

Trying to Make Sense of Christian Nationalism

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Good morning, everyone. I won't introduce myself further, because most of you already know me, and because you have already seen the blurb.

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The Christian Nationalist movement is very troubling. It seems impossible to understand how the religion I consider, that we consider to be based on loving relationships and inclusiveness, how that religion can be used to motivate people to riot on January 6, 2021, and to help put Donald Trump in power, twice.

I do not have the intellect or wisdom to answer so many questions I have about this fact of our American history and politics. So, I can only do so much today by introducing to you what I have done to educate myself. It was troubling to learn about some of the history that led to the Christian Nationalist movement. And it is troubling to wonder about the issues in human nature that allow such a movement to exist and grow.

Christian Nationalism will be one of the forces that will create communal Disorder in the remainder of our lifetimes. I do not have the power to minimize or mitigate that.

But we still have the challenge of how to manage our own lives. The Christian Nationalist movement has to be seen, with however much difficulty, as not entirely an Us/Them conflict. The historical and psychological forces that motivate Them are also present in Us. That is one of the themes I have today, and something to remind ourselves.

But a more Beloved Community? In America? That seems so far away with the very real presence of Christian Nationalism. I realize, unfortunately, that we may always have to live with those holding a worldview like that of Christian Nationalism: that is, a vision that Americans and

Humankind cannot create a Beloved Community on earth, but can only struggle to save some before the Second Coming, and to dominate others in the meantime.

Einstein famously said, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” Perhaps there could be a revolution in consciousness after the damage is done to the current situation. But maybe ... human consciousness can only live with cycles of Order and Disorder, and new but ultimately temporary Reordering, that there cannot be a “once and for all” Beloved Community or a Second Coming.

We are not given to know those answers. My credo, however, will be to believe that inclusiveness can work. But it will first and always take a willingness not to demonize the other: the capacities for Good and Evil are still and always within us, too.

We would well recall Jesus’ reminder to us in Matthew (7:1-5), the “Judge not, that ye not be judged” passage. In the version from The Message, it says:

It’s easy to see a smudge on your neighbor’s face and be oblivious to the Ugly Sneer on your own. ... Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.

We have to be careful that there is no sneer on our face. That is where I start from and where I hope for us to end up today.

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Christian Nationalism – definitions

- “A cultural framework – a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives and value systems – that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”
 - Whitehead A, S Perry. Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Christian nationalism is a radical-right movement that views American exceptionalism as a God-given purpose, with an identity and worldview that is under existential threat.
- [How do we “make sense” of this?](#)

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What is Christian Nationalism?

The most commonly used definition is that reported by Whitehead and Perry in their 2020 book. Christian Nationalism is “a cultural framework – a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives and value systems – that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.” (It is a very tidy academic definition)

In my reading, I arrived at a more distressing (an alarming) definition: Christian Nationalism could also be described as “a radical-right movement that views American exceptionalism as a God-given purpose, with an identity and a worldview that are under existential threat.”

The question I posed for myself was, “How do I try to make sense of that?”

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Outline

- The documentary, *Bad Faith: Christian Nationalism’s Unholy War on Democracy*
 - Christian nationalism – a political, more than a religious movement
- The book, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide*
 - Why are people drawn in?
 - Psychology of individuals and groups
 - (How to talk across the divide)
- Are “They” that different from “Us”?

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I am not a theologian, and I am not a social scientist. I will be trying to describe what I have learned about this subject as someone who is curious, but not anything like an expert.

First, I hope you will put yourself through watching the video documentary *Bad Faith: Christian Nationalism’s Unholy War on Democracy*. (<https://www.badfaithdocumentary.com/>) It is a bit polemical (there is a slightly paranoid tone to it, that there is a conspiracy at work), but it covers a history of the political and religious movement that could be labeled as Christian Nationalism. I will review some of its salient points. But it will be eye-opening to see for yourselves.

In general, I am interested in what motivates people in their behaviors, including “unusual” or extreme viewpoints and behaviors. To try to tease that out, I will review points from the book, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How To Talk Across the Divide*. The book examines motivations that might move individuals to take on the beliefs of Christian Nationalism. And it describes how the psychology of groups is also important to understand.

And, importantly, I want to maintain a perspective that despite the glaring differences in “their” worldview from “ours,” it is critically important to seek to be a unifying not a polarizing force. We have to remind ourselves of the humanity of the Other, and our commonalities: their environments and motivations are not foreign, however different they might be. We need to

remind ourselves that “we” also contribute our faults and limitations to the lack of communication and to the friction.

The difference, if there is to be a more Blessed Community though, is that the unification needs to be done in the pursuit of justice and mercy, not through domination and division.

So, let’s begin ...

The Christian Nationalist movement

- It is powerful and well-organized.
- It is complicated.
- Christian Nationalism is dismayed by the current Order.
 - But ... “When the Church gets in bed with government, the offspring is unholy.”
- A period of Disorder is needed before Reorder is possible.

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The Christian Nationalist movement is powerful, and it is well-organized. It is also a lot more obvious now than a month ago. Its power and organization will contribute to the institution of programs of Project 2025 in the next few years. It is not going away.

I would love to have the ability to define “what to do” about Christian Nationalism. But the more I delved into its nature and influences, the more complicated it became. It is complicated.

Christian Nationalism begins with dismay, dismay at the current Order. In America, “solutions” to that dismay, we will see, began to be offered many, many years ago. I think it is an interesting challenge to wonder about What that dismay might be about. I believe that there might be a sense that the current Order is too secular: that the secular system has become too dominant, with not enough attention to the spiritual and sacred.

Christian Nationalism has the consolation of NOT having to choose between God and country – by unifying them. The problem though, of course, is that “When the Church gets in bed with government, the offspring is unholy.” We saw it historically in Nazi Germany and with ISIS, and currently in Iran and Afghanistan.

Reorder is possible only somewhere in the future, beyond our knowing and beyond our controlling. We will be living through a period of great Disorder, as existing belief systems and institutions are questioned and attacked.

The documentary, *Bad Faith*

- Christian Nationalism is a political movement masquerading as a religious movement.
- Paul Weyrich was a prime architect (look him up).
 - “The integration of theory and practice: a program for the New Traditionalist movement”
https://web.archive.org/web/20170204212709/http://www.makehemaccountable.com/articles/Free_Congress_Foundation_integration_of_Theory_and_Practice.htm
- Integral to the strategy was to enlist evangelicals.
- Using the Seven Mountains Mandate to dominate the 7 “spheres of influence”:
 - Family, Economy, Religion, Arts/Entertainment, Media, Government, Education
- Donald Trump is a charismatic leader despite his un-Christian character.

The goal is one of eventual domination by this cultural worldview.

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The documentary, *Bad Faith*

Let me summarize a few, salient points in the documentary, “*Bad Faith*.” As I said, I hope you will take the chance to view it if you have not done so already. (If you Google “*Bad Faith* documentary,” you will find its website, and that will take you to several streaming services.)

First, Christian Nationalism is a political movement masquerading as a religious movement. The documentary suggests in fact that a political interest has co-opted religious leaders and religious institutions to support and to be manipulated by non-religious interests. At the same time, it is important not to conflate Christian Nationalism with Trumpism. And we have to realize that Christian Nationalism is not the same as Evangelicalism or white Protestantism.

The documentary says CN is a nationalistic movement primarily, and nationalistic movements always emphasize the primacy of one ethnic group over others. This one is mostly about preserving power for white people, especially white males. The traditional or conservative values it espouses are reactionary, and seek to reverse the social progress made since the 1960s. Its moral and ethical direction is hierarchical, not egalitarian; its governance is authoritarian not democratic. Somehow it claims to be Christian despite that. There is much room for alternative social and religious models to claim to be “truly Christian.”

Second, the documentary says Paul Weyrich is a prime architect.

In times of stress and disorder, religious movements and authoritarian movements have always gained influence. (The KKK was powerful after the Civil War and the Nazis after WWI.)

The documentary proposes that after passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, the conservative movement needed an answer. A few years later there was the threat of withholding funds for colleges that held segregationist policies. So Weyrich began the Heritage Foundation in 1973, the first conservative think tank. In 1979 the Moral Majority was launched. These conservative movements began with intentions to mobilize resistance to the dismantling of conservative and racist institutions.

In 2001 Weyrich commissioned the monograph, “The Integration of Theory and Practice: A Program for the New Traditionalist Movement.” It is a brilliant analysis and call to action. It is a manifesto on how to resist the “cultural Marxism” of “political correctness” from “The Left.” It describes a broad strategy to fight a culture war to bring so-called “New Traditionalist” ideas to power.

If you have time, please take a look at this manifesto.

- [https://web.archive.org/web/20170204212709/http://www.makethemaccountable.com/articles/Free Congress Foundation Integration of Theory and Practice.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20170204212709/http://www.makethemaccountable.com/articles/Free%20Congress%20Foundation%20Integration%20of%20Theory%20and%20Practice.htm)

I find the document to be a brilliant piece, something to read if one realizes we are in a culture war, even more than a political one. In fact, that very document (Weyrich’s 2001 manifesto) could be and maybe should be used as a playbook for “us” in the prolonged, upcoming cultural and political battles.

Based on this manifesto, the documentary suggests, the past 25 years have been spent delegitimizing the institutions that had been “overtaken” by the political correctness of The Left. But the manifesto was not particularly Christian or religious.

Thirdly, the documentary suggests, it was integral to Weyrich’s strategy (or conspiracy) to enlist evangelicals. Enlisting them was not even mentioned in 2001, but has become a feature in 2024. (The CN movement is an important part of MAGA, but there are many MAGA supporters who are not Christian Nationalists. Likewise, there are many evangelicals who are not Christian Nationalists, and in fact evangelicals are beginning to leave the CN movement.)

The Christian evangelical movement has always been strong in the US. And certain types of church-going people have always been culturally conservative. The evangelical movement also has always had pastors who lead them, teach them and guide them. And they have mailing lists. Since the 1990s (a decade before the Theory and Practice manifesto), fundamentalist movements like the NAR (New Apostolic Reformation) have gained adherents. Some evangelicals have always emphasized a type of spiritual training envisioning “spiritual warfare” against “demons.” Demons would need to be identified, named and then exorcized. When the battle lines are thus drawn between Good and Evil, the commitments and fervor of followers are accentuated.

Beliefs of the NAR include (from Wikipedia):

- "The Kingdom of God is advanced on earth through the church gaining dominion"
- "Apostles, aided by prophets, [the leaders – it is a hierarchical system] constitute the church's strategic spiritual leadership"
- "The Kingdom of God will come through spiritual transformation of culture and society"
- "The end-times church will be the complete manifestation of Jesus on earth"

The Christian Nationalist movement has come to believe that popular culture has been overtaken by “Babylon.” (Isn’t that a very canny cultural reference?)

The “New Traditionalist” movement of Weyrich thus reached out to pastors preaching an existential battle of Good vs. Evil, and they used their own mass-produced materials (and the churches’ mailing lists) to spread ideas of the “New Traditionalist culture” to their churches. A culture war for conservative politicians joined with “Christians” who saw an existential battle of Good vs. Evil in America.

The Wikipedia page on NAR lists a Who’s Who of Republicans who are “associated with” NAR: Roger Stone, Mike Johnson, Mike Flynn, Charlie Kirk, Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Green. Thus, Christian Nationalism is no longer a fringe group.

Fourth, the strategy, the documentary says, would apply the Seven Mountains Mandate in its methods. (A 2013 book *Invading Babylon*, introduced the 7 Mountains Mandate.)

Not inaccurately, this system believes that Society is formed from 7 “spheres of influence,” Seven Mountains (I actually find it a very compelling model.) Thus, to control society and culture, one has to control the spheres of influence. The stated purpose of 7MM is to transform society by defeating Babylon’s current influence, eventually by dominating the 7 spheres of influence with Christian Nationalist ideas.

For the Christian Nationalists, it is an apocalyptic worldview. In their view, which is to bring about the end-times, it will be necessary first to control the 7 mountains. For the political Right, it was a matter of changing the culture. For the Christian right, it was a matter of preparing for end-times. Both movements are targeting the 7 Mountains. We should be wary, because this type of Christian mission speaks of domination, not love.

The 7 spheres of cultural influence are reasonable, understandable, targetable: Family, Economy / Business, Religion, Arts / Entertainment, Media, Government, Education. There is nothing wrong with this strategy and these tactics. They can and perhaps even, they should be considered by anyone hoping to bring about cultural change.

Also, the documentary suggests, the abortion rights issue was a cynical manipulation of the evangelical community by the political community, in order to get Supreme Court justices appointed. In the early 2000s, despite Moral Majority victories in Congress and occasionally the Presidency, there was still not enough effective cultural change. The documentary suggests that to get conservative Supreme Court justices appointed, the abortion issue was leveraged: it wouldn’t work to campaign on a return to racial segregation after all. The reasoning was that because conservatives on one issue tend also to be conservative on others, once one gets anti-abortion judges in place, you would likely also have judges who are conservative on other issues: they would be against affirmative action, they would be pro-family, pro-school choice, pro-business.

Finally, in Donald Trump there is a charismatic leader despite his (very, very) un-Christian character and behaviors. His ascendancy has been construed as God’s elevation of a Cyrus. The Persian King Cyrus conquered Babylon (a non-religious person brought down an empire) and

allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Donald Trump is not a religious avatar, but in this view he is being used by God to bring down the Babylon that exists, in order for a new Order to come.

To summarize, there is an alliance of a certain Christian theology that envisions an existential struggle between Good and Evil, one that needs to be won a certain way before the Second Coming of Christ. That theology has been wedded to a political movement to restore “traditional cultural values.” One crusade perceives that a secular Babylon, the other that the political correctness of “the Left” has overtaken the Seven Mountains. The joint goal is to regain control, to establish dominion over the Seven Mountains. Evidently, the movement has been successful in changing the politics and culture so far, with more to come.

All of that is pretty scary. It does seem to be a battle between Good and Evil!

Lest we judge ...

- “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”
- “I am human; nothing human is foreign to me.”
- “If a man has beheld evil, he may know that it was shown to him in order that he learn his own guilt and repent; for what is shown to him is also within him.”
- “What is an idol? Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol.”

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But ... lest we judge others as being evil, or stupid and unenlightened, or angry and greedy for power and judge ourselves as the ones good, smart and enlightened ...

Let us also always remind ourselves:

- Alexandr Solzhenitsyn wrote: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”
- So, “I am human; nothing human is foreign to me.”
- And Rabbi Heschel said: “If a man has beheld evil, he may know that it was shown to him in order that he learn his own guilt and repent; for what is shown to him is also within him.”
- And Heschel again: “What is an idol? Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol.”

The Book, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide*

By Pamela Cooper-White

- Cooper-White has impressive academic and clinical credentials.
- Examines Why's and How's of the dynamics between leaders and followers in extremist religious and political movements.
 - There are psychological tendencies in individuals and groups that enable Christian Nationalism.

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This brings me to the book, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide*. The author, Pamela Cooper-White, is a professor at Union Theological Seminary, in fact a Professor Emerita of Psychology and Religion there.

She has impressive credentials: B.Music from Boston University, magna cum laude; she received her M.Div from Harvard Divinity School; she also has a master's in pastoral counseling; she has two Ph.D.s, one from Harvard, and another Ph.D from Institute of Clinical Social Work (Chicago); she is ordained in the United Church of Christ, and then she was ordained an Episcopal priest (1992 - present). She practices both teaching and clinical therapy, and she writes books.

In her book, Dr. Cooper-White delves into the dynamics between leaders and followers in extremist movements, religious and political. There are psychological tendencies in individuals and in groups that enable movements like Christian Nationalism.

She reminds us that "Them" and "Us" share very basic needs and desires. She reminds us that whatever describes "Them" can apply to "Us" as well.

Observations on CN from a psychologist

“Why/how are people led to extremist ideas like Christian Nationalism?”

- Individual dynamics
 - Need for belonging and purpose
 - Fear of loss – of social status and power
 - Fear of loss – of patriarchal power / masculinist hierarchy
 - Irrational allure of conspiracy theories
- Group dynamics
 - Groupthink
 - Narcissistic leaders
 - Splitting behaviors

There is much more in the book than I have time to discuss. The underlying question she tries to answer is, “Why and How are people led to extremist ideas like Christian Nationalism?”

There are 4 areas of individual psychodynamics that she covers, trying to explain the psychology of those attracted to Christian Nationalism. They are: (see above). Not every follower is attracted by all these reasons. But all seem to have at least some of these motivations.

Today I will only provide some detail about how the first two act: The Need for Belonging and Purpose, and The Fear of Loss of Social Status and Power. I will also cover the other two topics about individual dynamics, in the print version of this talk.

And I do want to cover how the psychology of groups can help us understand how Christian Nationalism and Donald Trump interact.

Need for Belonging and Purpose

Not only “them”

- All humans share a need for belonging and purpose.
- Christian nationalists start out as Christians.
 - A safe harbor in a disordered world
 - Social connections within groups
- Can be exploitative: “purity” involves letting go of critical thinking; theatrics can be experienced as depth of conviction.
- *Is the goal inclusion and uplift, or division and dominion?*

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It is not difficult to appreciate this: there is a human need for belonging and a sense of purpose. Democrats and Republicans, evangelicals and other churchgoers, white supremacists and feminists, etc. – everyone shares in this. There is meaningful connection within the group, as well as a sense of shared, spiritual purpose and for some, even meaningful engagement in cosmic battles.

Christian nationalists usually start out as Christians. Often churches use social justice activities (e.g. food pantries) to get people in the door. Church members can show empathy for others’ struggles, and they frequently provide personal follow up. There can be small group discussions. An American addition is the revivalism experience, related to finding personal salvation in Jesus: passionate preachers call up listeners and call out for their emotional responses. In the 21st century, books, social media, merchandise and the Internet expand the sources of “true” information. These influences – personal, communal, concrete and virtual – surround followers of Christian Nationalism (as with any extremist group).

Churches can be exploitative though: they can be a safe harbor in a disordered world, but at some point there may be a price to pay – that of surrendering one’s individual will. Theatrical anger and emotion in worship services can be experienced as depth of conviction. “Purity” involves letting go of critical thinking and personal discernment. The messaging in the Christian Nationalist world, you recall, includes finding and rejecting personal sinfulness that exposes one to eternal damnation; and one needs to become always vigilant against the danger of corruption from “Babylon.” And finally, unfortunately, there can be a bait and switch: letting go (of one’s willfulness) sometimes becomes enforced submission to the group and to the group’s leaders. Personal meaning comes from supporting the leader’s mission. Commitment is a virtue, and questioning or leaving the group exposes one to shaming and ostracism.

(To which William Sloane Coffin once said, “Christ came to take away your sins, not your minds.”)

But ... we also have to recall the fervor we felt towards Barack Obama and Kamala Harris (or even with the Buffalo Bills): that sense of belonging, emotion, theatrics, good vs. evil. Belonging to a group is powerful stuff.

The difference is in the goal: Is the goal inclusion and uplift, or division and dominion?

Fear of loss of social status and power

Not only “them”

- Loss of power to people of color and non-religious
- Hard work and personal willpower are no longer enough.
- Loss of upward mobility; wealth gap
- Damages to ego from “Disses”: disrespect, disregard, despair, dishonor, disgrace.
 - Humiliations in the form of micro-aggressions by the “woke”

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Another motivating force for some Christian Nationalist followers is the fear of loss of power: loss of power to Blacks and other people of color, and to the non-religious. MAGA supporters, Christian Nationalists, other Trump voters seem also to experience to varying degrees threats of being “less than” from:

- Condescending attitudes of the elites,
- Economic changes: robots, Wall Street and the service sector are taking over the economy from laborers. Hard work and personal willpower and persistence are no longer enough.
- There is a wealth gap and a loss of upward mobility. Even if you are white and working, you do not feel privileged, as it is hard to get ahead or even get by.
- Finally, the rise of the Nones (the non-religious) are reminders that traditional white Christian values are in decline.

As well there is the resentment and humiliation that come from being looked down on by “the elites.” The first post-election post on the Heritage Foundation’s website proclaims, “With Trump’s Win, ‘Ordinary’ Americans Declared Independence from the Elites.”

In that reality, the “woke” are seen and/or experienced as the sources of their humiliations, damages to their ego, and their feeling less-than: encountering the “woke” mindset leads to feelings of disrespect, disregard, despair, dishonor and disgrace.

Since this month’s election, there have been countless analyses of what went wrong for the Democrats. Many say the election was a repudiation of the norms of the educated classes, or a neglect of the working classes. But I believe we can also imagine that the election loss – the

repudiation from the “other side” – maybe also had to do with the microaggressions and humiliations that “the other side” have been feeling for many years – humiliations in the form of those “5 disses” (Disrespect, Disregard, Dishonor, Despair, and Disgrace).

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Groupthink – observations

Not only “them”

- Groups behave in “irrational” ways, counter to reason and even self-interests.
- Individuals in groups voluntarily or unconsciously express instincts that might ordinarily be restrained in their personal lives.
- The anonymity of group membership can corrupt the sense of personal responsibility.
- Groups tend to regress in their behaviors – more spontaneous, more violent.
- Groups tend not to be uncertain.
- Groupthink can motivate altruistic and moral behaviors, too.

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We also have to try to understand the psychology of groups, not only individuals. In this effort, psychologists can also help us. We can add their insights to what our individual “common sense” seems to tell us.

It has to be evident to any observer that groups behave in “irrational” ways, ways that are against the reasoning, self-interests and values of individuals.

- Individuals in groups voluntarily and/or unconsciously express instincts that might ordinarily be restrained in their personal lives.
- The anonymity of group membership can corrupt the sense of personal responsibility.
- Groups tend to regress in their behaviors: to become less rational, more spontaneous and enthusiastic, more violent.
- Groups do not tend to doubt, groups tend not to be uncertain.

It is not all good or all bad. Sometimes groupthink is good – it can powerfully motivate altruistic and moral behaviors (such as in the camaraderie of social activism). Sometimes groupthink is bad – mobs are known to tear down goal posts, participate in lynchings, invade the Capitol.

Groupthink is a feature (not a bug) in humans as social beings, I guess.

Groupthink – when narcissistic leaders appear ...

We all could do this ...

- A group takes on their leader's character and aims.
 - Identification
 - Idealization
- A narcissistic leader can be powerful and dangerous
 - Healthy / Loving relationships are based on reciprocity.
 - A pathological narcissist only has capacity for self-love.
- Train oneself to avoid the Not-me Myth.

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When groups form their corporate identities, they follow their leaders. We have just witnessed that in this election season. Both Republican and Democratic parties had hugely enthusiastic, motivated followers. Groupthink is not just a feature in “Them”; all of us are susceptible. It is in our human nature as social animals.

But it is also a characteristic of groups that they take on the character and aims of their leaders. These psychological processes are called identification and idealization.

Identification is the process by which a person internalizes another person's attributes. Oscar Wilde said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery (that mediocrity can pay to greatness). We know this in our adolescent behaviors (trying to dress and act like the cool kids), and also in our adult ones. How many MAGA hats have been sold? How many Josh Allen Buffalo Bills jerseys? The emulation extends to imitating the behaviors and beliefs of our heroes and heroines.

Idealization is a related process in which persons take on the character traits of another person, most often a parent. The parent or other role-model is idealized and judged to be good. This process forms the basis of conscience and values. (I often want to note to myself that whenever I say something “should” happen, it is at least due in part to my expression of values instilled by my parents.)

But ... when individuals have had unhealthy relations with their parents (the parent was distant, absent, inconsistent, or abusive), they are left with the lack of a strong ego ideal: there is no good or positive role model. But, the psychologists tell us, there is still a need to identify with something perceived as good and strong.

And very often this identification is with a male figure – perhaps because we are socialized to believe males should be authoritative (vs. females being caring/nurturing).

A narcissistic leader interacting with persons who have already ceded some or much of their agency to their group identity can be very powerful and dangerous.

Narcissism (self-love) can be healthy or unhealthy. Healthy narcissism is healthy self-esteem, healthy self-love. It is necessary to uphold and defend one's individuality. And healthy loving relationships between individuals need to be based on reciprocity. Love, as it were, puts a check on one's healthy narcissism: the other person and the relationship limit what the individual wants for themselves.

But a pathological narcissist only has capacity for self-love: they do not see the needs of others and cannot value the identities of others. Narcissists only have attention for themselves.

When Trump said that January 6 was a "day of love," I can believe that he was not trying to gaslight us. I think it was a great day of love – for him and only for him. It was a day of adulation, not a mutual, reciprocating kind of love of course, but a narcissist experiencing the height of others adoring him. And for many in the crowd possibly, it was similarly a day of adulation and a glimpse of possible salvation.

Donald Trump is a master manipulator and mental predator, and his followers may be particularly undiscerning, but we also have to realize that the movement that resulted in Trump's ascendancy prepared them for his version of reality. It was a movement before he arrived, and Christian Nationalists and others were already primed with conducive ideas. Trump will always be a manipulator and mental predator, and he has been able to bend his followers' beliefs to fit his reality. They live, think, and exist in a different world. They feel belonging to a different world.

At the same time, we have to be clear, everyone is susceptible to these influences: we need to train ourselves to avoid the "Not-Me Myth." (I believe that we felt and behaved somewhat like this in excusing Bill Clinton's prurient behaviors, and Barack Obama's sometimes-avaricious ones: the "salvific ideal" gets a pass on character flaws that other people don't get!)

We should train ourselves to avoid the Not-me Myth. We are social beings, so at all times we are under the influences of others – other individuals and the groups we choose. Sometimes we are somewhat conscious of how we are being affected. Oftentimes we are hardly aware of how our values, defenses and desires are being reinforced and/or changed in our interactions.

Splitting behaviors

Not only “them”

- With healthy development, one learns to accommodate both bad and good judgments of oneself and the world – parents, the world, oneself can be “good enough.”
- Some people are unable to manage their “bad parts” except by **splitting** – the contradictions cannot coexist, but are seen as Either/or.
 - Right or wrong, victim or perpetrator, ...
- America has not accommodated the contradictions between its ideals and its history.

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I am almost done ...

Lastly, we need to consider the phenomenon of Splitting Behaviors. Again, it is something that is a potential for all of us, and observable in the Christian Nationalist movement.

Dr. Cooper-White reminds us that it is difficult for anyone to see themselves as “not-good.” One of the psychological mechanisms to live with and cope with (to avoid and defend against) the Not-good aspects within oneself is to employ so-called “splitting behaviors.” (Remember? “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”)

With healthy development one is able to accommodate both the good and bad judgments of oneself and the world – one’s parents, the world, oneself can be regarded as “good enough.” But some people are unable (either they never learned, or they never were shown) to tolerate or manage their “bad” parts, except by denying and suppressing the existence of those “bad parts.” The Either/Or world is easier to live with, because living with a Both/And view is too hard. For others, traumatic experiences damage one’s ability to trust the world’s goodness. The result either way is that there is an impaired ability to feel that good and bad can coexist.

The world, oneself, others can be seen more manageably as Either/Or: it is divided by right or wrong; having purity or sinfulness; being either victim or perpetrator; lovable or unlovable; strong or weak; perfect or demonic; us or them.

For this discussion, we should note that historically and culturally the American psyche can be viewed as showing such splitting behaviors: the splitting is between the ideal of a virtuous, principled, peace-loving America, versus a history of violence, greed, genocide and racism. One pole is elevated; the other is repressed.

In internal medicine I tried to ask patients about their so-called ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences). Having more Adverse Childhood Experiences correlates with the presence of

conditions in adulthood: alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, suicide attempt (the so-called diseases of despair – here the correlation is strongest). Also correlated with ACEs are smoking, obesity, STDs; obesity and inactivity; even heart disease, cancer, liver disease. I bring this up because stereotypes of “them” often include unhealthy behaviors such as drinking, smoking and obesity. Does that stereotype suggest a higher degree of ACE’s in their history? This could be a subject of future research, if one is curious and could get the funding ...

In my mind, I picture this as meaning that it takes psychic and spiritual energy to mind and balance the good and bad in oneself. When trauma or multiple ACEs are present, bad health and diseases of despair can follow. The psychological tool of Splitting can also be called on to help with ACEs and trauma, so that less psychic and spiritual energy would need to be expended in one’s efforts to cope.

But ... we also have to acknowledge that recognizing Splitting is not enough. The concept is not meant to “explain” behaviors (to stop there, or write someone off) but as a first step to understand, to have compassion for the efforts others are using to cope: seeing the behavior should (there’s that word) prompt a realization that there is an underlying hurt. “The condition of truth is to let suffering speak.”

We can paraphrase Father Gregory Boyle here, who said, “Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it.” We could replace some words and say, “Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the Christian nationalist has to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it.”

And any discussion of the relationship between trauma and splitting, or between childhood adversity and splitting should include a reminder to try to recognize that “we” can and also often do participate in splitting. As I said earlier, the world, oneself, others can often be seen more manageably as Either/Or: that “we” are right, pure, victimized, perfect and/or at least lovable, while “they” are wrong, sinful, perpetrators, unlovable and/or demonic.

Justice and mercy are holy work.

- The work of inclusiveness does not end when someone changes their mind about Christian nationalism.
 - They leave a lot behind when they do.
 - What loving community will be there for them afterwards?
- “Love politics” is holy work.
 - We need to heal our own splits between purity and evil.

“The day is short and the work is endless ... You are not obliged to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

x

The work of inclusiveness does not end when someone changes their mind away from Christian Nationalism. They are leaving a whole lot when they do. What will replace their community, support their losses, assuage their guilt and sense of betrayal? CT Vivian (one of MLK’s mentors and colleagues) said: “When you *ask* people to give up on hate, you have to be there for them when they do.” It is necessary to already have a loving community to embrace them – one that is not based on hatred.

This will require, of us, the formation of a “love politics.” This will be a test of our spiritual integrity: “Is this (whatever we are doing) based on love? Does this (whatever we are doing) reduce suffering?”

It will be a culture war to counter the machinations of Paul Weyrich and those who came along with him. This battle, our battle will need to acknowledge that there are limitations to secularism (“the other side” may have a good point), and that somehow The Existing Order must be sustaining and contributing to injustice and suffering, especially to “them.”

It will be a process to battle back against Christian Nationalist efforts to “dominate” the 7 Mountains. It will require a well-reasoned, well-planned, multifaceted, and very prolonged effort. I would suggest that it might even use Weyrich’s playbook in reverse.

But it is holy work to engage in mercy and justice. The Beloved Community will not come into reality just by saying so, wishing so, even talking to others like this. There will need to be years of holy work. We have to join these ideas to concrete actions.

But we also have to work on ourselves. I believe strongly that it will require work on ourselves to heal our own splits and our own tendencies to preserve status, pride and privilege, to be callous, selfish and angry. In those regards, ultimately Christian Nationalists are not “others.”

Rabbi Tarphon reminded us: “The day is short and the work is endless ... You are not obliged to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” And the work is both external work and internal work.

So, thank you. I hope I have left you with questions. I will say I do not have many answers. This was my attempt to “make sense” of this difficult fact of our current American life together.

What follows below are additional words, parts I did not use during my talk at DUPC. **They are not in a final draft form**, and thus contain repetitions, clumsy phrasing, incomplete logic, etc. – they are a bit embarrassing to read, but I will not be working to improve on them.

The additions include:

- The “blurb” that went out with the announcement for the Forum.
- Slides and comments on two additional issues that Dr. Cooper-White believed would motivate individuals to embrace a Christian Nationalism mindset: “Fear of loss of patriarchal power” and “The irrational allure of conspiracy theories.”
- An introduction to the third chapter of Dr. Cooper-White’s book, where which she offers ideas on how to begin to “talk across the divide.”
- A few other lines that I did not use in the spoken version.

Lastly, Cooper-White’s book will soon be available in the church library.

Speaker Biography:

David Lee is a retired physician who is not a theologian or a political scientist. He worked at Rochester General Hospital in pulmonary and critical care medicine and at one time chaired its ethics committee. He took courses at Union Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School to acquaint himself also with “spiritual issues” such as the nature of suffering and how to define purpose and meaning, how to encourage compassion and connection in the lives we have together. He has been a member of Session at Downtown United Presbyterian Church since 2021.

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Fear of loss of patriarchal power

- Civil rights movement led to decline in white authority; feminist movement led to decline in male authority.
 - The alternative, following Jesus as a Christian soldier, a spiritual badass
- Patriarchal authority in families should not be egalitarian but “complementarian.”
 - Women not in their places: The “feminization of liberal Protestantism”;
- Responses to patriarchy: Strong Black woman, Steel Magnolia; toxic masculinity
- Gun ownership for protection against “encroachment of an amoral, irreligious world.”

Many males expect to hold power, and not everyone is pleased that the norms of the 1950s began to be replaced after the civil rights and feminist movements. There is a segment of the population that wants to show strength, to not be bullied. “No rules, just rights!” In this view, even Jesus can be a spiritual badass, and so an ideal of a Christian warrior is elevated. The culture wars are partly fought to restore this type of patriarchal power.

In the home, patriarchy authority would appear as authority that is not egalitarian, but “complementarian.” There would be expected roles: the leader/ and the nurturer; males had the final authority, others would be submissive.

In trying to keep women in their places, there is already a schism within evangelical churches. Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church (“The Purpose-Driven Life”, 2002) was thrown out of the Southern Baptist Convention for ordaining women. There is resistance to the “feminization [seen with] liberal Protestantism”: “Liberal theology is the kiss of death for any church or denomination ... Little remains but social justice activism and deferred maintenance.”

A masculinist hierarchy has unsurprisingly led to sexual abuses in churches and families. It remains a question how adequately these issues will be addressed.

There are feminine reactions to patriarchy, with mixed consequences.

- Archetypes of resistance include the Strong Black Woman and Steel Magnolia (outwardly conventional, inwardly resisting); but maintaining either image is exhausting
- Toxic masculinity (Sarah Palin, Marjorie Taylor Greene) – no rules, no nonsense image: being more masculine than the men.

Gun ownership

Finally, possibly related to the fear of loss of power might be the attraction to gun ownership. Victimhood and vulnerability can be limited by owning a gun! When Christians and Christianity are under siege – loss of patriarchal power, loss of status – guns could be “one final defense against the encroachment of an amoral, irreligious world.”

Irrational allure of conspiracy theories

It is not only “them”

- The paths from anxiety to conspiracy theory are made easier by social media.
 - There are models to use technology for dedicated agendas (7MM).
- With repetition and social media algorithms, fear, anger, divisions are accentuated.
- Result: fear and hatred of an imagined world; fringe ideas become mainstream.
- *How is discernment modeled in a world that overflows with data and manufactured emotion?*

x

The path from anxiety to conspiracy theory is made easier by social media, especially if there is already a concerted model (7MM) to use proven technologies for dedicated agendas.

Christian Nationalism is an immersive culture – an alternate reality, a different world. The idea of a “Deep State” begins with sowing seeds of doubt within otherwise innocuous social groups (even knitters have been targeted). The myth of Haitians eating pets began as a small post, but was repeated and repeated, getting more and more amplified by “leaders” with an agenda and a following. The story became “mainstream,” which only means that it was felt to be normal, conventional, and dominant.

The algorithms of social media intentionally accentuate emotional posts, and direct viewers to similar materials. Social media also allows the convenience of participating in outrage from the safety of one’s own living room. The result is fear and hatred of an imagined world, with words and ideas reinforced by repetition. Conspiracy theories are also attractive to “the Left. What conspiracy theories might we harbor, even if we do not repeat them? For an older population, it is difficult to imagine a world of

virtual influences Remember, today’s audience here was not raised on social media, we are not awash, not surrounded by virtual influences and virtual influencers. How is discernment modeled (not “taught”. Not “learned”) when social media provides too much data and so much manufactured emotion?

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How might we talk across the divide?

Lest we judge ...

- “I am human; nothing human is foreign to me.”
- “If a man has beheld evil, he may know that it was shown to him in order that he learn his own guilt and repent; for what is shown to him is also within him.”
- “What is an idol? Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol.”
- “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

x

We also need to be careful not to judge. We must still and always remind ourselves of our own vulnerability to these dichotomies and splitting behaviors.

Here again are some words reminding us not to polarize our beliefs by elevating the value of our own thinking.

[READ above]

So far, all of my comments are meant to describe phenomena and make sense of the range of behaviors that individuals and groups use to cope with their environments. Understanding some of the possible influences on human behavior might help in our interactions with those we encounter. Professor Cooper-White spends the last chapter offering suggestions on how we might talk across the divide.

I offer these academic insights to enlarge the circle of our understanding, in order to increase compassion and reduce callousness. We are not equipped to be amateur psychologists. It would be nonproductive for amateurs to analyze or counsel others – please leave that to professionals working with subjects who are actively seeking their help. We certainly have to be careful not to judge these behaviors: I am human, nothing human is foreign to me.

But what do we do at Thanksgiving if this comes up?

There *is* a divide.

What are the problems with “Us”?

- Calling for unity by papering over differences is inadequate (“moving on”). That is just calling to maintain the status quo.
 - Past injustices and past traumas need to be lifted up.
 - Images of self purity are splitting behaviors – an unwillingness to feel shame.
- To become freer to care and be less calloused, one needs to mourn.
 - Argumentation does not work. Only empathetic dialogue holds out hope.
- But first ask (triage): *“Am I the right person to have this conversation, with this person, here and now?”*

x

So far I have introduced ideas about why people are drawn in to Christian nationalism. Dr. Cooper-White’s book has a subtitle: “The psychology of Christian nationalism: why people are drawn in and how to talk across the divide.” We do not have time, and I do not have the expertise to address how practically to begin to bridge the divide. In the print version of this talk, there will be some slides to summarize some of her points.

There is a divide though, and papering over the differences with calls for unity are inadequate. Calling for unity while denying past injustices and traumas are arguments to maintain a status quo. That is one world view and approach – to move on, unite for some idea of a greater good. But it is also a worldview of denial and repression, keeping the lid on in order to maintain an image of self-purity and order. This is potentially splitting, because it feels more necessary to split than to feel shame. This applies to the Left as well as the Right.

The alternative view is that the past must be raised up to mourn what was lost and hurt, in order to free oneself to be more caring and less calloused. “The condition of truth is to let suffering speak.” And the Kindness poem says, “Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, / you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. / You must wake up with sorrow. / You must speak to it till your voice / catches the thread of all sorrows / and you see the size of the cloth.” How can we be more empathetic about the other side, to their sorrows, losses, humiliations?

Argumentation with facts to change someone’s view will not work! Only empathetic dialogue holds out hope to change someone else’s heart and mind and have your own heart and mind changed, in the interest of drawing a larger, more inclusive circle.

Dialogue first requires discernment.

- First ask (triage): *“Am I the right person to have this conversation, with this person, here and now?”*
- Triage is important: RED, YELLOW, GREEN LIGHTS.

But dialogue requires discernment first. Not all persons or institutions are ready for dialogue. So, one needs to ask oneself first: *Am I the right person to have this conversation with this person now?*

Triage is important: RED, YELLOW, GREEN LIGHTS

Triage - RED LIGHT

- Sometimes it is not possible to have a productive conversation
 - You may not be talking to a single, free individual. You also have a crowd of influences.
- Walk away gently; say you disagree.
 - Walking away does not mean giving up – there are other ways to make a difference.
- Become aware of your own sources of othering
 - Riches, status and pride will distance oneself.

x

RED LIGHT

Sometimes, maybe very often, it is not possible to have a productive conversation with a Christian nationalist (or anyone with a different worldview). Remember: you are not talking to a single, free individual (and vice versa, you also have your history and influences) – you are both bringing to the table a whole crowd of experiences and symbols. Both parties have developed a system of beliefs that have been reinforced by social, personal and intellectual connections.

So sometimes (often) the best response might be to walk away after saying “I disagree.” And if there is a chance of verbal, emotional abuse or physical violence, it may be necessary to take protective (non-violent) actions.

Not having a conversation with this person at this time does not mean walking away from all efforts to bring about change in the other person and in the other system. One can also work on removing the cultic leader(s); work to change the media/social media environment to be less divisive; change the circumstances that made Christian nationalism an acceptable alternative. Recall that Paul Weyrich's manifesto in 2001 has resulted in Trump's election in 2024. His playbook is also one to use to resist the New Traditionalist agendas – to resist their culture war.

At the same time we have to raise awareness that the riches, status and pride that we have (and our greed, anger and delusions) ... are likely sources of our "othering." [David Brooks is just the latest, taking educational elitism to task.]

Triage – YELLOW LIGHT

- When there are grounds of commonality, and a mutual willingness to converse.
 - Do you share attitudes and connections?
 - Is civility the basis of relationship?
- Begin by listening. Empathetically.
 - Gregory Boyle: "Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the [poor] have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it."
- You or the other person(s) may not be ready to discuss (RED LIGHT).
 - Agreement is not the goal.

x

YELLOW LIGHT

A yellow light exists when there are grounds of commonality with the other, and mutual willingness to converse. But at this point, it still might not be clear if the light will turn Red or Green.

Does the other person share attitudes and connections with you? Is civility – mutual respect and even affection – the basis of a relationship?

If so, and the road seems clear, then **begin with respectful listening**. This is listening to be curious and to understand, not to plan a reply or an attack. It means to try to empathize with the struggles of the other (to let *their* suffering speak). It should never include contempt or even pity of the other's situation, responses, or beliefs.

We can paraphrase Father Gregory Boyle, who said, "Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what *the poor* have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it." Can we also say, "Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what *the Christian nationalist* has to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it."

It may turn out that the other person is **not** really ready to discuss. Or it may turn out that you are not ready to listen – that your sense of integrity is not willing to change to accommodate

the other's perspective. Agreement is not the goal; one does not have to change one's values to agree. And although we insist for ourselves that an ethic of loving relationship is ideal, sometimes (as EM Forster wrote) some people are not lovable: "Don't try to love them: you can't, you'll strain yourself. But try to tolerate them."

Triage – GREEN LIGHT

(The light may still turn back to Yellow or Red)

- The book ends with 25 pages of reminders (!!), from Professor Cooper-White an experienced psychotherapist who also teaches pastoral and spiritual care.
- You are speaking to a person in a different reality.
- Some principles and practices ...
- Then: The work of inclusiveness does not end when someone changes their mind away from Christian nationalism.

x

GREEN LIGHT

Sometimes the light turns green. But one needs to be careful still: the light may turn back to yellow, or even red.

Cooper-White is a psychotherapist and someone who teaches pastoral and spiritual care. She spends 25 pages at the end of her book reminding the reader of important principles and practices to be kept in mind when moving with someone to a new point of view. Remember, you are not talking to someone living with *your* worldview: your conversation partner comes from a different reality, one that they have only begun to reimagine, given everything that happened before.

Principles and practices to keep in mind

It is not easy to engage in nonviolent resistance.

- Relationship always comes first – build them, maintain them.
- Find common ground. Kindness is always necessary
- Realize old family dynamics will be stirred up by new conflicts.
- Breathe – especially when your adrenaline is triggered.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Avoid making assumptions
- Use I-statements. Remember, liberals and conservatives value their moral foundations differently.
 - Avoid argumentation and debate! Facts arouse resistance; sometimes feels like shaming.
- Be willing to admit your own failings
- Don't call out individuals in public. Even in private, try to call in.

x

Professor Cooper-White knows the nuances and pitfalls of having difficult conversations. Here are some of the principles and practices she encourages. There isn't time to go into detail or give examples though.

The tools and rules are “obvious” perhaps – simple at least for someone trained in and teaching how to counsel. But psychotherapy is indeed the interpersonal work that begins when common sense no longer works. Remember, this is not easy. *It is never easy to engage in nonviolent confrontation.*

- Building and maintaining relationships always comes first.
- Find common ground. Kindness is absolutely necessary.
- Realize old family dynamics will be stirred up by new conflicts.
- Breathe, count to 10 when your adrenaline is triggered
- Notice your feelings, especially defensiveness: such feelings can be noted, then set them aside, don’t act on them now.
- Learn to listen with intention; listen more than you speak (there are useful techniques to go with this attitude).
- Avoid making assumptions
- Use I-statements: in a post-modern world subjectivity is important; but neither is everything relative. I-statements show how you own your piece of the truth.
 - Liberals and conservatives value the same moral foundations but differently – care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, liberty/oppression.
- Avoid fact-checking and debate: facts arouse resistance (they are already split?). But it is still important not to abandon facts. Argumentation also can often be taken as criticism of the person, not just the facts. Shaming is experienced.
 - Realize and be careful – there are histories of other conflicts.
- Don’t let politics become a central feature of a relationship. Political differences can become a symbol for other conflicts. Stay connected, and stay differentiated.
- Be willing to admit your own failings. Self-righteousness (who-me? myth) is likely a splitting and a projection
- Calling out doesn’t work. Rather, find smaller groups to build trusting relationships, and call in with love.
 - If you find you are making enemies of your allies, you have probably become a cult.
 - Justice and mercy. Mercy and justice. As Rev. Phil had reminded us, ask yourself, “Is this based on love? Does this reduce suffering?”

More principles and practices ...

- Be attentive to power and social context
 - Adding “white” in conversations reminds oneself of unspoken norms
- Watch for conducive and unconducive times
- Choose your battles
- Model civility
 - Allow righteous anger; recognize oppressive anger
- Practice self-care
 - Social activism is self-care. Including writing an op-ed!
- Violent protest does not create constructive change.

x

And finally, let’s remind ourselves of these principles and practices:

- Be attentive to power and social context.
 - Add “white” to your conversation, to remind yourself of the unspoken norms – some values may merely be “white,” not universal!
 - Recall that we are largely a product of “WEIRD culture” – White, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic
- Watch for conducive and unconducive times and places to talk.
- Choose your battles
- Model civility; allow anger
 - Righteous anger in response to injustice is not the same as the oppressive anger that fuels injustice.
- Practice self-care
- Social activism *is* self-care
 - Write an op-ed!
- Violent protest does not create constructive change.

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A little more unused text:

- “The Left” has perhaps elevated the concept of “Democracy” above the concept of “God”? Or “The Left” has elevated Profit over God? Or Reason? Or Self? And so on.
- The 7 Mountains Mandate enlists some cryptic Biblical references: In Deuteronomy, Joshua is commanded to dominate 7 tribes in the Holy Land (genocidally, if you will). In Revelation there is also reference to “seven heads” that influence the mind. And Isaiah 2:2: “In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it”.