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Body

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The United States had long been a holdout among Western democracies, uniquely and perhaps even suspiciously devout. From 1937 to 1998, church membership remained relatively constant, hovering at about 70 percent. Then something happened. Over the past two decades, that number has [dropped](#) to less than 50 percent, the sharpest recorded decline in [American](#) history. Meanwhile, the "nones"-atheists, agnostics, and those claiming no religion-[have grown rapidly](#) and today represent a quarter of the population.

But if secularists hoped that declining religiosity would make for more rational politics, drained of faith's inflaming passions, they are likely disappointed. As Christianity's hold, in particular, has weakened, ideological intensity and fragmentation have risen. [American](#) faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it's just that what was once religious belief has now been channeled into political belief. Political debates over what [America](#) is supposed to mean have taken on the character of theological disputations. This is what religion [without](#) religion looks like.

Not so long ago, I could comfort [American](#) audiences with a contrast: Whereas in the Middle East, politics is war by other means-and sometimes is literal war-politics in [America](#) was less existentially fraught. During the Arab Spring, in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, debates weren't about health care or taxes-they were, with sometimes frightening intensity, about foundational questions: What does it mean to be a nation? What is the purpose of the state? What is the role of religion in public life? [American](#) politics in the Obama years had its moments of ferment-the Tea Party and tan suits-but was still relatively boring.

We didn't realize how lucky we were. Since the end of the Obama era, debates over what it means to be [American](#) have become suffused with a fervor that would be unimaginable in debates over, say, Belgian-ness or the "meaning" of Sweden. It's rare to hear someone accused of being un-Swedish or un-British-but un-[American](#) is a common slur, slung by both left and right against the other. Being called un-[American](#) is like being called "un-Christian" or "un-Islamic," a charge akin to heresy.

[\[From the October 2018 issue: *The Constitution is threatened by tribalism*\]](#)

This is because [America](#) itself is "almost a religion," as the Catholic philosopher Michael Novak once put it, particularly for immigrants who come to their new identity with the zeal of the converted. The [American](#) civic religion has its own founding myth, its prophets and processions, as well as its scripture-the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and The Federalist Papers. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther

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King Jr. wished that "one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed." The very idea that a nation might have a creed—a word associated primarily with religion—illustrates the uniqueness of **American** identity as well as its predicament.

The notion that all deeply felt conviction is sublimated religion is not new. Abraham Kuyper, a theologian who served as the prime minister of the Netherlands at the dawn of the 20th century, when the nation was in the early throes of secularization, argued that all strongly held ideologies were effectively faith-based, and that no human being could survive long **without** some ultimate loyalty. If that loyalty didn't derive from traditional religion, it would find expression through secular commitments, such as nationalism, socialism, or liberalism. The political theorist Samuel Goldman calls this "the law of the conservation of religion": In any given society, there is a relatively constant and finite supply of religious conviction. What varies is how and where it is expressed.

No longer explicitly rooted in white, Protestant dominance, understandings of the **American** creed have become richer and more diverse—but also more fractious. As the creed fragments, each side seeks to exert exclusivist claims over the other. Conservatives believe that they are faithful to the **American** idea and that liberals are betraying it—but liberals believe, with equal certitude, that they are faithful to the **American** idea and that conservatives are betraying it. **Without** the common ground produced by a shared external enemy, as **America** had during the Cold War and briefly after the September 11 attacks, mutual antipathy grows, and each side becomes less intelligible to the other. Too often, the most bitter divides are those within families.

No wonder the newly ascendant **American** ideologies, having to fill the vacuum where religion once was, are so divisive. They are meant to be divisive. On the left, the "woke" take religious notions such as original sin, atonement, ritual, and excommunication and repurpose them for secular ends. Adherents of **wokeism** see themselves as challenging the long-dominant narrative that emphasized the exceptionalism of the nation's founding. Whereas religion sees the promised land as being above, in **God's** kingdom, the utopian left sees it as being ahead, in the realization of a just society here on Earth. After Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in September, droves of mourners gathered outside the Supreme Court—some kneeling, some holding candles—as though they were at the Western Wall.

On the right, adherents of a Trump-centric ethno-nationalism still drape themselves in some of the trappings of organized religion, but the result is a movement that often looks like a tent revival stripped of Christian witness. Donald Trump's boisterous rallies were more focused on blood and soil than on the son of **God**. Trump himself played both savior and martyr, and it is easy to marvel at the hold that a man so imperfect can have on his soldiers. Many on the right find solace in conspiracy cults, such as QAnon, that tell a religious story of earthly corruption redeemed by a godlike force.

[\[From the June 2020 issue: Adrienne LaFrance on the prophecies of Q\]](#)

Though the United States wasn't founded as a Christian nation, Christianity was always intertwined with **America's** self-definition. **Without** it, Americans—conservatives and liberals alike—no longer have a common culture upon which to fall back.

Unfortunately, the various strains of wokeism on the left and Trumpism on the right cannot truly fill the spiritual void—what the journalist Murtaza Hussain calls **America's** "**God-shaped hole.**" Religion, in part, is about distancing yourself from the temporal world, with all its imperfection. At its best, religion confers relief by withholding final judgments until another time—perhaps until eternity. The new secular religions unleash dissatisfaction not toward the possibilities of divine grace or justice but toward one's fellow citizens, who become embodiments of sin—"deplorables" or "enemies of the state."

This is the danger in transforming mundane political debates into metaphysical questions. Political questions are not metaphysical; they are of this world and this world alone. "Some days are for dealing with your insurance documents or fighting in the mud with your political opponents," the political philosopher Samuel Kimbriel recently told me, "but there are also days for solemnity, or fasting, or worship, or feasting—things that remind us that the world is bigger than itself."

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Absent some new religious awakening, what are we left with? One alternative to **American** intensity would be a world-weary European resignation. Violence has a way of taming passions, at least as long as it remains in active memory. In Europe, the terrors of the Second World War are not far away. But Americans must go back to the Civil War for violence of comparable scale-and for most Americans, the violence of the Civil War bolsters, rather than undermines, the national myth of perpetual progress. The war was redemptive-it led to a place of promise, a place where slavery could be abolished and the nation made whole again. This, at least, is the narrative that makes the myth possible to sustain.

For better and worse, the United States really is nearly one of a kind. France may be the only country other than the United States that believes itself to be based on a unifying ideology that is both unique and universal-and avowedly secular. The French concept of *laïcité* requires religious conservatives to privilege being French over their religious commitments when the two are at odds. With the rise of the far right and persistent tensions regarding Islam's presence in public life, the meaning of *laïcité* has become more controversial. But most French people still hold firm to their country's founding ideology: [More than 80 percent](#) favor banning religious displays in public, according to one recent poll.

In democracies **without** a pronounced ideological bent, which is most of them, nationhood must instead rely on a shared sense of being a distinct people, forged over centuries. It can be hard for outsiders and immigrants to embrace a national identity steeped in ethnicity and history when it was never theirs.

Take postwar Germany. Germanness is considered a mere fact-an accident of birth rather than an aspiration. And because shame over the Holocaust is considered a national virtue, the country has at once a strong national identity and a weak one. There is pride in not being proud. So what would it mean for, say, Muslim immigrants to love a German language and culture tied to a history that is not theirs-and indeed a history that many Germans themselves hope to leave behind?

An **American** who moves to Germany, lives there for years, and learns the language remains an **American**-an "expat." If **America** is a civil religion, it would make sense that it stays with you, unless you renounce it. As Jeff Gedmin, the former head of the Aspen Institute in Berlin, described it to me: "You can eat strudel, speak fluent German, adapt to local culture, but many will still say of you 'Er hat einen deutschen Pass--He has a German passport.' No one starts calling you German." Many native-born Americans may live abroad for stretches, but few emigrate permanently. Immigrants to **America** tend to become **American**; emigrants to other countries from **America** tend to stay **American**.

The last time I came back to the United States after being abroad, the customs officer at Dulles airport, in Virginia, glanced at my passport, looked at me, and said, "Welcome home." For my customs officer, it went **without** saying that the United States was my home.

In *In the Light of What We Know*, a novel by the British Bangladeshi author Zia Haider Rahman, the protagonist, an enigmatic and troubled British citizen named Zafar, is envious of the narrator, who is **American**. "If an immigration officer at Heathrow had ever said 'Welcome home' to me," Zafar says, "I would have given my life for England, for my country, there and then. I could kill for an England like that." The narrator reflects later that this was "a bitter plea":

Embedded in his remark, there was a longing for being a part of something. The force of the statement came from the juxtaposition of two apparent extremes: what Zafar was prepared to sacrifice, on the one hand, and, on the other, what he would have sacrificed it for-the casual remark of an immigration official.

When Americans have expressed disgust with their country, they have tended to frame it as fulfillment of a patriotic duty rather than its negation. As James Baldwin, the rare **American** who did leave for good, put it: "I love **America** more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." Americans who dislike **America** seem to dislike leaving it even more (witness all those liberals not leaving the country every time a Republican wins the presidency, despite their promises to do so). And Americans who do leave still find a way, like Baldwin, to love it. This is the good news of **America**'s credal nature, and may provide at least some hope for the future. But is love enough?

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Conflicting narratives are more likely to coexist uneasily than to resolve themselves; the threat of disintegration will always lurk nearby.

On January 6, the threat became all too real when insurrectionary violence came to the Capitol. What was once in the realm of "dreampolitik" now had physical force. What can "unity" possibly mean after that?

Can religiosity be effectively channeled into political belief ***without*** the structures of actual religion to temper and postpone judgment? There is little sign, so far, that it can. If matters of good and evil are not to be resolved by an omniscient ***God*** in the future, then Americans will judge and render punishment now. We are a nation of believers. If only Americans could begin believing in politics less fervently, realizing instead that life is elsewhere. But this would come at a cost-because to believe in politics also means believing we can, and probably should, be better.

In *History Has Begun*, the author, Bruno Maes-Portugal's former Europe minister-marvels that "perhaps alone among all contemporary civilizations, ***America*** regards reality as an enemy to be defeated." This can obviously be a bad thing (consider our ineffectual fight against the coronavirus), but it can also be an engine of rejuvenation and creativity; it may not always be a good idea to accept the world as it is. Fantasy, like belief, is something that humans desire and need. A distinctive ***American*** innovation is to insist on believing even as our fantasies and dreams drift further out of reach.

This may mean that the United States will remain unique, torn between this world and the alternative worlds that secular and religious Americans alike seem to long for. If ***America*** is a creed, then as long as enough citizens say they believe, the civic faith can survive. Like all other faiths, ***America***'s will continue to fragment and divide. Still, the ***American*** creed remains worth believing in, and that may be enough. If it isn't, then the only hope might be to get down on our knees and pray.

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