrast, Moses and Elijah believed in redemptive violence. Moses famously descended from his mountaintop encounter with Yahweh to find his people worshiping a golden calf. He responded by ordering the slaughter of 3,000 idolatrous Israelites.

In like fashion, Elijah celebrated his victory over 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel by putting his ideological enemies to the sword. The biblical text is rife with incidents of this sort. So is the history of the Christian church. If every aspect of the biblical witness is equally inspired, we can use the example of Moses and Elijah to justify our latter-day massacres.

The myth of redemptive violence lies at the heart of MAGA religion.

C.S. Lewis and the Bible

C.S. Lewis never was confined by the distinctly American dogma of biblical inerrancy. "It is Christ himself, not the Bible, who is the true Word of God," Lewis believed. "The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to him." (If you're interested, a more nuanced account of his views on biblical inspiration can be found in *Reflections on the Psalms*.)

American Christians who venerate Lewis would be wise to follow his advice. How many C.S. Lewis Christians are there in America? Not a lot. After a decade of steady numerical decline, white evangelical Christians comprise just 13% of American society, and 81% of them voted for Donald Trump. So, at best, we're talking about 2% of the American population.

But French, Moore, Wehner and company punch above their weight. They write for mainstream publications like *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*, and they keep popping up on cable news shows and prominent podcasts. They are A-list performers on the lecture circuit. And when secular pundits and podcasters want help analyzing MAGA religion, they call up C.S. Lewis Christians like French, Moore and Wehner.

On any given weekend, only 30% of Americans attend religious services; ten years ago it was 42%. This secularizing trend may level off, but I am not expecting a resurgence of American religion in my lifetime.

But might we see the emergence of the kind of a pared-down, ecumenical, exilic, Jesus-centered Christianity Jonathan Rauch is advocating. That is my prayer. ■

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Ten Ingredients for the Practice of Hope in an Era of Collapse

by Cody J. Sanders

Lately, I've been working to make hope mean something to me and to the communities that I serve that moves beyond wishful thinking that all will work out in the end, or a thin theological sentiment that gets us off the hook from worrying too much about what's going on in the world.

But I don't want to give you a theological or philosophical treatise on hope that will help you *think* better about the subject, but fail to address your real concerns. What I imagine those to be in an era like ours, with climate collapse looming and our political fabric being torn apart, goes something like this: *What good is hope in a world on the brink of collapse, and how do we practice it?*

So, I want to offer you 10 ingredients for the practice of hope in an era of collapse.

1. Hope of any use must be undomesticated from its captivity to ideas of progress and optimism.

Progress says: *Things are always getting better; discoveries and inventions in science and technology will save us; history is an upward movement toward greater good.* It's not that there isn't progress, of course. We benefit from it every time we don't die from a minor infection (if we have access to medical care). But progress isn't linear and, more importantly, it's not hope.

Optimism says: *Look on the bright side, keep your thinking positive, everything will be ok!* And while that might be psychologically helpful for us to believe in some circumstances, it isn't always true and, most importantly, it isn't hope.

This de-domestication of hope from the thin ideological and emotional experiences of progress and optimism is the first step toward a re-wilding of hope – that I call *feral hope*.[1] But that's still a little too philosophical. And practicing hope isn't all about how we *think* about hope.

2. Hope of any use must become something we *practice* and not just something we either *have* or *don't*.

Joanna Macy describes this as *active hope* – something we do, rather than something we have.[2] So if you're sitting around feeling hopeless because you can't feel confident that things are going to work out, you're not hopeless. You're a realist. And realist hope looks with eyes wide open at the present realities of the world *yet refuses to accept them as the final word*.

Hope is a full-bodied orientation toward a future that is yet-to-be. Nurturing a future that is trying, through struggle, to be born.

If you still care – about the ecological web of life, about democracy, about lives that are on the brink – then you're still orienting yourself toward hope. If you're putting your care into practice, then you are already practicing hope—whether that's working on climate science or environmental policy issues; whether it's organizing to protect our trans siblings from the onslaught of anti-trans legislation in the country; whether it's working to preserve the freedom of inquiry and campus diversity of our educational institutions.

What I imagine those to be in an era like ours, with climate collapse looming and our political fabric being torn apart, goes something like this: What good is hope in a world on the brink of collapse, and how do we practice it?

Even if you don't necessarily believe that disaster will be averted and things will work out in the way you wish they would, your active orientation toward a future that you long to see come to fruition is the tangible evidence of your hope.

3. To practice genuine hope in this era, we must know – *really know* – that things may not work out as we wish they would, yet nurture our imaginations toward new possibilities anyway.

Certainty is an enemy of hope. Because if we only hope within the confines of what we already know is possible, we never reach beyond the status quo toward something that may seem *impossible* now. (See Romans 8:24.) And meaningfully addressing climate

collapse likely falls into that category of seeming impossibility in our political moment in the world.

But hope pushes us beyond certainty over possibilities we believe are locked in and invites us to imagine new possibilities. The quickest way to slide into a place of hopelessness is to succumb to the belief that the way things are is the way they will always be.

Nurturing your imagination for otherwise possibilities[3] fuels hopeful orientations toward possibilities beyond the present status quo and keeps us nimble for the practice of hope. Transgender sci-fi writer, Charlie Jane Anders, says, "Visualizing a happier, more just world is a direct assault on the forces that are trying to break your heart."[4] Whether that's through reading science fiction like Anders or Octavia Butler or Kim Stanley Robinson, or by gathering every regularly with people who are imagining possibilities beyond the status quo in churches or book groups or community organizing collectives, do whatever you can to nurture your hopeful imaginations so as not to let the present status quo have the last word on what is possible in your life or in our world.

4. To practice genuine hope in this era, we must also practice grief.

It's easy for a pastor or professor of pastoral care to say that grief is an important part of our experience of life in the world right now and that we need to make space to grieve together all that we are losing. But when a *scientist* says that grief is a necessary part of addressing climate change, you should really pay attention. Grief isn't their subject matter. It's their visceral experience of being in the midst of trying to address a climate emergency that is unfolding too fast while our collective will is developing too slowly, if at all. Here's how human-environment relations geographer Leslie Head puts it:

> The evidence is mounting that we are well past the point where climate change response can be a planned, gradual transition…We need to deal with at least the possibility of catastrophe. Yet daily life continues more or less unchanged, in varying combinations of struggle and contentment. We are in collective denial. We are grieving.[5]

Grief may not look a whole lot like hope to you, but if you're not grieving in community all that we're losing, including the rapidly vanishing species we share life with on this planet, then your hope is likely not rooted in the reality of the wild world in which we live. Grief keeps our hearts tender to all that is breaking while not allowing our own hearts to break completely in the process. Grief gives elasticity to hope. Grieving together is hoping together.

5. Hope is fully embodied. We are inspirited bodyminds and whatever hope we manage to practice must be nurtured with spirit, mind and body.

Hope isn't a matter of our positive thinking. It is our full-bodied orientation toward possibilities of life in the world. And that means caring for our bodies, our minds and our spirits. Acknowledging that we are whole beings – inspirited bodyminds – and caring for the wholeness of our selves allows us practice hope with the fulness of our self: putting our bodies where they need to be – whether in the woods or on the protest line – orienting our minds toward imagination and possibility, and nurturing our spirits toward wonder shared with the wider web of life. Hope is a practice of our whole lives – body, mind, spirit – not just our heads.

6. To practice hope, we must cultivate *communities* of hope. Hope is not a solo enterprise.

Grief keeps our hearts tender to all that is breaking while not allowing our own hearts to break completely in the process. Grief gives elasticity to hope. Grieving together is hoping together.

Loneliness is an enemy of hope. We know from myriad studies – physiological, psychological, neurological, etc. – that loneliness is harmful to our health. But loneliness and isolation are also harmful to our hoping abilities. When we become mired in loneliness, we become more cynical of others and, ironically, less satisfied with the relationships that we *do* have.

Loneliness is normal. We all experience it. In fact, about half of adults in the U.S. experience loneliness regularly, according to the former surgeon general.[6] But loneliness is our evolutionary mechanism that signals to our brains that we are in danger. Deeper in our evolutionary history, this meant literal bodily danger – getting separated from our community might mean being attacked by a wild animal or starving. But loneliness is still experienced by our bodies as a warning signal that flashes in our brains and says: Turn toward other people! Increase your connection to others! You need others to live!

And you need others to hope. If your hope is lacking,

then focus on nurturing your relationships.

7. To practice hope within community, those communities must include the ecological web of life, not just human community.

Our lives and our fates are entirely and totally and inextricably bound up with the wider ecological web of life. There is no escape for us. The earth is our home and all that is in it is our kin. This further makes our hoping *feral* when it becomes undomesticated and then joins up with the wild.

Practicing hope in a world on the brink means learning to talk to trees and listen to lakes and rivers. Rushing home to spend time in the backyard with squirrels and birds because they're companions, we've missed seeing all day. It's being in *relationship* with other earth beings, not just admirers of them.

Most of us don't grow up learning to communicate with our more-than-human ecological kin. So, it'll feel funny at first. But the communicative cosmos is deeply rooted in many of our religious traditions.

Psalm 148 portrays the sun and moon and stars praising God, the sea monsters and wild animals and cattle, the creeping things and flying birds – all with voices unique to their being-ness. And for some reason, we act as if that is just metaphorical poetic language when in "reality" the celestial bodies are inert and the animals voiceless. But at the end of the Psalm, humans join the cacophonous chorus of creation with their praise – all genders and ages – and we don't understand that as metaphor, do we?

The earth creatures – animal, vegetal and geological – have a language. It's our work to learn to listen. Increasing the types of voices you're listening to will also increase your ability to practice hope in a world on the brink, as we're all woven together in this web of life.

8. To practice hope when the world feels on edge and so much of what we care about is being pushed to the brink, we must be grounded by spiritual practices.

Some might call this faith. Others, more specific name like God. But no matter the specific religious or spiritual orientation, practicing hope summons us beyond our bounded individual selves toward something that is larger than us, which sets life within an ultimate context.

And that is not "belief" in something beyond us. It is grounding ourselves in practices that move us toward something that is beyond us: Prayer; the serious study of sacred texts; singing songs of faith with others; disciplined meditation; faithful service to our community.

If you don't have any spiritual practices – perhaps you don't even have a faith tradition – then find some friends who do and ask them about those practices. Get them to teach you what they mean and how they practice them. Then try a few of them out for yourself over a set course of time as a spiritual experiment.

9. Hope looks and feels a lot like courage. Hope is risky, especially right now.

The risk is not hoping and being wrong – that's just the nature of hope. We may not get what we wish for in the end. The real risk of practicing hope is that we live our lives in such a way that the hoped for reality *is the reality out of which we live*, and that will put our bodies in dangerous places.

It takes courage to life as if the ecological web of life matters as much our human comfort and demands that we live differently. It takes courage to stand up to the gatekeepers of the status quo in defiance, as Augsburg University recently did in signing onto the national letter to oppose government overreach into higher education and live in the reality that freedom of inquiry and classrooms of rich diversity *is the reality out of which we will live*, even when that vision is under dire threat.[7] We may be punished for living in a different reality than the one imposed upon us, with different values and guiding principles, but that is the beautiful danger of hopeful practice.

For Christians, it should be of special significance to us that the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 said,"And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love"(v. 13, NRSVue). Not hope. Not even faith! But love.

Hope and courage are about as close to one another as you can get.

10. Hope looks and feels a lot like love. Hope loses any point if there is nothing that we love enough to live our lives in audacious and courageous ways.

For Christians, it should be of special significance to us that the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 said, "And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love" (v. 13, NRSVue). Not hope. Not even faith! But love. Or that the writer of 1 John,

when reaching for something that we could understand that could be equated with God, said, "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God…for God is love" (4:7-8, NRSVue).

So, if you feel at the end of your rope and hope is absolutely too tall an order that you can possibly manage, that's okay. Just let go of your worry about hope for the moment and turn to others and to the ecological web of life and *love it all* instead.

In loving the world and all that is in it and receiving that love back in return wherever it can be found, you will taste something even greater than hope itself. In and through love, you will know God. ■

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1 Cody J. Sanders, "Feral Hope for Futurist Leaders," *Word & World* 44(3) (2024).

2 Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), 3.

3 Ashon Crawley describes "otherwise possibility" this way: "Imagination, the practice of otherwise possibility, is not the lack of fear, it does not mean one isn't afraid. Imagination, the practice of otherwise possibility, is the recognition of – and honoring as sacred – fear and being afraid and moving in the direction of the alternative anyway, anyhow, in spite of." "It's Ok to Be Afraid," accessed April 26, 2025, https://ashoncrawley.com/its-ok-to-be-afraid/?srsltid=AfmBOorm3ZMvIEqi_wIWC-NUmZYzPsI4tZrzqviP4Qir-y1i5Sft8J4ij. See also his book, Ashon Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

4 Charlie Jane Anders, *Never Say You Can't Survive: How to Get Through Hard Times by Making Up Stories* (New York: Tordotcom, 2021), 2-3.

5 Lesley Head, *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene: Re-Conceptualising Human-Nature Relations*. New York: Routledge, 2016, 1.

6 Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), 8-9. Available online at: https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

7 At the time of this writing, 14 colleges and universities in Minnesota have signed the letter. Erin Adler, "More Minnesota Colleges and Universities Sign on to National Letter Opposing 'Unprecedented Government Overreach,'" *The Minnesota Star Tribune*, April 24, 2025, https://www.startribune.com/more-minnesota-colleges-and-universities-sign-on-to-national-letter-opposing-unprecedented-government-overreach/601337794

In loving the world and all that is in it and receiving that love back in return wherever it can be found, you will taste something even greater than hope itself. In and through love, you will know God.

From the Chinese Exclusion Act to pro-Palestinian activists: The Evolution of Politically Motivated Deportations

By Rick Baldoz

*T*he recent deportation orders targeting foreign students in the U.S. have prompted a heated debate about the legality of these actions. The Trump administration made no secret that many individuals were facing removal because of their pro-Palestinian advocacy.

In recent months, the State Department has revoked hundreds of visas of foreign students with little explanation. On April 25, 2025, the administration restored the legal status of many of those students, but warned that the reprieve was only temporary.

Because of their tenuous legal status in the U.S., immigrant activists are vulnerable to a government seeking to stifle dissent.

Critics of the Trump administration have challenged the legality of these removal orders, arguing that they violate constitutionally protected rights, including freedom of speech and due process.

The administration asserts that the executive branch has nearly absolute authority to remove immigrants. The White House has cited legislation passed during the peak of the nation's Cold War hysteria, like the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, which expanded the government's deportation powers.

I'm a historian of immigration, the U.S. empire and Asian American studies. The current removal orders targeting student activists echo America's long and lamentable past of jailing and expelling immigrants because of their race or what they say or believe – or all three.

The arrest of Turkish graduate student Rümeysa Öztürk by Department of Homeland Security agents in Somerville, Mass., on March 25, 2025, is an example.

Where it began

The United States' current deportation process traces its roots to the late 19th century as the nation moved to exercise federal control of immigration.

The impetus for this shift was anti-Chinese racism, which reached a fever pitch during this period, culminating in the passage of laws that restricted Chinese immigration.

The influx of Chinese immigrants to the West Coast during the mid-to-late 19th century, initially fueled by the California Gold Rush, spurred the rise of an influential nativist movement that accused Chinese immigrants of stealing jobs. It also claimed that they posed a cultural threat to American society due to their racial otherness. The Geary Act of 1892 required Chinese living in the U.S to register with the federal government or face deportation.

The Supreme Court addressed the constitutionality of these statutes in 1893 in the case of Fong Yue Ting v. United States. Three plaintiffs claimed that anti-Chinese legislation was discriminatory, violated constitutional protections prohibiting unreasonable search and seizure, and contravened due process and equal protection guarantees.

The current removal orders targeting student activists echo America's long and lamentable past of jailing and expelling immigrants because of their race or what they say or believe – or all three.

The Supreme Court affirmed the Geary Act's deportation procedures, formulating a novel legal precept known as the plenary power doctrine that remains a key tenet of U.S. immigration law today.

Court confirms the law

The doctrine included two key assertions: First, the federal government's authority to exclude and deport aliens was an inherent and unqualified feature of American sovereignty. Second, immigration enforcement was the exclusive domain of the congressional and executive branches that were charged with protecting the nation from foreign threats. The court also ruled that the deportation of immigrants in the country lawfully was a civil, rather than criminal matter, which meant that constitutional protections like due process

did not apply.

The government ramped up deportations in the aftermath of World War I, fueled by wartime xenophobia. American officials singled out foreign-born radicals for deportation, accusing them of fomenting disloyalty.

The front page of the Ogden Standard, from Ogden City, Utah, on Nov. 8, 1919, announced the arrest and planned deportation of 'alien Reds' (Library of Congress).

Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who ordered mass arrests of alleged communists, pledged to "tear out the radical seeds that have entangled Americans in their poisonous theories" and remove "alien criminals in this country who are directly responsible for spreading the unclean doctrines of Bolshevism."

This period marked a new era of removals carried out primarily on ideological grounds. Jews and other immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were disproportionately targeted, highlighting the cultural affinities between anti-radicalism and racial and ethnic chauvinism.

'Foreign' agitators

The campaign to root out so-called subversives living in the United States reached its apex during the 1940s and 1950s, supercharged by figures like anti-communist crusader Sen. Joseph McCarthy and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

The specter of foreign agitators contaminating American political culture loomed large in these debates. Attorney General Tom Clark testified before Congress in 1950 that 91.4 percent of the Communist Party USA's leadership were "either foreign stock or married to persons of foreign stock."

Congress passed a series of laws during this period requiring that subversive organizations register with the government. They also expanded the executive branch's power to deport individuals whose views were deemed "prejudicial to national security," blurring the lines between punishing people for unlawful acts – such as espionage and bombings – and what the government considered unlawful beliefs, such as Communist Party membership.

While deporting foreign-born radicals had popular support, the banishment of immigrants for their political beliefs raised important constitutional questions.

Prosecution or persecution?

In a landmark case in 1945, *Wixon v. Bridges*, the Supreme Court did assert a check on the power of the executive branch to deport someone without a fair hearing.

The case involved Harry Bridges, Australian-born president of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union. Bridges was a left-wing union leader who orchestrated a number of successful strikes on the West Coast. Under his leadership, the union also took progressive positions on civil rights and U.S. militarism.

The decision in the case hinged on whether the government could prove that Bridges had been a member of the Communist Party, which would have made him deportable under the Smith Act, which proscribed membership in the Communist Party.

Since no proof of Bridges' membership existed, the government relied on dodgy witnesses and assertions that Bridges was aligned with the party because he shared some of its political positions. Accusations of "alignment" with controversial political organizations are similar to the charges made against foreign students currently at risk of deportation by the Trump administration.

The Supreme Court vacated Bridges' deportation order, declaring that the government's claim of "affiliation" with the Communist Party was too vaguely defined and amounted to guilt by association.

The campaign to root out so-called subversives living in the United States reached its apex during the 1940s and 1950s, supercharged by figures like anti-communist crusader Sen. Joseph McCarthy and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

As the excesses and abuses of the McCarthy era came to light, they invited greater scrutiny about the dangers of unchecked executive power. Some of the more draconian statutes enacted during the Cold War, like the Smith Act, have been overhauled. The federal courts have toggled back and forth between narrow and liberal interpretations of the Constitution's applicability to immigrants facing deportation – shifts that reflect competing visions of American nationhood and the boundaries of liberal democracy.

From union leaders to foreign students

There are some striking parallels between the throttling of civil liberties during the Cold War and President Donald Trump's crusade against foreign students exercising venerated democratic freedoms.

Foreign students appear to have replaced the immigrant union leaders of the 1950s as the targets of government repression. Presumptions of guilt based on hyperbolic claims of affiliation with the Communist Party have been replaced by allegations of alignment with Hamas.

As in the past, these invocations of national security offer the pretext for the government's efforts to stifle dissent and to mandate political conformity. ■

Rick Baldoz is Associate Professor of American Studies at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. This article first appeared in The Conservation on April 30, 2025 and is reprinted here with permission.

From Letters from an American by Heather Cox Richardson on May 31, 2025

Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine addressed her colleagues seventy-five years ago on June 1, 1950:

> "I would like to speak briefly and simply about a serious national condition….It is a national feeling of fear and frustration that could result in national suicide and the end of everything that we Americans hold dear…. I speak as a Republican; I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States senator. I speak as an American…."
>
> "Freedom of speech is not what it used to be in America," she said. "It has been so abused by some that it is not exercised by others…."
>
> "It is high time that we all stopped being tools and victims of totalitarian techniques—techniques that, if continued here unchecked, will surely end what we have come to cherish as the American way of life…."
>
> "I do not want to see the Republican party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Calumny—Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry, and Smear."

Wisconsin senator Joe McCarthy was sitting two rows behind her, as leader of a faction of the Republican Party accusing their opponents of "communism." Smith had seen the effects of his behavior up close in Maine, where the faction of the Republican McCarthy-ites had supported the state's Ku Klux Klan.

> "As an American, I condemn a Republican Fascist…," she said. "As an American, I want to see our nation recapture the strength and unity it once had when we fought the enemy instead of ourselves…."

In 1950, six other Republican senators signed onto Senator Smith's declaration, leading McCarthy to sneer at "Snow White and the Six Dwarves." Other Republicans quietly applauded Smith's courage but refused to show similar courage themselves….Four years later, the Senate condemned McCarthy, and after his death in 1957, Wisconsin voters elected Democrat William Proxmire, who held the seat for the next 32 years.

See the full text of Senator Smith's speech at: https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/SmithDeclaration.pdf

How Can We love Jesus and Let the Children of Gaza Starve?

By Alissa J. Thompson

I have tattoos — several, in fact. The one on the inside of my left forearm, inked in black and printed in *Koine* Greek, translated says, ***According to Matthew 18:3.*** The verse? *Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus uttered these words in response to one of the disciples' countless egotistical inquiries. "Who is the greatest in heaven," they wanted to know (hoping it would be them, of course). So, Jesus pulled a child into their midst and told them, "*This one* will be the greatest, and if you get in her way, there are millstones awaiting your neck."

With an admonition like that, I'd feel pretty humiliated if I were a disciple.

With precious few references to children throughout the Gospels, I cherish these teachable moments. For in them, we catch a glimpse of not only Jesus' love of children, but their standing in the divine order of things.

In a time when infant exposure and infanticide were not uncommon practices, Jesus pulled the utilitarian children out from the margins and into the dead center of the kin-dom. With it, Jesus proclaimed the most vulnerable would be first — and that included the little ones. Their humility and meekness made it so.

Children *are* vulnerable, which makes it no surprise Jesus would elevate them in the kin-dom. Their dependency on others for care occupies a particular place in the social order. A la Darwin, children are not exactly fit to survive on their own. Their very existence is contingent upon those of us who can and will provide the base of Maslow's hierarchy, at the very least.

It is also contingent upon the body politic to uphold children's value in any given society. And when that body politic neglects to see the *Imago Dei* in certain bodies, the results can be catastrophic.

"Let them come," Jesus said. But that is infinitely harder to do, if not impossible, if the child is starving.

I have been haunted by the recent images coming out of Gaza. Without humanitarian aid for more than 60 days, already malnourished children are dying of preventable starvation. I have mourned the curvature of their rib cages and spines jutting through their pale skin. I have lamented their sunken-in cheekbones and dark, helpless eyes. I have writhed, watching mothers and fathers wail as they cradle their children's now-lifeless bodies, with bloated tummies and brittle bones.

And all I can think about is "yes." Jesus said let the children come — but not like this. He *blessed* the children, not *cursed* them to starvation.

Starvation as a war tactic is considered a war crime. The numbers are inconclusive, but some reports indicate upward of 290,000 children in Gaza are "on the brink of death." Meanwhile, the international community remains largely silent, as do large swaths of the church.

Are we, as Christians, to ignore these emaciated, innocent bodies? What does it say of our faith convictions if we are reticent to respond to the horror and suffering of the least of these? And what kind of church are we if not one that feeds the hungry?

"Who is the greatest in heaven," they wanted to know (hoping it would be them, of course). So, Jesus pulled a child into their midst and told them, "This one will be the greatest, and if you get in her way, there are millstones awaiting your neck."

He said to let them come; but they are too malnourished and weak, Lord, to walk.

The world and the church have abdicated their responsibility to Gaza's children, with few exceptions — South Africa and Pope Francis being among them. The lack of response and accountability from the world community is astonishingly cruel and tragic.

Perhaps more wretched, though, is the silence and inaction of those who claim to follow Jesus. In light of Gaza's children, how can we read Matthew 25 and not see we are starving the body of Christ? What good are multiplying loaves and fishes if we blockade them? With every one of those small bodies that waste away, so, too, does our very humanity. Who have we become that we would allow for such wickedness?

Surely this is not what Jesus had in mind for his chil-

dren. And if the children of Gaza cannot come to Jesus on account of their withering, then we must find a way to get to the children. As people of The Way, we cannot allow the body politic to determine who is worthy of bearing the image of God. Jesus already has exalted the children in heaven. What more do we need to see or hear?

This is a *metanoia* moment. We must turn as Jesus instructed in Matthew 18:3. Or perhaps we are the ones who should be wearing those millstones. ■

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The Seldom Heard Story of Robert Prevost, Now Pope Leo XIV

In 1975 Robert Prevost was at the top of his game. Chicago math teacher; devout Catholic; accepted into Harvard Law. He had everything a young man could dream of. But then, he made a decision that no one saw coming. He said no to Harvard. No to a six-figure future. No to fame. No to comfort. And yes to something few dare to choose: A life of complete surrender. He joined a missionary group and moved to Peru. Not to the cities. Not to the tourist spots. But to the most remote villages where children die from treatable diseases. And families walk miles just for clean water. There were no roads. No running water. No WiFi. Just mountains, silence, and poverty. But he embraced it like home. Robert didn't just live among the people. He became one of them. He:

- Learned Quechua—the sacred language of the Incas
- Carried food on foot for days
- Slept on dirt floors with the villagers
- Prayed under the stars

When he wasn't building shelters, he taught math to barefoot kids under broken rooftops. When he wasn't teaching, he carried the sick on donkeys to get help. When he wasn't healing, he listened—truly listened—to stories no one else cared to hear. While his friends from back home became lawyers and doctors. He became something else entirely. A shepherd. A brother. A quiet warrior of faith. And slowly—his legend grew. His acts weren't broadcast. But they echoed through the Andes. Bishops noticed. Priests noticed. And eventually—the Vatican noticed.

He wasn't just fluent in Latin or Canon Law. He was fluent in compassion, in humility, in listening, in presence. The Vatican didn't just see a priest. They saw a leader with soul.

And then, in 2025 history was made. For the first time ever an American, a former math teacher, a missionary to the forgotten, was elevated as the 267th Pope of the Catholic Church. And he didn't forget the people who shaped him. To this day. Pope Robert still returns to the same villages. Still prays in Quechua, still sits on dirt floors, still holds the hands of the elderly in silence. Because leadership he believes is about presence not position.

Source: This is one of the most profound posts on social media about the new Pope, Pope Leo XIV of the Roman Catholic Church.

A Big White Lie

By Marvin A. McMickle

Donald Trump wants to retell American history by removing the story of slavery from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

As part of his attack on anything that suggests diversity, equity and inclusion, Trump wants to create a version of American history that ignores the events of 1619 when indentured servants who later became victims of generational slavery were off-loaded by a Dutch-owned slave ship at Jamestown, Virginia.

Trump prefers a narrative that begins in 1776 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where an all-white assembly of delegates, many of whom were slave owners themselves, signed a Declaration of Independence complaining about their oppression at the hands of King George III and the British Parliament, even as they were silent about their own oppression of the Africans they were buying, selling, raping and brutalizing.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture has a specific design and intention and narrative that starts at the lowest level of the building where the history of slavery is told and displayed in graphic detail. The mood is dark, because there is no pleasant way to tell that story. There is a tree stump that appears to be polished. In fact, the shine of that stump is the result of the thousands of feet of African men, women and children who were shuttled up and down, forced to stand there until sold to the highest white bidder.

This practice continued for 245 years. Africans and African Americans were sold to be field hands, house servants, midnight mistresses and sex workers who were used as profit to reproduce new slaves so that slave owners would no longer need to buy them at market prices. The slaves cleared fields, planted and picked crops, and built plantation houses. They even built the United States Capitol and the White House in which Donald Trump now lives.

This is part of the story that Donald Trump does not want told. He wants Thomas Jefferson, but not his slave mistress Sally Hemmings. He wants George Washington, but not the slaves that built his Mount Vernon mansion. He wants Valley Forge and Yorktown, but he does not want Crispus Attucks, a black man who was killed by the British at the Boston Massacre of 1770, becoming the first person to die in pursuit of American independence. He does not want Salem Poor and Peter Salem, black soldiers who fought in the battle at Bunker Hill in 1775, or the all-black first Rhode Island Regiment that fought under George Washington at the decisive Battle of Yorktown in 1781.

President George W. Bush signed H.R. 1471 in 2003 which authorized the creation of this museum. The doors to the museum were opened in September of 2016 during the presidency of Barack Obama. Now, to celebrate the "golden age" of America, Donald Trump wants to erase the stories of African Americans.

Is it because of Trump's jealousy and contempt of Barack Obama that he has decided to remove all vestiges of black achievement in this country? Is that why he fired four-star General C. Q. Brown as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff? Is that why he wants to reduce or remove funding for HBCUs? Is that why he wants to remove references to Jackie Robinson and Harriet Tubman from all federal government websites?

Trump signed an executive order on March 27 that he calls "Restoring Truth in American History." A much better way of describing what Trump is doing is telling "a big white lie."

Both April Ryan the White House correspondent for the Griot and Nicole Hannah Jones who started the 1619 Project are sounding the alarm about Trump's intentions in the April 7, 2025 edition of the BlackPressUSA Newswire. So, too, is Khalid Gibral Muhammad in the April 7, 2025 issue of U.S. News and World Report.

Trump signed an executive order on March 27 that he calls "Restoring Truth in American History." A much better way of describing what Trump is doing is telling "a big white lie." ■

The Rev. Dr. Marvin A. McMickle is pastor emeritus of Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. He also served as president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, New York, from 2011 to 2019.

Book Reviews

Migrant God: A Christian Vision for Immigrant Justice

by Isaac Samuel Villegas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025, 161 pages)

Review by Cody J. Sanders

As someone who reads books for a living – and occasionally writes them – I pay very careful attention when I suddenly and immediately want to put down all the other books that I *should* be reading for my teaching and writing because a new book has captivated my attention and won't let go. Isaac Samuel Villegas' book, *Migrant God: A Christian Vision for Immigrant Justice*, came to my attention in February of 2025 as the immigration orders from the new presidential administration came rolling in, crueler and more heinous by the day. I knew I needed to read this book immediately. I needed someone to converse with who had dedicated his life and ministry to immigration justice and ministries of compassion for migrants. Villegas' book was the book I needed. His is a prophetic, compassionate, companioning voice. And I couldn't put the book down. Every time I tried, it summoned me back.

Villegas lives and works as an immigrant justice community organizer in North Carolina and is an ordained minister in the Mennonite Church USA, a denomination in the Anabaptist tradition rooted in the peace and justice ways of Jesus, committed to "bear witness to this gift of peace by rejecting violence and resisting injustice in all forms, and in all places."[1]

Migrant God is tethered to that commitment from page one. Villegas's own familial legacy stretches across three nations' borders – the United States, Costa Rica and Colombia – giving him what he describes as "a transnational sense of belonging" (p. 120). His familial stories enrich the entirety of this text.

The book takes readers on an expansive journey alongside Villegas and the migrants he accompanies. We begin in the desert of Douglas, Arizona, at a cemetery next to the U.S. border wall. Over 7,000 remains of migrants have been recovered in the U.S. borderlands. "A whole landscape of anonymous skeletons and mass graves, untold horrors—the dead are victims of enforcement mechanisms that conceal personal responsibility. Indirect murder" (p. 16). This chapter is the most profound treatment of migrant death in the U.S. borderlands that I have ever encountered, detailing vigils that are kept in the desert, graves sanctified with crosses for unknown victims labeled "no identificado" or "no identificada" where names should be (p. 18).

But Villegas goes further to explore the theological weight of the crucified people caught in political and economic violence, and the social death that occurs when undocumented people are locked in detention centers, like the one Villegas takes readers to in Eloy, Arizona, (where I have also twice visited on accompaniment journeys into the immigration courts housed inside this for-profit detention facility). "Imprisonment is a labyrinthine passageway into the realm of social death," he argues, "alienation from kinship, from community, from life…deaden[ing] a person's humanity, estranging them from their sense of self" (p. 23).

Over 7,000 remains of migrants have been recovered in the U.S. borderlands."A whole landscape of anonymous skeletons and mass graves, untold horrors—the dead are victims of enforcement mechanisms that conceal personal responsibility.

Villegas then invites us into the Sonoran Desert where border patrol conducts warrantless searches and seizures, driving some 20 miles from the border where he and his companions create a cenotaph at the place where Lucio Sanchez-Zepeda was found dead some time ago, most likely of hypothermia. "To memorialize the dead is to claim a relation, to honor a mutual belonging, an intermingling—to recognize another's life as somehow part of our own" (p. 28). Words of profundity and tenderness like these are a staple of Villegas' writing.

We then encounter Villegas' own *Abuelita* briefly in her kitchen as she serves up *arroz con pollo* to her grandchildren. Soon to join Villegas in *another* kitchen

– that of La Casa del Migrante in Tijuana, Mexico, as he puts the coffee cauldron on for the 50 migrant adults living there before they go off to work for the day. Here "the domestic arts of the kitchen were sacred rites of communion…Every meal was a last supper" (p. 46).

We move from the kitchen to a protest outside the unmarked brick office building of the local ICE facility in a business park in Cary, NC. (I've stood in similar demonstrations outside of almost identical unmarked ICE buildings in Massachusetts and recognized the scene immediately.) Villegas and about 50 others from local churches have gathered to witness the injustices taking place in that unmarked facility by singing hymns, praying prayers and requesting to wash the feet of those detained within. While that request is not granted, they wash *each other's* feet amid increasingly serious and loud threats of arrest from the local police. As he points to an empty chair in the parking lot representing those who have been taken from their community by ICE, Villegas says to the crowd, "In this holy act, we bear witness to God's love for us and for those who've been taken from us, leaving us wounded, dismembered, with holes in our hands and side: the pierced and severed body of Christ" (p. 52).

Next comes a crash course on community defense as neighbors and congregants develop a method to alert immigrants in their city to the presence of ICE and to track that presence through their neighborhoods. Community defense *is* pastoral care, in Villegas' view.

As a professor of pastoral care, I couldn't agree more. "The community we want is already here," he says, "among us, in our neighborhoods and workplaces" (p. 75). The work is protecting that community from unjust immigration policy and enforcement and providing the mutual aid necessary to keep our neighbors from falling through the cracks created by inadequate affordable housing, detention bonds, utility bills and grocery needs that mount when a family member has been taken by ICE.

Then we get a glimpse into the creation of a sanctuary coalition in North Carolina comprised of several congregations that accompany an undocumented person, Rosa del Carmen Ortez-Cruz, for two years. Volunteers slept on cots across the hall from the makeshift apartment inside one of the churches for those years where Rosa lives after she was targeted for deportation at the outset of the first Trump administration. She worked through the legal channels against deportation for several years prior to needing to enter sanctuary, or else return to a dangerous situation in her home country where her life was threatened by a former partner who had already once attempted to murder her. He explains the churches' commitment to Rosa: "All of us were ready to assemble ourselves as a shield of protection, to intercede on her behalf, and to stand in solidarity with her by blocking the entrance into the church building" (p. 83). Additionally, the chapter provides a helpful history of sanctuary practice in the U.S. beginning in the 1980s and roots this practice in the history of Christianity all the way back to St. Augustine.

I am a former pastor in an American Baptist/Alliance of Baptists congregation that practiced sanctuary with undocumented people in the 1980s, when the sanctuary movement began in the U.S. We renewed that sanctuary practice with a coalition of 10 other congregations and communities at the outset of the first Trump administration in 2016. Back in the 80s, we even had an FBI informant in the pews each Sunday, and every Sunday the congregation would pray for their informant, never knowing who the person was.[2]

As I reflected on Villegas' words about sanctuary in light of my congregation's experience, I became grateful for the ways this book opens a window for readers into so many communities making that same precarious sanctuary journey with immigrants in other parts of the country. The recent Trump administration has tried to take away the sanctuary protection that churches can offer to undocumented immigrants – along with that of other protected areas such as schools and hospitals. That executive order is now being challenged in court in a lawsuit joined by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The idea behind the protection of immigrants in those sensitive spaces from the risk of ICE detainment is that everyone, no matter their documentation status, should have the ability to seek medical care, receive education, and worship their God without fear.

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Involvement in sanctuary work has been one of the most transformative seasons of my entire ministry. Our congregation, along with 10 other communities,

accompanyed one family living in sanctuary inside one of our churches for nearly four-and-a-half years until they achieved documentation status. We celebrated the birthdays of the two children in a church fellowship hall through those years. Congregants walked the children to school every day because their mother could not leave the church building without risk of detainment. Several of us accompanied her to immigration court hearings every time she was summoned, witnessing the arduous and often cruel process one must go through to prove one's life is in danger if returned to their country of origin. Among the other ways she passed her time inside the church walls for all those years, this young mother learned to sew and made paraments for our communion table that we used throughout the church year.

This family in sanctuary transformed the lives of our congregations while we protected theirs. Anyone who reads *Migrant God* will understand why churches do this work and, hopefully, be inspired to stand in similar acts of solidarity with immigrants and the God who shows up with those on the move, in wilderness places.

Finally, Villegas helps readers marry their understandings of liberation and worship, saying, "To prepare ourselves for worship is to set our faces toward liberation," rooting that claim in the fact that the Hebrews' liturgical festival upon leaving Egypt was in protest of their enslavement there. All the time since, the spiritual and the political, worship and liberation, have been bound up together in a communal process of social formation – liturgical acts "of belonging that create and maintain a community" (p. 105).

Preachers will find in this book a companion in the exploration of biblical texts that pertain to immigration. One text Villegas draws upon to reflect upon his own family's life at the edges of Los Angeles where his father worked in a factory is the text at the end of Genesis when "socioeconomic forces pull the Hebrew people into ancient Egypt to survive the devastation of famine" (p. 95). Like many migrants since, they did whatever was necessary to keep their children alive and fed. "Despite the contemptuous gaze of the long-standing residents, the Hebrews made a home in this foreign land…even if this relocation will mean their constant subjection to their new neighbors' disgust" (p. 96). The Egyptian economy required precarious Hebrew labor, yet the Hebrew people were considered alien, and Pharaoh feared that the foreigners would someday become more numerous than the Egyptians (Exodus 1:9-10).

Like his treatment of this text, wherever Villegas touches upon a biblical text in the book, the light and shadows cast between the sacred text and the sacred lives of migrants refuses to let go of the theological imagination. The reader cannot unsee what Villegas helps us to witness, both in the Bible and in the lived experience of immigrants living in the U.S. This book will live with you long after you finish reading it. The book will also be ideal for the layperson and for book groups. Aside from the rich theological reflection on the socio-cultural and political landscape for immigrants in the U.S., readers will also learn a great deal about U.S. immigration policy and enforcement, and the historical trajectories that have led us to where we are today. Seven short, well-cited, highly accessible, and beautifully written chapters are a crash course education for readers wishing for a more descriptive understanding of U.S. immigration realities. And if you watch and read the news thinking, "I know in my heart that this is wrong, but I wish I knew how to talk about this with more theological depth," Villegas accompanies you beyond the religious shallows into the theological depths where the migrant God is trou-

The Egyptian economy required precarious Hebrew labor, yet the Hebrew people were considered alien, and Pharaoh feared that the foreigners would someday become more numerous than the Egyptians (Exodus 1:9-10).

bling the waters.

Finally, I believe many seminary professors will find this a welcome addition to course reading lists. What this book offers to seminarians is a window into embodied faith praxis and religious leadership that cultivates courage to stand with those whose lives are made precarious by our political situation. As Villegas says, "The Bible reminds us that God has been known to join caravans in the wilderness. The Spirit of God dwells with people on the move. A migrant God for migrant life" (p. 117). *This* is the God students should encounter in their formation as clergypersons, if they haven't already. *Migrant God* offers to expand imaginations for ministerial possibility in an era of creeping fascism and provides a crash course in what congregational and ministerial courage looks like in practice. My seminary students will be reading this book in semesters to come.

The only limitation that I can see in this book whatsoever is that, while it was published in 2025, many of the contemporary narratives that root the book's theology in lived immigrant experience and congregational ministry are set within the first Trump administration. (The book was published just as Trump was being reelected to his second term.) Though while the contemporary context has shifted toward more dramatic and brutal federal policy and practice related to immigrants, the theology and ministerial praxis that the book advances remain as prescient as ever. And far from simply an anti-Trump screed, he also brings into view the harmful immigration policy and enforcement of the Obama and Biden administrations. Most importantly, perhaps, Villegas' critique reaches far back into U.S. immigration policy and practice – for example, colonial "lantern laws" in New York City aimed to track and regulate the movement of Black and Native American enslaved persons at nighttime. Some of these historic precedents of contemporary law were new to me, as I imagine they will be for many readers.

The political onslaught against immigrants in the U.S. continues unabated since the re-election of Donald Trump. As some immigrants are now being deported without due process to a "Terrorist Confinement Center" in El Salvador, the administration's sights turn toward the possibility of deporting U.S. citizens, too. As of the week of this writing, the U.S. House Republicans voted *against* a measure that would block immigration officials from detaining and deporting citizens.

There is no more time for churches to dither over whether we are on the brink of catastrophe. Ministers and congregations must organize and respond to a crisis that threatens to entangle so many vulnerable lives in webs of injustice and violence and draw our entire country into the terrors of fascism. Isaac Samuel Villegas has gifted the church with *Migrant God: A Christian Vision for Immigrant Justice* at a time when we desperately need accessible theological resources to help congregations understand how to practice the historic Judeo-Christian call to compassion for "foreigners who live in your land" (Leviticus 19:33 CEV). I can't recommend this book strongly enough. ■

Cody J. Sanders is Associate Professor of Congregational and Community Care Leadership at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN, Interim Pastor at The Table in Minneapolis, MN, and a member of the CET board.

1 "What We Believe," *Mennonite Church USA*, accessed May 3, 2025, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/what-we-believe/

2 Congregant and theologian, Harvey Cox, wrote about this experience at the time. "The Congregation, and Its F.B.I. Spy, Will Rise," *New York Times*, March 3, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/03/03/opin-

Isaac Samuel Villegas has gifted the church with Migrant God: A Christian Vision for Immigrant Justice at a time when we desperately need accessible theological resources to help congregations understand how to practice the historic Judeo-Christian call to compassion for "foreigners who live in your land" (Leviticus 19:33 CEV).

We too often see billionaires and other mega-rich people believing that the beauty of the earth was simply one more gift that a just and capitalistic deity had bestowed on them for their own personal use.

Chris Hayes, ***The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource.*** Penguin Random House, 2025 and Nicholas Carr, ***Superbloom: How Technologies of Connection Tear Us Apart,*** W. W. Norton & Company, 2024.

Reviewed by Gary Furr

Few would or could argue that human existence is not being seriously undermined and disrupted by the digital age, despite the many advances that have come with it. Two recent books have sought to understand the distress to human community that has come with the breathtaking advances that technology brings. They do so, ironically, by beginning in a pair of uncomputerlike ways—with stories that give metaphors for understanding the moment we are in.

Christopher Hayes' book is ***The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource.*** Hayes is best known as a news commentator and anchor on MSNBC. He is also a podcaster, author and editor-at-large for The Nation Magazine. His undergraduate degree, though, was philosophy at Brown University, and it shines through his latest work.

Hayes begins with the mythological story of Ulysses and his sailors as they pass near the island of the sirens. Circe has warned Ulysses of the danger of their seductive song and advises him to have his sailors plug their ears to be able to resist the desire to go toward their beautiful sounds and wreck the ship on the rocks near the shore. Ulysses chooses to be tied to the mast so he may hear their song but nearly goes mad in the process.

Hayes does a deep dive into the disruptive impact of social media and the digital age by examining the role of attention in human life. The book's subtitle captures his overarching concern: the ever shrinking and distracted attention span. The power of this revolution, which first came from Marchall McLuhan and futurists like Alvin Toffler, has caused the initial euphoria over the connectional power of the internet to give way to profound alarm in recent years.

Defining attention in philosophical and economic terms, the book describes the modern attempts to capture and commodify our attention. Attention, of course, is essential for human connection, survival and the love necessary for our collective and individual lives. Since the advent of modern psychology, William James and others have rightly identified the centrality of attention as a core reality of our humanity. Attention is love—the most basic and elemental form of love and thriving. "My contention," he writes, "is that the defining feature of this age is that the most important resource—our attention—is also the very thing that makes us human. Unlike land, coal, or capital, which exist outside of us, the chief resource of this age is embedded in our psyches. Extracting it requires cracking into our minds," (p. 12).

The metaphor of the siren is enlarged by consideration of what a "siren" means in modern industrialized and bureaucratic life—the sound of a siren breaks in upon our attention and forces us to pay attention. Witness the ambulance, the police car, or the tornado warning system. But there is also the seduction of hearing our name mentioned at a party or in class. Our mind immediately fastens attention to search out the origin.

Defining attention in philosophical and economic terms, the book describes the modern attempts to capture and commodify our attention.

While it is normal and human to respond in this way, the evolution of modern society, particularly as it has linked with capitalism, is to seek to capture and hold our attention. Attention is money—by distracting us, holding our attention, and luring us to the temptations of material possessions, pleasures and relief from boredom.

It is boredom, the perennial challenge of human life, that we face as a spiritual and philosophical test. Platforms in the computer age employ the effect long ago discovered in the slot machine to capture our attention and hold it. By giving us intermittent rewards we are kept captive. The problem is that as the distractions and lures have proliferated through our technological devices, our attention has not. It is a fixed amount, not increased in any way. We pay attention to only one focus at a time. Therefore, as more and more choices are available in ways never before possible, there is almost infinite competition for the same fixed resource.

For much of human history, we paid attention togeth-

er—in person, or in groups. Even in our practices of faith, we paid attention collectively through rituals, actions and practices. "For the first 99 percent of our time on this planet, the only way we could experience ritual or spectacle or athletic competition was in person, with others." Now that is no longer so (p. 145).

If we see what has happened even since the mid-19th century, the effect on our democracy is understandable. Hayes points in chapter seven to the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 to illustrate what has happened to us. A democracy requires sufficient time and attention to hear and absorb debate and different ideas. These robust debates are necessary as an alternative to fascism and authoritarianism, in which a powerful individual or group decides for the society.

Lincoln and Douglas traveled the country, debating the single issue of slavery from town to town, drawing massive crowds who would listen for hours as they argued, answered and explored this critical issue. The shrinking of the attention span has been well-documented, but this requirement of a democratic society is often missed in our current moment. If we consider the phenomenon of Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, we see success of a certain kind, but at the expense of any intelligible conversation about substance. Speeches are entertainment and emotional response and, most importantly, gaining attention, whether good or bad is irrelevant.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates could not be had today. That the religious culture, particularly among white evangelicals, has been absorbed and shrunk by this reality is of great dismay. Because the loss of attention means loss of moral depth, the loss of genuine discernment, the loss of critical debate and discussion, and the loss of spiritual change.

Our attention is extracted without our will even being able to weigh in, he argues. As economists once talked about the alienation created by the mundane nature of work in the Industrial Age, now this loss of focus and attention creates a crisis of alienation within our very selves. Jonathan Haidt, Sherry Turkel, and others have documented the damage this is doing to children. Hayes has done us the favor of seeing that we must fight for our very selves. It is our inner freedom that is at stake.

It is easy to see the dilemma of our current politics and culture. Hayes notes on page 205 that we tend to compare the authoritarian tendencies to George Orwell's ***1984***, but in fact it is Aldous Huxley's ***Brave New World*** that is more apt. He quotes Neil Postman who said that that what Orwell feared was there were those who would ban books, but what Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read.

Attention is our most precious faculty. By it we love and are loved. By it we decide, connect to one another, and promote value and truth. The irony is not lost on Hayes that he earns his living in this attention commodity. But he notes that most news media people do not control attention. They spend their days chasing it.

When we come to Nicholas Carr, we meet another profound metaphor, that of a story of reality colliding with virtuality. Nicholas Carr is a journalist and author who has written substantively about the consequences of technology for humanity. ***The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*** was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2010. It's an intellectual history of how various technological revolutions have affected the human brain and how the one in which we currently find ourselves is transforming every part of our lives. An updated edition was released in 2020.

The Shallows examines the impact of technology on the long history of human beings and how this current epoch is particularly damaging to our brains. His latest

Lincoln and Douglas traveled the country, debating the single issue of slavery from town to town, drawing massive crowds who would listen for hours as they argued, answered and explored this critical issue.

work, ***Superbloom: How Technologies of Connection Tear Us Apart,*** starts in a different place, the beginning of modern attention industries.

The opening chapter begins with a current story, in which a young social media influencer documented a spectacular area in Walker Canyon, California, in which a spring "superbloom" of poppies had occurred in 2019. Carr says:

> It would appear on Instagram a hundred thousand times over the next two weeks—selfie-seekers followed, pulled the blossoms up by the fistful. "Flowergeddon," the press called it. In an internet minute, a semblance of joy had turned to a semblance of remorse. with everyone churning out content and competing for the symbolic applause of the like button. As well as a portrait, it offered a metaphor. We live today in a perpetual superbloom—not of flowers but of messages (p.3).

Carr examines our present moment from a different vantage point than Hayes but overlapping it. He begins with Charles Horton Cooley, a communications theorist born in the 19th century, and in fact who first coined the phrase "social media." He and others were in the early heyday of new technology that was changing the social landscape—the telegraph, then radio and mass newspapers, and later television.

Cooley did not think individuals existed apart from society. While human nature may be fixed, it also could be altered by social influence. Therefore, as ideas spread and technologies enabled letters, telegraphs and other technologies to carry words beyond face-to-face conversation, collective changes and affinity groups could form.

The early pioneers of mass communication were heady with optimism about the impact of this new possibility on human life. The faster and more effective our communication with one another and between groups, the more our differences might be overcome. Ministers were also seized with euphoric hopes for an age of spiritual change, documented in sermons of the time.

They were blinded to the possibility that, by giving people more information and ability to form groups on the basis of their personal ideas that this might also have detrimental effects, what Philip Rieff said in 1962, says Carr, was "a disinclination to take into account the demonic in man" (p. 11). This same naivete was rampant among the early developers of the internet and social media. Mark Zuckerberg had ascended into dominance with Facebook in 2012 and was on a stated mission to create a more perfect world by getting people to communicate more. By 2016, when a heavily armed father of two stormed a pizza parlor in Washington based on a conspiracy theory, his vision was unraveling. The moral qualities to manage and harness this power were outstripped by the technology itself. Marconi and Tesla had earlier hoped that their inventions would bring an end to war by speeding communication and eliminating misunderstandings. The opposite seems to have been the case.

Carr then traces the long and complicated history of the tension between the private and the public interest and the many issues of privacy, freedom and self-expression. As the new technologies evolved, there was a general understanding that a distinction could exist. What may be permitted privately did not apply when a broadcast was universally available. The public then had an interest in regulating and monitoring it.

What changed with the internet, however, was that the ability to maintain this distinction disappeared, says Carr. For most of the 20th century, there were producers of content and consumers of content. Feedback could go the other way, of course, as in campaigns of complaints or letters to the stations. The technological innovations of Bell Labs, however, changed this fatefully through the work of engineer Claude Shannon. Shannon and his team developed the beginnings of coding that could reduce, theoretically, anything humans have by means of ones and zeroes. They could compress all information to be easily transmitted across a network this way, opening the door to the current reality. "By 2007, half of Americans had home broadband. By 2010, two-thirds did" (p. 58).

Carr's survey of this story is fascinating and illuminating. What ensued was "content collapse," a reductionism of all things into their simplest form. Next, he says, came the "feed," a reality Hayes also notes as fateful for humanity. For now, through algorithmic response, users themselves edit and select the information they see and interact with. Suddenly the wall between producers of content and consumers collapsed and the information moved everywhere at once.

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While much obvious focus and blame falls upon the greedy merchants of Silicon Valley, Carr underlines the collective fault is what is inside each of us being manifested in the selections we make and comments we share. Moreover, we have run up against a disturbing truth—we do not like and cooperate more as we know more about one another. After a certain polite distance, the more we know, the more our antipathies to one another deepen.

Social media brought us oversharing as the new norm. In agreement with Chris Hayes, he notes what "to shut up, even briefly, is to disappear. To confirm our existence, we must keep posting. We must keep repeating Here I am!" (p. 108). But with this sharing comes the spurring of cascades of dissimilarity.

Familiarity breeds contempt, envy, rivalry and covetousness.

The democracy fallacy of the early utopians crashed in the realities of the social media age. Rather than spreading democracy, we now well know that the opposite has happened. Proliferation of information has overwhelmed any capacity to adequately evaluate and debate truths. This was not new, of course. "In 1919, Walter Lippmann wrote a despairing essay in the Atlantic Monthly titled 'The Basic Problem of Democracy.' 'The world about which each man is supposed to have opinions has become so complicated as to defy his powers of understanding,'" (p. 131). We live and move about in the same way but think and feel about it in completely different ways.

When provocateur Steve Bannon suggested the strategy to "flood the zone" with excrement, to put it nicely, he was only channeling the entire effect of social media—to overwhelm with too much unfiltered and unreflective information. Human society is simply overwhelmed and paralyzed with information, much of it created by our own forwarding, responding and reacting. It is the perfect step-up transformer. What results is our own inner, contradictory (and theologians might say both "image of God" and "fallen sinner") natures projected upon the universe in a chaotic and disastrous tsunami of useless and trivial bytes.

In chapter seven, Carr focuses on the impact of the Coronavirus epidemic, as people were confined and cut off from physical proximity. Isolated, people spend more and more time online. And misinformation also grew. The political and cultural conflicts of that time compounded the deep cracks in our institutional and political life. Now the stage was set to deepen the crisis.

Up to this point in his book, Nicholas Carr traces how global humanity came to the present moment. In his final section 3, titled "Everything is Mediated," he turns to the revolution of AI and the development of LLMs (large language models). It is a disturbing survey of the AI arms race currently underway. While it is obvious that a handful of opportunistic elites have seized on this revolution for their own benefit, including the current president and his circle, both to enrich themselves and to increase their power and control of society and its direction, the danger is even larger to the future of humankind than our daily crises enable us to understand.

Social media has created a perfect mirror of the neurotic selves we have become. It is fashionable in a therapeutic age to use the language of narcissism to diagnose one another. But a generation ago, pastoral theologian Donald Capps identified narcissism as the emerging disorder of our time in his book ***The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age.*** I heard Capps lecture when his book first appeared, and his argument was compelling to me. Narcissism operates profoundly out of a fear of shame, not guilt. At the core of the narcissist is emptiness of soul. Failing to develop a healthy and well-ordered self at early stages of life, this person is bereft of inner resources. Life consists of grasping constantly to fill the emptiness with the external world through manipulation and seeking accolades and praise.

Now we carry the instruments of disordered self-image in our purses and pockets, complete with a camera to edit our words and images to gain the faint praise of unknown people on the web whose actual presence in our lives is nearly non-existent. And we are universally all trapped in this "web." The stage is now set for the machines to take over the content production phase.

AI is moving at breakneck speed to develop alternatives to actual human connection. Carr documents this in terrifying detail.

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> In 2012, half of American teenagers said they'd rather socialize with friends through screens than in person, [and a study] found that from 2010 to 2019 social engagement "plummeted for young Americans." Socializing in person with friends fell by half, from 133 to 67 minutes a day. As people spend more time with technologies of connection, they feel more disconnected. Interacting through screens is not the same as hanging out. The virtual world is a cold place. For many teens and tweens, particularly girls, the twenty-first century has been a time of growing despair. (171-172).

It is not hard to see the consequences for humanity in this development. Carr calls it a "World without

World" as the title of chapter 9. He now begins to explore the key characters of the AI overlords, most prominently Marc Andreessen (notably a mentor for Vice-President Vance).

Carr says that he thinks that "AI will neither save nor destroy the world. But its power brokers will be more likely to be guilty of the latter." Andreessen believed that anything humans can produce, AI can do better. It is infinitely patient and sympathetic and "AI will make the world warmer and nicer." The manifesto where Andreessen set forth these ideas ends with a warning for "the public and the government to stay out of the tech industry's way."

In an obscure interview in 2021, Carr tells of Andreessen's belief that human beings left to themselves are destructive and wasteful. His vision is a technocracy, in which a small, powerful group of elites control the wealth, power and information systems for the sake of humanity itself. "Behind today's dystopian AI dreams lurk character traits all too common to the tech elite: grandiosity, hubris, and self-aggrandizement" (p.183).

Both Hayes and Carr underline that once technological change comes, there is no way to go back. The consequences are already underway. Both argue persuasively that our technology both amplifies and diminishes our inner lives simultaneously. It is odd to think that in the creation of a means of sharing connection and possibilities by flattening every made part of ourselves into cyphers that we have somehow attained something worth giving complete devotion and trust into.

The problem is, what do we do now that we see the price, but cannot turn back? As a former executive from that world told me, "You either fight it or try to get ahead of it and manage it." Both options are profoundly difficult. ***Superbloom*** and ***Sirens' Call*** are extraordinarily engaging reads. When you finish them, you will be tempted to live in a mountain cave without electricity, but that is not an option for the followers of Jesus. As the fourth century monastics went to the deserts to create alternative communities of faithfulness as a protest against the secularization of the Constantinian church, so there is an opportunity for Christians to renounce the nationalist idolatry of the present moment, which is buttressed by the virtual sirens in its spread We are in the world they describe. For Hayes, this calls for the nurture of the inner life, which AI and the web stand as a temptation more than a help. What is needed are spaces for human connection, reflection, strategic withdrawal and "retreat." This has long been a part of religious life. Human beings' souls are under fire today by a collective self-destruction created by our brightest minds and enhanced by our own unreflective and addictive cooperation. It is a dangerous moment. And an opportunity for the best our long heritage of collective wisdom has to offer.

While neither author sets forth explicitly religious visions (Hayes grew up Catholic), invitations to robust theology are everywhere. Hopefully, we will not fail the moment. And, if our convictions are connected to the living God, we won't. ■

Superbloom *and* ***Sirens' Call*** *are extraordinarily engaging reads. When you finish them, you will be tempted to live in a mountain cave without electricity, but that is not an option for the followers of Jesus.*

Gary Furr is a speaker, writer, and performing musician living in Birmingham, Alabama with his wife, Vickie, and their three children and grandchildren. He retired in 2021 after forty one years as a pastor and is a frequent contributor to Christian Ethics Today. He can be reached at bhmpicker@gmail.com.

The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy,

by Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry
(Oxford University Press: 2022)

Yale Professor of Sociology, Philip Gorski, and Samuel Perry of the University of Oklahoma examine white Christian nationalism, the ideology that inspired many who attacked the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Professor Gorski was interviewed by Mike Cummings of *Yale News* on March 15, 2022. The following contains edited excerpts from that interview and is reprinted with permission.

Introduction

The January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol was a hodgepodge of conflicting symbols.
The protestors erected a large wooden cross and gallows. Some waved Rebel battle flags; others the Stars and Stripes. Some carried signs declaring that "Jesus Saves" while others wore sweatshirts bearing white supremacist slogans. The men who invaded the Senate chamber — some clad in body armor, one wearing a horned headdress — invoked Christ's name as they bowed heads and prayed.

To many, the clashing imagery was one of many bewildering and unsettling aspects of that chaotic day. To sociologists Philip Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, the scene was instantly recognizable as an extreme form of white Christian nationalism. They co-wrote this primer that relies on historical sources and survey data to explain the ideology, trace its origins and history, and describe the threat it poses to the United States.

What is white Christian nationalism?

Philip Gorski: First, it is an ideology based on a story about America that's developed over three centuries. It reveres the myth that the country was founded as a Christian nation by white Christians and that its laws and institutions are based on Protestant Christianity. White Christian nationalists believe that the country is divinely favored and has been given the mission to spread religion, freedom, and civilization. They see this mission and the values they cherish as under threat from the growing presence of non-whites, non-Christians, and immigrants in the United States. This is one point at which white Christian nationalism overlaps with the Make America Great American narrative. It's the view that somebody has corrupted the country or is trying to take it away. White Christian nationalists want to take it back.

Where are the roots of today's white Christian nationalism?

Gorski: By digging into the historical source materials, you can see this perspective taking shape in the 1690s, which is the title of one of the book's chapters. In a way, you can trace it back even further, because this idea of a white Christian nation does have roots in a certain understanding of the Bible that weaves three old stories into a new story.

One is this idea of a Promised Land. God bestows a Promised Land on the Israelites. They go to that land and find the Amalekites inhabiting it. They conquered the land. This is how a lot of the early settlers of New England, many of them Puritan, understood their situation. Quite literally, they saw themselves, like the Israelites, as a chosen people. North America was the new Promised Land. The Native Americans were the new Amalekites and the Puritans felt entitled to take their land.

Another strand is the End Times story, which today is viewed as the Second Coming of Jesus in the most literal sense. It's a belief that Jesus is going to come down to Earth for a final showdown between good and evil. And the Christians in America will be on the side of good. These two stories describe the "Christian nationalism" in white Christian nationalism.

This is one point at which white Christian nationalism overlaps with the Make America Great American narrative. It's the view that somebody has corrupted the country or is trying to take it away. White Christian nationalists want to take it back.

Whiteness came into play when some white Americans tried to develop a justification for slavery. The traditional justification for slavery, theologically speaking, had been that heathens and captives of war could be enslaved. Initially, this is how slavery in America was justified, but a couple of generations later, the justification didn't really work. You can't argue that a young boy of African descent born in the Virginia Colony in 1690 was a captive of war. His mother might have converted to Christianity, in which case he's not a "heathen." A new justification had to be embedded in the culture, which gave rise to the notori-

ous idea of the curse of Ham. Because Ham had seen his father Noah drunk and naked, God placed a mark on Ham's son Canaan and condemned his offspring to slavery. Christians used this to justify enslaving people of African descent.

Why is 1690 the origin for white Christian nationalism as opposed to, say, 1776 or 1619, when the first enslaved people were brought to colonial Virginia?

Gorski: The three biblical stories merge in 1690. You can see this very clearly in what is still one of the authoritative histories of early New England, which was written by Cotton Mather III from the great family of Boston preachers. Once this script is in place, it gets revised as time passes. Maybe the Promised Land is out West. Maybe the Native Americans are no longer the enemy, but it's immigrants from the southern border who represent the threat. The story gets made and remade and becomes a central part of American religious culture as well as secular, popular culture.

What does "freedom" mean to white Christian nationalists?

Gorski: For various reasons, there's a very individualistic idea of freedom within white Christian nationalism today. It isn't freedom in the sense of being a democratic citizen working with others to pursue the common good. It is a strongly libertarian, "don't tread on me" mentality. Historically, it goes together with a certain idea of order that places white men on the top of society with everyone else below them. Anything that threatens that order is seen as a justification for violence.

You can really see this in the Capitol insurrection. It occurred against the background of the Black Lives Matter movement and nationwide calls for racial justice, which white Christian nationalists view as a threat to the racial order. It offends their notion of freedom and liberty. It leads to guys showing up to the Capitol with cattle prods and bear spray ready to beat up police officers in the name of their understanding of patriotism. In the book, we call it a Holy Trinity of freedom, order, and violence.

How did people with sincerely held Christian religious beliefs come to view Donald Trump as their champion?

Gorski: We should recognize that a surprising number of Trump's Christian supporters really do believe that he is sincerely devout. They think this because he's kind of played along with the idea and because people they trust, such as Franklin Graham and other prominent evangelical pastors, have told them that Donald Trump is a good Christian.

I think there are others who realize he's not a devout Christian, perhaps not Christian at all, but they see Christianity as under attack and believe that he will stand up for it. If they are choosing between a politician who has religious faith and somebody who is prepared to fight, they prefer the person with the fight to the person with the faith.

What kind of threat does white Christian nationalism represent to American democracy?

Gorski: It's a very serious threat. We should of course be clear that there's not any inherent contradiction between Christianity and democracy. In fact, I think one of the remarkable things about the United States has been that, for most of our history, Christianity and democracy have complemented each other very well. Democracy brought religious freedom to different groups of Christians. But the right and the Christian right have taken a sharp, authoritarian turn in recent years for many reasons. My previous book, "American Babylon," sought to understand them.

If they are choosing between a politician who has religious faith and somebody who is prepared to fight, they prefer the person with the fight to the person with the faith.

White Christian nationalism is a dangerous threat because it's incredibly well-organized and powerful. There's absolutely nothing like it on the left. The white Christian nationalists boast local and national networks that can raise money and to turn people out to the polls and to school board meetings or protests. They can effectively communicate messages and support policies that are out of step with liberal democracy, such as the coordinated attack on voting rights. ■

Source: https://news.yale.edu/2022/03/15/yale-sociologist-phil-gorski-threat-white-christian-nationalism.

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