Restoring Friendly Relations Between Freedom and Religion

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By Peter Berkowitz
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Over the last 50 years, the left has directed two opposing criticisms at Christian conservatives. In the late 1970s and 1980s, progressives denounced the Moral Majority for injecting faith-based values into public life. The religious right's deplorable mixing of faith and politics, progressives contended, compelled Christian conservatives to dwell on divisive issues like abortion. Since the 2015 rise of Donald Trump, progressives have denounced Christian conservatives for declining to inject their faith-based values into public life. This disgraceful refusal to apply religious morality to politics, progressives maintained, permitted Christian conservatives to embrace President Trump despite his egregious moral transgressions. It is tempting to conclude that in progressives' eyes, Christian conservatives are damned if they do and damned if they don't.

Much progressive enmity toward Christian conservatives stems from poor understanding of American constitutional government, from animus toward religion, or both.

America's founding documents adopt a friendly stance toward religion. The Declaration of Independence holds that God endowed human beings with unalienable rights and that it is government's chief purpose to secure them. Article I of the Constitution protects religious liberty by refraining from delegating to Congress authority to legislate in matters of faith. The First Amendment underscores the constitutional priority of religious liberty – banning "an establishment of religion" and guaranteeing religion's "free exercise" – by placing it first among the five crucial rights that Congress may not impair.

In his 1785 Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessment – composed two years before the Constitutional Convention that he helped to organize and to which he made a decisive contribution – James Madison affirmed that religious liberty is an unalienable right. He maintained, moreover, that government is neither "a competent Judge of Religious Truth" nor authorized to "employ Religion as an engine of Civil policy." The former, in Madison's view, "is an arrogant pretension falsified by the contradictory opinions of Rulers in all ages, and throughout the world" while the latter is "an unhallowed perversion of the means of salvation."

In "Democracy in America," published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville added the complementary observation that separation of church and state empowers religion and freedom to collaborate to fortify American democracy. The same individual freedom and democratic equality that enable people to worship God in accordance

with conscience let loose desires, untether the imagination, and unleash conduct contrary to conscience. Amid these temptations, Tocqueville argued, Christianity imposes limits on wants and ambitions, fosters virtues, and supplies transcendent moral standards. This enables free and democratic citizens to maintain balance, discharge their responsibilities, and contribute to the public interest.

Rare among critics of Christian conservatives, my friend Jonathan Rauch (who recently joined Carl Cannon on the RealClearPolitics podcast) cherishes American constitutional government and admires its friendly stance toward religion. Nevertheless, in "Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy" Rauch takes to task white evangelicals for familiar reasons: politicizing religion, imposing their sectarian will on the nation, and supporting Donald Trump. However, Rauch's central criticism, as he notes, is surprising coming from a secular Jewish homosexual: Christian conservatives are not too Christian but rather are not Christian enough.

A veteran journalist, Brookings Institution senior fellow, and contributing writer for The Atlantic, Rauch has authored several excellent books in defense of liberal and enlightened politics and thought. In "Cross Purposes" he espouses the modern tradition of freedom, which presupposes that human beings are by nature free and equal, that legitimate government must be grounded in the consent of the governed and must be limited, and that generally applicable laws must secure individuals' equal basic rights. He champions the Madisonian view that limited constitutional government fosters the mutual give and take and compromise essential to freedom and democracy, particularly in America's exceptionally diverse – multireligious, multiracial, and multiethnic – political society. And over the years – and, he explains, thanks to considerable reflection, study, and conversation – he has been persuaded that Tocqueville was correct that the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom in America are "intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land."

Today, Rauch reports, Christianity is in crisis. Between 2007 and 2023, the number of American Christians declined 15%, which set off an avalanche of church closures and precipitated a substantial shrinkage of church congregations. If the present trend holds, the nation would "lose 30 to 40 percent of its congregations in the next 20 years." However, a Pew Research Center study published last week indicates that the contraction of America's Christian population has slowed and may have stabilized.

Rauch rejects the postliberal explanation for Christianity's decline (which he rightly traces to Nietzsche) prominently associated with University of Notre Dame Professor Patrick Deneen and his books "Why Liberalism Failed" and "Regime Change." Postliberals argue that the modern tradition of freedom must decline into "an aggressively godless, consumerist, hyperindividualistic, and self-absorbed culture, which dissolves faith and tradition." Rauch replies that postliberals exaggerate America's depravity, obscure its achievements, and

overlook free societies' self-correcting mechanisms. But he does acknowledge that "we see evidence everywhere of the inadequacy of secular liberalism to provide meaning, exaltation, spirituality, transcendence, and morality anchored in more than the self."

Rauch is not scandalized by secular liberalism's inadequacies because he understands the "implicit bargain between American democracy and American Christianity." That bargain extends beyond the Constitution's promise of religious liberty and religion's promise to operate within law's boundaries. It also encompasses the expectation that each will supply a critical lack in the other. Under a limited government that leaves questions of salvation and the best life to individuals and their families and communities, Christianity forms character, inculcates morals, and gives spiritual depth. While Christianity focuses on the soul and redemption, limited government provides the institutional structure and laws – alongside systematic and scientific inquiry that yields indispensable knowledge and know-how – that enable a diverse citizenry to live together in peace and prosperity.

The bargain is crumbling, observes Rauch, and he faults Christian conservatives. While the United States has largely upheld its end of the deal, Rauch argues, Christianity – mainline Protestants as well as evangelicals – betrayed its obligations by becoming "thin" and "sharp." Christians cast aside their rich transcendent spiritual mission, Rauch laments, to pursue harsh partisan political goals.

The gravest offenders, according to Rauch, are white evangelicals, and their gravest offense is supporting Donald Trump, a "semi-fascist," maintains Rauch: "MAGA may not be the full Mussolini, but it gets at least halfway there."

Rauch finds an inspiring alternative to white evangelicals' thin and sharp Christianity in the "Thick Christianity" taught and practiced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Church members, Rauch reports, learn about individual dignity, toleration, pluralism, forgiveness, and mutual accommodation from the Bible. And they bring these virtues, which are also virtues of freedom, to politics. Rauch highlights the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' support for a 2015 bill passed by the conservative Utah state legislature "extending non-discrimination protections to LGBT Utahns while also providing targeted exemptions for religious organizations."

Rauch's unconventional, sophisticated, and illuminating summons to Christian conservatives to put faith before politics reflects a welcome respect for religion and its vital place in America's constitutional order. Nevertheless, he is unlikely to move many Christian conservatives to repudiate Trump. Three reasons stand out.

First, correcting one church by urging it to emulate another church – especially one that subscribes to some fundamental doctrines rejected by the church whose correction is sought – is of doubtful efficacy.

Second, Rauch's treatment of white evangelicals departs from his laudable determination to listen carefully and sympathetically to other perspectives. Rauch provides alarming examples of Christian conservatives who subordinate Christianity to politics. And he quotes eloquent Christian critics of Christian conservatives. Yet he barely sketches or finds a responsible figure to explain the white evangelical case for Trump.

Indeed, Rauch misstates it. For example, he attributes white evangelical anger to fears for their religious liberty, though "Never before in American history have the law and the Supreme Court been as protective of religious liberty as they are right now." What is true about the law on the books and the Supreme Court, however, does not hold for progressive ideologues and activists in and out of government. Organizations such as Becket and Alliance Defending Freedom have their hands full filing lawsuits to counter attacks on religious liberty. Moreover, Christian conservatives' quarrel with the status quo reaches well beyond religious-liberty concerns. They support Trump for leading a robust countermovement to an illiberal progressivism that, they believe, threatens the moral and cultural foundations of American freedom.

Third, and relatedly, while harshly condemning Christian conservatives' broken bargain with democracy, Rauch neglects – indeed, he comes close to denying – democracy's broken bargain with Christianity. Yet the Justice Department's and the FBI's brutal eight-year lawfare campaign against Trump coupled with their sweeping under the rug of Hunter Biden's crimes and the Biden family's influence-peddling schemes subverted the rule of law. The mainstream media's cover up of President Joe Biden's cognitive deterioration further damaged the public's trust in journalism. The Biden administration's open borders policy harmed national security, accelerated the flow of deadly drugs into the United States, and diminished confidence in government's competence and motives. Rampant diversity, equity, and inclusion programs that classify based on race eroded toleration and political cohesiveness. A transgender ideology that belittles the pertinence of biological sex outraged common sense. And elite-university students' siding with blood-thirsty jihadists who hate freedom and democracy confirmed the growing public sense that the educational system, dominated by progressive administrators and faculty, was failing the nation.

In opposing these abuses of power, many white evangelicals do not aim to impose their religion on the nation but to call out and undertake the repair of the federal government's and elite organizations' broken bargain with the people. These Christian conservatives are not hotheads, fanatics, or authoritarians. Madisonian constitutionalism counsels fellow citizens to heed their voices, too.

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