

Review Article

The Cultural Psychology of Religion and Political Ideals: Political Liberalism as a Protoevangelium?

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In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul remarks memorably that perception of divine truth is comparable to seeing “as through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12 New International Version). For a number of contemporary Christians, the glass through which humans might perceive dimly the truths of the Christian faith is thought to have grown darker over the past two centuries due, in part, to the manner in which the culture of advanced political democracy has undermined revealed religion—has rendered more opaque the light of Christian faith. One villain in this view is the environment of meaning supported by political liberalism, an ecology formed by widely disseminated decrees of courts and legislative bodies as well as by a set of cultural expectations concerning the scope of justice realizable through state power, an expectation growing from, and reinforced by, the juridical and legislative pronouncements of the liberal state itself. Such an ecology of meaning is held by some Christians to have created an environment in which traditional Christian faith is perceived as marginal, or, worse, as harmful [1]. Hence, it is claimed that humanity’s capacity to know God, if only imperfectly, is made even more difficult by the rise of political liberalism and the symbolic universe it delimits: a world of governments always unmoored to churches or other religious institutions, a world, as a result, where the decisions of states can defensibly and intelligibly be grounded not on revelation but only on natural science, and where, partly in consequence of the state’s firm pursuit of justice, the morally serious pursue not transcendence, but the rectification of injustice in this life, unconcerned with a justice beyond the here and now—the justice dispensed to an immortal soul. These features of the culture of contemporary liberalism—separation of church and state and the resultant elevation of science as the basis of state decision making, and the overarching concern with overturning on earth injustice and the associated loss of the persuasive appeal of divine justice in a future life—have made much darker the knowledge of God’s truth, creating, it is claimed, a “culture of disbelief” [2].

In this work I develop, on the contrary, the hypothesis that the ideas created through the mediation of liberal courts and legislatures, and the cultural expectations that ensue, have forged a set of meanings that, although they may well have some of the consequences certain Christians decry, also, if seen in a proper light, have the power to incline the mind to conceive as plausible basic propositions of the Christian faith. Specifically, I hypothesize that the world in which church and state are separated and science brought to the forefront of culture, and the world in which the men and women whom all can agree to call heroes are those who seek to press as far as possible the redress

of injustices in this life—in other words, the world of contemporary political liberalism—is an environment that might incline the mind to think in terms that are deeply consistent with, and thus open to, traditional Christian claims. The world of liberalism communicated through the instrumentalities of the state and through political culture, when viewed in a particular light, can help to prepare the mind for the acceptance of Christian faith: as a result of the cultural environment it creates, political liberalism can represent a kind of proto-evangelium, or presaging of the Christian message. The purpose of this work is not apologetic, however, but psychological: it is to deploy the insights of the cultural psychology of religion to suggest the internal complexity of the universe of meaning associated with liberalism and its potential to push thinking in directions not previously appreciated.

In the first section, I outline recent work in the cultural psychology of religion that demonstrates cogently the importance of this area of psychological research. Second, I provide an outline of basic tenets of traditional Christian thought and the cultural fora through which these understandings emerged. Third, I describe two concepts central to contemporary liberal political thought and the communicative technologies and cultural media that have facilitated their development. Fourth, I review briefly the claim made by certain Christians that political liberalism creates a system of reference and cultural ideals that militates against Christian truth-claims. In section five, I argue that the two principles of liberalism on which I focus can be hypothesized to support a system of cultural signs that point toward the plausibility of traditional Christian claims. In the sixth and final section, I lay forth a research agenda of qualitative inquiry designed to test the hypothesis that political liberalism can bear a fruitful connection to traditional Christian belief.

i) The Cultural Psychology of Religion

The cultural psychology of religion is a subfield in psychological research that, as J.H. Pak [3] notes, “focuses on understanding human behavior in the social context by taking into account environment, history and culture.” Using these insights, it studies the “generation of categories for understanding” the world individuals’ find themselves in, and their religious responses to it (p. 171). Cultural psychology is especially useful as one tool in the psychological study of religion since, as J.A. Belzen recounts [4], religiosity “is a culturally constituted phenomenon in which psychic life expresses itself.” (p. 25). Concretely, Pak, echoing D. Polkinghorne’s famous inventory of psychological research methodologies [5], notes that the cultural psychology of

religion is an approach based on qualitative inquiry guided by a well-defined and plausibly-grounded hypothesis (Pak, p. 171). It is thus unmoored to large quantitative data collection research. However, it is not meant to replace quantitative analysis; it is meant, rather, as one tool to augment the study of the psychology of religion with theories derived from assessments of cultural-ecological effects on religious belief and practice. Lastly, the cultural psychology of religion is especially receptive to interdisciplinary analysis (Pak, 180), a point that will become important in the development in our last section of a future interdisciplinary research agenda.

ii) An Outline of Orthodoxy Christianity

Traditional, or orthodox, Christianity is certainly not univocal, but, for present purposes, it can be defined as a set of propositions and ideals derived from oral church tradition and ritual practice, scripture, and conciliar pronouncements, most centrally the creedal declarations of the Nicean and Constantinopolitan church councils. What many today call orthodox Christian thought, therefore, emerged through the communicative technologies of orality, collective practice, written exposition, and collaborative debate in the form of ecumenical councils comprised of leading church officials. These technologies forged the environment in which men and women came to define themselves as orthodox. Orthodoxy can thus be studied as the product of specific communicative strategies: the collection of oral tradition and ritual observances, the writing down and continual passage over time in written form of these traditions, and the collective debate and discussion of the true meaning of the claims found in oral and written material.

One abbreviated outline of the substance of orthodox thought can be adumbrated in the following way. All that exists in any space or any time is the result of an act of a creator god. This being created first a time and a place somehow anterior to the time and space we experience in our ordinary lives. In this place the creator made humanity from the substance of the earth. Here, the humans the creator made lived in harmony with their maker, the entire created world was peacefully and harmoniously directed toward god, and humans were, within their own psychological makeup deeply at peace. However, through a transgression by the first humans, the initial condition was radically altered. By force of this transgression, divine punishment came to be executed. The souls of the first humans became disordered and their orientation was turned away from their god. And the natural world itself also was wounded. Since the initial transgression and the resulting punishment, instead of being harmoniously directed toward god, the natural world became a captive of decay, etched with suffering, locked in ruthless competition, and travailed in pain—groaning for its ultimate redemption (Romans 8: 21-23). As the Book of Isaiah recounts: “the earth languishes...for a curse is on the earth” (Isaiah 24: 4-6). Indeed, “cursed is the ground because of you [Adam and Eve]” (Genesis 3:17). This altered state was a punishment visited not only on the perpetrators themselves but on all the humans who followed the initial pair. The creator gave to the later generations a punishment—a disordered soul, an orientation away from god, a natural world marked by decay, enmity and discord—for a transgression that they themselves did not commit, a penalty that makes it hard, or perhaps

even impossible, for any human on his or her own to secure god's favor. Through the redemptive act of Jesus Christ, however, atonement for the transgression is given. Humans who are in some way followers of the redeemer will then be resurrected in a new heaven and a new earth, in which there will be the restoration of internal balance for individuals; the reorientation of humankind to god; and the healing of the violence that marks the natural world, for, in that new place, “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion” will live in harmony, with “the wolf and the lamb feeding together.” Indeed, “they shall not hurt nor destroy” in the abode of the new creation (Isaiah 11:6; 65:25).

iii) Contemporary Liberalism: Two Central Concepts

Contemporary liberalism is a complex and often amorphous set of ideas and aspirations. It has been shaped in the crucible of a distinctive set of institutions: standing courts issuing written decrees accessible through print media, and representative bodies assembled to address matters of public concern, informed in their deliberations frequently by the technology of representative polling, and issuing written laws accessible to the mass of society. The emergence and continued maintenance of liberalism depends on these (or very similar) institutional structures and communicative technologies. At least several constellations of ideas are central to the culture created by political liberalism. First, as Robert Audi and others have maintained, the concept of the separation of church and state is indispensable to contemporary liberal political thought [6]. Moreover, this separation is often viewed as deep and wide. The proper functions of the state should not include any meaningful promotion of religion at all.

Related to this strict separationist viewpoint is the idea of science as the privileged, even exclusive, means of state decision making. Since the state should not promote religion, policy making must not be based on claims derivable from scripture unless they can independently be verified by a non-religious source, most frequently the natural or social sciences (Audi, 2000). Science is privileged because its claims are held to be reproducible in empirical experiments, and are held to be subject to continual revision and testing through on-going debate and discussion in the forum of scientific conferences and publications.

With a strict separation of church and state has come the political and cultural elevation of science. As Oxford theologian Roger Trigg has argued, science has assumed the status of an alternative system of truth that takes the place of religion in the decision processes of government (2007, p.198). An example of this development can be seen in recent debates surrounding public school curricula. In the celebrated case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School* [7], the United States District Court held that the decision as to which textbooks to assign in a public school had to be made in a way that was untingered by the influence of any concepts even remotely religious; the decision as to which textbooks for a public school district to accept is a governmental decision that has to be made solely on that basis deemed the most purely scientific, a basis allowing no influence, however indirect, for religious concepts or ideas.

Another idea integral to contemporary liberalism is at least the aspiration that humans will treat injustice as a *summum malum* to

be combated tirelessly as a highest duty. Liberalism has developed through the instruments of government power, specifically court rulings, legislative enactments, and executive orders. A central preoccupation of the liberal state has been to advance the cause of justice for individual citizens seen as free and equal members of the political community. Courts have perhaps most visibly advanced the cause of ensuring justice, understood as the fair and equal treatment of all citizens. Indeed, as Thomas Woods, Kevin Gutzman, and Thomas Sowell have argued, through the mediation of the court system and its printed decrees accessible to all in society, liberalism has grown into a set of cultural norms defined by an expansive and deeply ambitious claim that men must strive to rectify all human injustice [8,9]. From this overarching concern to redress injustice in this life has emerged dilated concepts of restorative justice. Several of such very ambitious attempts to right human wrongs can be found in the policy of affirmative action, in school desegregation, and calls for reparations for African slavery.

Affirmative action programs are born of a high idealism, the desire to take charge and make right past injustices. Injustice is so vilified, and the call to rectify wrongs in this life, without relying on divine justice in an afterlife, so powerful that affirmative action has emerged as a policy demanded by the political liberalism's understanding of justice. Due to past wrongs, and the lingering consequences presently of the past injustices, all traces of the initial wrong must in this world be extirpated. To do so, all individuals now should not be treated strictly or fully equally, but rather, some advantage should be given today to the members of the class historically treated unfairly, even if this means that a member of a non-protected class unrelated in any direct way to the perpetration of the initial injustice is denied a strict conception of equal treatment. Perhaps the clearest articulation of this understanding of racial justice was expressed by Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun in the important affirmative action case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* [10] when he notes that "in order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race." True justice, Blackman argues, demands that past injustices to African Americans be rectified to the point of treating whites who had no role in the imposition of earlier injustices in a way that can in effect prove to make their admission to college harder.

In respect to primary and secondary school desegregation, in *Swann v. Mecklenberg Board of Education* [11] the Supreme Court authorized the busing of white students to schools with a large percentage of African American students to remedy past state-sponsored school segregation on the basis of race. As a result of this ruling—one born of a deep desire that justice be done on earth—"among the losers," Woods and Gutzman note, "were nonblack students bused to underperforming schools, even though none of the affected children was a wrongdoer," i.e. the children had no role in the earlier state-sponsored acts of racial discrimination (2008, p. 58). Hence, the courts enshrined a conception of justice based on collective responsibility and accountability: it rejected, Woods and Gutzman remark, an "older idea of justice" which holds that only present malefactors are to be held responsible for criminal or immoral acts and that the state should only "target the guilty party and not inflict their punishments on a broad class of individuals"

not themselves responsible for previous injustice (p. 61). Indeed, when justice is pursued with such passion as evidenced by many of the rulings of the United States Supreme Court—rulings that are core features of contemporary political liberalism—it often leads to an expansive definition of justice that includes and even necessitates collective responsibility.

Moreover, in regard to the question of material reparations for African slavery the same logic often holds. Calls by international legal bodies for reparations for slavery follow the logic of expanding justice to the point of implementing liabilities based on a de-personalized and collective sense of responsibility for previous egregious offences. The Legal Committee of the Organization of African Unity, for example, has called for monetary reparations for the past injustice of African slavery, a call echoed by legal scholars such as Mari Matsuda [12,13], who all call for the legal and political systems of the western world to make material amends for the past injustice of transcontinental African slavery. Against arguments that the injustice of past slavery is no longer justiciable since (presumably) no Western individual or state today is directly responsible for any current act of transcontinental African enslavement, these legal scholars and corporate bodies argue that the injustice of African slavery was so monstrously egregious—such an affront to justice itself—that any lingering aspect of the previous injustice, say, in the form of material advantages that the Western world may still enjoy as a result of its previous acts of unjust enrichment through slavery, must be extirpated: justice demands that collective responsibility for past wrongs be born by individuals and states not themselves responsible for the earlier injustice [14]. Through calls widely disseminated in print and electronic media, the demand for reparations for African slavery has begun to have a powerful influence in Western culture. As the noted scholar of global restorative justice Richard Falk argues, the decisions of the African Union and the writings in their defense by Western legal scholars have allowed the demands for reparations to assume a good deal of the same cultural force held by legal holdings of the United States Supreme Court (2008).

iv) The Claims that Political Liberalism Undermines Christian Faith

These influential ideas—the separation of church and state and the resulting political potency of natural science, and the rise of expansive claims on behalf of justice—are thought by some conservative Christians to have undermined the Christian faith. Separation of church and state is thought by such scholars as Roger Trigg (2007) and Stephen Carter (1994) to be religiously corrosive, in part due to the representational power of the state. That is, a functioning state is an entity that will always elicit awe. The technologies of state power will always be, to some degree, awesome: even the most constitutionally restrained government will have the reserve power to field an army and to send its young people to die in combat to defend the state; and even the most minimal state intent on survival will retain the reserve power to shape in some manner the upbringing of youth, through some control over schooling to ensure a minimum of social cohesiveness; and even the most minimal state will also have the power to take away the life of egregious wrongdoers, if not literally

through the instrumentalities of the death penalty, then at least in the sense of taking away one's life as a free person through the technology of perpetual imprisonment. A functioning state of any political stripe will, therefore, always be viewed with awe, having as it does power over life, youth, and death. Since the state concerns itself with these fundamentally important things and so is always to some extent awe-inspiring, for it not to be involved at all in religion is for religion to risk being seen as not awe-inspiring, as not fundamentally important: for if religion were, how could such an awesome force as government ever be indifferent to it? (Trigg, 2007, p. 128).

By this logic, when the state bases its activities on science (and not religion), science takes on the representational gravity of the state. Science, then, tends to become fundamentally important in the mind of the people. Moreover, many Christians have come to see science as increasingly and belligerently opposed to Christian faith. The burgeoning industry of natural scientists authoring god-rejecting books [15] has not assuaged this concern. For these reasons, some Christians see the culture of political liberalism as denigrating the faith, and even as setting up a parallel pseudo-religion using the same rhetorical technologies of the earlier religion: we see sacred books disseminated by writers claiming to have firsthand knowledge of the truth, but now not in the form of Christian oral tradition derived for eye witnesses to Christ but of empirical revelations of scientists in laboratories; ecumenical councils of learned experts convene to define creedal statements, but now not as a Christian creed but as a kind of scientific conciliarism to construe the precise meaning and formulations of disbelief; and the majesty of the state becomes moored to claims of ultimate reality, but now not through a union of church and state but through an establishment of science as the state's official confession.

Additionally, the expansive concern for justice has also been viewed by some Christians as establishing ideals that erode orthodox faith. Combating injustice is of course not seen by any Christians as wrong. What is questioned is the commitment to a bold idea to make the world fully morally clean by human law and government. The proponents of reparations for slavery, for example, seek to purge the world of lingering vestiges of injustice, a desire they pursue with such passion that they see as fair the imposition of tariffs and impediments on individuals in no way directly implicated in the sin of human bondage. Here Christian thinkers often point to Eric Voegelin as having detected a dangerous siren song. Such a project communicates the idea that the mind must be focused on straightening the crooked timber of injustice on earth, remaking by human will the whole of social relations. Voegelin refers to this kind of a mission as the call to immimentize the eschaton, a call of a secularized heart for a world redeemed by human effort (1987).

v) Liberalism as a Cultural-Psychological Proto-Evangelium? A Hypothesis.

Such Christian thinkers, however, overlook a very real sense in which the culture of political liberalism might serve to underscore the viability of central Christian claims. The culture shaped by political liberalism can be hypothesized as forging a worldview that makes more accessible key Christian concepts—however mysterious these

may be in a complete sense. The conjunction of the emergence of strict separation of church and state, and the resulting elevation of the power of science, and the rise of expansive claims on behalf of restorative justice can together create an ecology of meaning that can make plausible orthodox Christian views.

Separation as we have seen leads to the high cultural valuation of science. One of the central concepts of modern science is evolutionary biology. In fact, the Dover school case mentioned above was itself about evolutionary biology. Affirming evolutionary biology as the account of the origins on this earth of life and humanity is to affirm as true an account of the world in which the natural order itself is replete with suffering. As the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, in Darwin's world nature is "Red in tooth and claw" (1850). Darwin's natural world is marked by severe competition and frequent genetic mistakes that result in their animal bearers being butchered on, in paraphrase of Hegel's famous words, natural history's "blood-soaked slaughter-bench" [16,17]. Random mutations coupled with selection through ruthless competition are the engines of development on earth.

As this evolutionary account takes a greater cultural hold, it becomes natural to look for ways that the universe itself could be seen as the result of evolution. The drive is set in place to think about worlds before the big bang, which would allow our current universe to somehow be itself a product of a larger scheme of cosmic evolution. Indeed, a large number of scientists now speak frequently of evolution being applied to the universe as a whole. Many now speak of some earlier universe; and as a part of an evolutionary mindset—which sees incredible change over time in the natural order—an earlier universe is often seen as quite likely being radically different from our current universe, there being, as evolution demands, radical change over time. Hence, a number of physicists speak now of an earlier universe with entirely different physical laws, different "domain functions." Scientists such as Lee Smolin in his work *Life of the Cosmos* have popularized this idea [18]. And major scientific conferences and publications have also widely disseminated this understanding. Indeed, as astrophysicist Bernard Carr argues, due to the rise of the "multi-verse" view of the cosmos, "although conservative cosmologists might prefer to maintain the [one universe model]...history is against them" [19,20]. Or as the noted physicist and author of the popular work *The First Three Minutes*, Stephen Weinberg argues, the many universe model is compelling and represents "a major shift in our understanding of the universe" (2007, p. 17), a view supported by such other luminaries of natural science, and promoters of science in popular culture, as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, [21,22]. As Dinesh D'Souza points out, these ideas are now widely disseminated and well known in the broader culture (2007, pp. 133-137; Trigg, 2007, p. 192). Given the cultural importance of science in a liberal political regime, which we have explored, the multiverse idea can indeed take a powerful hold.

So the culture of liberalism bends in the direction of seeing our world as one in which, hardwired in the natural world, is violence and discord, but at the same time as a world we can increasingly suppose was preceded by an earlier world with different physical laws—laws that might perhaps be other than the savage ones of mutation, competition, and selection repeated over immense periods

of time which has fashioned in this universe the beings we are today. Moreover, by the logic of cosmic evolution--that is, of an evolutionary process at work in the cosmos in its broadest sense--it is increasingly plausible to assert that there will exist in the future a world after this, also possibly with entirely different natural laws.

Importantly, we must add to this concept of cosmic multiverses the cogency of claims of collective responsibility, such as inheres in the policies of affirmative action, school busing, and slavery reparations. Liberal political culture, by supporting policies that in effect punish some people today in order to rectify injustices perpetrated by earlier generations, makes increasingly plausible the idea that the savage laws of mutation and selection could actually be visited on this world due to some action in a previous one: that this world is a world suffering its own collective punishment.

From these ideas emerge a viewpoint consistent with orthodox Christianity, a kind of presaging of the Christian drama supplied by modern scientific and political liberal presuppositions. Humans are born into a natural order that is itself deeply disordered due to the operation of savage laws of competition, mutation, selection, and slaughter--the world of Charles Darwin. As beings made of the very stuff of nature, man is therefore also born disordered. Yet an earlier world existed in which different laws controlled, and the created being or beings in that world were not subject to Darwinian laws of mutation and selection. This current world with its Darwinian laws--laws the Christian writer Henry Morris [23] describes as "monstrous, inefficient, and cruel"--could be a punishment visited collectively on later humans for the transgressions of the beings in the earlier universe. Evolutionary biology could merely depict the physiology of the Pauline letters: man's constitution in this world is inherently marked by inner turmoil, nature is scarred by incessant competition, the natural order is "red in tooth and claw"--and thus is in need of God's deliverance--all because of an earlier offense. Such would, moreover, be no scandal to liberal justice, since the liberal language of justice inclines the mind to accept the validity of unearned punishment, of individuals--for the sake of justice--being punished for acts they themselves did not commit. The language of liberalism affirms in effect the right to punish sons for the sins of their fathers. For despite perhaps some superficial protests to the contrary, collective punishment is indeed an inexorable consequence of the policies of an expansive understanding of justice which has come to typify political liberalism. The liberal language of justice in the context of an evolutionary worldview, therefore, creates a system of cultural signposts pointing toward the Christian message of the fall. Yet the evolutionary framework points also to the possibility of a yet other world, with different physical laws, laws that could be free from the rule of mutation, selection, competition, and death: a new heaven and a new earth.

Of course, it can be argued that both policies like reparations and the Christian concept of the fall are unjust *simpliciter*. But this is not the logic of either position. Liberal political thought sees its policies as representing a deeper, fuller sense of justice; and Christianity holds that the fall does not impugn God's justice, for "the judgments given by the LORD are trustworthy and absolutely just." (Psalm 19:9 New English Translation).

Moreover, nothing I have sketched about evolutionary science and collective responsibility speaks *clearly* about the Christian drama of sin and salvation; yet the reference to one who would "crush" the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15 Berean Study Bible)--what is called by Christians the proto-evangelium, or the pre-figurement of the Christian redeemer--is itself only *suggestive* of things to come; it only *points* in a particular direction. In the same way, might we be able to call political liberalism its own form of proto-evangelium?

My argument is not one of apologetics, it is one concerning the ecology of cultural meaning as an exercise in the cultural psychology of religion--a determination of how cultural symbols are available in the context of contemporary political liberalism that can point thought in a particular direction by broadening the imagination to think in terms consistent with fundamental Christian claims. It is about how forms of thought can be made viable by their presentation and elaboration in the culture of a particular time; it is about, in all, how liberalism might cast on what Paul calls the dark mirror a shimmer of new light.

iv) An Agenda for Future Research

Interdisciplinary work among political scientists deeply conversant in liberal political ideology and the leading figures in the liberal political movement, joined by religious studies scholars deeply conversant in Christian theology, and also qualitatively-focused psychologists of religion, can test this hypothesis in the following way. In line with suggestions developed by Pak [24,25], one especially fruitful method in the cultural psychology of religion to do this would be through in-depth examination of autobiographical narratives of leading liberal activists. As Pak argues, autobiographical narratives serve to create a sense of psychological "consistency and coherence across time" (p. 180; Belzen, 2008); and they do so, McAdams notes, by how "they serve to define self, define relationships with others, and regulate emotional experiences through drawing moral and life lessons" (Pak, p. 180; McAdams, 2001). These features of narrative writings, Pak maintains, are precisely the tools that should be seized on in the cultural psychology of religion (2017, pp. 180-82). In-depth analysis by an interdisciplinary team, therefore, should review the autobiographical accounts of leaders in movements that embody political liberal ideals to assay if self-descriptions are discoverable that fit the hypothesis developed above. A study of this nature would provide important advances in the cultural psychology of religion [26,27].

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