

Foreword

Coming to Terms

Communal Relationships

What's the connection between a honey bee, a faithful pup, a family, and a people? Our relationships with each are communal. Our destination in later chapters is understanding peoples and the narratives we tell. To identify where we properly locate peoples and our peoplehood stories within the taxonomy of human communal relationships, I will argue that we best understand peoples as derivatives of the more fundamental created relationships we call families. In this chapter, we will think first about a purely communal relationship. This relationship is simultaneously personal and communal. We will then consider what marks a familial relationship as rightly-ordered. That will set us up for consideration of rightly-ordered peoples.

Our Communal Relationships with Other Orders of Creation

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Let's start with the honey bee. My eight-year-old has yet to learn how to live in communion with honey bees. In his immature view, we should avoid or kill them lest they sting. When I visit my garden, however, I'm in awe, increasingly appreciative of how most creatures depend on honey bees' work. A honey bee's proper work is gathering nectar, making honey, and pollinating. A third of our agricultural production depends on pollination, and they do eighty percent of that. They are the most crucial flower lover in the world, involved in one of eight pollination events daily. Like the ant, their work per gram of body weight vastly exceeds anything I will achieve in my lifetime. Moreover, they cooperate with other bees to create beautiful things. Still, that cooperation and their hierarchical colony relationships are rigidly encoded in their DNA. This natural selection sacrifices flexibility in their encounter with the world for a lighter onboard CPU that can handle loads of one as busy as a bee.

Because of our shared space and interdependence, I can have a communal relationship with a plethora of bees, but not an individual bee. A personal relationship is beyond my capacity because that requires a shared sociality, a history of call and response through which we mutually reveal our characters. When I try to get too close, bees sting. I can have a communal relationship with a plethora of honey bees, but it will always be impersonal, which makes such relationships distinct from my other communal relationships. Indeed, my relationships with all insect communities belong to the genus of communal relationships that are intrinsically impersonal.

Now consider my dog, Sadie, who is, from all reports, the most intelligent, gentle, and lovable dog in canine history. At least 15,000 years ago, canines were naturally selected for common life with

humans. Based on my empirical observations of Sadie, the proper work of dogs is to sleep sixteen hours daily, scratch, roll, play, eat, and teach humans how to love. In terms of pure productivity per pound, the laziest honey bee in the garden has due cause to shame my Sadie. But the reverse is true when the measurement is a creature's flexibility in response to the dynamism of life. Sadie knows not to occupy the couch or bed at our house but the opposite at the dogsitter's house. She knows she can slobber on our daughters, must maintain a sanitary deportment with my wife, and can tackle our youngest as long as he's frolicking, too. She thrives with routine but delights in the unknown, her mix of curiosity and caution matching mine as we explore the world together. She can be deep in luxurious slumber but will come running immediately at the first sniff of tears as though her particular vocation is to lick our cares away.

In contrast with the honey bee, my relationship with Sadie is simultaneously communal and personal, grounded in the covenant I offered. She accepted when I fed her exclusively by hand in the first four weeks after we weaned her. Bread-sharing is the hallmark and promise of our relationship. Generally, I do all the sharing, but there is reciprocity. When she surprises herself and me with an occasional execution of rodent invaders in our backyard, she also shares her prize with me. Sadie and I constituted a family after I was widowed, and after a few years of just us in the house, she consented delightedly to my wife's and her young children's admission to our pack. If the scientists are right, she knows about a thousand English words and even more hand signals, which makes possible a communion nurtured through seven years of my pedagogic call and her faithful response. Ours is a deep mutual trust, a friendship that exemplifies the genus of familial, communal relationships that manifest the shared sociality and history that make them also personal.

Personal and Communal Relationships with Other Humans

My relationship with Sadie shares attributes with my relationship with my wife, but the latter is far richer and more complex. I'll sidestep the minefield of naming most of the differences by stipulating that Sadie belongs to the order of Carnivora and my wife is a Primate. Both of these relationships are personal and communal. They are personal in that they are marked by a shared history in which we address and respond to each other in ever-deepening ways through which we reciprocally reveal our character. They are communal in that they are marked by cooperation towards the common goal of constructing lives that are not merely bare life (*zoè*) but perfectly proper to our kind (*bios*). For Sadie, that seems to be the straightforward project of eating, sleeping, playing, and loving. For my wife and me, that entails that much more challenging project of "being in act of the soul and action accompanied by logos" that Aristotle assures us is the path to human flourishing. Figuring that out and executing it makes human relationships so rich and complex.

I should clarify that "human flourishing" is technical jargon for me. I use it to denote that teleological vision Aristotle, Plato, and Thomas Aquinas described as *eudaimonia* and what others describe in terms of the life manifesting the fullness, essence, completeness, or maturity of our humanity. I clarify that because I don't want you to think I am being sentimental when I profess thanksgiving for the love I experience with my wife. On the contrary, as soon as I speak of her, I evoke in myself a passion that I experience as an irresistible power driving me to unite with her so that my life is not merely 'bare life,' but consists of that autarchy that, per Aristotle, qualifies me for participation in the political community. It's a single power driving me to live well. Yet, it achieves that by driving me to unite cooperatively in our mutual effort to experience fullness in crucial dimensions of life that constitute human flourishing.

The ancient Greeks understood more about love than Hollywood; their love language helps us notice what's happening when we create families. Love drives me to cooperate with my wife to satisfy our innate sensual desires for food, water, shelter, sexual union, growth, and community (*epithymia*). Love drives me to cooperate with her in our mutual need to unite with intrinsically valuable things (eros) because of their capacity to embody Beauty, Truth, and Justice, which are the values through which we rational beings sense and engage the depth of life with God. Love drives me to cooperate with her in our mutual need to participate and commune (*philia*) with one who is like yet wholly other than ourselves and whose life breathes possibilities of our creating together that which is beautiful, true, and just. Love drives us to cooperate in uniting with those things through which we humans transcend 'bare life,' thereby enjoying the depth and breadth of human flourishing.

Tragically, the story of our lives East of Eden is a tale of our getting in our way in our quest for human flourishing. It is a tale of disordered love that seeks fulfillment in that which is unworthy of such demands, distorts Beauty, Truth, and Justice, and creates parodies of the good. Like those of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah, our families too often manifest disordered love and dysfunction. As a result, we need to remember how to flourish. Through ordinary things like bread, wine, and water, Jesus gives us the gift of that memory.

Jesus' Teleological Reordering of Family

With Luke Bretherton, I observe that 21st-century Westerners inhabit a world awash

in at least four compelling, related, and competing narratives about the path of human flourishing. and that we rightly characterize all of these as related species of nationalism (Bretherton2022ChristianHumanism). It's beyond my scope to consider these alternatives, so I'll make allusions to them now and consider them more in-depth in subsequent chapters. I have in mind White Anglo-Protestant Nationalism, White Progressive Christian Nationalism, Pragmatic Nationalism, and Christian Humanism. In navigating life together, my wife and I trust that Christian Humanism best describes the path to human flourishing. Throughout my work, that's my premise and proclamation. Since there are numerous accounts of Christian Humanism, I need to specify my understanding of it sufficiently now to convey how it will help us imagine a nationalism that is aptly (rather than ironically) described as Christian. In future chapters, I will differentiate it from competing narratives.

By Christian Humanism, I refer to an ethics that responds to the question concerning how humans flourish by considering how we know what it means for a human to be perfected or complete. As Bretherton notes, three of the major competing narratives in the Western world answer that question in distinctive anthropocentric ways. In contrast, Christian humanism presumes we creatures can only answer that question by turning our eyes to our Creator. We only know what it means to be a complete human through what our Creator reveals. We encounter that revelation primarily through reflection on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as mediated through Scripture, Christian traditions, and our Spirit-guided rationality, which always testifies through the real presence of and never contradicts Jesus (Hooker, Yoder).

Because we are simultaneously redeemed and still sinners (Luther), such reflection is always subject to error and contested. We, therefore, ground our thought epistemically by beginning our contemplation in one of the many places Jesus promised to meet us, for there, we boldly expect to encounter human "Being-in-action," the divine Logos himself. We imitate Jesus, and, over time, our habit of imitation leads to new habits of thought in the form of transformed dispositions with which we encounter our 21st-century world. We are renewed by the transforming of our minds (Rom 12:2).

That transformation involves changes in how we perceive others and our vision for human flourishing. For example, discovering that all are the same "in Christ" subverts our prevailing social boundaries. And we learn that flourishing consists not of perpetual linear progress up the ladder of honor but of perpetual movement toward God and our neighbors. Moreover, that transformation involves changing our understanding of how

we relate as individuals to our communities. We learn that diversity is a necessary element of unity and that unity is the fullest expression of our humanity. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" (1Cor 10:17), and therefore we seek the advantage of the many, "so that they may be saved"(1Cor 10:33).

As Paul notes throughout his corpus, Jesus reconfigures our conception of family. We encounter Jesus' real presence - and thus Truth - in the sacrament of baptism, and there we are confronted with God's gracious incorporation of us in God's family based on God's character alone. Forgiveness in response to such forgiven-ness, and not honor, is the generative principle of a rightly-ordered family. Similarly, when we encounter the real presence in the Eucharist, we discover that the form of the forgiveness principle becomes enfleshed in the bread-sharing of daily life. Grace abounds, and Jesus himself tutors us in what it means to be fully human.

The epistemic ground of family is our knowledge of and trust in God's pretemporal decision to be with us because of who God is and not because of who we are. In the moments that one of us, in response to such unmerited grace, offers himself to God as a channel through which God may bless another family member whom God also adores, and makes such self-offering out of reverence to Christ, and not based on who the other is or may become, then God's reconciling action on the Cross is manifest. God's reconciling action enfleshed in our oikos reveals the mystery of the divine oikonomia. Through mimesis, not analogy, Christ is made mystically visible in the family, and the family grows in the Spirit-led rationality that generates the virtues that constitute human flourishing.

All this is instinctual for Sadie. But, for us humans, becoming human is hard communal work.

From Jesus' teleological reordering of family, we can observe markers of a family oriented toward the flourishing that God desires for us. In what follows, I am not suggesting that those markers are fully realized in my or any family, but rather propose them as descriptive of what Max Weber called an "ideal-type," and, borrowing from Weber, suggest that such families "can appear in reality and in historically important ways, and they have" (Weber, 1946, p.323) though, given that we are simultaneously redeemed and yet sinners, any such appearance would be both fleeting and imperfect.

First, it epitomizes a personal relationship. As with my dog, Sadie, there is shared sociality, a pattern of call and response by which we speak into each others' lives and

thereby enjoy a shared history. However, our sociality manifests an incomparable depth because it is not grounded in our finitude. At our best, we are not the Source of the love performed in our reciprocal address but merely its channel. Through us, the Spirit expresses the Father's and Son's "Yes!" to our beloveds, rendering our shared history eternally significant.

Second, it epitomizes a communal relationship. There is cooperation that nourishes a common life. That cooperation, however, manifests the depth of those who know their belongingness and nourishment are not threatened by an economy of scarcity but rather are secured through their participation in the economy of superabundance orchestrated by the Source of all goodness. Moreover, that cooperation no longer aims at a transient's goal that will fade like the grass. Instead, bread-sharing becomes a means of grace, nourishing both belly and heart, bearing witness to and performing the family's participation in God's eternal life, even as the family grows toward its mature capacity to love each other as God loves all.

Third, the familial, communal relationship is covenantal. God sets apart two or more who become a "we," a sacred parity group formed on the basis not of their shared blood but their shared vows. Sacred oaths, ritually enacted, solemnize the lifelong commitment to solidarity and the intentional creation of a shared history constituted by mutual reciprocity, bread-sharing, and the assurance that each will provide others a permanent space not just for bare life but for flourishing. Integral to the covenant that creates the 'we' are instructions concerning the privileges and responsibilities to each other that in their practice or neglect answer the question, "Who are we?"

Fourth, the familial covenant is not a social contract involving a promised exchange of property, services, or outcomes but a social covenant involving the promised exchange of lives. Borrowing from Barth, in response to and in imitation of God's unilateral promise to be with us, we exchange with other family members a pledge of loyalty and solidarity in the sense of "I will never be except to be with you. You belong to me and I belong to you and nothing you could do or become will cause you to forfeit involuntarily the blessings of the mutual belongingness of our shared table."

Fifth, a familial covenant is a relationship in which the parties are subject to one another. This is already implied in the commitment to a shared sociality in which each addresses and responds to the other. Those within the covenant are never mere objects to be exploited for their utility like a tool one discards once no longer useful. On the contrary, they are subjects who always bear the essential dignity of God's presence

within them. The covenant creates unity without erasing differences or the agency of its members.

Sixth, to the extent it embodies and grows in the Spirit-led rationality that generates the virtues, the familial, communal relationship is both sacramental and holy and, therefore, worthy of devotion. In the moments that one family member, in response to unmerited grace, offers himself to God as a channel through which God may bless others, and makes such self-offering out of reverence to God and not based on who others are or may become, then God's reconciling action on the Cross is manifest. And as we witness such moments in faith, we have cause to hope that, as we participate in that fellowship, we will encounter the gentle pressure of the divine selfcoming, drawing us more deeply into God's reconciling love. To the extent that such being is actualized, we rightly declare our familial community holy and respond to it with the deep and abiding respect and devotion appropriate to all signposts that mark where we have found the Living Waters, flourished, and expect to flourish again.

Finally, because the basis of membership is a shared vow and nothing else, there are intrinsically both an openness to and boundaries for new participants in that covenant. Others may join it through their ritualized acceptance of the communal vow spoken by them or on their behalf (as in the example of children). This openness provides the flexibility to respond to the needs of orphans, widows, the elderly, the infirm, and others in need of such hospitality. The boundaries exist intrinsically at the limits of the family's capacity to generate the sustaining goods that are its cooperative purpose. (For example, at age four, my great-grandfather became part of a new familial community bound for the United States when his Prussian father determined that he could not feed twelve children while paying the subscription fee levied in support of the Franco-Prussian war.) The boundaries are essential, for only if we can relate as an "I" to a "Thou" or as a "We" to a "Thou" can we relate to the Beautiful, True, and Just, to those who manifest those fundamental values, and to their Source (@tillich1954LovePowerJustice, p. 32). And this suggests the rightly ordered relationship to those we consider outside our familial community: as Willie Jennings put it so well, in the encounter with them, we yield to "the power of love that constantly gestures toward joining, toward the desire to hear, to know, to embrace" (Jennings, Loc 6420).

Familial communities are quite tangible. Though the membership of our familial communities will vary over our lifetimes due to events and members' choices, we generally know those who share our familial covenant through face-to-face encounters

with them. Circles of intimacy within our families ebb, flow, and reconfigure in response to everyday life events. We may question whether they are rightly ordered at times but rarely do we question whether they are real. Indeed, often, like our skin color, language, and place, we don't question them at all: our family relationships usually fade into the set of givens in our lives that we receive as blessings but don't think much about at all until they are disrupted. At such times, our pain testifies to their concrete substance and our deep need for them. With that concreteness in view, let's now turn to other species of human communal relationships we creatively construct on that pattern.

Peoples

With a vision for a rightly-ordered family in view, we now turn to the consideration of peoples. First, we will develop the insight that peoples are imagined communities based on the conceptual DNA of families and scaled as needed for our cooperative purposes. Next, we will use that insight to contemplate the markers of a rightly-ordered people. That will enable us to pivot in the next chapter to reflect on peoplehood and the relationships of peoples to individuals and other peoples, as well as the structures we create to govern those relationships.

Imagined Communities

If anthropologist Yuval Noah Harari is correct, Karl Barth threaded the theological and anthropological needles when he rejected any suggestion that a person's nation-ness (Anderson) can be "decked out as an order of creation" or that "place, home and motherland" can be an independent or parallel source of divine revelation. Instead, Barth emphasized that nations and our nation-ness are not created goods like the parent, child, and communal procreative relationships. He decried the use of the term "people" as a theological construct and dismissed the notion of a "national god" as "arbitrary fancy" and "innovation" and "in the most concrete sense of the term heretical." For Barth, nations and our sense of nation-ness are creations of the human imagination, to be understood as temporal providential goods that we may ourselves change, displace, or extend (Karl Barth, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation, Part 4*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 292, 302-6). The consensus of 21st-century anthropology agrees.

According to Harari, about six million years ago, the first animals of our genus, 'Homo' walked the earth, and about two million years ago, at least six species of our genus subsisted on the planet as rather mediocre gatherers who also hunted smaller animals while avoiding predation by the more impressive genera at the top of the food chain. (Harari, 3-4). We Homo Sapiens arrived more than two million years after the first humans, evolving in East Africa about 150,000 years ago, migrating northward to the Middle East, and retreating after an unsuccessful engagement with Neanderthals (Harari, 10-14).

We have every reason to believe that, at that point, our Sapien ancestors shared with all other primates both the capacity to create communal relationships of the familial type and the incapacity to imagine, create, and sustain extensions of those relationships into large-scale cooperative associations. Then, however, something remarkable happened about 70,000 years ago. Anthropologists call it the Cognitive Revolution. Within about 40,000 years, we Sapiens invented "boats, oil lamps, bows and arrows, and needles," migrated from East Africa to Europe, East Asia, and Australia, and out-competed all other species of our genus so successfully that they became extinct more than 30,000 years ago.

What happened? Harari dubs it "the Tree of Knowledge mutation." Our DNA evolved such that our brains developed our extraordinary linguistic capacity to conceive and track the statuses of large communal networks. However, in addition to our capacity to manage extensive kinship relationships, our brains gained the linguistic capacity to imagine not just what existed but also that which not yet existed and that which could exist only intangibly as concepts in our minds. Harari dubs the latter "fictions," which I will call "abstract symbols" or "abstractions."

Our creativity - this capacity to live between the "now" and the "not yet" by letting the "not yet" propel us into the future - is now essential to our nature, encoded in our DNA. Our creativity spawns abstractions that spawn real possibilities like bread-sharing and bridge-building. Abstract symbols make flexible cooperation as a community possible at small, medium, and large scales, transforming our species from a mediocre plant and nut gatherer to a formidable hunter capable of imagining and creating armies. Our capacity to imagine, create, and sustain abstract relationships of belongingness and cooperation with massive numbers of strangers distinguish us Sapiens from all other earthly creatures (Harari, 22-4). We thrive to the extent we participate in them. Small and large-scale communal belongingness and cooperation are vital to human

flourishing and identity.

Barth was right when he recognized that nations and nation-ness are fluid human constructions. What is essential to humans is not our people or peoplehood but the flexibility that fuels the creativity of our imaginations. Abstract symbols are tools we create to solve problems. Nations, nation-ness, and peoplehood are abstractions we create, reconfigure, extend, and discard as needed as we solve problems that require large-scale cooperation. They are tools that last long but do not come with a quality and endurance warranty backed by God.

Nationalism as a Genus

The hominid species closest to us sapiens, the chimpanzee, can organize and sustain cooperative groups not more extensive than about 100 chimps. Through our capacity to store, synthesize, and analyze larger volumes of personal relationship data (gossip), we sapiens can sustain stable cooperative groups consisting of about 150 individuals, but few of us can orchestrate cooperation among more than that number of personal relationships effectively, and human groups destabilize at about that threshold (Harari, 26).

Something happened at the dawn of the Cognitive Revolution 70,000 years ago that enabled us to surpass that limit and construct cooperative relationships in the form of armies, cities, and empires numbering tens of thousands and even millions of individuals. Since then, our brains have enabled us to determine our actions in response to a world we perceive bifocally. We perceive the tangible phenomena of place, including geographical features, inhabitants, climate, shelter, and food, and we also perceive intangible phenomena that we experience as abstract realities like gods, rights, justice, money, cities, nations, and corporations. Of course, we cannot touch, taste, smell, hear or see what these abstractions signify. However, their abstract reality stimulates our creativity, generates communal relationships and shared values with strangers we will never meet, establishes loci of exchange, and inspires our loyalty to and trust in associations that add depth and breadth to our lives (Harari, 27-33).

Our communal relationships beyond the horizon of our acquaintance are genuine in the same sense that ownership of land or intellectual property is meaningful though imagined. Augustine of Hippo and Richard Hooker gestured toward this

meaningfulness of our abstract relationships in their metaphors of the cities of God and Man and the mystical yet visible body of Christ. Our capacity to recognize that something can be simultaneously mystical and visible is the engine of the creativity that aligns the work proper to humans with God's.

However, only our Creator creates out of nothing—all human creativity is derivative. The genera of our imagined communal relationships all are derivative of the one genus grounded in the created order - the familial kinship group of parent and child. Because our minds manufacture countless communal networks, there are many genera, such as the many species of ecclesial bodies with their distinct orderings, military units, the spectrum of business and non-profit entities, student bodies and their related parent groups, civic associations, grief support groups, alums, and countless other affinity groups, and, of course, the myriad species of polis we have created. These genera share, to some degree, the DNA of the familial genus and, as such, inherit certain traits.

As the genus Pan, which includes chimpanzees and bonobos, is closest genetically to our genus Homo, the genera of ecclesial bodies and peoplehoods are closest genealogically to the genus of familial communities. Their proximity may explain our perennial desire to mate them. Perhaps the best evidence of their proximity is that ordinary folks will not sacrifice their lives for their Rotary Club or the Cancer Society, but we historically have shed our blood for family, God, and country. All three promise "the possibility of transcendence within a historical collective" (Rosen, 247). *People* names a genus of imagined communal relationships that are kin to those we associate with hearth and home.

If our family kinship group is our smallest communal identity, then the group we denote as our people or nation is our most extensive communal identity capable of inspiring consistent and inclusive widespread cooperation. As I have already noted, one's people is an imagined communal relationship because, as Benedict Anderson noted, one will likely never know of or meet more than a tiny fraction of one's people, yet will feel a bond of affection for them that one does not extend to those who are not of one's people. Moreover, despite significant differences in power and socioeconomic status and histories of domestic oppression, one's people is generally imagined in terms of a passionate fraternity that, in the engagement of other peoples, sets aside domestic hierarchies of human value (Anderson, 6-8). We all wear the same jersey when our nation's team is on the field.

This bond of affection for strangers who are also our people arises from the same qualities of love that drive me to unite cooperatively with my wife. I unite with those I recognize as my people cooperatively to satisfy our shared desires for food, water, shelter, security, growth, and community (epithmia). I cooperate with them in our mutual need to unite with intrinsically valuable (eros) things because of our community's potential to embody Beauty, Truth, and Justice. I cooperate with them in our mutual need to participate and commune (philia) with others who are strangers to me and yet make our collective creation and sustenance of that which is Beautiful, True, and Just possible. Love drives us who otherwise would be distant strangers to see ourselves as distant neighbors and to cooperate in uniting and participating in those things which transcend 'bare life.'

As we address and respond to each other over time and share in the goods that make our communal flourishing possible, our discourse and cooperative actions yield shared beliefs, idioms, symbols, and practices that convey and affirm values that we aspire to embody in our imagined community. We become a storied community of what Barth called "near and distant neighbors" with a shared present and hopeful future. We become a people. Our communion is imagined, abstract, yet real, or, as Hooker might put it, mystical and yet visible in the distinctiveness of our shared practices.

Nevertheless, like our familial communities, our imagined communities live east of Eden, and our history of peoples is an ambiguous tale of wondrously creative achievements, horrific parodies, and, sometimes, holocausts of the good. At times, evil triumphs, or at least credibly announces its triumph, as peoples struggling for power choose to manifest ugliness, falsity, and injustice. Like the peoples who fill the stories of Moses, Elijah, and Isaac, our peoples too often manifest disordered love and dysfunction. For that reason, it is helpful to imagine the attributes of a rightly ordered people and our relation to it.

First, as with our families, our peoplehood is not merely communal. We individuals experience our peoplehood in an asymmetric relational matrix that always begins and remains personal. Through our immersion in its shared everyday life, our people addresses us as individuals by inviting us to comprehend and participate in its traditioned beliefs, idioms, symbols, practices, and the values to which all of these point. It conveys the people's myths through which the people's past - however truthfully rendered - becomes our past. Nevertheless, we meet our people always in

the present. In continuity with our imagined heritage, we meet in the present moment and imagine our shared future together through participation in the people's civic discourse and governance. The people and we experience an actual history through which the abstract symbol, our people, dialectically reveals and develops its character and related power to address us further. Our people and we encounter each other as subjects and objects in what is always a personal though asymmetric relationship for us. That is why the personification of the abstract symbol is so powerful for us. We learn to know and treasure the character of Uncle Sam, the motherland, or our fatherland, and our experience of reciprocal belongingness nourishes us.

Second, peoplehood is a communal relationship characterized by cooperation to create a meaningfully shared life. We express communal piety more through edifying speech, bridge-building, and safety nets than through pageantry, colors, and anthems. Bread-sharing is both the people's standard and symbol. Their cooperation manifests the depth of those who know their belongingness is secure and unthreatened by an economy of scarcity in food, shelter, and respect.

Third, the people's communal relationship is covenantal. Pledges, oaths, anthems, and other cultural practices solemnize the people's enduring commitment to solidarity and the intentional creation of a shared history constituted by mutual reciprocity, bread-sharing, and the assurance that each will provide others a permanent space not just for bare life but for flourishing. Integral to the covenant that constitutes the 'we' are instructions concerning the rights, procedures, and responsibilities to each other that, in their practice or neglect, answer the question, "Who are we?"

Fourth, the people's communal relationship is not a social contract involving an exchange of socioeconomic outcomes but a social covenant involving the exchange of lives. The people say to the individual, "We will be your people," and the individual says to the people, "I will be one of you." The people and individuals exchange promises of loyalty and solidarity that are the fruits of belongingness and make truth-speaking, forgiveness, and peace sustainable.

Fifth, the people's covenant is a communal relationship in which we recognize all constituents as subjects and agents with essential human dignity. Neither the people nor its constituents are objects to be exploited for their utility. The people's covenant creates unity without erasing differences or the agency of its members.

Sixth, to the extent that it is always on its way toward achieving the Beauty, Truth,

and Justice it promises to embody, the people's communal relationship is worthy of devotion. To the extent that those values are rooted in the people, we rightly respond to our people with the deep and abiding respect and devotion appropriate to all places where we have drunk from the Living Waters, flourished, and expect to flourish again.

Finally, because the basis of membership is a shared pledge and commitment to our constituting covenant and nothing else, there are intrinsically both an openness to and boundaries for new members of a people. Others may join a people through their solemn vow or be born into it. This openness provides the flexibility to respond to the needs of refugees seeking political identity or those seeking humanitarian relief (Bretherton 2011). The boundaries exist intrinsically at the limits of the people's capacity to sustain their cooperative purpose. The boundaries are essential, for only if we can relate as a "We" to a "Thou" can we comprehend neighborly identities and our responsibilities to them (O'Donovan). As Barth notes, the command of God to us in response to our near and distant neighbors is identical (CD III/4 §54.3). We love them and are disposed to will and do the right as we discern it in the particularity of our encounter (Woodard-Lehman).

Furthermore, this suggests the rightly ordered relationship to those we consider not of our people. Bound by our responsibility for good order and inspired by the catholicity of our people's covenantal solidarity in bread-sharing, we prioritize hospitality to the people-less, responding to their need for peoplehood with the communal solidarity that transforms bare life into fully human life (Bretherton, 2011). Because membership in our people is open and bound by a commitment to our constituting covenant, subject to sustainable order, we are free to become a people who "desire to hear, to know, to embrace" our near and distant neighbor (Jennings, Loc 6420).

I never thought about the meaning of "nation" or "race" until I began my research on Christian nationalism. Now I think about both concepts differently.

In this post, I focus on how I've evolved in my conception of 'nation.' I'll save 'race' for later since that's a much more complicated matter.

My starting point was to get a handle on nationalism so I could clarify why its Christian form is so pernicious. But it turns out nationalism is itself a contested term. We think we know what it is but as conversations progress we discover a broad range of definitions, some of which are inspired by political agendas. We have to clarify such terms because their confusion enflames conflicts between groups competing for dominant power.

Recognizing 'nationalism' is a contested term prepared me for the discovery that I naively use words in its constellation - like nation, race, people, ethnic group, society, and community - without recognizing they shape how I perceive the world. Their definitions matter more than I realized.

I am normally casual in my usage of 'nation.' I thought its meaning was obvious and the same for all of us. When we pledge allegiance to a republic that is "one nation under God" we commit to a vision that we will act as a people who are indivisible and who embody "liberty and justice" for all. I always thought "one nation" described what we are rather than what we are becoming.

But now I get the nuance I missed. Our republic is not an aspiration. It's already a thing, an inheritance we are charged to steward. "One nation" names our project, the grand experiment we now lead, of becoming a more perfect union of many nations who share a single sovereignty authorizing our shared strivings for the common good.

We pledge to be "indivisible" because we once divided. The Civil War led to our pledge of allegiance because our republic of many nations sorted into two republics. Just before Fort Sumter, we almost divided into four. Division is always a temptation precisely because we were "conceived in liberty" with the hope that we would nonetheless bind ours many nations into one.

I always used "nation" as a shorthand for "nation-state." That works in most cases because it's not often necessary to distinguish between the citizenry and the agent we authorize to act on our behalf. Once we begin to contemplate things like Christian nationalism such distinctions matter. "Nation" denotes our body politic, the people who strive to create a more perfect union. The United States is our agent, the State we, acting as one nation, create to pursue the common good.

"Nation" works as shorthand for the United States insofar as we understand it to be an agent whose mission is to act for the good of all citizens. In other words, it works when the set of people who are members of a nation are identical to the set of people who are citizens of the state that governs them. When that's not true, that shorthand fails. We have to be more precise about what we mean when we speak of nations.

The best way I know to get at a precise definition of nation is to think first about the distinction between two related things, a community and a society.

A community is a group identity based on shared attributes like habitat, region, origin, language, socioeconomic class, and caste. It's pre-rational and pre-voluntary in that it exists independently of individual persons. It's a cooperative social consciousness generated by heredity or geographic and historical context. To be part of a community, I don't need to think about it or volunteer to be a member. It's a social identity that I receive as a given.

In contrast, a society is a group identity based on shared ideas, visions, missions, or ends. It's also a cooperative social consciousness but it's personal and generated by the group's shared commitment to an idea or cause. To part of a society, I need to think, experience a spiritual connection to the shared cause, and volunteer. Society membership is not something we receive as a given. The society itself is something we deliberately create. and our free consent precedes our cooperation in it. Although we don't often concern ourselves with this distinction, our affinity groups like businesses, labor unions, scholarly guilds, and political associations are societies.

A nation is properly understood as a community, not a society. "People" is a less contested synonym that I often use. A nation or people is a web of autonomous communities connected usually by a treasured land, history, tradition, or collective consciousness. It's a social identity I receive as a given by virtue of my being a part of one or more communities based on my habitat, region, origin, language, socioeconomic class, and caste.

Civic republicanism

Race is a false category (original)

Early Modern Colonialism Still Shapes Contemporary Peoplehood Narratives

Many Americans are tired of discussing our divisions, particularly our racial differences. However, it's crucial to understand that these discussions are not just about our past but also our present and future. The wounds caused by our history of slavery are still significant, and we need to address them.

Some may believe that the civil rights legislation of the 1960s already healed those wounds. As a friend of mine once said, "Yes, Americans enslaved Africans, but we fought a Civil War over 160 years ago that ended that, and the Civil Rights Act made everyone equal. And my generation is not responsible for any of it. The only racists are those who keep talking about it."

But the truth is that the spiritual, economic, and political impacts of racial divisions are ongoing. It's a mistake to think that we made things right when we outlawed Jim Crow practices and naive to think oppression's wounds no longer hobble us. In this article, I want to stress the importance of understanding how our enslavement practices transformed both the enslaved and the enslaver in ways that persist in the American soul, like genetic cancer passed from generation to generation. We cannot truly "achieve our country" until we conquer this cancer. (Cite Baldwin)

To explain what I mean, let's talk about some history that most people don't know.

The English and French nobility were embroiled in the Hundred Years' War at the dawn of Europe's Early Modern era. At the same time, the Holy Roman Empire faced threats from Muslim military successes—the Turks on its eastern flank and the Moors on its western flank. During the 15th century, the decisions made by the popes in response to these forces profoundly shaped 21st-century life.

We often mistake these decisions as part of the natural order. They initiated a significant shift in Christian theology that created contradictory *hierarchies of human value* within our contemporary peoplehood narratives. This shift, which was a departure from the teachings of Christ and the early Christian church, is often invisible to us until we reflect on the destruction it has caused.

When the modern nation-state emerged, this transformation in Christian theology was poised to spread across continents. The first carriers were papal bulls transported to African shores on Portuguese caravels, where sailors then loaded seized Black and Brown lives—lives whose suffering and sacrifice were sanctioned by these bulls in the name of God.

Many scholars have highlighted that the papal bulls *Dum Diversas* (1452), *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), and *Inter Caetera* (1493) granted Portugal and Spain exclusive rights to trade in Africa and the New World. These documents also permitted the seizure and enslavement of the inhabitants of the lands they invaded in the name of Christ.

The wealth—especially gold and silver—gained by the Portuguese and

Spanish attracted the attention of English, French, and Dutch nobles. These nations quickly found their own ways to finance nation-state building by participating in colonization and capitalism.

While other scholars focus on the Age of Discovery that followed, a period marked by European exploration and expansion, an old professor of mine, Willie Jennings, urges us to reflect on the transformation in our Christian understanding that these papal bulls caused and how they influenced the actions and justifications of the colonizing powers.¹

Jennings describes the sacramental actions of Prince Henry of Portugal on August 8, 1444, during the liturgical debarkation and auction of 235 enslaved Africans at Lagos. A religious ceremony was deemed fitting because the Portuguese present believed, as Pope Nicholas IV had stated, that their actions of enslavement were part of God's work. In gratitude for this affirmation of Portugal's mission to save the souls of the so-called heathens through kidnapping and enslavement, Prince Henry offered a tithe to God. He donated one enslaved boy to the Church at Lagos and another to the local Franciscan convent.²

Jennings highlights the crucial question of Prince Henry's chronicler: "How should I understand the suffering of these Africans?" This question loomed over every future colonizer's interpretation of the doctrine of Providence.³ Colonizing powers responded to this dilemma by constructing justifying narratives: "African captivity leads to African salvation, and to black bodies that exemplify the disciplining power of the faith."⁴

This negligence of the 15th-century popes is striking, and there are numerous theological errors present. Jennings points out the irony in the fact that the Portuguese liturgical rituals concerning the debarkation of enslaved people

¹ Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. Yale University Press, 2010.

² Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. Yale University Press, 2010, 15-16.

³ Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. Yale University Press, 2010, 17.

⁴ Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. Yale University Press, 2010, 19.

resemble a passion narrative, placing the pope and the prince in the culpable roles of the Jewish oligarchs and Pilate. He also highlights the profound error of a pope who translates Jesus' kingship over the world into the authority of a bishop to divide the world into zones of exploitation for his allies.

Additionally, Jennings critiques the pope's heretical assertion that enslavers act as the providential hand of God, claiming they save the enslaved through the seizure of their lives in Jesus' name. However, Jennings does not dwell on this for long. He encourages us to move forward to examine the devastating shift in the Christian imagination that such sanctioned seizure has produced. This shift is the primary thing I invite my readers to ponder.

From that moment on, Christianity accepted the practice of displacing enslaved individuals from their place-centered identities, allowing enslavers to sell them in the market as part of a supposed divine order. This 'divine order' was a theological concept that justified the enslavement and displacement of individuals as part of God's plan.

This belief was both heretical and blasphemous.⁵ However, the enslavement itself was not a new phenomenon on that day. What was new was the identification of Europeans as God's agents of salvific displacement, positioned providentially between the enslaved and their homeland, serving as both deliverers and teachers.

This pivot in European self-identity continues to have profound downstream effects on us. There is much to unpack. I will turn to those effects on the American soul in my next letter.

Nevertheless, there are more significant damages done. The mutation that Jennings wants us to see happens to both the enslaver and the enslaved in the repetitive performance of enslavement. The mutation is displacement, and the displacement is multi-dimensional.

First, the Church unfaithfully displaces rather than joins the vocation of Israel. Israel's vocation is to live in such a way that it invites the world to live in holy

⁵ Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. Yale University Press, 2010, 22.

friendship with God and each other. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob delivers Israel from bondage, shaping a people for this reconciling vocation. The God Christians name as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit grafts Jesus-followers into Israel through their participation in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Instead, in his justification of the enslavement of Africans, the pope displaces Israel, substitutes the European Church in its place, and casts Jews, Muslims, and the rest of the world in the role of Gentiles whom God sends Europeans to save.

Second, the Church distorts and betrays the Gospel of Jesus. The kerygma is the good news of God's action to deliver humankind from bondage so that we may live in holy friendship with God and each other. Instead, the papal bull displaces the Gospel with a perverse parody in which God delivers non-Europeans by seizing them from their homelands and delivering them into captivity.

Third, the performance of enslavement displaces persons from their place-based identities and into new identities derived from a Eurocentric assessment of their distance from God. The assessment consists of two moves. The first move is self-referential, assessing other people's beauty, strength, and potential by comparing them to Europeans as the plumb line. The second move is to universalize that deduction. If the chocolate-skinned African is radically different from one's people and therefore aesthetically and mentally inferior, then the same must be true of those one meets when exploring the Indies whose skin the sun's heat similarly darkens. One can assess a person's identity and relation to God not based on their particularity but on their skin pigment, which, transcending geography, universally signals human value and potential.

We see the color-based hierarchy arising here, but that is not the displacement that is so damaging. Instead, the crucial displacement is the detachment from a particularity-grounded, character-based identity and the movement to a portable identity based on an impersonal, universal attribute over which one has no control. It is the beginning of the commodification process. However, this happens not merely to the enslaved but also the enslaver. Both are robbed of particularity, identity as persons connected to and shaped by particular geography, and shared communal relationships with the people and creatures

who share that space (Jennings, 2010, pp. 29-30). This loss of an identity grounded in enduring personal and communal relationships with all the created order is devastating for all; it is dehumanizing.

Fourth, humankind's relation to the land, symbolized theologically by the Promised Land, is forever distorted. The land is no longer a living and stable subject capable of shaping a people's identity; it is an object to be conquered and exploited. Human identity henceforth is no longer contained within a particular land but within a commodified body whose collective agency registers in a pigment and a language and whose value now varies unstably as a function of its utility.

Fifth, because human identity, through the repetitious practice of enslavement, is displaced into a function of an individual's utility, human personal and communal relationships mutate as well. God no longer gives a person's or group's identity, but a market exchange of utility does. As a result, relationships tend to be contractual rather than covenantal and, therefore, less stable.

Once upon a time, we believed the earth was the center of the cosmos. Once upon a time we believed the earth was flat. Once upon a time we believed diseases passed from us to others via magic. Once upon a time, we believed that the cosmos is fixed and that the Bible provides a comprehensive account of how humans came to exist.

These and countless more examples reflect the models we create to comprehend ourselves, our habitat, God, and the relationship between these things. We construct language that reflects the world we perceive, make the most of the models our language enables, and then discard both the language and the models upon discovering their mismatch with reality.

We live in a time when we must discard the once universally held concept "race." Our decoding of *homo sapiens*' genome confirms what many predicted: race is a flawed concept that misrepresents reality. Skin hues can help us predict reasonably well that persons carry a blend of *homo* genomes more or less well adapted to life near or distant from the equator. But there is no statistically significant difference that enables us to sort humans into clusters of genomes that correspond to our concept of race in the same way we can reliably sort humans into clusters based on biological

sex. Our concept, race, has no scientific basis.

We err whenever we sort humans based on the once universally held concept of race. We depart from reality when we use skin hues to assign individuals moral, cultural, and intellectual characteristics. Moreover, history shows we obtain tragic results when we use skin hues to assign societal value to groups.

In the 21st century, only the ignorant and foolish use race as a concept to comprehend and order our world. Like flat-earth proponents after Columbus' voyages, they disqualify themselves by insisting on false ideas.

Yet it's equally foolish to insist we need no language to sort people into groups. As noted, we reliably sort humans into clusters based on biological sex. Our concept, biological sex, arises from a scientific foundation. We do well to sort men and women into groups when thinking about how to help their different anatomies flourish. Similarly, we reliably and fruitfully sort humans into clusters based on measurable characteristics like height, weight, age, and place. Public policy goals often require sorting populations based on measurable snapshots like income, wealth, and education. Less objectively, we sometimes find it necessary to distinguish ourselves by pointing to ways communities we cherish are distinctive. We create language to sort people into groups because sometimes sorting provides our collaboration needed precision.

If we now recognize only the ignorant and foolish retain race as a sorting tool, what language can we use when we need to distinguish between groups larger than kinship groups that generate our consciousness of belonging based on shared history and ways of being?

We have words that differentiate groups but are poor substitutes for 'race.' Family and household, for example, refer to smaller scale communal identities that generate intimate bonds of affection. "Community" refers to relationships that may be intimate but in the 21st century also refers to non-voluntary, often anonymous relationships that may be bounded locally, nationally, or globally (i.e., an urban city population, "the LGBTQ community," "the Hispanic community," etc.). "Nation," "nationality," "people," "tribe," and "clan" are highly contested terms today, suffering from overly extended usage (the Kansas City "Chiefs nation"), frequent confusion with 'community' and 'nation-state' populations, conflicting assumptions concerning shared language, history, whether membership is voluntary, and the possibility of interregional boundaries (i.e., Germanic peoples live in Germany, Austria, France, and Hungary).

None of these synonyms sufficiently replace the linguistic function ‘race’ plays in differentiating groups.

These common synonyms no longer suffice because, increasingly, we no longer have singular, permanent place-based identities.

In the early 20th century, ‘race’ and ‘nation’ were synonyms that referred to a permanent place-based origin. We receive the English word “national” from the Latin word *natio*, which denotes one's birthplace or paternal home. By the Middle Ages, the word “national” referred to free males of high descent or rank in the political community who held responsibility for governance.⁶ Nation denoted a homeland, and “national” denoted one's membership in the subset of homeland residents empowered to govern. In the early 20th century United States, race or nation referred to one's ancestors' homeland. Both were permanent, singular attributes, with nation becoming potentially malleable for European immigrants assimilating with the evolving Anglo-Saxon culture.

In the 2020s, decades of mass immigration, high rates of intergroup marriage, and multigenerational citizenship in the United States give vast numbers of citizens plural, civic-based identities. For example, they may claim ancestral homelands in China and Ireland, India and Texas, or West Africa, Puerto Rico, and New York, while celebrating more than a century as citizens of the United States. They may hold citizenship rights simultaneously in India, Canada, and the United States, while carrying on daily the rich Atlanta and California heritages their grandparents bequeathed them. Today, many Americans flow fluidly between multiple cultural identities they treasure.

We need language enabling us to differentiate between groups in an era in which many of us embrace multiple cultural identities.

Recognizing race is a category with no scientific basis and that its continue use impedes achievement of America's promise, I intend to eliminate it from my thinking. After weighing available synonyms, I've settled on a new term. When it becomes necessary to sort people into groups in ways formerly served by the category of race, I will turn first to a familiar term that I will use with a more rigorous definition than I have before: *ethnic group*.

Popular usage of ethnic group lacks sufficient precision for the kind of work I need it to do. In my thinking, I use it as a technical concept that refers to “any substantial aggregation of persons who are perceived by themselves and/or others to share a unique set of cultural and historical commonalities.”⁷

⁶ (@benner2013nationalism, p. 38

⁷ @zelinsky2001enigma, Loc 618)

Like race, ethnic group is a social construct, a tool. As such, we should expect its meaning to evolve through its deployment as a better substitute for race. I rely on cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky's robust definition in my usage, which I explain below.⁸

An ethnic group, like a national community, is imagined. We can never gather or know all its members. Unlike a family or household, the group is too large to expect members to know each other intimately.

Group members themselves and/or third parties perceive that members share distinctive cultural practices and a real or imagined history. That history includes recollection of "friction with other groups that adjoin it in physical or social space" that generates the group's identity. Over time, group size can vary.

An ethnic group can be a small minority, a majority, constitute a homogeneous national community, or transcend a nation-state's territorial boundaries. It may or may not share memories of a cherished land.

Since ethnic groups are imagined and not real communities, membership is fluid over time. individuals may themselves accept or reject membership or it may be assigned by political authorities. Ethnic group membership is not an indelible identity. Like a legal corporation, it's a convenient fiction we use to imagine collaborative activity and comprehend power dynamics within the *polis*.

Three important points arise from this technical usage of the term, ethnic group.

First, as with our government census forms in recent decades, ethnic group identification is voluntary and subjective. Unlike widespread racialized approaches that determined one's racial category based on the fraction one possesses of a race's "blood," one associates with an ethnic group through participation in his distinctive cultural practices and shared history.

Second, ethnic groups may at different times and in different places enjoy minority or majority status within a population. An ethnic group with majority status and cultural or political hegemony remains an ethnic group to the extent it meets the criteria described above.

Third, individuals potentially (and usually) have a one-to-many relationship with ethnic groups. For example, imagine a child reared in Texas whose mother descends from Malayali parents who immigrated to the United States from the Indian state called Kerala, and whose father descends from Irish and German immigrants. Depending on circumstances, that child could conceivably become an adult whose cultural practices and shared histories enable them to move fluidly between memberships in Texan,

⁸ @zelinsky2001enigma, Loc 618

Malayili, Indo-American, Irish-American, and German-American ethnic groups. Similarly, imagine a United States citizen reared in New York City whose Spanish-speaking mother descends from Peruvian Chinese and German parents, and whose father descends from New York Puerto-Rican and Cuban immigrants. Again, contingent on circumstances, she could fluidly move between the distinctive Peruvian-Chinese, German-American, New Yorker, and New Yorkican (New York Puerto Rican) ethnic groups, while also claiming membership in the larger Chinese-American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American ethnic groups. Participation in distinctive cultural practices and shared histories, not skin hues or place of origin, determine ethnic group membership, and many 21st century Americans move easily between multiple cultural heritages.

In the 2020s, the United States Census Bureau retains race as an official category for organizing data about American residents, but clarifies that it uses race as a “social” category without biological, anthropological, or genetic significance. As a social category, the Census Bureau race categories “include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups” and individuals may select multiple categories to describe themselves. The 2020 census named five racial categories as well as an “other” bucket: (1) White, (2) Black or African American, (3) American Indian or Alaska Native, (4) Asian, and (5) Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

In addition to these racial categories, the 2020 census invited Americans to sort ourselves into one of two places of origin, which the Bureau calls “ethnicities.” Per our federal government, our relevant origins are either “Hispanic or Latino” or we are “Not Hispanic or Latino.” By Census Bureau definition, our Hispanic population consists of those who self-classify their places of origin as Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or “another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.”

Like ethnic groups, the Census Bureau’s racial and “Hispanic origin” categories are social constructs. They are imagined, not real. Congress, assuming they provide utility, mandates their use in data collection about American residents. In 2020, the official government racial and Hispanic origin categories are social constructs of dubious value.

Cultural geographers refer to mandated racial and origin buckets - White, Black, African American, American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, and Pacific Islander - as *panethnicities*. We construct panethnicities by inventing and assigning a broad classification to many ethnic groups based on the assumption they share cultural or historical kinship. At the highest level, panethnicities do the work the we’ve historically

done with the flawed social construct, race. Indeed, in the case of the Census Bureau's categories, it's hard to see how their panethnic categories are not merely dressed up versions of the old racial categories.

The Census Bureau's 2020 race categories reflected America's Jim Crow legacy while seeking to move past it. Skin hues are out. "Origins in any of the original peoples" of a major land mass is in. The Census Bureau retains unhelpful racial terms like White and Black that evoke skin hues but redefines them in terms of ancient ancestral homelands.

What made one White in 2020 per the Census Bureau? "Having origins in the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa." Those carrying forward Jim Crow era definitions would find this panethnicity surprising since not just the original NATO allies, but all Europeans - including more olive-complected people from Southern Europe and Slavic peoples - count as White. What's more surprising given America's historic racial hierarchies is that the White bucket includes descendants of original non-Arab peoples from the Middle East - Iran, Israel, and Turkey. White Supremacist groups will be surprised to discover that the 2020 census counted descendants of Arab and transnational peoples (i.e., Palestinians, Chaldeans, and Kurds) as White. It also counted North Africans as White - those descending from the original peoples of Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Western Sahara.⁹

The Biden administration announced in 2024 that the next census will add two new race categories to reflect research on how respondents perceive their origins.¹⁰

The White category will be split into two, creating a new Middle East and North African category. That move reflects the fact that many descended from those regions don't perceive themselves as White. The White category will only include those descending from original European peoples.

In addition, the next census will drop the separate "Hispanic ethnicity" question and add "Hispanic or Latino" as a seventh panethnicity, changing the label on government forms from "race" to "race and/or ethnicity" with instructions to check "all that apply."

⁹ @samhanmiddle

¹⁰ (@wangnext)

Race is a false category (SubStack letters)

Peoples, Peoplehood Stories, and Folkways

Both nation and nationalism have long been essentially contested terms (Gallie). In what follows, I'll follow the counsel of Rogers Smith and Oliver O'Donovan in using people rather than nation to denote our largest sustainable communal relationship through which we act inclusively, corporately, and cooperatively (@smith2015PoliticalPeoplehoodRoles, loc 710; @odonovan2022response, pp. 661-2). Similarly, I will mostly use peoplehood to denote political identity in that community, understanding it to be a preferred synonym for nationality. The purpose of these decisions is to clarify that these are human social entities distinct from the political structures that govern them. A people has at least a single and often multiple competing narratives that answer critical questions concerning who counts as a people, who gets to rule, to what ends, and how the people relate to individuals and other peoples. I will interchangeably use peoplehood narrative or nationalist narrative to denote these identity-shaping stories. I use stories, accounts, and narratives as synonyms.

The most important term used here is nationalism. That's the concept I claim the Church must contest if we are to retain our capacity to speak intelligibly in defense of bare life. Unfortunately, social scientists in recent decades, and especially recent works on Christian nationalism by Phillip Gorski, Andrew Whitehead, Samuel Perry, and Paul Miller (@whitehead2020TakingAmericaBack, @gorski2022FlagCrossWhite, @miller2022ReligionAmericanGreatness), presuppose a narrow and negative definition of the term. For them, nationalism inherently includes an illiberal claim that a significant purpose of government is to preserve a particular community's cultural identity at the expense of other communities who share that government. For some political scientists like Stephen Wolfe (@wolfe2022case), that illiberal move is a good thing; for others, it's an attack on liberal democracy. As I will develop below, that definition is unhelpfully narrow and serves contemporary political agendas well but fails to capture the personal and historical aspects by which such narratives have been blessings. In addition, it obscures how white supremacy and colonialist perspectives remain embedded in our peoplehood narratives.

My account argues that nationalism is rightly understood as both an individual

consciousness and a communal narrative. As individual consciousness, it manifests the qualities of love that drive us to seek those things that move us from bare life to autarchy - i.e., food, water, shelter, security, companionship, learning, the sense of belongingness to enduring communities, as well the possibilities of cooperative creation of the beautiful, true, and just. At the personal relationship level, nationalism names the love that drives us to unite with and creates our participation in that love's object, our people. As a communal narrative, nationalism describes and prescribes the relationships between an individual, a people, and their and other people's political institutions. We distinguish nationalist narratives by their contextualized answers to the questions of who counts as the people, who gets to govern, to what ends, and how the people see themselves in relation to other peoples.

My basic argument is that the problem with American White Christian Nationalism is not nationalism per se but disordered love. Therefore, bishops and priests should name rightly-ordered nationalisms as blessings and equip the faithful in our shared task of out-narrating the disordered narratives that compete in the 21st-century public square. To that task of equipping the saints, I now turn.

White ethnic group anxiety concerning the dilution of their ethnotradition within the American identity drives the MAGA movement.

The term 'ethnotradition' combines "ethno," which refers to a particular ethnic group, and "tradition," which refers to the commonly accepted instructions for living well passed down through generations. Essentially, an ethnotradition represents the set of cherished instructions that a particular ethnic group has received as given. Even if you have not seen *Fiddler on the Roof*, you can still understand the meaning of this term.

It refers to an ethnic group's tradition, consisting of shared practices that form the context within which all reasoning and innovation occur. Arguments about how human communities can thrive continuously shape this context.

Ethnotraditions, far from mere relics of the past, serve as guiding maps that steer us towards a good life. They are about communal well-being, enabling our success, and providing direction and purpose.

It's essential to understand that the 'tradition' I am referring to here differs from the dogma churches often present as God's law. Representing church dogma as divine revelation is a category error. Dogma belongs to the category of human thought. It is always vulnerable to the same error probability as other human laws.

We must also differentiate between tradition and ideologies that those around us may accept to the point that we consider them to be given facts and expect others to do the same. Ideologies are frameworks of ideas used by small, highly educated, and engaged segments of populations. For these groups, ideologies may seem like unchanging principles and function like religious beliefs. However, just like religious doctrines, ideologies are a product of human thought—not a divine revelation—and are therefore prone to errors.

[Dialectical provenance]

[Why folkways persist long after assimilating migrants]

The MAGA movement aims to unite people around one of America's four dominant Anglo ethnotraditions, white Christian Nationalism. This ethnotradition, characterized by its unique religious beliefs and ideology, defines for White Christian Nationalists what it means to be an American.

Ethnotradition denotes a people's general and perpetual wisdom that passes from generation to generation. It's what ancestors have discerned about how to sustain the good life. They don't relay it in a user manual. Instead, it's preserved and conveyed through what cultural geographers call "folkways." Folkways are a people's distinctive shared practices. They include human laws, customs, and practices that generate and convey a people's identity. [EXPAND THIS]

Understanding the factors that influence American politics is crucial. Two of the most critical factors are ethnic group participation and an ethnic group's culture. Although these factors are related, they are not the same. An ethnic group's population can decrease while the influence of its ethno-tradition remains strong. This phenomenon was evident during the era of white American hegemony when the conflicting cultures of North America's Anglo-settler groups drove political tensions even as their shares of the national population decreased. As white anxiety, in response to immigration, rises, it is essential to note that the decrease in the white ethnic population share does not necessarily mean a decline in the white ethno-tradition in American identity. We must recognize and understand these factors to build a stable, inclusive society.

Ethnotraditions evolve because we rely primarily on received wisdom in our active effort to flourish.

I use 'ethnotradition' to refer to a group's established norms.

I use 'received wisdom' to refer to the knowledge and insights we inherit. Received wisdom guides our understanding of the world and the best ways to flourish.

Those who precede us pass on the best maps for the best path forward.

Committed to logic, they map the signposts that lead to the good they experienced. We seek the good using inherited maps.

Humans shape and transmit wisdom through ongoing discourse. We seek truth, teach what we learn, and authorize norms using reasoned debate. Reasoned debate empowers individuals, shapes our understanding, and adapts our wisdom.

Via public discourse, we establish norms that bind all in a community.

Too often we err or discover our received wisdom no longer fits our context. Prudence often requires correcting course. Challenging received wisdom, we adapt norms to fit the terrain we encounter. This self-critical discourse is how we discover the best pathways to the good.

We don't debate solo. We debate contemporaries and ancestors. We test all wisdom, refining knowledge. No ethnic group flourishes without calibrating inherited wisdom.

We cannot escape the need to calibrate wisdom by applying "universal" principles, disregarding the facts that determine whether and how we may use such principles. We only navigate the present terrain.

Yet, because most of the terrain we traverse is well traveled by ancestors, our inherited maps are a treasure. They simplify life. We are right to expect goodness where our ethnotradition suggests we may find it.

Ultimately, today's battles concern whose folkways will generate tomorrow's American identity.

'Folkways', a term used by cultural geographers, encapsulate a culture's unique ways of life: the customs, values, and insights that set a group apart and define its identity.

Folkways are the practices that carry the freight for ethnotraditions. They make ethnotraditions visible, and they transport them across time and space.

Folkways make ethnotraditions visible when they contrast with the practices of other groups. For example, differences in female dress habits often distinguish Indo-Americans from Chinese-Americans and European-Americans. Jambalaya, crawfish pie, and gumbo distinguish Cajuns from their neighbors. My Louisiana speech patterns reveal that I am not from the Yankee culture. Distinctive religious and social practices distinguish Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Hindi from other citizens. Folkways make ethnic communities visible.

Like cultural messengers, folkways transcend time and space. They are handed down from one generation to the next, ensuring their survival. Immigrants also play a crucial role, bringing their own folkways and enriching the cultural fabric of their new homes. As practices, folkways serve as a conduit, passing on ethnotraditions to new generations and lands.

Cultural geographers identify a culture's presence by examining dress, food, speech, religious practices, music, dance, art, sports, literature, and built landscapes. They also analyze group social practices.

Social practices that structure daily life, including family, marriage, gender, sex, child-naming, child-rearing, aging, death, education, time, work, wealth, rank, order, governance, and freedom practices, are less visible but essential in sustaining cultural norms. They encapsulate and transmit a group's ethnotradition. Social practices also generate group identity by enabling individuals to locate themselves within the group's history, whether real or imagined.

In 21st-century North America, it's become commonplace to speak of panethnicities. A panethnicity assigns persons to global ethnic groups based on broadly shared characteristics like language and skin hue. Spanish speakers are categorized as Hispanic, irrespective of stark differences between originating cultures in Spain, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Dark-skinned persons are classified as Black despite vast socioeconomic differences between those sharing the mark of America's enslavement and Jim Crow history and the 30% who have no such legacy. Perhaps most misleadingly, light-skinned persons are aggregated in the panethnicity called White despite centuries of sustained conflict between at least four dominant British-origin ethnic groups. Panethnicities confuse more than they illuminate.

Attention to folkways illuminates the differences that divide us. For three centuries, Anglo settlers with mutually exclusive social practices competed for American hegemony. When we attend to those social practices—especially wealth, rank, order, governance, and freedom practices—we see that those who reduce our current divisions to the rise of White Christian Nationalism are mistaken. The causes are more profound.

Today's battles concern irreconcilable wealth, rank, order, governance, and freedom

practices long cherished by four of America's original settler groups. At stake is which social practices will generate tomorrow's American identity.

Hooker's complaint about the 'speedy discourse' of Ramist method points directly to the most fundamental philosophical difference. In the Hookerian account, binaries and epitomes can not sufficiently describe reality in all its complexity. Reality defies description through reduction. One reason for the complexity of the world is the ongoing creativity that reflects creation's participation in the rationality of God. Hooker appropriates the Aristotelian concepts of phenomenon, endoxon, and dialectic in order to describe human experience of and engagement with this creativity. Humans encounter phenomena, dialectically gather endoxa that describe these phenomena, and then create structures and concepts in response to phenomena that then themselves become phenomena for all who follow. Reality is not fixed, but open.

We saw that Ramist realism evinces a philosophical optimism about human access to reality, but that optimism is circumscribed by the qualification that such access is exclusively in the form of axiomatic principles discovered in scripture. The current account is optimistic as well, but in a different way. Reality is directly known, but always phenomenally. The phenomena we experience reliably refer to the reality of the objects we encounter, though we are vulnerable to probabilistic error in our apprehension of them. Our descriptions of reality occupy two descriptive domains - the spaces of causes and reasons. In the interpretative stance of causes, we reason inductively by identifying efficient causes. This scientific knowing is least resistant to reductive summarization and categorization schemes. Yet this is not our only manner of knowing. We also experience things and ideas as final causes; they manifest themselves to us rationally through their addressing us and through our responses to them - through our shared history. We know them personally in their particularity. We are justified in our claims about their dispositions. When we make such claims, we do so within the descriptive domain of the logical space of reasons. Such personal knowing defies schematic reduction. It cannot be exhausted in binaries and epitomes.

A second, related philosophical difference follows from this. The Hookerian account of this study privileges phenomena, endoxa, and dialectic as the primary methods of inquiry into the nature of reality. These methods are themselves phenomena - concepts known within the logical space of reasons. The privileging of these tools, however, entails assumptions about the nature of reality and human participation in it. This is best seen in contrast. To argue for them as methods of ethical discernment over and against the method of mining axioms objectively discovered in scripture is to presuppose

something about reality and human knowledge of it. At minimum, such privileging assumes that dialectical discourse more fruitfully assists us in knowing the good.

The dialectic common in Hooker's era was derivative of the medieval scholastic practice based on Aristotelian dialectics. In my Hookerian account, I do not denote merely that particular form, but rather the broader category of dialectical deduction appropriate "for training, for conversational exchange, and for sciences of a philosophical sort."¹¹ We have already seen that conversational exchange with moral exemplars is particularly important in the formation of mimetic virtue. Dialectical discourse generally involves premises to be tested and relevant endoxa. One of the potential results of such testing may simply be the negation of the premise. In that instance, it simply resolves binaries in a fashion similar to Ramist method. Yet the premise might instead be affirmed, elevated partially into a new premise, or transformed through correction. The key move here is to notice the orientation towards a "*mediating synthesis*":

Dialectic is a tool whose chief use is to resolve and reconcile binaries, not through a *median* synthesis (something like splitting the difference and avoiding extremes), but through a *mediating* synthesis (sublation as elevation, transformation, abolition, and preservation all at once) It is overcoming contradictions and resolving tensions by inheriting the strengths of predecessor/competitor theories and practices while overcoming their weaknesses.¹²

This orientation towards synthesis in our primary method of ethical discernment signals a worldview quite distinct from that reflected in intellectual inquiry grounded by self-authenticating axioms. It implies a communal quest for knowledge of the good in which address and response are expected, and in which our conclusions are at best probabilistic. More importantly, however, it sees this communal quest itself as creative and open. Through dialectic, humans overcome contradictions and resolve tensions, creating a mediating synthesis that not only describes the good, but (potentially) manifests the good.

A profound implication for ethics thus arises from the doctrine of justification. Precisely because Christ's Spirit meets us personally, reconciling us in our particularity, Christ's "creative act repeats itself in the justifying word that declares new life to dead sinners."¹³ Creation is always new creation. Therefore, "we cannot isolate an old creation, or "nature," from which to draw general theological or ethical concepts." There are no universal rules, no original created human nature to which we can point in order

¹¹ Aristotle. *Top.* 101a26-b4.

¹² Woodard-Lehman, Derek. "Dialectic in Hegel and Barth." (email). Aug 02, 2013. Emphasis original.

¹³ Congden. 50.

to ground our ethics, no axioms governing matters of action that we can mine in order to secure our covenantal position with God. There is only Christ himself, “the concrete universal, the contingent event that is universally significant in that it includes all other people and events within its singular reality.”¹⁴

Ramist-like methods of definition and division, therefore, are properly rejected as methods of theological and ethical inquiry. This rejection is not merely on pragmatic grounds, but because their deployment represents theological puzzlement: a failure to recognize that theological inquiry is an ontological problem, not merely an epistemological one. Our descriptions of reality must be dialectical because our knowledge of God is determined by God's continuing act of election which itself constitutes the cosmos. Reality is neither fixed materially nor static, but dynamic, and there are no universal rules to be mined or upon which to ground our ethics, precisely because of Christ's justifying acts of re-creation.

Recognition of the dynamic nature of reality enables us to complete the metaphor preliminarily sketched in the introduction of this study. There I described Hooker's view of human life using the metaphor of a journey to the summit of the highest mountain, where union with Christ at the summit is our destiny. Ethics have to do with how to move toward the summit safely from wherever we find ourselves on the mountain. They have to do with our next steps toward the summit. I anticipated there the conclusion that is now in full view. The right path to the summit is inherently local, contingently known, and particular to our coordinates at our moment in time. Now we understand that this is due to an ontological problem: our path to the summit can not be universally known in advance precisely because of Christ's justifying acts of re-creation.

I asked then, “how do we find our way to the summit given the fog through which we see only dimly?” In particular, given the fog and the great distance, how do we hear and recognize Christ's voice? How do we rightly navigate? We can now answer that navigation is possible because Christ is really present to us in our practices. Christ creates a personal relationship with us through the Spirit and addresses us in our particularity. Through mimesis, Christ shapes us along our journey, equipping us and guiding us out of the brambles into which we wander, away from precipices, and through our periods of wilderness wandering. We find our way to the summit that is our destiny by improvising in response to Christ's voice which addresses us, justifying and re-creating us in each encounter by steps and degrees.

The statement that there are no universal rules upon which to ground our ethics ought not be understood to be an assertion that there is nothing we can say in advance

¹⁴ Congden, David. "The Presence and Presentation of Philosophy in Barth's Theology." Message to Craig Uffman. 09 Aug 2013. E-mail.

about right actions. To the contrary, there is much indeed that can be said. The first thing is simply to invoke all that has been said regarding the role of one's community in shaping its members. The community's *endoxa*, communicated didactically and through mimesis, provide the images of the world as we assume it to be. Hauerwas and Wells call them convictions. They "become assumptions, habits, and even reflexes through years of practiced use. It is these skills, rather than moments of rational decision, that will frame Christian life."¹⁵

Endoxa can not determine in advance what our right actions must be but they do shape how we perceive the phenomena we encounter. Moreover, community norms draw attention to actions most likely to constitute a prudential response. The Christian agent is not left to invent the good from scratch. As Wells notes, "Improvisation is not about being clever or original, but about being so trained in one's tradition that one trusts that the obvious is the appropriate."¹⁶ There are no universal rules but there are contingent, provisionally-known, and providentially-given signs and tokens by which the community has marked the coordinates of the good. Just as the apprentice plumber is not sent without thermodynamic principles and mimetic experience to guide him, so, too, the apprentice Christian is not sent without *endoxa* and mimetic experience to guide her.

We turn, at last, from Hooker's theoanthropological account to his application of that account to the ethical task of creating laws governing political societies. Especially helpful here is Hooker's description of how are made laws grounded in Christ the Eternal Law. The key move here is to notice the thoroughly Aristotelian framework underlying Hooker's description of how we deduce good laws as a consequence of our gravitation to the signs and tokens of goodness. This section consists of three parts. In the first part, I will develop a thick account of signs and tokens by recalling the Aristotelian concept of *endoxa*. In the second part, I will show how Hooker views our discernment of the good - and thus the discernment of the natural law - as an essentially dialectical process. In the final part, I will show how the preceding two conceptions lead to an understanding of law-making as an essentially phronetic practice. On the basis of this demonstration, we are able to render, in a thicker way, why the forms in which we encounter Christ historically and actually are always contingent and provisionally-known. Moreover, we will be prepared to understand more robustly the focus of the next chapter - the contingent and provisional nature of the practices that

¹⁵ Wells. "How the Church Performs Jesus' Story: Improvising on the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas." 215.

¹⁶ Wells. 230.

form the mind of Christ in the supernatural society of souls that is the Church.

When Hooker suggests that “the general and perpetual voice of men is as the sentence of God himself,”¹⁷ and when he speaks of that which nature teaches,¹⁸ he speaks as one long-immersed in the Aristotelian tradition during his tenure at Corpus Christi college. That is to say, when Hooker refers to ‘the voice of men’ and more generally in terms of that which reason discerns in nature, his meaning in such references seems nuanced, an allusion to *endoxa*, the Aristotelian method paired with Aristotle’s method of *phainomena*. Aristotle taught that “*Endoxa* are those opinions accepted by everyone, or by the majority, or by the wise—and among the wise, by all or most of them, or by those who are the most notable and having the highest reputation.”¹⁹ Consideration of *endoxa* is not merely respect for those who go before us, but a reliable process of puzzle-solving by which we resolve mysteries arising from our study of phenomena by gathering and testing ‘the most important’ ‘credible opinions,’ setting aside those which fail testing, moving forward by critical examination of the ways in which our most authoritative predecessors framed those puzzles.²⁰

“The general and perpetual voice of men” echoes Aristotle’s *endoxa* and thereby evokes Aristotle’s meaning within Hooker’s discourse. Aristotle’s twin methods of *phainomena* and *endoxa* constitute the two most basic ways by which philosophy discovers truth:

As in other cases, we must set out the appearances (*phainomena*) and run through all the puzzles regarding them. In this way we must prove the credible opinions (*endoxa*) about these sorts of experiences—ideally, all the credible opinions, but if not all, then most of them, those which are the most important. For if the objections are answered and the credible opinions remain, we shall have an adequate proof.²¹

This background illuminates Hooker’s complaint about the philosophical method of his interlocutors. First, there is a domain within which only Scripture expresses the eternal law in a manner comprehensible to fallen humanity, and that domain is the supernatural path to eternal beatitude that is the incarnate Christ. Yet many of the questions that arise in communal life belong to a second domain in which the eternal law is expressed both by divine law (scripture) and the natural law of reason. Within this latter domain, in which the eternal law is revealed to humans through scripture, “the

¹⁷ *Laws*.1.8.3

¹⁸ See, for example, *Laws*.1.14.5 “

¹⁹ Aristotle. *Top.* i 1, 100b21–23 in Shields.10.

²⁰ Shields.13.

²¹ Aristotle. *EN* vii 1, 1145b2–7.in Shields.11.

glorious works of nature,” personal experience of the Spirit’s direction, and through the fruits of “worldly experience and practice,” the proper philosophical method by which the good is discovered begins with the particularities of the puzzle the community confronts. The community then gathers and tests the *endoxa* which seem to be applicable, and thereby reaches conclusions which may or may not validate the received wisdom. Hooker’s complaint was that, within this second domain, his opponents failed to recognize the authority of these non-scriptural sources of authority, and, when applying scriptural guidance, failed to assess adequately whether and how general principles from scripture were applicable to the particularities of the presenting ethical questions.

Endoxa, not ‘tradition’

It is important to pause at this point to take note of a common fallacy in popular depictions of Hooker’s legacy. It is now a commonplace to attribute to Hooker a doctrine in which ‘tradition’ is placed alongside scripture and reason as part of a three-fold set of authorities that legitimately guides Christian thought. That depiction is problematic for a number of reasons, but for our present purpose it is important to clarify that Hooker infrequently referred to ‘tradition,’ and when he did, he almost always used the term in a highly negative sense.²² In what follows, I distinguish between *endoxa* (or ‘voice of men,’ as Hooker referred to it) and ‘tradition’ in the sense of Roman Catholic sacred tradition having an authority like that of scripture.

Tradition,’ for Hooker, usually referred to Roman Catholic declarations pertaining to things necessary to salvation, the authority of which was forcefully rejected by the Reformers. Hooker rejected the addition of Roman ‘traditions as a part of supernatural necessary truth,’ noting that ‘we do not reject them only because they are not in the Scripture but because they are neither in scripture nor can otherwise sufficiently by any reason be proved to be of God.’²³

As we have seen, Hooker’s doctrine of *duplex cognitio Dei* traces the genealogy of both human positive law and scripture to the eternal law in order to demonstrate that both manifest God’s law. In Hooker’s schema, scripture is the sole element in the category of ‘divine law,’ whereas various forms of law constitute the category of natural law. The importance of this schema is not solely in the distinction it protects between the natural and supernatural paths to eternal blessedness, nor in the clarity it provides about which sources of authorities govern in each domain. The schema also illuminates differences in the reliability we reasonably assign to those authorities. Elements in the

²² Neelands, W. David. 1997. Scripture, Reason, and “Tradition”. In *Richard Hooker and the Construction of Christian Community (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies)*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade, Binghamton: MRTS. 93.

²³ *Laws*.1.14.5

category of divine law are reasonably assumed to be of the highest reliability because they, by definition, consist of direct revelation of God within history. The principles thereby revealed carry the authoritative rank of necessity. In contrast, elements in the category of natural law are derivative, consisting of socially mediated and historically experienced principles, and thus, though they have their origins in the eternal law, are subject to the compounded probabilistic errors of human receipt and transmission. The principles thereby revealed cannot be said to be necessary because they are only provisionally known. That which is of the category of divine law is divine; that which is of human law, is not.

Rome's error was categorical. Roman 'tradition' was not divine law, but human law. Rejection of Roman tradition properly was not a matter of naming all things Roman as false, but rather of naming as idolatrous the claim that Roman tradition is sacred alongside scripture. That is,

whether we do now stand bound in the sight of God to yield to traditions urged by the Church of Rome the same obedience and reverence we do to his written law, honoring equally and adoring both as divine; our answer is no. They that so earnestly plead for the authority of Tradition, as if nothing were more safely conveyed than that which spreadeth it self by report, and descendeth by relation of former generations unto the ages that succeed, are not all of them (surely a miracle it were if they should be) so simple, as thus to persuade themselves; however if the simple were so persuaded, they could be content perhaps very well to enjoy the benefit, as they account it, of that common error. What hazard the truth is in when it passeth through the hands of report, how maimed and deformed it becometh; they are not, they cannot possibly be ignorant.²⁴

In contrast, Hooker held a high view of the authority of 'the voice of men.' As I have suggested above, however, the trajectory of credible opinions in resolving a question is not a source of authority separate from and alternative to reason, but rather is *itself* a phenomenon presented to and examined by reason. Consideration of what I have characterized as *endoxa* is not consideration of some authority severable from reason, but rather is integral to proper philosophical reasoning. In each considered question, the voice of men properly is heard, examined critically, and either affirmed, rejected, or amended. Hooker does not, in a positive sense, posit a three-fold set of authorities by which we discern our way to the good, but rather sets nature and scripture alongside each other as sources of all knowledge necessary to salvation:

It sufficeth therefore that nature and scripture do serve in such full sort that they both jointly and not severally either of them be so complete that unto everlasting felicity we need not the knowledge of any thing more than these two may easily furnish our minds with on all sides, and therefore they which add traditions as a part of supernatural necessary truth have not the truth

²⁴ *Laws*.1.13.2

but are in error.²⁵

An illustrative example

As an exception to his consistent use of ‘tradition’ to describe ecclesiastical laws assigned ‘sacred’ authority by Rome, Hooker explicitly defines ‘tradition’ in the sense I have used for ‘the voice of men’ when defending liturgical practices challenged by his opponents. Defending the use of the cross liturgically during baptism, he refers first to a credible authority, Tertullian:

For, saith Tertullian, ‘If of this and the like customs thou shouldest require some commandment to be showed thee out of scriptures, there is none found.’ What reason there is to justify tradition use or custom in this behalf, ‘either thou must of thyself perceive or else learn of some other that doth.’ Least therefore the name of tradition should be offensive to any, considering how far by some it hath been and is abused, we mean by tradition’s ordinances made in the prime of Christian religion, established with that authority which Christ hath left to his Church for *matters indifferent*, and in that consideration requisite to be observed till like authority see just and reasonable cause to alter them.²⁶

The key distinction is that in the form of tradition Hooker rejects, the subject is law given the status of ‘necessary to salvation.’ In that case, tradition is set on a plane with scripture. In his own narrow usage, however, tradition has a meaning consistent with what I’ve described above as *endoxa*. Hooker gives an account of the use of the cross during baptism by citing the *endoxon* from Tertullian. He concludes that the subject matter in question pertains not to things necessary to salvation, but rather to ‘matters indifferent,’ and therefore belongs in the domain governed by human law rather than divine. His conclusion is that it is right and proper for the church to carry on with the practice of using the cross during baptism based on the received precedent until such time as cause is shown to change the precedent. Moreover, the judgments rendered about that subject matter are understood to be provisional, and therefore mutable.

This illustration is characteristic of Hooker’s method of appealing to the powerful signs and tokens of universal consent - the voice of the church - when discerning the good. As with Aristotle, such *endoxa*, for Hooker are, themselves phenomena to be gathered and examined; they mediate within history principles about where the good may be found, yet even simple ones know “what hazard the truth is in when it passeth through the hands of report, how maimed and deformed it becometh.”²⁷ We can neither credit *endoxa* with divine status nor insist that scripture alone governs in the domain of the natural law:

²⁵ *Laws*.1.14.5.

²⁶ *Laws*.5.65.2 Emphasis added.

²⁷ *Laws*.1.13.2

Neither may we in this case lightly esteem what hath been allowed as fit in the judgment of antiquity and by the long continued practice of the whole Church from which unnecessarily to swerve experience hath never as yet found it safe.²⁸

With this reasoning Hooker defends manifold practices of the Church challenged by his presbyterian opponents. Defending the appointed liturgical calendar, Hooker concludes that feast days arise from the law of nature:

If it then be demanded whether we observe these times as being thereunto bound by force of law, or else by the only positive ordinances of the Church, I answer to this that the very law of nature itself which all men confess to be God's law requireth in general no less the sanctification of times than of places, persons, and things unto God's honor. For which cause it hath pleased him heretofore as of the rest so of time likewise to exact some parts by way of perpetual homage never to be dispensed with all nor remitted, again to require some other parts of time with as strict exaction but for less continuance, and of the rest which were left arbitrary to accept what the Church shall in due consideration consecrate voluntarily unto like religion uses.²⁹

Similarly, Hooker asserts that fasts arise from the law of nature:

We are therefore the rather to make it manifest in all men's eyes that set times of fasting appointed in spiritual considerations to be kept by all sorts of men took not their beginnings either from Montanus or any other whose heresies may prejudice the credit and due estimation thereof, but have their ground in the law of nature, are allowable in God's sight, were in all ages heretofore, and may till the world's end be observed not without singular use and benefit.³⁰

In like manner, Hooker concludes that the law of God and nature require tithes and offerings. Speaking "of oblations, foundations, endowments, and tithes, all intended for the perpetuity of religion," Hooker once again grounds his claims in the law of reason:

So that this we may boldly set down as a principle clear in nature, an axiom which ought not to be called in question, a truth manifest and infallible, that men are eternally bound to honor God with their substance in token of thankful acknowledgement that all they have is from him. To honor him with our worldly goods, not only spending them in lawful manner, and by using them without offense, but also by alienating from ourselves some reasonable part or portion thereof and by offering up the same to him as a sign that we gladly confess his sole and sovereign dominion over all, is a duty which all men are bound unto and a part of that very worship of God which as the law of God and nature itself requireth so we are the rather to think all men no less strictly bound thereunto than to any other natural duty....³¹

²⁸ *Laws*.5.7.1

²⁹ *Laws*.5.70.9

³⁰ *Laws*.5.72.1

³¹ *Laws*.5.79.1

Given his commitment to the Aristotelian philosophical method of philosophical inquiry, Hooker strongly affirmed the authority of learned men, but he also insisted that reason was the property of all men and therefore that reason should triumph no matter the station of the one advancing its cause:

For if the natural strength of man's wit may by experience and study attain unto such ripeness in the knowledge of things human, that men in this respect may presume to build somewhat upon their judgment, what reason have we to think but that even in matters divine the like wits, furnished with necessary helps, exercised in scripture with like diligence, and assisted with the grace of Almighty God, may grow unto so much perfection of knowledge, that men shall have just cause, when any thing pertinent unto faith and religion is doubted of, the more willingly to incline their minds towards that which the sentence of so grave, wise, and learned in that faculty shall judge most sound.³²

If nature's voice is "God's instrument," and "the general and perpetual voice of men is as the sentence of God himself," then God reveals Godself through both nature and the transmission of received wisdom from generation to generation. This is a natural theology, an optimistic view of the revelatory role of nature, but one that simultaneously is aware of the problems inherent in the methods of receipt and transmission. Hooker's observation that "the voice of men" is the "perfectest and strongest" "sign and token," is descriptive and not prescriptive. He is fully aware of the probabilistic nature of all signs and tokens. As we saw in the previous section, his phenomenological point is that the most important way that humans discern the good is through study of received wisdom about the good. The task of this section is to show that Hooker understood the process of creation of such wisdom as dialectical.

Hooker exhibits a strong commitment to his claim that 'the voice of men' is our most potent sign of goodness. This commitment finds a twin in his commitment to the premise that the voice of men arises from *discourse* regarding the lessons that nature teaches. For Hooker, discourse is the primary means by which nature tutors. Whatever principle we choose as our subject, "it was at the very first found out by *discourse*, and drawn from out of the very bowels of heaven and earth."³³ "The law of reason or human nature is that which men by *discourse* of natural reasons have rightly found out themselves to be all for ever bound unto in their actions."³⁴ Good laws are those "draw[n] from the laws of nature and God, by *discourse* of reason, aided with the influence of divine grace."³⁵ Whereas, the "mysteries of heavenly truth" are taught readily in Scripture, "... all kinds

³² *Laws*.2.7.4

³³ *Laws*.1.8.5 Emphasis added.

³⁴ *Laws*.1.8.8 Emphasis added.

³⁵ *Laws*.3.8.18. Emphasis added.

of knowledge else have that virtue in themselves whereby they are able to procure our assent unto such conclusions as the industry of right *discourse* doth gather from them.”³⁶ That most reliable token of goodness, most commonly referred to by Hooker to as ‘the voice of men,’ is the trajectory of conclusions reached by men through the time-honored process of rational and communal discourse.

Hooker’s emphasis on rational discourse arises from a commitment to logic as a means by which valid conclusions are reached in developing all forms of knowledge. God presupposes human reason in God’s self-revelation: “God hath not moved their hearts to think such things as he hath not enabled them to prove.”³⁷ Indeed, the incarnated Christ relied on the tension of rational disputation to reveal the light:

Our Lord and Savior himself did hope by disputation to do some good, yea by disputation not only of but against the truth, albeit with purpose for the truth....There is as yet no way known how to dispute or to determine of things disputed without use of natural reason.³⁸

Disputation is the reliable and orderly means through which humans seek truth together and reach conclusions that contribute to knowledge and authorize communal actions. Via public discourse, we discover the eternal law and establish norms consistent with it to which all in the community are bound:

... of this we are right sure, that nature, scripture, and experience itself have all taught the world to seek for the ending of contentions by submitting itself unto some judicial and definitive sentence, whereunto neither part that contendeth may under any pretense or color refuse to stand.³⁹

Disputation is thus a means of knowledge, though fraught with a probability of error. Course correction is often necessary. Through discourse, we accept and reject the norms of the past as experience warrants. This dialectic pattern is how we discover laws consistent with the eternal law. Such self-critical discourse is necessary if communities are to discern the good. For example, trial and error brought an evolution in the forms of government men prefer:

[In the discourse pertaining to the creation of laws of commonwealth], because there is difficulty and possibility many ways to err, unless such things were set down by laws, many would be ignorant of their duties which now are not, and many that know what they should do, would nevertheless dissemble it, and to excuse themselves pretend ignorance and simplicity which now

³⁶ Laws.5.21.3 Emphasis added.

³⁷ Laws.5.10.1

³⁸ Laws.3.8.17

³⁹ Laws.Preface.6.1

they cannot.⁴⁰

Hooker, ever the Corpus Christi humanist, sees logical discourse as the means by which a community receives and tests the conclusions of those it recognizes as authoritative and thereby itself contributes to knowledge. Through calm and patient logic, the community discerns the truth:

Our desire is in this present controversy, as in the rest, not to be carried up and down with the waves of uncertain arguments, but rather positively to lead on the minds of the simpler sort by plain and easy degrees till the very nature of the thing itself do make manifest what is truth.⁴¹

The dialectical nature of principles derived from human experience of the eternal law arises from the probabilistic nature of human judgments. Hooker's opponents err in their opposition to certain ecclesiastical laws as a consequence of their habit of lifting general principles from scripture and applying them without due regard to the particularities that rightfully determine whether and how such principles may be applied. Such generalities do not illuminate but instead are like "cloudy mists cast before the eye of common sense." In his critical response, Hooker outlines the inductive reasoning he sees as characteristic of fruitful discourse:

The cause of which error is ignorance what restraints and limitations all such principles have in regard of so manifold varieties as the matter whereunto they are applicable doth commonly afford. These varieties are not known but by such experience from which to draw the true bounds of all principles to discern how far forth they take effect, to see where and why they fails, to apprehend by what degrees and means they lead to the practice of things in show though not indeed repugnant and contrary one to another, requireth more sharpness of wit, more intricate circutions of discourse, more industry and depth of judgment than common ability doth yield. So that general rules till their limits be fully known (especially in matter of public and ecclesiastical affairs) are, by reason of the manifold secret exceptions which lie hidden in them, no other to the eye of man's understanding than cloudy mists cast before the eye of common sense. They that walk in darkness know not whether they go.⁴²

We are right, therefore, to expect to encounter goodness near where "the universal consent of men" suggest it may be found, for the dialectical process of transmission of such wisdom from generation to generation clears the mists that cloud our eyes, giving us cause for confidence that we can in fact recognize the good we are to do:

The light therefore which the star of natural reason and wisdom casteth is too bright to be obscured by the mist of a word or two uttered to diminish that opinion which justly hath been

⁴⁰ *Laws*.1.10.5

⁴¹ *Laws*.5.21.2

⁴² *Laws*.5.9.2

received concerning the force and virtue thereof even in matters that touch most nearly the principle duties of men and the glory of the eternal God.⁴³

We have seen that Hooker has an optimistic view of the human capacity to know the eternal law through experience of its governance of the created order. He makes a crucial distinction between the domains of natural and divine laws, corresponding to the two-fold knowledge of God. Within the category of divine law, scripture is the only element, because the divine law has as its subject matter the supernatural path to eternal life provided in Christ. Within the domain of natural law, however, the subject matter is the natural path along which we live with God - a path blocked ultimately by sin - but the path which nonetheless demarcates the life natural to humans. Within that natural domain, humans encounter the eternal law not just in scripture, but also in the majesty of the created order, our personal experience of the Spirit's direction, and through the fruits of "worldly experience and practice." Because these latter points of contact with the eternal law are socially and historically experienced, the *endoxa* we receive and to which we contribute are derivative, and inevitably subject to the compounded probabilistic errors of human receipt and transmission. Consequently, our natural knowledge of the eternal law is only provisionally known. From this Hooker concludes that certain laws are by their nature mutable or immutable. In what follows, I will examine Hooker's teaching about the mutability and immutability of ecclesiastical laws. Though we've anticipated this already in our discussion of *endoxa* and dialectic, the task of this section is to demonstrate more fully the provisional yet reliable character of the signs and tokens by which humans discern the good.

'all things which are necessary unto salvation'

Undergirding much of Hooker's rhetoric is a strong philosophical commitment to the idea that faith and reason are not disjunctive, but rather that reason so commands human psychology that faith presupposes reason. Recalling the story of Paul's conversion, he notes that Paul taught "that nature hath need of grace, whereunto I hope we are not opposite by holding that grace hath use of nature."⁴⁴ He devotes much of Book 3 to the task of demonstrating this, noting for example, that scripture is not self-authenticating but rather depends on human reason to persuade humans that scripture is the Word of God. Grace presupposes reason, and reason, even after the Fall, is apt:

The natural aptness of man's will to take or refuse things presented before it, and the evidence which good things have for themselves, if reason were diligent to search it out, may be soundly and safely taught without contradiction to any syllable in that confession of the Church, or in those

⁴³ *Laws*.3.8.17

⁴⁴ *Laws*.3.8.6

sentences of holy Scripture....⁴⁵

Consequently, reason and faith are not disjunctive, but complementary:

There is in the world no kind of knowledge, whereby any part of truth is seen, but we justly account it precious, yea that principal truth, in comparison whereof all other knowledge is vile, may receive from it some kind of light.⁴⁶

This conclusion leads Hooker to consider the meaning of the Reformation slogan, *sola scriptura*. In accordance with the Thirty-Nine Articles,⁴⁷ he agrees that scripture contains all things necessary to salvation. Yet, as we saw above, Hooker's doctrine of the two-fold knowledge of God differentiates between the domains of the natural and the supernatural, and that implies a further distinction between the kinds of matter that scripture treats. The category, 'things necessary to salvation,' pertains to the supernatural domain. This prompts Hooker to assign different degrees of authority to the different kinds of matter contained in scripture:

Although the scripture of God therefore be stored with infinite variety of matter in all kinds, although it abound with all sorts of laws, yet the the principal intent of scripture is to deliver the laws of duties supernatural.⁴⁸

So what is meant by the claim that scripture contains all things which are necessary unto salvation? Hooker unfolds its possible meanings, reaching a conclusion coherent with his insight that grace presupposes nature:

"... Albeit scripture do profess to contain in it all things which are necessary unto salvation; yet the meaning cannot be simply of all things that are necessary, but all things are necessary in some certain kind or form; as all thing that are necessary, and either could not at all, or could not easily be known by the light of natural discourse; all things which are necessary to be known that we may be saved but known with presupposall of knowledge concerning certain principles whereof it receiveth us already persuaded, and then instructeth us in all the residue that are necessary. In the number of these principles one is the sacred authority of scripture. Being therefore persuaded by other means that these scriptures are the oracles of God, themselves do teach us the rest, and lay before us all the duties which God requireth at our hands as necessary unto salvation."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Dublin* 4.109.4-111.33

⁴⁶ *Laws*.3.8.9; 1:226.3

⁴⁷ Article VI: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church."

⁴⁸ *Laws*.1.14.1; 1:124.29-32.

⁴⁹ *Laws*. 1.14.1; 1: 126.1-13

The claim that scripture contains all things necessary to salvation is not properly a claim that faith and reason are disjunctive; rather, recognition of the complementarity of scripture and reason illuminates the inherent rationality of faith.

‘matters of *mere faith*’ and ‘matters of action’

This insight draws attention to a fallacy held by Hooker’s opponents that is not uncommon today. Hooker’s presbyterian opponents argued for the exclusive authority of scripture in ethical reasoning based on the assumption that faith and reason are disjunctive, and that faithfulness entails obeying scripture over reason in all aspects of life. To this, Hooker responds by rejecting this premise, insisting that the first question to consider is “whether the light of reason be so pernicious that in devising laws for the church men ought not by it to search what may be fit and convenient.”⁵⁰

Hooker’s claim is that it is impossible to choose between scripture and reason because reason precedes, is integral to, and follows our engagement of scripture. Humans cannot choose between faith and reason. Humans cannot choose to avoid subjective engagement with scripture precisely because human psychology is fundamentally rational. His opponents’ puzzlement is due to two category errors. The distinctions needed are not between faith and reason but, first, between the domain in which scripture alone can direct us and the domain in which other sources of knowledge contribute helpfully, and, second, between the matters of faith and matters of action. The first distinction sheds light on the need for the second.

As we saw above, the category, ‘things necessary to salvation,’ pertains to the supernatural domain. Only scripture is authoritative with regard to the supernatural path to eternal bliss given in Jesus Christ. That said, those principles of salvation found in scripture themselves are phenomena that humans encounter and gather dialectically into *endoxa* that we also encounter as human positive laws. As we shall see, Hooker seems to have in mind here scriptural imperatives enshrined into positive ecclesiastical law, such as the requirements for baptism and eucharist. Discovered originally in scripture, these supernatural laws are also manifest in natural law as ordinances of the church. So the first category error has to do with things either necessary or unnecessary (things indifferent) to salvation, and the recognition that exclusive scriptural authority pertains only to the former.

From this arises the second distinction. We discover divine law originally in scripture alone, but because we also encounter it in its endoxic manifestation as positive ecclesiastical law, and because both scripture and positive law therefore treat matters

⁵⁰ *Laws*.3.8.18; 1:235.3-5.

necessary and unnecessary to salvation, when evaluating our positive laws, we must further distinguish between the matters they treat. Hooker proposes accordingly that the proper distinction for ethical reasoning is not between reason and faith, but between matters of faith and matters of practical action:

Touching matters belonging unto the Church of Christ the we conceive, that they are not of one suit. Some things are *merely* of faith, which things it doth suffice that we know and believe; some things not only to be known but done, because they concern the actions of men. Articles about the Trinity are matters of *mere* faith, and must be believed. Precepts concerning the works of charity are matters of action, which to know, unless they be practiced, is not enough. This being so clear to all men's understanding, I somewhat marvel that they especially should it absurd to oppose Church-government a plain matter of action unto matters of faith, who that themselves divide the gospel into Doctrine and Discipline.⁵¹

Episteme, techne, and phronesis

Though Hooker alludes to Calvin's distinction between doctrine and discipline in making his distinction, it is important to note that he does not identify his distinction with Calvin's. I submit that his distinction between matters of '*mere* faith' and 'matters of action' is crucial to his larger argument against his opponents' hermeneutical method, and that it is can be fruitfully understood in terms of the Aristotelian categories of knowledge (*episteme*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Adopting that nomenclature for our analysis, we can substitute those Aristotelian concepts in my conclusion above, and declare that Hooker proposes that the proper distinction for ethical reasoning is not between reason and faith, but between knowledge (*episteme*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). By pausing to see what Aristotle teaches about these intellectual virtues, we can more readily comprehend Hooker's conclusions regarding the mutability and immutability of laws.

Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* is relevant to Hooker's account of how we discern the good and thereby creates laws that are good, because his ethics is framed in terms of the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, or 'happiness,' which is for Aristotle the ultimate good. To that end, Aristotle distinguishes three intellectual virtues, *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*.

Episteme is what many of us have in mind when we use the English word 'knowledge' to refer to mastery of the content of a field of study. For Aristotle, the intellectual virtue of knowledge is attained through study of a field's causes. One reasons inductively from first principles, proceeds through deduction to the particulars, and reaches demonstrable conclusions:

⁵¹ *Laws*.3.3.2; 1:210-1-13 Emphasis original

Now what knowledge [*episteme*] is, if we are to speak exactly and not follow mere similarities, is plain from what follows. We all suppose that what we know is not capable of being otherwise; of things capable of being otherwise we do not know, when they have passed outside our observation, whether they exist or not. Therefore the object of knowledge is of necessity. Therefore it is eternal; for things that are of necessity in the unqualified sense are eternal; and things that are eternal are ungenerated and imperishable.... it proceeds sometimes through induction and sometimes by deduction. Now induction is of first principles and of the universal and deduction proceeds from universals. There are therefore principles from which deduction proceeds, which are not reached by deduction; it is therefore by induction that they are acquired. Knowledge, then, is a state of capacity to demonstrate.... for it is when a man believes in a certain way and the principles are known to him that he has knowledge....⁵²

In contrast with knowledge, *techne* is not the understanding of an object through comprehension of its causes, but 'a seasoned state of capacity to make.' *Techne* is often translated into English as 'art' or 'craft.' But perhaps the most important aspect of *techne* for our purposes is that it is an intellectual excellence oriented towards production of a *thing*:

Among things that can be otherwise are included both things made and things done; making and acting are different so that the reasoned state of capacity to act is different from the reasoned state of capacity to make. Nor are they included one in the other; for neither is acting making nor is making acting. Now since building is an art [*techne*] and is essentially a seasoned state of capacity to make, and there is neither an art that is not such a state nor any such state that is not an art, art is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning. All art is concerned with coming into being, i.e., with contriving and considering how something may come into being which is capable of either being or not being, and whose origin is in the maker and not in the thing made; for art is concerned neither with things that are, or come into being, by necessity, nor with things that do so in accordance with nature (since these have their origin in themselves). Making and acting being different, art must be a matter of making, not of acting.⁵³

In contrast with both *episteme* and *techne*, *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue consisting of excellence in *action* towards the end of producing the *good*. Often translated as practical wisdom or prudence, it is the 'capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man':

Regarding practical wisdom [*phronesis*] we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it. Now it is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular aspect, e.g., about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general. This is shown by the fact that we credit men with practical wisdom [*phronesis*] in some particular respect when then have calculated well with a view to some good end which is one of those not the object of any art. Thus in general the man who is capable of deliberating has practical wisdom. Now no one deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise

⁵² Arist. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1139b.18-36

⁵³ Arist. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1140a.1-23

nor about things that it is impossible for him to do. Therefore, since knowledge [*episteme*] involves demonstration, but there is no demonstration of things whose first principles can be otherwise (for all such things might actually be otherwise), and since it is impossible to deliberate about things that are of necessity, practical wisdom cannot be knowledge nor art; not knowledge because that which can be done is capable of being otherwise, not art because action and making are different kinds of thing. It remains, then, that it is a true and reasoned statement of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man. For while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end. It is for this reason that we think Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom, viz. because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general; we consider that those who can do this are good at managing households or estates.⁵⁴

So practical wisdom has to do with that which is conducive to the good, is about what is 'good and expedient' and things that are not necessary but can be 'otherwise,' and involves deliberation with a view to some good end.' Knowledge is a quite different virtue, having to do with the comprehension of an object through understanding of its causes, an object that is necessary, and therefore eternal. Practical wisdom has to do with things that cannot be demonstrated as true because they can be otherwise, while knowledge has to do with things that can be demonstrated through logic because they cannot be otherwise.

This background puts in perspective Hooker's distinction between 'matters of mere faith' and 'matters of action.' It is not that faith and reason are opposed, but that matters of faith, like *episteme*, involve knowledge of things that are necessary and eternal, and matters of action, like *phronesis*, have to do with deliberation 'about what is good and expedient.' The principles of that which is good cannot change precisely because they are necessary and eternal, while that which is conducive to the good cannot be demonstrated and must be chosen through deliberation, for, inherently, it can be otherwise than it currently is.

Principles for 'matters of action'

The distinction between *episteme* and *phronesis* sheds light on the principles "touching judgement what things are convenient in the outward public ordering of church affairs"⁵⁵ that Hooker offers in the conclusions of chapter six through nine of Book V. Here, more clearly than anywhere else, Hooker deploys the language of *phronesis*. First, he proposes that religious practices that "can be sufficiently proved effectual and generally fit to set forward godliness... may be reverently thought of."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Arist. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1140a.24 - 1140b.12

⁵⁵ *Laws*.5.4.Title

⁵⁶ *Laws*.5.6.2

Second, he argues that we should defer to the ‘judgment of antiquity’ unless we are able to allege any known weighty inconvenience which it hath, or to take any strong exception against.⁵⁷ Third, he argues that the ‘authority of the Church’ “may give so much credit to her own laws as to make their sentence touching fitness and convenience weightier than any bare and naked concept to the contrary.”⁵⁸ Fourth, he states, “we lastly require that it may not seem hard, if in cases of necessity, or for common utility’s sake, certain profitable ordinances sometime be released, rather than all men always strictly bound to the generally rigor thereof.”⁵⁹ Fitness for godliness, expedience, deliberation, prudence: this is the language of *phronesis*.

The concepts of *episteme* and *phronesis* make sense of Hooker’s rule about immutable and mutable laws. Those laws having to do with the supernatural path in Christ - whether in Scripture or translated into positive law - are of the category of *knowledge*. Their principles are necessary and eternal, and therefore immutable. Those laws having to do with the practical action of ordering the state or church are of the category of *practical wisdom*. Such laws are deliberative choices in cases which may be otherwise than they are; those choices are not necessary, but provisional. They are therefore mutable.

.... laws that were made for men or societies or Churches, in regard of their being such as they do not always continue, but may perhaps be clean otherwise a while after, and so may require to be otherwise ordered than before: the laws of God himself which are of this nature, no man indued with common sense will ever deny to be of a different constitution from the former, in respect of the one’s constancy, and the mutability of the other. And this doth seem to have been the very cause why Saint John doth so peculiarly termed the doctrine that teacheth salvation by Jesus Christ, “*Evangelium aeternum*, an eternal Gospel” because there can be no reason wherefore the publishing thereof should be taken away, and any other instead of it proclaimed, as long as the world doth continue, whereas the whole law of rites and ceremonies, although delivered with so great solemnity, is notwithstanding clean abrogated, inasmuch as it had but temporary cause of God’s ordaining it.⁶⁰

Immutable laws

Scripture testifies to the divine law of God’s gracious disposition towards humans revealed in Jesus Christ. From this supernatural law arise others, including the bond Christ creates in all who participate in him and “the kind of worship” appropriate to him:

unto the Church as it is a society supernatural this is peculiar, that part of the bond of their association which belong to the Church of God must be a law supernatural, which God himself

⁵⁷ *Laws*.5.7.4

⁵⁸ *Laws*.5.8.5

⁵⁹ *Laws*.5.9.5

⁶⁰ *Laws*.1.15.3;1:132.6-18

hath revealed concerning that kind of worship which his people shall do unto him.⁶¹

Such divine laws are of the category of knowledge, and, being eternally true, are immutable.

Near the end of Book I, Hooker concludes with 'a general rule' concerning such laws:

Wherefore to end with a general rule concerning all the laws which God hath tied men unto: those laws divine that belong whether naturally or supernaturally either to men as men or to men as they live in political society, or to men as they are of that political society which is the Church, without any further respect had unto any such variable accident as the state of men and of societies of men and of the Church itself in this world is subject unto, all laws that so belong unto men, they belong forever, yea, although they be positive laws, unless being positive God himself which made them alter them.⁶²

In Book V, Hooker makes this more clear. Here the distinction is between matters of doctrine and matters of order. The former are immutable; the latter mutable:

The Church hath authority to establish that for an order at one time which at another time it may abolish, and in both do well. But that which in doctrine the Church doth now deliver rightly as a truth, no man will say that it may hereafter recall and as rightly avouch the contrary. Laws touching matter of order are changeable by the power of the Church; articles concerning doctrine not so.⁶³

The 'scripture, tradition, and reason' trope, debunked

Yet, Hooker understands this conception of mutability based on doctrine and order within the framework of his presupposed methods of phenomena, *endoxa*, and dialectic. That is, there is a distinction between a principle and our comprehension of the principle that has to do with our method of knowing. There is a spectrum of probability in the accuracy of our knowing. The certainty of our right comprehension varies with the source of our knowledge. He therefore proposes a hierarchy of authorities in our discernment process:

Be it in matter of one kind or of the other, what scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth. That which the Church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think and define to be true or good must in congruity of reason overrule all other inferior judgments whatsoever.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Laws*.1.15.2

⁶² *Laws*.1.15.3

⁶³ *Laws*.5.8.2; 2:38.17-23.

⁶⁴ *Laws*.5.8.2; 2:39.7-14.

This hierarchy, unfortunately, has been reduced in popular literature to the trope of ‘Hooker’s three-legged stool’ of scripture, reason, and tradition. But based on our analysis so far, we are in a position to see why this trope is problematic. The stool metaphor can be dismissed quickly by simply observing that Hooker is not at all suggesting an equality of authorities that can be described by analogy to the three equal and balanced legs of a stool. Indeed, he proposes nothing of the sort. Rather, Hooker quite clearly imagines a hierarchy of authorities, a prioritization scheme to which we are to refer in deliberating questions of either doctrine or order. These are ranked, not equal.

Moreover, we are in a position to understand this hierarchy differently than the metaphor suggests. Hooker is not suggesting that our discernment process follows a three-fold sequence in which we turn first to scripture, and, if necessary, then consider what we can conclude with unaided reason, and then, having failed to resolve our puzzle, turn to the tradition of the church.

First, as I shall develop further in my treatment of scriptural hermeneutics, Hooker does not believe that scripture is universally perspicuous. Far from it. It is clear with respect to the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ. But there is much in scripture that is not ‘plainly delivered.’ Scripture is our highest authority because it is our only source of knowledge of the supernatural path in Christ, and because it is our most direct revelation from God. To be sure, we encounter scripture socially and historically, and therefore our comprehension of what it plainly delivers does not avoid the probabilities inherent in the endoxic and dialectical methods. Yet that which it does plainly deliver is our surest source of knowledge when resolving puzzles having to do with scripture’s purpose of revealing the supernatural path in Christ.

Second, it should be clear by now that Hooker would never suggest that ‘reason’ is a source of authority in our discernment process because, for Hooker, reason underlies everything humans do. We cannot suspend our rational faculty in order to hear the direction of scripture. We engage all things with reason. Rather, the source of authority in view is the accumulated *endoxa* of our forebears. That is, “whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason” is a strong allusion to Hooker’s introductory remarks regarding how humans discern the good in chapter eight of Book I. He alludes here to the most powerful of the ‘signs and tokens’ by which we discern the good; viz., “... the universal consent of men is the perfectest and strongest in this kind which comprehendeth only the signs and tokens of goodness.”⁶⁵ The phenomenon of ‘universal consent’ is second among all sources of authority, for universally known

⁶⁵ *Law*.1.8.3

principles - which constitute the natural law - are the primary means by which humans discern the good naturally:

The general and perpetual voice of men is as the sentence of God himself. For that which all men at all times learned, nature herself must needs have taught; and God being the author of nature, her voice is but his instrument.⁶⁶

Finally, “that which the Church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think and define to be true or good,” is not to be identified with ‘tradition,’ for, as we saw above, ‘tradition’ is for Hooker a highly negative reference to Rome’s self-authenticating elevation of its dogma and custom to ‘sacred’ status. In his own narrow usage, however, ‘tradition’ has a meaning consistent with what I’ve described above as *endoxa*. Indeed, Hooker circumscribes ‘tradition’ to “ordinances made in the prime of Christian religion, established with that authority which Christ hath left to his Church for *matters indifferent*, and in that consideration requisite to be observed till like authority see just and reasonable cause to alter them.”⁶⁷ Hooker’s reference here is not to tradition, even as more narrowly defined by him, but rather quite literally to “the Church by her ecclesiastical authority” in the local and immediate sense.⁶⁸

So, within reflections on the mutability of ecclesiastical laws, Hooker proposes not a three-legged stool, but a hierarchy of authorities. Those authorities are, ranked according to their ordering on a probabilistic spectrum, (1) that which scripture plainly delivers regarding its subject matter, the supernatural path in Christ; (2) the general and perpetual voice of men; and (3) the judgments rendered by “the Church by her ecclesiastical authority” in the local and immediate sense.⁶⁹

We must be careful lest focus on an alleged ‘three-legged stool’ perhaps distract us from what may have been Hooker’s more important point. And that is the point with which I introduced the present discussion: there is a distinction between a principle and our comprehension of the principle that has to do with our method of knowing. That Hooker stresses that his hierarchy of authorities pertains to “matter[s] of one kind or of the other” is significant in its implication for how we are to think about the mutability of both ‘matters of mere faith’ and ‘matters of action.’ We have already anticipated

⁶⁶ *Laws*.1.8.3

⁶⁷ *Laws*.5.65.2 Emphasis added.

⁶⁸ In context, Hooker is responding directly to claims by Thomas Cartwright that laws need not be obeyed if judged by individuals to be inconsistent with scripture. Hooker, like Whitgift before him, is asserting the current authority of the Church headed by Queen Elizabeth to order the affairs of the national church.

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Hooker's teaching regarding the mutability of laws having to do with the ordering of the church. But Hooker here implies the potential for puzzles in matters of faith, too, in which our discourse must also refer to the hierarchy of authorities. The subtle implication here seems to be that the principles constituting our *episteme* of such matters are eternal and immutable, yet they are to be distinguished from our comprehension of them. The methods by which we deduce these principles socially and historically - through our encounter of the Christ *ensarkos* in scripture, the phenomena constituting our encounter with the Christ *asarkos* in the created order, our creation and gathering of *endoxa*, and our dialectic discourse regarding these things - render our comprehension inherently uncertain. Therefore, though the principles themselves are eternal and therefore immutable, we might reasonably expect ongoing discourse regarding them, and expect a trajectory in meanings of the concepts we use to speak about them.

Mutable laws

While Hooker acknowledges this potential need to correct the concepts we use in speaking of God's deliverance in Christ, the need for correction is clearer in matters requiring phronetic judgement. Refusing to make such corrections can be 'perilous.' Hooker notes that "The end wherefore laws were made may be permanent, and those laws nevertheless require some alteration, if there be any unfitness in the means which they prescribe as tending unto that end and purpose."⁷⁰ As I noted above, the potential for error is greatest in matters of action wherein multiple options are possible. *Phronesis* is an intellectual virtue, precisely because:

Men's consultations are always perilous. And it falleth out many times that after long deliberation, those things are by their wit even resolved on, which by trial are found most opposite to public safety. It is no impossible thing for states, be they never so well established, yet by oversight in some one act or treaty between them and potent opposites, utterly to cast away themselves forever.⁷¹

The phronetic character of laws pertaining to matters of action means that the expedient chosen eventually becomes no longer expedient, requiring their amendment or abolition:

Laws, as all other things human, are many times full of imperfection, and that which is supposed to be behooveful unto men, proveth often times most pernicious. The wisdom which is learned by tract of time findeth the laws that have been in former ages established needful in later to be

⁷⁰ *Laws*.3.10.3

⁷¹ *Laws*.3.11.9; 1:254.1-7

abrogated. Besides that which sometime is expedient doth not always so continue, and the number of needless laws unabolished doth weaken the force of them that are necessary.⁷²

Hooker's opponents argue that the slogan, *sola scriptura*, means that scripture alone should determine how the church is ordered. In response, Hooker insists that there is much that scripture does not plainly deliver, and there is much that scripture leaves unsaid, leaving the Church to determine how best to order itself in each context:

.... no more is by us maintained, than only that scripture must needs teach the Church whatsoever is in such sort necessary, as hath been set down, and that it is no more disgrace for scripture to have let a number of things free to be ordered at the discretion of the Church, than for nature to have left it unto the wit of man to devise his own attire, and not to look for it as the beasts of the field have theirs....⁷³

Reflecting on these general principles, Hooker presses his point that the Church is warranted in making ecclesiastical laws pursuant to the good with an eye to that which is expedient and convenient in its historical context. Scripture provides only general guidance with regard to the ordering of the Church. Referring to the scriptural mandates cited by his opponents, he observes that:

these rules are no such laws as require any one particular thing to be done, but serve rather to direct the Church in all things which she doth, so that free and lawful it is to devise any Ceremony, to receive any order, and to authorize any kind of regiment, not special commandment being thereby violated, and the same being thought such by them, to whom the judgment thereof appertaineth. as that is it not scandalous, but decent, tending unto edification, and setting forth the glory of God, that is to say, agreeable unto the general rules of holy scripture....⁷⁴

New Folder

Peoples & Peoplehood Stories

Dear readers,

There's nothing like breaking bread with a brother to remind me not to believe that social media and journalists present a realistic portrait of America's present and future.

⁷² *Laws*.4.14.1; 1:336.24-31.

⁷³ *Laws*.3.4.1; 1:213.2-8.

⁷⁴ *Laws*.3.7.4; 1:128.19-24.

~~It's true that we are a divided people and that our union seems once again in peril of dissolution.~~ Like many, my family is deeply divided on how to respond to what I call MAGA populism. But popular descriptions of those who support MAGA populism and the drivers of their support are inaccurate in ways that matter. So too are the accounts of those, like me, who oppose MAGA and what drives us. There's nothing like breaking bread with those with whom we disagree to shine light on the gap between the abstractions we fear and the enfleshed truth of our compatriots.

But my expertise is Christian ethics. Of course I would claim that truth is most powerfully revealed when we share our bread.

One of those truths is that our opponents defy reduction to selfish bigots or highfalutin hypocrites. Like us, they are more complex than the abstractions to which we reduce opponents in their absence. Like us, their most fundamental aim is to flourish. We differ not in our hunger for good but in the paths we think will take us there.

Often obscure but always near the question of how to flourish that divides us are deeper questions about how we know what we know and how we discern what's good. If our answer to the first of these invokes Christian beliefs - as it does for many in my orbit - that raises deeper questions concerning how we read Scripture in support of our ethical questions, when ought we depart received traditions, and what authority should we assign laws not derived from or consistent with what we discern as faith's mandates.

These questions transcend the policy questions that divide us. They challenge every generation. Even after our policy questions cease to be urgent, these deeper questions will remain sources of tension. They persist because competing answers generate different visions for achieving America. At stake are not just debates about power, women's rights, immigration, taxation, regulation, and inequalities in wealth and income, but, more importantly, fundamental claims about what it means to be American and how we will create and sustain the virtues that make us American.

Those fundamental questions will necessarily be recurring themes in these letters, but addressing them is not my primary aim. I'd love to persuade you ultimately that the MAGA way is not our best way forward, but that's not the immediate task at hand, either. We are heirs to the promise that we will become a more perfect union, but we struggle now with estrangement. Reconciliation begins with discernment of and remorse for our sins against each other. What's needed is not prescription, but description. That's my immediate task.

In what follows, my hope is to describe sympathetically the who, what, when, where, and how of the MAGA coalition whose vision for our country I oppose. What

wounds, old and recent, generate mistrust? What anxieties generate their movement? What's their account of how America will flourish and what do they see as the obstacles to our flourishing?

Social media and journalists like to entertain us by scorekeeping the battle between two poles, currently narrated as MAGA and the Left. But our politics are not binary. There are at least five major answers to the question of how we Americans will flourish. Before the 1980's, New Deal liberalism reigned, and its heir, as extended by Barack Obama and Joe Biden, generates many of the answers and policy prescriptions to which the MAGA movement responds. The Reagan revolution knocked off the champ, supplanting New Deal liberalism with what Republicans until recently called conservatism but which is more aptly described as neoliberalism. [OBAMA name for his version of the New Deal] Neoliberalism reigned until 2016, but it spawned not one but two powerful opposing movements, the MAGA and New Left populisms. We battle now over what politics will replace neoliberalism.

My hope is to describe sympathetically all four of these competing movements before turning to description of a fifth major answer about our path to flourishing, which I currently dub Humanism. I'd love to persuade you to join me in embracing that vision for America, but that's not crucial. I'd consider this effort a success if it helps some of us do the work of hearing and understanding compatriots' wounds, breaches of trust, and anxieties sufficiently to make discernment, remorse, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation possible.

Let's get started!

Dear Kerry,

In my [last letter](#), I conveyed my hope to provide a sympathetic account of what I call MAGA populism in service of a reconciliation project. My hope is that if we Americans take time to hear and understand each others' wounds, breaches of trust, and anxieties, we can collectively discern where we contribute to our national estrangement and take the steps that will make reconciliation possible.

As I write this, my mind floods with recollections of various African and Irish reconciliation efforts that began with truth-telling and mutual remorse and paved the way to greater political cooperation. I don't mean to suggest our situation is now as dire as it became in South Africa, Rwanda, Ireland, or other nation-states. Our politics are toxic and unfruitful but our union has not yet ruptured. It's far better to hear and understand each other before we act out our worst fantasies of schism.

I also am not so deluded as to think that letters from me could have an observable effect on our national politics. I'm not an "influencer" and, frankly, have too many things I'd like to do with my time rather than become one.

I write because writing is my way of thinking. I am trying to sort out what's happening in our country and how we get back to becoming America like we promise in our pledge of allegiance and as many of us pledged in solemn oaths of military and civic office. My guess is that many of us are seeking to understand. These letters are my way of discerning collaboratively.

My theory is that we build America not with grand acts by politicians but by households like ours deciding one at a time to hold fast to our bonds of affection and to draw - or restore - ever more friends into them.

With that preamble, let me turn now to the task I've taken on: providing a sympathetic account of the MAGA populism that I oppose.

We need a sympathetic account because we broke our fourth estate: we've permitted journalism to degrade over the last four decades such that it's swapped its mission of reporting reliable information for the more profitable mission of entertaining us with addictive hyperpartisan scorekeeping. The heirs of Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, and Barbara Walters prefer to entertain us with nightly rooster fights. Our fourth estate needs repair.

Like unhelpful neighbors who enjoy and encourage rather than calm family drama, pundits offer several explanations for the rise of the MAGA movement. From the right, we hear it's a response to bank bailouts, high taxes, budget deficits, fascism, socialism, political correctness, suppression of Christianity, and distaste for "the Swamp." From the Left, we hear it's the last hurrah of White Supremacy as national demographics threaten White hegemony, xenophobia, Christian nationalism, selfishness, homophobia, theocracy, and the rise of fascism.

Left and Right accuse each other of fascism, plutocracy, and destroying our democracy. That would be funny if it weren't a troubling signpost. Couples on the verge of divorce often indict each other for the same offense.

The pundit crossfire misguides more than it informs. It feeds our estrangement.

It took me too long to recognize this. My wife and I rarely watch TV news and our vocations and family blessings dominate our time. Consequently, I didn't pay much attention to the rise of Donald Trump and Trumpism in the early years/ I've had to catch up. When he descended that elevator and announced his presidential candidacy, it didn't register. Indeed, the only person in my orbit who immediately joined his parade was my mother. I assumed he reminded her of my late father's habit of discomfiting

candor, as well as his blue eyes, and red-blond hair. But it wasn't a widow's crush. He voiced concerns I didn't recognize she had. An early adopter, she heralded the rise of "Trumpism" long before we invented that word.

A lifelong Republican, I waited patiently to see who would replace Mitt Romney as the 2016 GOP standard bearer. When, one after one, recognizable heirs of the Reagan revolution fell to Trump's distinctive brand, I waited expectantly for his campaign to collapse. Surely Republicans, as we did in past elections, would reject his vulgarity, unethical ways, and lack of policy chops? Not this time.

Something new was happening. Something that most of our rhetoric obscured. As happened a handful of times in American history, a new politics was being birthed.

In retrospect, that politics has both continuity and discontinuity with our history. I'll write more about those in future letters. For now, I want to highlight that the immediate explanations were wrong.

In our initial moments of disorientation at the prospect of Trump leading the Republican Party, many, like me, assumed that his nomination implied a shocking revelation: that the majority of Republicans embraced his racist and xenophobic rhetoric as their own. We stood on the sidelines as the Left used a relatively new antiracism ideology to declare all conservatives racist. Was there truth in their accusations? Why else might Trump's dog whistles avoid his disqualification?

I didn't need to settle that question to make my own decision. Like my mother, I was an early adopter. I became a Never Trumper before we invented that term.

I tuned out most of Trump's 2016 term. The first half I walked alongside my first wife as she died of cancer. It was a time for grieving and resilience. New house, new job, an empty nest, and a long learning curve in mastering home economics for the first time. A second home, a return to a role as a parish priest. Near the end of his term, COVID hit, and I remarried.

Falling in love with a woman whose family immigrated from Asia rather than Europe challenged me to come to inspect myself for a character defect I never considered before. Am I a racist? That mattered to me not because of Trumpism's rise but because I wanted nothing to impede my capacity to love fully my wife and her extended family as my own.

Only then did I take seriously Trump's racist rhetoric and the counter-rhetoric that claimed "White supremacy" sufficiently explains the growing MAGA movement. I studied carefully the Left's critique, including Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* and two of Ibram X. Kendi's books. I retraced my own history and devoured scholars' deep dives concerning White supremacy, colonialism, King Cotton, Jim Crow, our centuries'

long civil rights struggles, and current realities including voting practices, education, architecture, highway construction, urban planning, real estate, policing, and incarceration.

That journey continues but already three conclusions seem irrefutable.

- First, I still host many unexamined and unnoticed habits of thought that make sense only in a world that presupposes the hierarchy of human value I disavow.
- Second, the New Left's rising ideology that it brands as "anti-racist" is not anti-racist, but a new species of racism.
- Third, though "White supremacy" remains a grave problem, it does not sufficiently explain the MAGA movement. There is something else - something more - generating our estrangement.

Given these conclusions, I carried on, still a Never Trumper as the 2020 election arrived, still seeking to understand how my cultural inheritance impacts my relationships, but unpersuaded that Trump supporters were motivated more by racism than other factors.

January 6, 2021 was a life-changing event for me. I never imagined that fellow citizens would attack what for me has always been a sacred space. Our Capitol is not merely a building. It's our national gathering place - the symbolic place where we are all at once gathered representatively in the expression of a revolutionary idea - that we citizens and not elites rule ourselves, by ourselves, and for ourselves. For me, it's a holy place worthy of reverence. I thought it was more or less that way for all Americans.

Seeing citizens attack the police, scale its walls, break its windows, threaten those we elected, and make a mockery of the work we do there was too much. It crossed a line I never dreamed compatriots would cross. They profaned something sacred. For the first time, I felt the horror and remorse I imagine Jews felt when they watched Greeks slaughter pigs in the Jerusalem Temple.

Remorse implies responsibility. Remorse arose like bile as I experienced shared responsibility. For I didn't just witness fellow citizens profaning the Capitol. I witnessed fellow Christians claiming their profanation fulfilled God's will. In every scene, I saw Christian symbols - Scripture, the Bible, the Cross, and other signs - naming Christian faith as the cause inspiring their assault.

There are times in relationships when one crosses a line that should never be crossed lest we fracture bonds beyond repair. A husband strikes his wife in the face and their eyes lock on each other, both recognizing that the damage done was far greater than the physical consequences of the blow. One discovers their beloved in

bed with another, and both know the consequent wound can't be undone by reductively describing its cause as a mere fling. Healing is possible, but never by denying the profanation of a sacred bond ever happened.

January 6th was such a turning point for me. The walls were scaled and a sacred trust was breached. Like many, I can't see the way to restored communion with those who orchestrated or now defend that sacrilege without a national discernment, accountability, remorse, and repentance.

But who, beyond Trump's band, is responsible?

The pundits gave an answer that matched the video evidence: Christian nationalists. More than half of Americans, they said, either were ambassadors for or supported Christian nationalism. The message of January 6th, they said, was that Christian nationalists attempted to seize control of our government with a coup.

For the past few years, I've been completing a study of Christian nationalism along with other Episcopal theologians and bishops. I've dug deeply into the academic research on Christian nationalism, nationalisms of all kinds, populism, and democratic theory.

I confess surprise at my findings. Once again, three conclusions seem irrefutable:

First, claims that more than half of Americans endorse or support Christian nationalism are based on research with fatal theoretical and empirical flaws. A small minority of our citizens advocate what I call Church statism, and a larger minority a less exclusive but still onerous form of Christian nationalism.

Second, Most Christians, like the generations before us, embrace a banal form of the American civil religion.

Third, none of these individually or in aggregate sufficiently explain the MAGA movement.

If we want to understand our estrangement, we have to look beyond both racism and Christian nationalism for answers.

So what's going on?

Personal relationships can suffer when stressed by events that surface strongly held mutually exclusive values. The same is true of our politics. Despite the claims of our rhetorical crossfire, our conflict is not a clash between selfish bigots and highfalutin hypocrites. The same bell curve of goodness describes both sides. Those dismissive tropes blind us to the deeper realities generating our alienation.

My sympathetic account of the MAGA coalition begins with the reminder that we are not just a people, but a people of many peoples. Our Constitution creates a single

nation out of several “in order to perform a more perfect union” of those who’ve for centuries had conflicting views on the nature of God, how we discern God’s will, what freedom is, and how best to embody our sovereignty. These different values surface in conflicts as we seek to build up our household, communities, and federation.

Despite his claims, Donald Trump is not the cause of the MAGA movement. He gave it a name and a distinctive voice as part of his successful effort to exploit it.

It’s a mistake to dismiss this movement with epithets about racism, xenophobia, and Christian nationalism. While all of those elements are part of its leaders’ repertoire and speak for many of his followers, something deeper is happening that likely will lead to a decades-long struggle to address substantive concerns, much like our Jacksonian “Democracy” era and the populist movement that followed America’s entry into the Industrial Revolution.

The MAGA coalition unites multiple American peoples in a populist movement determined to end four decades of domination by elites who failed to protect long-treasured ways of being from massive immigration flows of non-European peoples amidst the chaos arising from America’s transition to a post-industrial, postmodern society. Many peoples with conflicting values, four decades, domination by unpatriotic elites, external threats, amidst transition to a permanently chaotic, post-industrial, postmodern society: there’s so much more going on that charges of bigotry and religious zealotry obscure.

That’s the story to which I will turn in the letters that follow.

Excursis: Populism

Excurses: Sovereignty and Flourishing

Excurses: Discerning God's Will

Excurses: A People of Peoples

My brothers and I were shaped more profoundly than I realized on the playing fields of Baton Rouge. We lived outdoors. There was no question about whether our games would be competitive. The only questions were the names we gave to our teams and which side we were on that day.

If we weren't playing Shirts and Skins in football, baseball, or basketball, we played Cowboys and Indians, Army vs the Bad Guys, Rebs vs the Bad Guys, or the FBI vs the Bad Guys. Perhaps Peter Pan and Pilgrim mythology taught us to construe Native Americans (not a phrase we heard as kids) more ambiguously than in our other binaries. They were more Other than Enemy. We boys were indoctrinated into a dualistic world in which everyone was friend or foe, but Tonto was cool, too, though obviously subordinate to the Lone Ranger. We practiced protecting our rightful place on the playing fields of Baton Rouge.

That dualism colored the world black and white so effectively that I carried with me into adulthood a Gray/Blue reading of the American people. "Damn Yankees!" was a commentary about the relative value of Southern culture in comparison to arrogant Northerners long before I knew it was Broadway play about the Faustian bargain of a Washington Senators fan.

I confess all this because I've only recently discovered how off the mark I was in thinking Americans are mostly one nation divided culturally between North and South.

But, on my deep dives into our concepts of race, nationalism, xenophobia, and causes of the MAGA movement, I discovered I had longstanding misconceptions about three things. First, I had a shallow and incoherent understanding of "nation" and a host of potential English synonyms (people, tribe, clan, society, minority, ethnic group, community, nationality). Second, I had a gross and material misconception concerning the geographic and cultural origins of the European settlers who colonized North America. Third, I was mostly wrong about how waves of immigrants impact the established culture they enter after becoming U.S. residents and citizens.

I never thought about the meaning of "nation" until began my research on Christian nationalism. My starting point was to get a handle on nationalism so I could clarify why its Christian form is so pernicious. But it turns out nationalism is itself a contested term. We think we know what it is but as conversations progress we discover a broad range of definitions, some of which are inspired by political agendas. We have to clarify such terms because their confusion enflames conflicts between groups competing for dominant power.

Recognizing ‘nationalism’ is a contested term prepared me for the discovery that I naively use words in its constellation - like nation, race, people, ethnic group, society, and community - without recognizing they shape how I perceive the world. Their definitions matter more than I realized.

I am normally casual in my usage of ‘nation.’ I thought its meaning was obvious and the same for all of us. When we pledge allegiance to a republic that is “one nation under God” we commit to a vision that we will act as a people who are indivisible and who embody “liberty and justice” for all. I always thought “one nation” described what we *are* rather than what we are *becoming*.

But now I get the nuance I missed. Our republic is not an aspiration. It’s already a thing, an inheritance we are charged to steward. “One nation” names our project, the grand experiment we now lead, of becoming a more perfect union of many nations who share a single sovereignty authorizing our shared strivings for the common good.

We pledge to be “indivisible” because we once divided. The Civil War led to our pledge of allegiance because our republic of many nations sorted into two republics. Just before Fort Sumter, we almost divided into four. Division is always a temptation precisely because we were “conceived in liberty” with the hope that we would nonetheless bind ours many nations into one.

I always used “nation” as a shorthand for “nation-state.” That works in most cases because it’s not often necessary to distinguish between the citizenry and the agent we authorize to act on our behalf. Once we begin to contemplate things like Christian nationalism such distinctions matter. “Nation” denotes our body politic, the people who strive to create a more perfect union. The United States is our agent, the State we, acting as one nation, create to pursue the common good.

“Nation” works as shorthand for the United States insofar as we understand it to be an agent whose mission is to act for the good of all citizens. In other words, it works when the set of people who are members of a nation are identical to the set of people who are citizens of the state that governs them. When that’s not true, that shorthand fails. We have to be more precise about what we mean when we speak of nations.

The best way I know to get at a precise definition of nation is to think first about the distinction between two related things, a community and a society.

A *community* is a group identity based on shared attributes like habitat, region, origin, language, socioeconomic class, and caste. ~~It’s pre-rational and pre-voluntary in that it exists independently of individual persons.~~ It’s a cooperative social consciousness generated by heredity or geographic and historical context. To be part of a community, I don’t need to think about it or volunteer to be a member. It’s a social identity that I receive as a given.

In contrast, a *society* is a group identity based on shared ideas, visions, missions, or ends. It's also a cooperative social consciousness but it's personal and generated by the group's shared commitment to an idea or cause. To part of a society, I need to think, experience a spiritual connection to the shared cause, and volunteer. Society membership is not something we receive as a given. The society itself is something we deliberately create. and our free consent precedes our cooperation in it. Although we don't often concern ourselves with this distinction, our affinity groups like businesses, labor unions, scholarly guilds, and political associations are societies.

A nation is properly seen as a community, not a society. "People" is a less contested synonym that I often use. A nation or people is a web of autonomous communities connected usually by a treasured land, history, tradition, or collective consciousness. It's a social identity I receive as a given by virtue of my being a part of one or more communities based on my habitat, region, origin, language, socioeconomic class, and caste.

Excurses: Enchantment, Religion, and Jesus-Following

Book 1: Not This - MAGA Christianity

MAGA Populism

Genealogical Description

What Works

Text

What Needs Correction

Book 2: Not This - Identity Synthesis

New Left Populism

Genealogical Description-2

What Works-2

Text

What Needs Correction-2

Book 3: Not This - Liberalism

Genealogical Description-1

What Works-1

Text

What Needs Correction-1

Book 4: But This - Christian Humanism