

# **Is America Coming Apart?**

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Addressing Economic, Social,  
and Ideological Stratification  
in the United States

*A Compilation of Essays Presented at the  
2017 Values & Capitalism Faculty Retreat*



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## Introduction

In 2012, AEI Scholar Charles Murray offered a compelling diagnosis of the bifurcation of American society in his bestselling book *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*. Historically known for its large middle class and relative social equality, the US now finds itself home to a distinct upper and lower class that increasingly live in different cultures. Yet, this phenomenon is not merely five years old. As Murray argues, it is the result of decades of cultural change and steady socioeconomic trends, which have largely been hidden from the public eye.

As 2017 begins, most Americans are justifiably relieved to be leaving behind a brutal, ugly election year. However, despite all the bad, the election did serve an invaluable purpose. It sharply awakened us to the reality Murray points to, which until now had not been fully acknowledged by the country at large: America is divided across social, economic, political, racial, and ideological lines.

But what do we do with this newfound awareness? What will the consequences of social stratification be for the future of our country? What can be done to reverse—or, at the very least, adapt to—these trends?

The following essays, written by members of the Values & Capitalism Academic Network, attempt to answer these questions. Although each essay offers a distinct vision of our current situation and the proper way forward, the authors all realize that our country's division is deeper than politics. And therefore, they importantly understand that true, lasting solutions will not be legislated. They will most often be found in the context of local communities and personal relationships.

Tyler Castle

Program Manager, Values & Capitalism



# Fostering Civic Attributes in a Coming-Apart Age

*By Kevin Brown and Steve Clements*

Somehow he won.

The intelligentsia said it was not politically possible; economists mocked his heterodox economic rationality; fact-checkers exposed his myriad inconsistencies. The remarkably narcissistic real estate mogul and reality television throwback invited microscopic media scrutiny, further validating his lack of competency as a serious political figure and providing infinite fodder for sarcastic bloggers and late-night comedians.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these normally politically suicidal characteristics, Donald Trump is now president-elect for the most powerful nation in the world, and in a few days he will take office.

As expected, the postelection reactions have been as noisy and extreme as Trump himself. “Not Our President” marches (some rather unruly) cropped up in cities all across the country. Several college campuses broke out in protest or simply shut down in mourning. Social media outlets became battlegrounds for hostility and opposition.

Even the otherwise-affable Garrison Keillor was reduced to snarling at Trump supporters. In a *Washington Post* piece depicting Trump crusaders as illiterate and uneducated, Keillor suggests that “Trumpers” never really expected their guy to win: “They wanted only to whoop and yell, boo at the H-word, wear profane T-shirts, maybe grab a crotch or two, jump in the RV with a couple of six-packs and go out and shoot some spotted owls.”<sup>2</sup> The imagery is clear—any Trump vote in opposition to the “liberal elite” (his

term) could only come from a barbaric, redneck buffoon. That is, America's electorate is populated with imbeciles, and they are about to get what they deserve.

In spite of the conspicuous (and ubiquitous) nature of such commentary, sensible and reflective voices can still be found. Instead of fretting over the various apocalyptic scenarios that may occur under a Trump presidency, or deriding the supporters who turned out to "Make America Great Again," many are attempting to discern the state of the American experiment. As Arthur Brooks has suggested, there are "deeper trends" occurring across America—trends largely ignored in the political forecasting that all but promised we would awake November 9 to a Hillary Clinton presidency and GOP-controlled House (thus promising four more years of status-quo government, with ongoing executive/legislative strife between Democrats and Republicans).<sup>3</sup>

Eminent social scientists have described these trends in vivid details. In 2012, Charles Murray characterized the isolation of elites from everyone else, as the rising wealth of the top 20 percent of our socioeconomic spectrum concentrated themselves in exclusive suburbs or gentrified neighborhoods. Insights from Murray's *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* are prescient: "The new isolation involves spatial, economic, educational, cultural, and, to some degree, political isolation. This growing isolation has been accompanied by growing ignorance about the country over which our elites have so much power."<sup>4</sup>

Further illuminating the social effects of life in the upper and lower classes was Robert Putnam's 2015 book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, which examined the personal, familial, and employment lives of those in the top and bottom strata of our social order.<sup>5</sup>

Four years after the publication of *Coming Apart*, in the wake of an acrimonious election, Murray's diagnosis of an electorate split between elite and nonelite classes continues to find confirmation in various postelection reflection pieces. "There are many reasons for our troubles," writes Jill Lepore in a *New Yorker* article titled "Aftermath." "But the deepest reason is inequality: the forms of

political, cultural, and economic polarization that have been widening, not narrowing, for decades.”<sup>6</sup>

President Barack Obama spoke of a “crude sort of nationalism” built around distinctions of “us and them.”<sup>7</sup> Peggy Noonan characterized the election as a revolt of the “unprotected” against “protected and detached elites.”<sup>8</sup> Brooks describes the division as a “dignity deficit”—a bifurcated nation of winners and losers where the latter are bluntly alerted to their obsolescence: “We don’t need you anymore.”<sup>9</sup>

To summarize, we are a fractured nation with a socially segmented populace. Americans have sorted themselves into homogeneous enclaves across race, income, education, age, and partisanship. In one sense, this is natural. Homogeneity often serves as the social lubricant for belonging and affiliation among individuals.<sup>10</sup> Robert Putnam writes: “For most of us, our deepest sense of belonging is to our most intimate social networks, especially family and friends.”<sup>11</sup> That is, meaningful and authentic relationships are likely to occur more naturally among individuals who share similar characteristics (i.e., homophily—“love of the same”).

However understandable such sorting processes may be, we believe our various socially segmented arrangements threaten our future in both moral and practical terms. Though we cannot be exhaustive here, our aim in this short essay is to consider this threat and suggest some directions for reimagining an approach to our national project—“a civic culture . . . widely shared among Americans”<sup>12</sup>—that seems currently unavailable to our ideologically oriented political parties.

### **The Effects of Segmentation**

In using the term “segmentation,” we are simply acknowledging the spatial and ideological distance among our citizens across a host of social, political, and economic attributes.<sup>13</sup> Murray trenchantly captures this distance in his sketch of life in upper-class Belmont versus working-class Fishtown. Putnam’s book overflows with similar vignettes of family lives across such vastly different

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socioeconomic settings. But what, specifically, is objectionable about social segmentation in the long run?

In terms of the practical effects of segmentation, scholars have identified a broad range of social and economic ills associated with social isolation and separation.<sup>14</sup> But the problem is hardly limited to physical proximity. Indeed, groups can occupy a similar space yet still be worlds apart in their conceptions of reality, worldviews, values, and pursuits.

Ideological segmentation (politically, culturally) has been said to lead to more extreme views and less empathy among members of society.<sup>15</sup> In other words, our beliefs *matter* for the way we live. And our ability to self-select into neighborhoods, schools, work environments, recreational networks, media outlets, and so forth only reinforces this ideological gap and blunts our “democratic competencies.”<sup>16</sup>

This last point, in particular, deserves attention. The “in-group” loyalty associated with a segmented enclave of like-minded participants is at greater risk of social condescension, misunderstanding, or fear against the “out-group” other. Robert Putnam warns of the potential for conflict among homogeneous groups when only “bonding capital” (affiliation with others like me) and not “bridging capital” (affiliation with others unlike me) is the norm: “a society that has only bonding social capital risks looking like Bosnia or Belfast.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, such social bridges are “uniquely important in social life.”<sup>18</sup> Xavier De Souza Briggs writes:

Bridging ties are particularly crucial where they help bind diverse societies, expanding social and civic identities, opening up insular communities of interest, containing ethnic and other intergroup conflicts, and reducing status inequalities, for example, by widening access to valuable information and endorsements.<sup>19</sup>

The issue, says Putnam, is that if we ignore the necessity of having “bridging” relationships in our day-to-day lives, then “our efforts to reinvigorate community in America may simply lead to a more

divided society.”<sup>20</sup> Much can be written regarding the perils of a divided society, but suffice to say that it is not hospitable to American ideals of progress, prosperity, and the common good.<sup>21</sup> The success of our efforts to close the chasm evident in our physical and ideological proximity has significant implications for our future.

### **Addressing Segmentation: Left and Right**

As we suggested above, segmentation, at least as we have defined it, is a natural outworking of a liberal democratic arrangement, in which individuals and families make sensible decisions for themselves about the neighborhoods, schools, churches, and clubs with which they wish to identify. Although a seemingly ubiquitous collection of icons, symbols, and language prompts us to celebrate diversity in the United States, our populace has increasingly sorted itself into relatively homogeneous enclaves.

This is perhaps less of a contradiction than it seems. Indeed, the very notion of liberalism does not identify an overriding good around which members are morally impelled to organize. Rather, in celebrating a plurality of values and beliefs, “Liberals typically invoke higher-order principles (such as neutrality or impartiality) that are intended to transcend disagreement on specific policies.”<sup>22</sup> This is a nod to freedom, but freedom of a particular sort, in which individuals are at liberty to pursue their own conceptions of good so long as they are not prohibitive of others in their pursuit of good. “Live and let live,” we say.<sup>23</sup>

So we are on the horns of a dilemma. Several decades of socioeconomic-sorting decisions ordained by liberal philosophy have led to an increasingly segmented society. Yet the evidence is strong that such segmentation is harmful to us as a people and indicates further fraying of the body politic.

At present, our political elites have few constructive suggestions about how to reduce segmentation. Our liberal left, being naturally disposed toward principles of neutrality and impartiality, typically proposes integrating communities from above, so that less fortunate citizens may reasonably fulfill their pursuit of good alongside

their better-off peers.<sup>24</sup> To the extent that spatial segmentation is associated with an allotment of social ills and disadvantages—and thus an affront to equality—many political liberals in the US advocate for redistributing otherwise-impoorished households into nonpoverty areas and neighborhoods. This has been referred to as spatial integration or “mixing.”

Such solutions have been met with an abundance of criticism related to their modest effectiveness in reducing poverty (particularly given the cost to physically move individuals and families) and inspiring a sense of belonging.<sup>25</sup> Our efforts toward engineered mixing over the past 40 years have proved ineffective to create the enhanced standard of living, diversity, and solidarity these programs have sought.<sup>26</sup> To summarize, liberal ideology and its associated policy prescriptions appear impoverished when it comes to closing the gap in a coming-apart era.

On the other hand, it is questionable whether dimensions of conservative ideology, in its present form, rise above this impoverishment. Conservatives also invoke higher-order principles such as neutrality or impartiality—particularly in instances when state paternalism is deemed to wrongly infringe on individual freedom.

To be clear, the notion of freedom is invoked by both conservatives and liberals, as “an empty stomach [is] not conducive to freedom.”<sup>27</sup> Yet to the extent that the conservative vision of unencumbered human activity is solely defined by the absence of government action or other authoritative constraints (i.e., social norms, religious injunctions, etc.), a comparably limited conception of freedom is implied, where liberty is merely the occasion to do as one pleases. Here, freedom becomes nothing more than a euphemism for autonomy.

This conception of freedom (unfettered autonomy) is often present in the conservative defense of free markets. Conservatives rightly recognize that market structures provide incentive schemes that efficiently coordinate productive behaviors, provide gains through trade, stimulate innovation, and yield economic growth. Furthermore, conservatives recognize that markets are unparalleled in mobilizing productive forces and distributing scarce resources.

Beyond this, however, market apologists on the right tend to point to the freedom that markets afford as *ipso facto* substantiation for their existence. As Debra Satz writes, markets can be instruments for promoting freedom as they develop our capacities to choose: “markets allow people to make their own judgments about what they want to buy or sell, how hard they want to work, how much they want to save, what they value and how they value it, and what they wish to consume.”<sup>28</sup>

At face value, this seems entirely appropriate. However, this conception smuggles in a notion of freedom that makes value a subjective concept, a preference. As one ancient expression puts it: *suum cuique pulchrum est*—“to each his own is beautiful.” Put differently, under this paradigm, welfare (literally, the “condition of being or doing well”) is directly related to giving me what I want.<sup>29</sup>

To summarize, although conservatism as a philosophy often conceptualizes citizens in thickly constituted terms, they are not immune from potentially perpetuating what Robert and Edward Skidelsky call the liberty of indifference—“[where] all things are possible and nothing matters.”<sup>30</sup> Allowing agents to choose their values, they write, is one symptom of this confusion. Choice does not create value; rather, “choice responds to value.”<sup>31</sup>

Although liberals and conservatives, by category, exist on opposite sides of the political spectrum, they share a conception of freedom that has more commonalities than differences. “Both sides,” writes Harvard’s Michael Sandel, “assume that freedom consists in the capacity of people to choose their own ends.”<sup>32</sup>

Why does this matter? This assumption is prohibitive of mobilizing our otherwise-segmented social landscape toward a coherent suite of virtues worthy of our pursuit and necessarily antecedent to the American civic vision of self-governance (where early framers saw liberty and self-governance as intricately linked to the preservation and exercise of public virtue).

The aforementioned expressions of freedom, and their thinly constituted nature, fail to conceptualize citizens as relationally constituted members who realize their fulfillment in others. Our freedom, in a more traditional sense, functions out of commonality,

not in spite of it. Indeed, the notion of a “common good” is both relational and moral in its makeup. Sandel writes:

But to deliberate well about the common good requires more than the capacity to choose one’s ends and to respect others’ right to do the same. It requires a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake.<sup>33</sup>

Our current political atmosphere does not effectively inspire or encourage this knowledge and sense of belonging. Indeed, it is arguably impotent to do so.

Not only do our political ideologies have insufficient resources to combat social segmentation, but our political parties reflect the same weakness. As Yuval Levin writes in *Fractured Republic*, both Democrats and Republicans look backward to solutions and ideologies of previous eras—the Democrats to the strong union era of the ’50s and ’60s and the Republicans to the tax-cutting Reagan years of the 1980s—although the cultural and economic conditions in the country are radically different today and thus demand alternative solutions to contemporary and future problems, including segmentation.<sup>34</sup>

### **Coming Together and Moving Forward**

We believe a new approach toward segmentation is necessary—one that emphasizes certain civic attributes that are required to navigate the complexities of our social, political, and economic landscape in the coming years and cultivate the sense of belonging needed to come together and “deliberate well about the common good.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the task of cultivating civic attributes meant to address a coming-apart age invites—indeed requires—a suite of moral and pragmatic solutions.

Morally speaking, one such attribute relates to our *posture*, or our attitude toward others. If we are not careful, our beliefs and values can quickly ossify into dogmatism, in which we become deaf to the stories of those around us. Moreover, dogmatic expressions

that fuel “us and them” arrangements are not simply a function of intellect or action—but tend to originate from our attitude.

The right posture toward others, however different they may be from us, is a necessary antecedent to right practice. Put differently, Arthur Brooks, borrowing from the Dalai Lama, describes it as “warm-heartedness.”<sup>36</sup> Such a conception begins with the belief that others are a source of meaning and fulfillment, not a threat or impediment. Moreover, this perspective rightly recognizes that a significant dimension of our participation in a free democracy is bound up in, not independent of, other Americans and their pursuit of a satisfying life (what Murray calls “the heart of the American community”).<sup>37</sup>

Another moral attribute necessary for cultivating a sense of belonging in a coming-apart age is our *parlance*, or the common well of principled language that all can draw from. “I doubt people behave worse than before,” writes David Brooks, “but we are less articulate about the inner life.”<sup>38</sup> Brooks is critical of a public square deprived of moral conversation, which leads to a world where people who hunger for meaning “don’t know the right questions to ask, the right vocabulary to use, the right place to look or even if there are ultimate answers at all.”<sup>39</sup>

Murray writes: “If we ask what are the domains through which human beings achieve deep satisfactions in life—achieve happiness—the answer is that there are just four: family, vocation, community, and faith.”<sup>40</sup> Such virtues are values, and values compete in the marketplace of ideas. That is, they must be substantiated, articulated.

Thus, a significant dimension of decreasing ideological segmentation is the language we use to mobilize human activity and pursuits. Some of our greatest strides as a nation have followed from a well-articulated and compelling moral vision.

Finally, in more pragmatic terms, a sense of belonging requires our physical presence, or *proximity*, in the lives of others. In other words, it is important to think carefully about the public or shared spaces that best lubricate the pathway to social engagement.

Robert Putnam, Lewis Feldstein, and Donald Cohen write: “Again and again, we find that one key to creating social capital is to build in redundancy of contact.” They continue: “Common spaces for commonplace encounters are prerequisites for common conversations and common debate. Furthermore, networks that intersect and circles that overlap reinforce a sense of reciprocal obligation and extend the boundaries of empathy.”<sup>41</sup> This speaks to the construction of local amenities and shared spaces where common interaction and interests can occur. Parks, community centers, local newspapers, sports, and other shared venues provide “redundant multi-stranded” encounters.<sup>42</sup> Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen suggest that “webs of encounter” often need to be rewoven, and this can take place through “innovative uses of technology, creative urban and regional planning, and political will.”<sup>43</sup>

It is important to point out, as well, that the aforementioned virtues of posture and parlance (our attitude toward others and the common moral vocabulary we draw from) can be animated and indeed facilitated by our engagement of one another within these common spaces. This is consistent with the idea of “contact theory,” which asserts that healthy interaction with people from other groups can reduce prejudice and fears toward those different than us.<sup>44</sup> Contact theory or the “contact hypothesis” posits that “diversity fosters interethnic tolerance and social solidarity.”<sup>45</sup>

Our relationships moderate our ideas, beliefs, and values, and in a mutually causal manner, our ideas, beliefs, and values can also moderate and reinforce our relationships. As Emmanuel Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, our moral sensibilities become most acute in the presence of others.<sup>46</sup>

These attributes differ in many ways, but all draw on a *thick* conception of freedom (not simply freedom to do what I please, but freedom to do what I ought). This conception also recognizes the moral bonds and common fate we share with others (even those different than us), and it inspires and promotes arrangements where all can flourish. Murray writes: “Age-old human wisdom has understood that a life well lived requires engagement with those around us.”<sup>47</sup>

In sum, our appeal is to a new governing philosophy that encourages—indeed incentivizes—the creation of neighborhoods and communities that promote posture, parlance, and proximity. Moreover, we humbly suggest that such conditions offer an appropriate starting point for rebuilding our economy and social order, especially in the rural and urban areas that have been emptied out by economic changes over the past four to five decades.

As noted, our current elites appear less than capable of casting a vision for a coming-together future in a coming-apart age. Pro-government liberals and avid redistributionists tend to advocate for vast, federal, one-size-fits-all education and unemployment/reemployment programs that typically will not address concerns of distressed American communities. Similarly, antigovernment conservatives who appeal solely to market outcomes without considering the conditions, values, and virtues that presuppose market activity will also fall short in addressing these concerns.

We would like to see a vision emerge that draws on the efficacy of free market capitalism accompanied by the intentional pursuit of an integrated society, which—in Tocquevillian fashion—can be realized through churches, civic groups, and other mediating institutions being nudged, coordinated, and encouraged through governmental and nongovernmental entities.

### Conclusion

In the spirit of the Values & Capitalism project, we seek to counteract segmentation by first appealing to what we believe are necessary civic attributes for a coming-apart age. Our most recent election cycle is merely a symptom (or a signal) of deeper trends, not their cause, and our tendency to entrench into an “us and them” mentality would be a mistake. Our present circumstances call for us to close our proximate and ideological gap, articulate a thickly constituted expression of freedom, and cultivate the civic attributes that would animate networks of social intercourse.

Of course, such bridging can be complicated and complex. *Textured*. Yet in Murray’s judgment, this is our most rewarding

arrangement. “It can be pleasant to lead a glossy life, but it is ultimately more rewarding—and more fun—to lead a textured life, and to be in the midst of others who are leading textured lives.”<sup>48</sup>

### About the Authors

Kevin Brown is an associate professor in Asbury University’s Howard Dayton School of Business, where he directs the MBA program and teaches courses in ethics, business, and economics at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Steve Clements is an associate professor at Asbury University, where he is program director of political science and also serves as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

### Notes

1. The “remarkably narcissistic” description comes from Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner. See Dan P. McAdams, “The Mind of Donald Trump,” *Atlantic*, June 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/the-mind-of-donald-trump/480771/>.

2. Garrison Keillor, “Trump Voters Will Not Like What Happens Next,” *Washington Post*, November 9, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-voters-will-not-like-what-happens-next/2016/11/09/e346ffc2-a67f-11e6-8fco-7be8f848c492\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-voters-will-not-like-what-happens-next/2016/11/09/e346ffc2-a67f-11e6-8fco-7be8f848c492_story.html).

3. David Brooks, “What Is Your Purpose?,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/05/opinion/david-brooks-what-is-your-purpose.html>.

4. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York, NY: Crown Publishing, 2013), 22.

5. Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

6. Jill Lepore, “Wars Within,” *New Yorker*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/aftermath-sixteen-writers-on-trumps-america#lepore>.

7. Kevin Liptak, “Obama: Trump Tapped into a ‘Troubling’ Strain,”

CNN.com, November 15, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/15/politics/obama-greece-news-conference/index.html>.

8. Peggy Noonan, "What Comes After the Uprising," *Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/what-comes-after-the-uprising-1478824753>.

9. Arthur Brooks, "How Donald Trump Filled the Dignity Deficit," *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-donald-trump-filled-the-dignity-deficit-1478734436>.

10. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 279–80.

11. *Ibid.*, 274.

12. Murray, *Coming Apart*, 12.

13. We deliberately chose to use the word "segmentation" over "segregation" since the latter expression is freighted with a variety of images, ideas, and experiences that extend beyond the boundaries of our subject area.

14. For example, in terms of race and income, residential segmentation has been criticized for perpetuating an "underclass" in which low- to moderate-income households or racial minorities are more likely to live in dilapidated living structures, experience lower housing returns, receive inferior education, and suffer isolation from resource networks that would otherwise influence job opportunities ("spatial mismatch"). Related, scholars have speculated about the presence of "neighborhood effects"—or the causal effect of a neighborhood on the social, economic, and health outcomes of its inhabitants.

15. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2009); and *Economist*, "The Big Sort," June 19, 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/11581447>.

16. Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 102.

17. Robert D. Putnam, Lewis Feldstein, and Donald J. Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 279.

18. Xavier De Souza Briggs, "Some of My Best Friends Are . . . : Interracial Friendships, Class, and Segregation in America," *City and Community*

6, no. 4 (2007): 263–90.

19. Ibid.

20. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 362.

21. On a more ominous note, Trevor Noah, who grew up in apartheid South Africa, warns that there are costs beyond “the death of progress” for divided societies: “Divided people are easier to rule. That was, after all, the whole point of apartheid.” See Trevor Noah, “Trevor Noah: Let’s Not Be Divided. Divided People Are Easier to Rule.,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2016, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/opinion/trevor-noah-lets-not-be-divided-divided-people-are-easier-to-rule.html>.

22. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, “Moral Conflict and Political Consensus,” *Ethics* 101, no. 1 (1990): 64–88.

23. Of course, such an expression has its own unique application in contemporary political liberalism. That said, it still shares a significant philosophical lineage to classical liberalism.

24. For example, the famous 20th-century liberal philosopher John Rawls advocated for the necessity of primary social goods such as rights, liberties, opportunities, and wealth—goods that everyone wants regardless of whatever else they want (what has been called a “thin” conception of the good).

25. Indeed, increased diversity unaccompanied by increased social interaction among diverse individuals is more likely to breed conflict than harmony. See Dietlind Stolle, Stuart Soroka, and Richard Johnston, “When Does Diversity Erode Trust? Neighborhood Diversity, Interpersonal Trust and the Mediating Effect of Social Interactions,” *Political Studies* 56, no. 1 (2008): 57–75.

26. Over the past 40 years, there have been four major overtures toward residential mixing (both in terms of race and income): the Gatreux dispersal program, the Moving to Opportunity dispersal project (MTO), the HOPE VI Initiative, and the Mount Laurel land usage legislation.

27. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 189.

28. Debra Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22.

29. A particularly strident expression of unfettered freedom in a marketplace context comes from Jason Brennan and Peter Jaworski in their

2015 book *Markets Without Limits*. From private acts such as sex to political acts of voting—if something can be done for free, they write, then it can be done for money. (Note, though, that Brennan and Jaworski would likely not self-identify as “conservative.”) As mentioned, this risks snuffing out the moral significance of our preferences, making choice its own value (as opposed to judging the value of a choice based on the nature of what is chosen). Consistent with this suggestion is a comment from economist Jodi Beggs. Responding to the suggestion that it is important to value goods in an appropriate way, she writes, “Who in the hell are you to tell people what they ‘should’ be valuing? Some economists may try to account for tastes, but none of us are presumptuous enough to tell anyone what their tastes should be.” See Jason Brennan and Peter M. Jaworski, *Markets Without Limits: Moral Virtues and Commercial Interests* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015); and J. Beggs, “My Imagined Yet Realistic Debate Between Michael Sandel and the Economics World,” *Economists Do It with Models*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.economistsdoitwithmodels.com/2012/11/24/my-imagined-yet-realistic-debate-between-michael-sandel-and-the-economics-world/>.

30. Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much Is Enough? Money and the Good Life* (New York, NY: Other Press, 2013), 160–61.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Michael J. Sandel, “America’s Search for a New Public Philosophy,” *Atlantic*, 1996, 57–74; and Brooks, “What Is Your Purpose?”

33. *Ibid.*

34. Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America’s Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016).

35. While far from exhaustive, and recognizing that a variety of other attributes could be incorporated, these are the attributes we wanted to emphasize.

36. Arthur Brooks, “Values and Capitalism Summer Conference 2016 Opening Address” (speech, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, June 10, 2016).

37. Murray, *Coming Apart*, 239.

38. Brooks, “What Is Your Purpose?”

39. *Ibid.*

40. Murray, *Coming Apart*, 259 (italics in original).

41. Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 291.
42. *Ibid.*, 292.
43. *Ibid.*, 294.
44. Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 106.
45. Robert D. Putnam, "Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st Century: The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (June 2007): 137–74.
46. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Norwell, MA: Duquesne, 1969).
47. Murray, *Coming Apart*, 310.
48. *Ibid.*

# Evangelicals Coming Apart? The Three Faces of Evangelical Politics in the 2016 Election

*By Darren Patrick Guerra*

In his book *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, Charles Murray chronicles the unprecedented and growing levels of economic and social division in America. In Murray's account of the increasing divide between Americans along lines of class and culture, he creates two fictionalized towns that serve as archetypes for the growing divisions: Fishtown, the blue collar, working-class town, and Belmont, an upper-middle-class town. Citizens in each town increasingly live in vastly different economic and cultural landscapes, and they rarely interact with or even understand each other.

In several ways, Murray's analysis came to life in the divisions over the 2016 presidential election. One election statistic suggestive of Murray's thesis is that Trump won 76 percent of counties with a Cracker Barrel and lost 78 percent of counties with a Whole Foods.

Likewise, the evangelical voting patterns saw similar, albeit not identical, cultural and economic divisions in the 2016 election. On one hand, evangelicals seemed unified, with 81 percent of white evangelicals voting for Trump in the general election, which surprisingly topped Mitt Romney's, John McCain's, and George W. Bush's totals (78, 76, and 78 percent respectively). Also, the dominant media narrative credited evangelicals with propelling Trump's early success in the Republican primaries.

On the other hand, high-profile evangelical elites publicly and bitterly feuded among themselves over whether to support Donald Trump. For example, an *Atlantic* article headline concluded that the election revealed “deep fractures” among churches within the evangelical movement.<sup>1</sup> The *Washington Times* headline reported, “Trump Candidacy Divides Evangelicals, Possibly Irreparably.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the end, when it came time to choose between Trump or Clinton, there did seem to be relative unity on November 8. However, as we will see, that veneer of unity masked deeper fissures in the evangelical world.

First of all, it should be noted that most analysis of evangelical voting centers on white evangelicals, and there are some valid methodological and scholarly reasons for this. Looking at white evangelicals does, however, overstate the amount of political unity in the evangelical church. Overall, 50 percent of evangelicals lean Republican, and 30 percent identify as Democrat. For Latinos, 30 percent identify as Republican, and 48 percent identify as Democrat (9 points higher than the national average among all Latinos).<sup>3</sup> For African American evangelicals, only 11 percent identify as Republican, which is only 1 percent higher than the national average for all African Americans.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, white evangelicals tilt Republican 76 percent to 20 percent (22 points higher than the national average for whites).<sup>5</sup>

It should also be noted that the widely reported decline in religious belief is somewhat exaggerated since the rise in those claiming no religious affiliation is due largely to persons who were previously nominally religious finally dropping any claims of religious identity.<sup>6</sup> Overall, evangelicals comprise nearly 62 million Americans, and evangelical identification has remained pretty steady over the past 15 years, comprising roughly 25 percent of the population and 26 percent of the electorate.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Three Faces of Evangelicals in 2016**

Despite an eager and misleading media narrative that suggested a groundswell of evangelical support for Trump during the Republican

primaries, Trump only garnered an average of 36 percent of the evangelical vote between Iowa and Indiana, which is the period during which evangelicals had other Republican choices.<sup>8</sup> A close look at the exit polls in the primaries revealed essentially three groups of evangelicals in the 2016 election cycle.<sup>9</sup> I call these groups Jacksonian Evangelicals, Social Capital Evangelicals, and Elite Evangelicals. In Charles Murray's framework, the first group would live in or near Fishtown, while the second two would live in or near Belmont.

**Jacksonian Evangelicals.** Historically, in American politics, Jacksonians are highly nationalistic voters who reside in rural and urban blue-collar communities. They are fiercely egalitarian in the sense that they despise Wall Street bankers, Washington insiders, and cultural elites. In Charles Murray's terms, these voters likely hail from Fishtown.

There is a long historical precedent for these types of voters periodically rising up in anger and disrupting the political equilibrium, as was seen with Andrew Jackson himself, William Jennings Bryan, and to a lesser extent, Ross Perot. These voters were largely the Reagan Democrats who emerged in 1980 but were never brought into the Republican fold.

Walter Russell Mead wrote about this phenomenon long before the 2016 election in *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, in which he cited Jacksonians as a persistent force in American foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> It was Mead again, along with Steve Inskeep and others, who first began to connect the Jacksonian phenomenon with the rise of Trump. Jacksonian voters provided a firm and unwavering plurality foundation for Trump during the primaries and the general election, and it was on this foundation that Trump built his Republican and general-election coalition. Here is a description of Jacksonians from Mead himself:

Jacksonians don't have much respect for the educated and the credentialed. Like William F. Buckley, they would rather be governed by the first 100 names in the phonebook than by the Harvard faculty.

They loathe the interfering busybodies of the progressive state, believe that government (except for the police and the military) is a necessary evil, think most “experts” and university professors are no smarter or wiser than other people, and feel only contempt for the gender theorists and the social justice warriors of the contemporary classroom.

Virtually everything about progressive politics today is about liquidating the Jacksonian influence in American life. From immigration policy, touted as ending the era when American whites were the population of the United States, to gun policy and to regulatory policy, President Obama and his coalition aim to crush what Jacksonians love, empower what they fear, and exalt what they hate.

Jacksonian America is many things; well organized isn’t one of them. Jacksonians are found in both political parties; most are habitually indifferent to national politics, seeing all politicians as equally corrupt, equally useless. Other than the NRA, there are not many national organizations organized around the promotion of a Jacksonian agenda. In the world of think tanks and elite media, the Jacksonian voice is seldom heard and never heeded.<sup>11</sup>

So how do Jacksonians connect with the evangelical movement? In short, most Jacksonian Evangelicals exhibit lower levels of religiosity than the other groups. In the South especially, many Jacksonians are nominal evangelicals who attend church sparsely but self-identify as evangelical or born-again. Many of the early evangelical Trump voters in the primaries were likely Jacksonians first and foremost and adopted the evangelical label only as an afterthought. Primary exit polls showed that the self-identified evangelicals supporting Trump were far less likely to attend church than those supporting Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio.<sup>12</sup>

For many, but certainly not all, the evangelical label was likely more of a vague cultural affiliation rather than an indicator of deeply held religious beliefs and behaviors. If Charles Murray is right, Jacksonian residents of Fishtown would have higher levels of fundamentalism among those who are religious, but overall Jacksonians would be less religious than their more upwardly mobile

counterparts.<sup>13</sup> However, the intensity of the fundamentalism among the one-third of religious Jacksonians gives the illusion of higher levels of religiosity among the other two-thirds.

Jacksonian Evangelicals, then, display lower levels of religiosity on average, are on the lower end of the economic scale, and are less socially connected than other evangelicals. They seemed to be driven by economic and immigration concerns, which for them are inexorably connected. Culturally, they also seemed to be responding to the dominant culture's stifling political correctness and anti-Americanism on the left. They were drawn to Trump's seeming imperviousness to the dominant PC culture.

These voters were heavily present in the early pluralities of evangelical voters that were delivering victories for Trump in the Southern primaries, while the evangelicals from the outskirts and inner core of Belmont were still keeping their distance. This all changed after Indiana and the Republican Convention, when the more-religious evangelicals began to open up to Trump.

**Social Capital Evangelicals.** These evangelicals attend church more regularly than Jacksonians and are far more civically minded and socially active than the Jacksonians. In Murray's terms, they are more likely to live in or around Belmont than they are in Fish-town. This group of evangelicals relies heavily on their church communities and networks for sifting information and forming opinions about the world and politics. They "have strong family ties and wide circles of friends, are active in churches and voluntary organizations and work steadily"—all attributes that are minimal or declining among the Jacksonians.<sup>14</sup>

Michael Barone noticed in late March 2016 that there was a correlation between socially active and connected communities and a rejection of Trump as a candidate.<sup>15</sup> Barone built his observation on political scientist Robert Putnum's work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, which tracked declines in social capital among Americans since the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> As Barone notes, Charles Murray's work shows that these declines are real, but they are uneven—with upper-class whites still exhibiting much

higher levels of social capital than in the lower fifth of income and education levels.<sup>17</sup>

Social Capital Evangelicals are the rank and file of the evangelical movement. Based on the early primary exit polling, these voters probably represent 60–70 percent of the white evangelical vote and are by far the largest block of evangelical voters.

Barone argues that these voters resisted Trump in the upper Midwest among, for example, dense social networks of Dutch-American counties around Grand Rapids, Michigan.<sup>18</sup> This would help explain why Trump did better in southeast Missouri, an area with indicators of low social connectedness (such as high rates of disability insurance), than he did in southwest Missouri, which is headquarters for the Assemblies of God, a group with dense church networks.<sup>19</sup> It also helps explain why Trump did worse in Oklahoma, which has higher rates of church attendance, than in South Carolina.<sup>20</sup> In Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin, Trump actually did worse among evangelicals than he did among nonevangelicals.<sup>21</sup>

Their early rejection of Trump as a group had several dimensions. On one side, the higher religiosity of these voters made them more critical of Trump's moral failings. On another side, their more socially connected existence raised the social costs of openly supporting Trump. In other words, given the pervasive Trump virtue signaling and "Trump-shaming" in the larger culture, Social Capital Evangelicals did not want to risk losing friends or being ostracized from their PTA groups, Bible studies, or Rotary clubs.<sup>22</sup> They only began to move in Trump's direction once they felt they had no choice.

**Elite Evangelicals.** The last group that seemed to show up in the primary voting surveys were Elite Evangelicals. These are the institutional leaders of the evangelical world. These folks live in the core of Belmont and likely live and circulate in very elite social circles.

Given their positions and social group, Elite Evangelicals value their public reputation and credibility in a way that separates them from the rank-and-file Social Capital Evangelicals. Elite Evangelicals have more at risk than their own personal reputation. They

have the reputations of their respective organizations and the evangelical movement as a whole to consider. Indeed, some were concerned for the reputation of Christians and Christianity as a whole if it were too closely tied to Trump.

Given these responsibilities and Trump's highly negative public profile, they seemed far more reticent to embrace Trump's candidacy. With some notable exceptions, many were some of Trump's most vocal critics.

It is worth noting that while Elite Evangelicals are committed social conservatives, their economic and social status insulates them somewhat from the actual fallout of losing battles in the culture war in a way that the rank and file might not be able to escape. Elite Evangelicals in Belmont do not have to face the rampant drug abuse or broken families that might inhabit Fishtown, and their kids are less likely to go to schools where transgender bathrooms or teen pregnancy are prevalent.<sup>23</sup> This reality makes the culture wars much less visceral for them.

*World Magazine* conducted a periodic survey of top evangelical leaders over the course of the election that included anywhere from 77 to 100 respondents. While this is a highly selective group, it is likely reflective of a much wider circle of elites.<sup>24</sup> In stark contrast to the on-average 36 percent support (mostly from Jacksonians) for Trump in the early primaries, only a meager 5 percent of Elite Evangelicals in the *World* survey supported Trump as of March 22, 2016. Among this group, 41 percent said they would write in a name rather than vote for Trump in a two-way Clinton/Trump race.<sup>25</sup>

Even once Trump had secured the nomination, only 22 percent supported him as the candidate, and a full 74 percent identified as “never Trump” voters. A majority (51 percent) of these “never Trumpers” said they were not open to being swayed and would not vote for Trump “no matter what.”<sup>26</sup>

By September, Elite Evangelical support for Trump had jumped to 44 percent.<sup>27</sup> While an increase of 39 percentage points in Elite Evangelical support for Trump is significant, it is a far cry from the 81 percent support among white evangelicals as a whole.<sup>28</sup> If the last surveys were correct, then in the end, a majority of Elite

Evangelicals never supported Trump, and instead they were some of his most vocal critics among conservatives.

### Conclusions

An obvious question, then, is if there were so much division in the primaries, why did evangelicals largely coalesce around Trump in the end? One answer is that many felt they had no choice, and a Hobbesian spirit of self-preservation drove them into Trump's arms.

For example, it is telling that 70 percent of the entire electorate said that the membership of the Supreme Court was the most important or an important factor in their vote for president. Trump won these voters 50 to 46 percent, while in contrast, he lost by 10 percentage points among those to whom the Court mattered little or not at all.<sup>29</sup>

Now certainly the Supreme Court, as an election issue, is far from a proxy for social conservatives or religious voters, but one cannot deny that many of the key cultural issues facing the Court center on religious liberty, traditional moral values, and abortion on demand. In fact, the *World* survey revealed abortion, the Supreme Court, and religious liberty as leading issues even among Elite Evangelicals. This suggests that the Court's future weighed heavily in evangelical support for Trump.

Perhaps a key factor for evangelicals then was the totalitarian lurch by leftists in the months leading up to the election. With threats to pastors in Iowa,<sup>30</sup> government harassment of bakers and florists in Oregon and Washington who refuse to service gay weddings,<sup>31</sup> and legislative threats to shut down religious higher education in California,<sup>32</sup> many religious voters may have felt no other choice than to turn to Trump in the face of this powerful onslaught. Clinton assuredly would appoint justices who had little or no respect for traditional religious liberty, while Trump at least promised to appoint constitutionalist judges and even provided a list of names. In the end, it seemed that the attitude that drove many evangelicals to support Trump was expressed by pro-life

leader Scott Klusendorf as it was better to elect a “second-rate fire-fighter over a first-class arsonist.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite the final vote, the question still remains: is the evangelical movement, as a political force, coming apart? As we have seen, Trump’s candidacy revealed significant social and political divisions among evangelicals, and these fissures certainly could grow, depending on how things play out in the near future. For example, Jacksonians frame economic and immigration issues in far more nationalistic or patriotic terms than do the Social Capital or Elite Evangelicals. Thus, depending on Trump’s ultimate policy directions on such matters, one can imagine increasing tensions among evangelicals on trade and immigration issues.

In addition, there is also potential for increasing division on social issues. The fractures may arise, surprisingly enough, from the left’s growing willingness to use government coercion to enforce a new sexual orthodoxy on the nation. While all three groups agree for the most part on orthodox Christian sexuality and religious liberty in the abstract, there may be growing tensions on the best way to mount a defense. The Jacksonians and many of the Social Capital Evangelicals still mostly see the importance of manning the barricades in the culture war, largely because the battles are being fought in their neighborhoods and front yards. In contrast, there are signs that some Elite Evangelicals are tiring of the fight and looking for ways to tactically retreat.

For example, organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals and the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities are rolling out a legislative initiative called Fairness for All, which essentially offers to support increased federal civil rights for LGBT individuals in exchange for religious exemptions from such laws for religious institutions. Elite Evangelicals may see this legislation as a pragmatic and sophisticated attempt to preserve Christian institutions, yet Jacksonians and Social Capital Evangelicals in the rank and file may view such efforts as selling out by leaving religious individuals and small businesses exposed to a new federal law that would grant executive agencies vast new powers to advance the LGBT agenda nationwide.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, a more concrete sign of hope for evangelical unity may be found in the crisis surrounding the SB 1146 controversy in California in the summer of 2016. Not only did evangelicals, Catholics, and religious persons of all stripes pull together to defend religious liberty in that battle, but perhaps a decisive factor in the conflict was the impressive multiethnic evangelical coalition formed as African American, Latino, Asian, and white evangelical churches all joined together to effectively undermine Democratic support for the legislation.<sup>35</sup> At one point, hundreds of African American parishioners from Los Angeles chartered buses to march and lobby in Sacramento.

Pressure from minority churches and church leaders put Democratic lawmakers in a bind between two of their key constituencies, and support for SB 1146 swiftly eroded. The battle over SB 1146 showed that perhaps when the threats against religious liberty are focused and clear, there can be real, political unity among an ethnically diverse Christian church in some important, albeit narrow, areas.

One way to move forward is for evangelicals to work together on modeling sustained and substantive political dialogue. During the 2016 election, the conflicts between evangelicals became extremely heated in some cases. In one sense, this is simply healthy debate, but in another sense it was surprising that communities formed by grace showed so little of it toward their fellow believers.

While evangelicals might generally disagree on public policy and politics, they do so within a broad framework of loosely shared views about human nature and biblical authority. In addition, there is a shared philosophical belief in a common good anchored in a metaphysical reality and moral order that exists outside of space and time. This higher truth provides a basis, and a purpose, for sustained dialogue.

In contrast, many in the larger society believe that the common good is nothing more than the aggregation of individual preferences or the product of raw exertions of human power. In such a context, Machiavelli or Hobbes, and not Aquinas or Plato, rule the

day, and in that context *power*, and not *reasoned deliberation*, is the coin of the realm.

While Christianity still provides the best, fullest, and most accessible window on understanding truth, Plato and other ancients have shown us that the metaphysical reality that allows for a real common good to exist is accessible to all humans, not just Christians.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Christians have a unique responsibility to the larger community to testify in word and deed that a sound understanding of the common good can best be attained by sustained political deliberation and not raw exertions of power.

If these trends of leftist intolerance continue, it will be increasingly important that evangelicals model respectful, sustained political conversation as an example of what reasoned deliberation looks like. In the end, regardless of the larger context, evangelicals should model public discourse that is respectful, knowledgeable, and winsome, not just because of their faith, but for the good of our political community and the larger world.

### About the Author

Darren Patrick Guerra is an associate professor of political science at Biola University, with a scholarly focus on American politics, constitutional law, and public policy. He is the author of *Perfecting the Constitution: The Case for the Article V Amendment Process* (Lexington Books, 2013).

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8. This is based on my analysis of exit polling from Iowa through Indiana. After the Indiana primary, evangelicals no longer had alternatives to choose from, thus results after Indiana are not helpful in answering this question. I used exit polling data collected from CNN.com and Fox.com, but Fox.com has since taken their polling down. See CNN, "Republican Exit Polls," <http://www.cnn.com/election/primaries/polls>.

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36. See Romans 1:19–22.

# The Necessity of the Transcendent in a Fragmented Society

By William T. Reddinger

Alexis de Tocqueville famously observed that the most conspicuous feature of American society in the 1830s was the “equality of conditions.”<sup>1</sup> While such a social condition could foster an excessive individualism and isolation,<sup>2</sup> Tocqueville suggested that Americans were far from isolated. Instead, they were not only equal—a people neither very rich nor very poor<sup>3</sup>—but also together. They were a people who shared a common moral (if not doctrinal) creed<sup>4</sup> and a common habit of solving similar problems by joining associations designed for that purpose.<sup>5</sup>

Sociologists in the 21st century see a different America. Many economists, sociologists, and political scientists across the ideological spectrum fear the emergence of fragmentation and even stratification in American society. Two recent books illustrate this concern.

First, Charles Murray argues in *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* that America has something in the 21st century that it never had before: an upper class and a lower class.<sup>6</sup> Whereas in the past American society was essentially equal—and this more than anything else is what made it exceptional—Murray argues that between 1960 and 2010 American society saw the emergence of an upper class whose wealth, intellect, and cultural tastes seem to be almost foreign to the remaining majority of Americans’ tastes.<sup>7</sup>

Second, J. D. Vance’s 2016 book *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* tells the same tale in a less scholarly but no less persuasive manner.<sup>8</sup> *Hillbilly Elegy* is a heart-wrenching

story of Vance's own emergence from the squalor and social dysfunction of white, Scots-Irish Appalachia.

Vance's own picture of multigenerational poverty reveals the ways in which certain fragments of American society seem to be almost completely isolated from—and therefore ignorant of—the habits and customs that allow other parts of society to flourish.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Vance shows that multigenerational poverty, a phrase Americans often associate with the plight of inner-city African Americans, is by no means limited to that demographic.<sup>10</sup>

What can be done? Certainly, free markets and reducing excessive entitlement benefits are necessary to encourage socioeconomic mobility. Two reasons for this warrant a brief mention.

First, and most fundamentally, an irony of the modern welfare state is that while expansive welfare state assistance advocates aspire to help the poor by reducing inequality, it is difficult to resist the evidence that the heavy taxation necessary to support the welfare state reduces the capital accumulation and savings necessary for economic opportunity at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. In other words, rather than reduce inequality, large welfare state programs may actually augment inequality by making upward mobility more difficult.<sup>11</sup>

Second, large-scale entitlement programs ironically have the potential to create governmental dependence that has formed a lower class in both major racial demographics in the United States; this dependency appears at least partly to have occurred as a result of the atrophy of society's most fundamental institution—the family.<sup>12</sup>

Any comprehensive response to the emergent stratification in American society must therefore include a policy component that would require Americans to be responsible for finding material security ultimately in one's own earned success.<sup>13</sup> This essay assumes the modern welfare state's paradoxical dangers to the poor and the free market's desirability as a superior economic arrangement.

Although any discussion of social stratification must consider such concerns, this essay focuses on something even more fundamental: widespread religious belief and valuing the higher things in

life. In brief, this essay argues that attempts to achieve the free market's institutional or structural conditions are necessary but not sufficient in responding to cultural stratification. Instead, the challenge of the 21st century requires an economic culture informed by belief in transcendent truths that lie beyond the forces of supply and demand.

I defend this thesis in two parts. The first part is general and theoretical; I argue for the importance of robust *religious belief* for sustaining the free market and consider Tocqueville's and Wilhelm Röpke's arguments that for a free society to remain free, it must be informed by sincere religious belief. Tocqueville and Röpke speak less immediately to the problem of social stratification, but they do provide the framework for understanding the vital importance of religious belief for sustaining a free market and helping the poor in a condition of social stratification or any other arrangement.

In the second part, I turn from a theoretical argument to a practical and empirical consideration of the social utility of religious practice in responding to the problems Murray and Vance identified. Both men help us understand the value of religious belief for confronting the challenge of stratification in contemporary American society. Although different, both sections teach the necessity of a culture informed by sincere religious belief to generally support free market society (the first part) and to particularly help the poor in 21st-century American society (the second part).

### **Lessons from Tocqueville and Röpke: The Utility of Religious Belief in Perpetuating a Free Society**

The good news is that a truly free market can give the new American underclass the possibility of upward mobility. The bad news is that the free market, left to itself without the help of an economic culture informed by beliefs that transcend economics, fosters a materialism that paradoxically encourages a large welfare state, which has the potential to harm the poor rather than

help them. Any defense of the free market must then include some means to prevent free market society from a native tendency to degradation.

This, in any case, was the view of the two theorists whom we consider in this section. They were great defenders of a free society and great critics of socialism. Therefore, they can by no means be interpreted as opposing a freely functioning market. Yet both were deeply suspicious of any social arrangement's capacity to produce unlimited progress or eradicate social ills. In brief, both regarded religion as crucial for providing the values and norms of behavior that must undergird the free market.

The first theorist is Alexis de Tocqueville. Few theorists or statesmen were as critical of socialism's emerging threat in the 19th century as was Tocqueville. In *Recollections on the Revolution of 1848*, Tocqueville expressed his deep suspicion of socialism's spirit that contributed significantly to the social upheaval of 1848.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in his greatest and most well-known work, *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argued that equality of conditions and free market society seemed to be less a positive good and more a necessary evil. One recent commentator even suggests that Tocqueville's analysis of market society implies that "capitalism itself may be a road to serfdom."<sup>15</sup>

According to Tocqueville, this is because democratic market society encourages "love of material enjoyments." On the other hand, religion inspires "wholly contrary instincts" because there "is no religion that does not place man's desires beyond and above earthly goods and that does not naturally raise his soul toward regions much superior to those of the senses."<sup>16</sup>

Religion's power to bring men's hearts and minds to think of the super material is necessary because when men are not sure about what is true or false "in the matter of religion," then "they want at least that all be firm and stable in the material order and as they are no longer able to capture their former beliefs, they give themselves a master."<sup>17</sup>

The natural resting place of that man who lacks any sure religious belief appears to be to live one's life as comfortably as possible with

the help of what Tocqueville called “an immense tutelary power,”<sup>18</sup> but which we can with some reason today call the modern welfare state.<sup>19</sup> Murray captures this phenomenon well in what he calls the Europe Syndrome, which is a social pathology in which the purpose of life seems to be “to while away the time between birth and death as pleasantly as possible, and the purpose of government is to make it as easy as possible to while away the time as pleasantly as possible.”<sup>20</sup>

Tocqueville thought that a market society, left to itself, tended to foster a frenetic and restive pursuit after the enjoyment of the goods of this world.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in the absence of a belief in another world and in a future state of rewards and punishments, citizens tend to demand immediate gratification of their desires: “the final object being to enjoy [material things], the means of arriving at it must be prompt and easy, without which the trouble of acquiring the enjoyment would surpass the enjoyment.”<sup>22</sup>

That great force in modern democracies that fosters the easy enjoyment of material things and material security is the state. Tocqueville believed that any market society, left to run its own course without the guidance of religious belief, must necessarily end in what we today call a welfare state or worse.

To conclude, helping those at the bottom of the new American divide means encouraging free markets rather than solutions in the Great Society’s tradition. Yet Tocqueville’s teaching on market society leads one to conclude that free markets in the absence of a robust religious faith are unable to produce the conditions necessary for the continuation of free markets.

Less well-known than Tocqueville was the German-Swiss economist Wilhelm Röpke. More than anyone else, Röpke influenced the economic thinking of Ludwig Erhard, who directed the push for free markets that led to the German economic miracle following World War II.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Röpke was less favorable to free market society than were some contemporary free market defenders; he offered a conservative or *ordo-liberal* counterpoint to the Austrian classical liberal defense of the free market from thinkers such as Von Mises and Friedrich Hayek.

Röpke was especially focused on avoiding deep social inequality and stratification because those in squalor are more susceptible to political radicalism. He was therefore much more concerned than his more classical liberal contemporaries were with avoiding social stratification and other inequalities. Even as a free market defender, Röpke criticized classical liberalism as too reliant on free market forces to bring about human flourishing. Classical liberals tend to think that freedom itself encourages the moral conditions necessary for a free society's continuation, but Röpke argued that a free society's moral conditions must come from outside the market.<sup>24</sup>

Röpke's combination of free market economics, sound money, and a freely operating price mechanism made him significantly similar to Hayek and other Austrian thinkers. Yet he was at times critical of classical liberal economists because, he argued, they failed to remember Tocqueville's lesson that the free market, in the absence of a robust economic culture, contained the seeds of its own demise. Assistance to the poor, furtherance of economic growth, and protection of a free society depends on something more fundamental than economics. A free market, for Röpke, was necessary but not sufficient.

He argued in *A Humane Economy* that the most important things in life—religion, family, truth, and beauty—are things that are beyond (or ought to be beyond) the forces of supply and demand.<sup>25</sup> Such higher things must necessarily inform a society, its leaders, and its people if it is to have an economic culture that resists a drift toward the welfare state or socialism. Two reasons for this merit some detailed attention.

First, Röpke criticized socialism and liberalism for their appeal to the same fundamental view of man, one that sees man as being an essentially material *homo economicus*. If this charge is accurate, then the primary motivation encouraged in a socialist society—material security or improvement—is not significantly different than that which one finds in a free market society, and this suggests that, in an economic culture that is not informed by belief in something transcendent, there is little to prevent a free market

society from drifting into a socialist society. In other words, consistently pursuing material improvement in market societies may habituate people to long for material security and exclude pursuing higher things.

The second point that we must notice about his thought—especially his concept of the “asymmetry of the market”<sup>26</sup>—is that rather than maintaining stasis between the market realm and the aforementioned higher-things-of-life realm, free market societies tend to bleed market forces into areas traditionally not reserved for them, such as family and religion, in such a way that those higher things either become monetized or atrophy.<sup>27</sup> The free market, then, tends to attack the very values and institutions necessary for the free market’s perpetuation.

Any solution to perpetuating economic freedom—and the well-being of the less well off—must then include considering how to promote those transcendent values that a free society depends on but that the free market cannot produce.<sup>28</sup>

### **Lessons from Murray and Vance: The Utility of Religious Practice in Responding to Social Stratification**

The foregoing analysis of Tocqueville’s and Röpke’s economic thought strongly suggests religion’s utility for fostering healthy economic culture. What does all that mean for Murray, Vance, and other writers concerned about the emergent stratification in American society? The description of the new American social stratification in Murray’s and Vance’s recent works suggests that any response to the social dangers of that stratification will require preserving religious beliefs—and churches that encourage those beliefs.

Two features of Murray’s *Coming Apart*<sup>29</sup> illustrate the value of religious belief in responding to the challenge of stratification that he identifies in the book. First, Murray observes the clear testimony of social science regarding the social utility of religious belief. For example, he notes that the new upper class tends to be much more religious in contrast to the new lower class,<sup>30</sup> and while correlation

does not necessarily mean causation, Murray hints that the evidence clearly points to religion's social utility insofar as religious communities tend to be those Tocquevillian communities that produce behavioral norms that free societies need.

Moreover, over the past 50 years, active religious involvement among the lower class dropped significantly, indicating that religious communities no longer majorly influence lower-class behavioral norms, which could help explain the growing stratification in American society.<sup>31</sup>

Second, although the new upper class is in many cases more religious than is the lower class, the stereotype of the secular elite that never attends religious services is mostly accurate.<sup>32</sup> I would like to suggest that this explains what Murray variously calls the new upper class' problem of judgmentalism, loss of self-confidence, or ecumenical niceness, all of which describe rejecting older social norms in favor of "a set of messy injunctions to be nice" and to "respect everyone else's way of doing things."<sup>33</sup>

While all this may sound "nice," the problem is that although "members of the new upper class are industrious to the point of obsession," they nevertheless have "no derogatory language for adults who are not industrious." He goes on to explain, "The young women of the new upper class hardly ever have babies out of wedlock, but it is impermissible to use a derogatory label for nonmarital births. You will probably even raise a few eyebrows even if you use a derogatory label for criminals. . . . The new upper class doesn't want to push its way of living onto the less fortunate, for who are they to say that their way of living is really better?"<sup>34</sup>

Röpke spoke of a natural nobility whose social role was to defend those values that transcend the free market against the pressures of the market's asymmetry.<sup>35</sup> Murray's analysis suggests that the new upper class does not merit the natural nobility title. Instead, they are a people sick with Europe Syndrome in that they wish to live their lives with as much material security as possible between birth and death.

Although the new upper class may see some social utility in civil associations such as family and church, there appears to be so little

sincere religious belief or moral conviction that they are unwilling to preach their way of living to others. By contrast, Christians are leading the way in showing the clear evidence that poor Americans have need of not only money but also sound family life informed by traditional values.<sup>36</sup>

As with Murray's *Coming Apart*, Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* suggests the need for robust transcendent belief to provide society with a means by which to truly help the poor. To truly help poor whites (and, Vance implies, poor people of other races), people need the habits instilled by local, nongovernmental associations, which provide the skills and work ethic that make the primary difference in one's life, economically speaking.

Vance identifies the family as being the single most important civil association that gives people the habits and skills necessary to live a life free of poverty. He explains that the lessons he learned, especially from his grandmother, "might just have saved" him because his grandmother taught him to believe in himself and to solve problems that one encounters in life.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, in addition to the family, Vance notes that churches are also of crucial importance. Regular church attenders "commit fewer crimes, are in better health, live longer, make more money, drop out of high school less frequently, and finish college more frequently than those who don't attend church at all."<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, poor white Appalachians, contrary to stereotypes, tend not to attend church. Although they tend to be religious, people in the Bible Belt are unlikely to be formally part of a church.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, those who are part of a church too often encounter churches that do not require much of their members, thereby undermining their ability to teach much of anything about morality. Vance describes his father's church's minimalistic moral teachings: "The only affirmative teachings I remember drawing from church were that I shouldn't cheat on my wife and that I shouldn't be afraid to preach the gospel to others."<sup>40</sup> To the requirement that society have churches, we must then add the requirement that the churches faithfully present a robust set of moral teachings.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

In the desire to help those who are poor among us, we must defend the free market. Yet defending the free market must involve an awareness of not only economic policy but also religious belief's importance in perpetuating free market society. Social scientists believe that American society is currently entering into the uncharted waters of social stratification. Robust religious belief and practice are going to be necessary to meet this new challenge.

## About the Author

William T. Reddinger is an associate professor at Regent University, where he teaches political theory and American politics. His scholarly interests include American political thought, the intersection of Protestantism and modern political ideas, and the history of economic thought.

## Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3-7.
2. *Ibid.*, 482-84.
3. *Ibid.*, 32.
4. *Ibid.*, 278.
5. *Ibid.*, 485-92.
6. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (Crown Forum: New York, 2012).
7. Charles Murray, "Our Kind of People," chap. 1 in *Coming Apart*.
8. J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).
9. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 5-7.
10. *Ibid.*, 31 and 144.
11. Friedrich Hayek, "Taxation and Redistribution," chap. 20 in *The Constitution of Liberty* (University of Chicago Press); P. J. Hill, "Creating and Distributing Wealth," in *Wealth, Poverty, and Human Destiny*, eds.

Doug Bandow and David Schindler (ISI Books, Wilmington, DE), 13; and Wilhelm Röpke, *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market* (ISI Books, Wilmington, DE: 1998), 120.

12. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, 156 and 162–64.

13. Arthur C. Brooks, *The Road to Freedom: How to Win the Fight for Free Enterprise* (Basic Books: New York, 2012), 19–31.

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, “The Banquets—Sense of Security Entered by the Government Anxiety of Leaders of the Opposition—Arraignment of Ministers,” chap. 2 in *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. Alexander Teizeira de Mattos (London: The Harvill Press, 1948); and Steven Bilakovics, “Capitalism as a Road to Serfdom? Tocqueville on Economic Liberty and Human Flourishing,” in *Economic Freedom and Human Flourishing: Perspectives from Political Philosophy*, eds. Michael R. Strain and Stan A. Veuger (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2016), 98.

15. Bilakovics, “Capitalism as a Road to Serfdom?” 101.

16. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 419.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 663.

19. The question of the extent to which the modern democratic state, featuring large welfare programs and massive government bureaucratic regulations, matches the description of Tocqueville’s soft despotism is, of course, debatable. His description of soft despotism sometimes seems more akin to an Orwellian dystopia than to the EU. Nevertheless, adequate similarities between soft despotism and the modern welfare state make the comparison fundamentally sound.

20. Murray, *Coming Apart*, 288. Murray cites secularization as one symptom of the Europe Syndrome, but one wonders if it is instead one of the fundamental causes of it.

21. In this respect, one can see the application of Pascal’s psychology and anthropology in Tocqueville’s political thought; for Pascal, people have a deep penchant for unhappiness that results in their determination to find happiness in something other than in God.

22. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 512–13.

23. John Zmirak, *Wilhelm Röpke: Swiss Localist, Global Economist* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2001), 5, 168, and 174–75.

24. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, 126.

25. *Ibid.*, 5, 91.

26. *Ibid.*, 137–41.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 148–49.

29. We must note here that Murray's libertarianism at least in one respect disagrees with this essay. While the conservative viewpoint represented in this essay tends to see morality as a necessary precondition for free society, libertarians tend to place greater emphasis on the institutions of a free society, which then beget necessary social norms.

30. Murray, *Coming Apart*, 206–9.

31. *Ibid.*, 212.

32. *Ibid.*, 210. This is partly due to the fact that the aforementioned evidence that the upper class is more religious is data drawn from a pool not only of true upper class but also of upper middle class, the latter of which tend to be more religious than the truly upper class.

33. *Ibid.*, 293.

34. *Ibid.*, 293–94.

35. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, 137–49.

36. See, as just one example, Nick Schulz, *Home Economics: The Consequences of Changing Family Structure* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2013).

37. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 60.

38. *Ibid.*, 92.

39. *Ibid.*, 93.

40. *Ibid.*, 98.

41. I would like to note here that I regard it as a particular danger of discussions of Christianity's social utility that it risks reducing Christianity to having its primary purpose in benefiting society rather than in bringing glory to God. To the extent that this occurs, one risks paradoxically undermining Christianity's ability to affect social change.

# A Call to Monastic Activism with Abraham Heschel, Martin Buber, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Thomas Merton<sup>1</sup>

By Jeff Keuss

*Unless I read the evidence wrongly, the political and philosophic history of the West during the past 150 years can be understood as a series of attempts—more or less conscious, more or less systematic, more or less violent—to fill the central emptiness left by the erosion of theology. This vacancy, this darkness in the middle, was one of “the death of God” . . . but I think we could put it more accurately: the decay of a comprehensive Christian doctrine had left in disorder, or had left blank, essential perceptions of social justice, of the meaning of human history, of the relations between mind and body, of the place of knowledge in our moral conduct.<sup>2</sup>*

George Steiner’s bold pronouncement during the 1974 CBC Massey Lectures sought to place the question of God back at the center of discourse in the modern university curriculum. Regarding a concept he terms a boundless “nostalgia for the absolute,” Steiner states that “the major mythologies constructed in the West since the early nineteenth century are not only attempts to fill the emptiness left by the decay of Christian theology and Christian dogma. They are a kind of *substitute theology*. They are systems of belief and argument which may be savagely anti-religious, which may postulate a world without God and may deny an afterlife, but whose

structure, whose aspirations, whose claims on the believer, are profoundly religious in strategy and effect.”<sup>3</sup>

### Sense of Place

The evidence of a substitute theology is at work implicitly in the great divide that separates the cognitive elite and lower class, which Charles Murray brings to light in *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*.<sup>4</sup> With the four sociological shifts he highlights—the decline of marriage, work ethic, respect for the law, and religious observance—Murray meticulously chronicles and measures the emergence of two wholly distinct classes in today’s America: a new upper class, first identified in *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* as the cognitive elite in the imagined town Belmont,<sup>5</sup> and a new lower class personified in his fictive Fishtown.

While the sociological assessment Murray offers is rich, using Belmont and Fishtown to situate his analysis begs the question: are cities as Murray imagines the fait accompli for deep community in the 21st century? Murray’s analysis assumes that cities as we have experienced them will remain the form by which deep community will be located and sustained, usually with an eye to a nostalgic past—a “nostalgia for the absolute.”

Robert Putnam’s *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*<sup>6</sup> offers a similar sepia-toned sentimentality in his nostalgic recollection of Port Clinton, which is a baseline set for his study in the 1950s. While he acknowledges many of the troubles, it was for Putnam “a passable embodiment of the American Dream, a place that offered decent opportunity for all the kids in the town, whatever their background.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet as we will hear from Ta-Nehisi Coates later in this essay, perhaps it is the very concept and form of the dream that is the problem to begin with. This form of the idealized city—an Edenic place that can and should be recovered from yesteryear—is evident in much of what passes for solutions to our coming apart as a nation. If we can return to a city, a sense of place found in the

mind's eye, then perhaps the divides between us as a culture can be overcome.

Yet is place the real issue? Abraham Heschel made the astute observation in his classic text *The Sabbath*:

The Bible is more concerned with time than with space. It sees the world in the dimension of time. It pays more attention to generations, to events, than to countries, to things; it is more concerned with history than with geography. To understand the teaching of the Bible, one must accept its premise that time has meaning for life which is at least equal to that of space; that time has a significance and sovereignty of its own.<sup>8</sup>

For Heschel, Western culture has for too long been obsessed with colonizing place: “Technical civilization stems primarily from the desire of man to subdue and manage the forces of nature. The manufacture of tools, the art of spinning and farming, the building of houses, the craft of sailing—all this goes on in man’s spatial surroundings. The mind’s preoccupation with things of space affects, to this day, all activities of man.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, our control and management of spaces and places becomes idolatrous. Buildings, streets, and the very cities we live in provoke “blindness to all reality that fails to identify itself as a thing, as a matter of fact. This is obvious in our understanding of time, which, being thingless and insubstantial, appears to us as if it had no reality.”<sup>10</sup>

Consider our relation to border control and immigration in the past election cycle. In what ways were the physical borders of this country and the evocation of building a wall lifted to prophetic responsibility akin to the post-exilic call of the prophet Zechariah?

September 2016 marked the 15-year anniversary of 9/11. One of America’s grand images has been its modern cities—images of busy streets populated with new dreams and visions, soaring skyscrapers reaching to the heavens, and always the unbounded promise of possibilities to be realized.

Yet 9/11 offered up the futility of tying our identity to the cities we had constructed. As we collectively watched the Twin Towers

explode into nothingness, with clouds of dust chasing confident citizens into disarray, America felt the death of the modern dream of limitless progress that had served the country so well since the end of World War II. In many respects this trauma mirrors the recent response to the 2016 presidential election, with New York City once again the site of confusion, anger, and righteous indignation, focused not on Ground Zero but on Trump Tower.

When one thinks of models for deep Christian spirituality in the milieu of today's multicultural city, the name Thomas Merton does not readily come to mind. As a key figure in modern discourse surrounding Christian spirituality, Merton is often remembered as the contemplative critic who left behind the din and clang of New York City for the pastoral cloistered life of Trappist monastery in Kentucky.

However, a closer reading of Merton's life and writing demonstrates not only a deep concern for the challenges of urban life and multicultural engagement amid the context of mid-20th century Western culture but also a voice that provides a provocative vision for our lives in the 21st century and a helpful companion in reading Murray's *Coming Apart* and Putnam's *Our Kids*.

For Merton, the monastic life was not an escape or refuge from the modern city but a prophetic form of spirituality that he continually offered to the urban uncloistered time and time again. His calling to the monastic life was as much a profession of faith as it was a compelling alternative paradigm that looked deep into the assertions of material secularism found in city life and called for a renewal of body and spirit that continues to challenge and provoke.

As Merton wrote in *Contemplation in a World of Action*: "As long as I imagine that the world is something to be 'escaped' in the monastery—that wearing that quaint costume and following a quaint observance takes me 'out of the world,' I am dedicating my life to an illusion."<sup>11</sup> The monastic choice was simultaneously traditional and countercultural. "The monk," he says, "is someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the contemporary world and its structures."<sup>12</sup>

While Merton dwelled physically in the monastery's cloisters in Kentucky, his heart was broken and praying for the modern deserts

of 20th-century humanity that he saw in contemporary city streets and alleyways. The comparisons that Merton draws between the desert fathers and life in the multicultural city are timely—it is a call to remember the time before Christianity was confined by theoretical walls of the religious institution. “The monastic horizon is clearly the horizon of the desert. The monastic Church is the church of the wilderness, the woman who has fled into the desert from the dragon that seeks to devour the infant Word.”<sup>13</sup>

In his reflections on the desert tradition in *Wisdom of the Desert*, Merton challenges many rigid forms of Christian spirituality that seek method over encounter and critique without conviction.<sup>14</sup> After numerous tragedies in the past few decades, such as Columbine, 9/11, Sandy Hook, and Trayvon Martin, faith communities are continuing to reinforce certainty and safety as the baseline for faithfulness that in many ways counter the marks of the Spirit’s life. For Merton, those of us who live in such desert times as the desert fathers and mothers are called to seek the void that God wishes to fill and not merely avoid the reality of the void in us: “With the Desert fathers, you have the characteristic of a clean break with a conventional, accepted social context in order to swim for one’s life into an apparently irrational void.”<sup>15</sup>

While a call to deep justice amid the city masses is dampened this past year by the loudest voices of the election cycle, Merton compels those who live in cities to stand together in God’s sacred silence. In these times when the ecumenical, racial, and class concerns of the city continue to explode with tension and fear, authentic reconciliation is needed now more than ever. Merton challenges those who live in today’s cities to pray for not only mercy and forgiveness but also the ability to love. We are called not to reinforce the proverbial walls that surround and sustain the place in which we live but to seek the center point of why we live in the first place.

### **Monasticism Without Walls**

For the disenfranchised that seek meaning and purpose, Merton writes that meaning and purpose in the urban world will not be

grounded in the material nor in the dogmatic, but in the life that is lived with opened hands, in which absence of certainty is not feared but embraced. It is not the creation of stronger walls or systems but the patient, persistent turn toward what is at the center of our humanity that should be our goal, even if our cities as we have nostalgically remembered them never return.

This is highlighted in Merton's famous "Letters to a White Liberal" written in 1963, when he prophetically acknowledges what Coates and others have underscored decades later: America will continue to struggle with class and race until radical change is allowed to take place and ultimately dismantle the essential form of our current life. As Merton stated in the 1960s:

The problem is this: if the Negro, as he actually is (not the "ideal" and theoretical Negro, or even the educated and cultured Negro of the small minority), enters wholly into white society, then *that society is going to be radically changed*. This of course is what the White South very well knows, and it is what the white Liberal has failed to understand. Not only will there be a radical change which, whatever form it may take, will amount to at least a peaceful revolution, but also there will be enormous difficulties and sacrifices demanded of everyone, especially the whites.<sup>16</sup>

As Merton foresaw, without the ability to allow for radical change at all levels, change would be limited, and therefore there would never truly be change. In this Merton is essentially putting forward that the very form of our lives—not merely our ideology or aspirations—must change at a profound level.

In his 1919 lecture "Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur,"<sup>17</sup> Paul Tillich argues a similar point by asserting that authentic religious experience is found amid the triadic interplay of content, form, and meaning (*Gehalt*), to which he links the terms autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy. Content denotes something objective in its simple existence that represents what we culturally value. Giving form to content creates a recognizable structure in the cultural sphere—be it a city street, building, war memorial, or elementary

school. Meaning is something else again: it is the depth meaning, the spiritual substance of a cultural product. In a traditional formulation of Tillich's paradigm, content coupled with meaning is essential for human flourishing, and form mediates between content and meaning.

The power of form to mediate and control meaning and content is exemplified in Coates' notion of the dream that plagues our culture and continually frames race as an antithetical referent to the ideal life:

I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the Dream persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you.<sup>18</sup>

What Coates so provocatively describes is at the heart of Merton's letter to white liberals, central to Tillich's point of the controlling nature of form over content and meaning in religion, and the lacuna in Murray's *Coming Apart*: without the prophetic imagination<sup>19</sup> and courage to let go of our systems and forms entirely and allow the silent void to awaken us to our crippling idolatry in the forms and systems of Coates' notion of the dream, we will repeat history's horrors rather than learn from them. In this way we will defend the dream even if it is built on the bedding of the bodies of young black men shot in the streets again and again.

This monastic critique Merton levied and Coates picked up is also a perpetual self-critique that leads to an abiding conviction and love for the other. As seen throughout Merton's writings, the true monk knows that the chaos of the world is no more than a

macrocosm in his or her own soul. If one envisions the monastic choice as a choice to retreat from the world, then one has failed.

The monastic choice for Merton is that of conviction and critique. It is not protest against the world per se, only against the world's limitations that dismiss the ultimate concerns of the body and soul. It is the choice to be liberated from the confines of human potentiality that the world wants us to believe in. As he writes in "A Letter on the Contemplative Life":

It is true that when I came to the monastery where I am I came in revolt against the meaningless confusion of a life in which there was so much activity, so much movement, so much useless talk . . . that I could not remember who I was. But the fact remains that my flight from the world is not a reproach to you who remain in the world, and I have no right to repudiate the world in a purely negative fashion, because if I do that my flight will have not taken me to truth and to God but to a private, though doubtless, pious illusion.<sup>20</sup>

In seeking a renewed sense of deep faith in the multicultural city of 2017, the challenge of Merton's vision is to reclaim the call for what I have termed previously a "monasticism without walls" in our contemporary discussions of urban renewal and the future of institutions such as Christian higher education and the Church. More fundamentally, we must also develop an attentive ear to listen for the prophetic in the midst of the banal.

*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, arguably Merton's best-known contribution to political activism, stated that true monasticism is a political and spiritual protest. It is the protest of the humble and the contrite, as opposed to the protest of the sanctimonious and the righteous. It is a deeper and more treacherous kind of protest than we see often televised.

Its starting point is not to dwell on the evils of the world but on the failure of the self to love and find love in God before the culture that beckons us like a siren to the rocks. "[The monastic] flight is not an evasion. If the monk were able to understand what goes on inside him, he would be able to say how well he knows that the

battle [of the world] is being fought in his own heart.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore retreat is not always abandonment; it is sometimes deep critique, especially when we retreat more deeply into and not away from the center of the storm.

Although the desert fathers and mothers were deeply influential for him, he was acutely aware of the dangers of reviving their asceticism in our modern society, knowing that God had to become more and not less a part of our world. He also knew that the retreat model, which was the conventional way modern people viewed monasticism, was not productive for the 20th century. This is perhaps an important reminder for those of us gathered in retreat at such a time as this.

### **Reclaiming Religiosity**

One such move to be considered in our reflection is reclaiming religiosity for the sake of community, as it is often used in current parlance as narrow-mindedness. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote, “Religiosity induces sons, who want to find their own God, to rebel against their fathers; religion induces fathers to reject their sons, who will not let their father’s God be forced upon them. Religion means preservation; religiosity, renewal.”<sup>22</sup> As a mystic of sorts, Buber sees religiosity as a spiritual movement that both claims tradition and the current moment together—hand in hand—for the sake of reconciliation. While religion bends toward the static moment, religiosity strives for kinetic movement.

Similarly, Merton believed that what we need is not more religion but more religiosity—what Buber called “the elemental entering-into-relation with the Absolute,”<sup>23</sup> which is counter to the “Nostalgia for the Absolute” that Steiner fears. Merton recognized that we need to reconnect to the true spiritual quest’s roots before attempting to solve the urban blight and malaise of our time, which had become formalized and fossilized in institutional religion, beginning in the fourth century for Merton and the rabbinic period (second century) for Buber. Both Buber and Merton

knew the extent to which this pursuit of religiosity demanded rebellion, not against the secular state but against the very institutions of religion.

For Merton, renewal meant retrieving the past by questioning the traditional presentation of it. He desired traditionality and not traditionalism. Yale historian Jarsalov Pelikan suggests the following distinction: tradition is the “living faith of the dead,” and traditionalism is “the dead faith of living.”<sup>24</sup> Traditionality as embodying Merton’s idea of renewal is to live in the knowledge that true monasticism is to continually hold counsel with the dead and make religiosity in modernity “the living faith of the living.”<sup>25</sup> By living deeply, yet on the margins of tradition, one can revive the religiosity dormant within it.

However, to do that requires a protest against tradition itself, whose fatal flaw is that it seeks to preserve the past—akin to Coates’ the dream—even at the expense of the present’s creativity. This is at the heart of much of the rhetoric surrounding the 2016 election and the challenge before institutions called to justice,<sup>26</sup> such as Christian higher education and the Church.

Traditions perpetuate themselves by warding off, or at least controlling, change. Traditionality, which is founded on perpetual critique, does not seek to perpetuate itself. Its success creates its own obsolescence. Merton believed that commitment to tradition, even in its corrupt form, could lead to the desert, which he envisioned as the “living faith of the living.” It is alive precisely because it is unstable, precarious, and unpredictable.

To live a dead faith is to live solely in the institution of religion and in some respects the essentialism of the past form of cities as Murray and Putnam described. Merton constantly tried to diffuse the romantic and sentimentalist notion of the monastic life, maintaining that romanticism too often leads to nostalgia, which has no place in the authentic monastic quest.

Traditionality is lived by embracing tradition while simultaneously moving through it. In doing so, Merton believed, its essence is liberated and revived. In this sense, Merton knew the power of obedience and its indispensability to evoke love.

## Conclusion

Merton makes the following assertion: “The higher and more perfect union of wills in love (the goal of the monk) will not be possible if the lower and more elemental union of wills in obedience is lacking. It is an error to appeal to love against obedience. But it is also an error to reduce all love in practice to obedience alone, as if the two were synonymous. Love is much deeper than obedience, but unless obedience opens up all those inner spiritual depths, our love will remain superficial, a matter of sentiment and emotion, and little more.”<sup>27</sup>

By embracing a call for monastic activism, Merton entered a vocation modernity scorned, while still remaining a vital part of the modern project and offering those of us in the coming-apart era another element to consider in rebuilding our world. Our vocation in considering the analysis of Murray and Putnam in conversation with the critique and conviction of Merton, Buber, and Coates is to move deeper into our diverse communities, where faith, hope, and love offer more than merely rebuilding the dream in crisis, and to hopefully listen and respond to the God in which we live, move, and have our being.

## About the Author

Jeff Keuss is the general editor for *Literature and Theology*. He is also a professor of Christian ministry, theology, and culture at Seattle Pacific University and the director of the University Scholars program. His previous appointments include the Faculty of Arts and Divinity at the University of Glasgow, Scotland.

## Notes

1. Aspects of this essay were published in the *Merton Journal*. In that article, I offer a longer exploration of the ways in which Merton sought deep spiritual practices, which ultimately shaped his writing and activist legacy. See Jeff Keuss, “Thomas Merton’s Monasticism Without Walls,”

*Merton Journal* 10, no. 2 (2003), 2–6.

2. George Steiner, *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press, 1974), 1–2.

3. *Ibid.*, 4 (italics in the original).

4. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2012).

5. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

6. Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

7. Putnam, *Our Kids*, 1.

8. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 6–7.

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 5.

11. Thomas Merton, “Contemplation in a World of Action,” cited in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York, 1992), 376.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 13 and 14.

14. Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1960).

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

16. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 8 (italics in the original).

17. Paul Tillich, “On the Idea of a Theology of Culture” in *What is Religion?*, trans. James L. Adams (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1969), 165.

18. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between The World and Me* (New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 11.

19. See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

20. Thomas Merton, “A Letter on the Contemplative Life,” in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1992), 424.

21. Merton, *The Silent Life*, 14.

22. Martin Buber, “Jewish Religiosity” in *On Judaism: An Introduction to*

*the Essence of Judaism by One of the Most Important Religious Thinkers of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1967), 80–81.

23. *Ibid.*, 80.

24. Jaraslov Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lectures on the Humanities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 62.

25. *Ibid.*

26 For Paul Ricoeur humans are called to dwell in institutions bent toward what he terms a “moral constitution of action” that strives for justice. In this regard both teleological and deontological theories of justice are rooted in a deep desire for flourishing happiness (eudemonia a la Aristotle) and intimate friendship found and forged in just institutions and will not be actualized through mere individual striving. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

27. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York, 1963), 43–44.





