

Perspective

# How Religion Can Help Put Our Democracy Back Together

Eventually, we will need to rebuild our shared political norms. Faith should be part of the solution.



By **Richard Just**  
Illustrations by Anna Godeassi

OCTOBER 28, 2020



t my synagogue, Temple Micah in Washington, D.C., we often read this short poem at Friday night Shabbat services:

*As You taught Torah  
to those whose names I bear,  
teach me Torah, too.  
Its mystery beckons,  
yet I struggle with its truth.  
You meant Torah for me:  
did You mean the struggle for me, too?  
Don't let me struggle alone;  
help me to understand,  
to be wise, to listen, to know ...  
Lead me into the mystery.*

That poem's simple idea has for years struck me as a particularly beautiful statement of the purpose of organized faith. The basis of religion, sociologist Daniel Bell [once observed](#), is “the awareness of men of their finiteness and the inexorable limits to their powers, and the consequent effort to find a coherent answer to reconcile them to that human condition.” He argued that the “world has become too scientific and drab.” Humans, he continued, “want a sense of wonder and mystery.”

Bell's intuition about what humans want rings true, but today, fewer and fewer Americans are turning to religion to satisfy this craving. From 2009 to 2018-19, according to the [Pew Research Center](#), the share of Americans who identify as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular” leaped from 17 percent to 26



percent, while the percentage who attend religious services once a month or more declined from 52 to 45. And because millennials are far and away the least religious age group — with 40 percent describing themselves as religiously unaffiliated — these trends will almost certainly accelerate in the years ahead.

Meanwhile, another parallel collapse is unfolding: the erosion of the traditional norms that have sustained our democracy. Whatever happens on Nov. 3 and in the days afterward, the biggest lesson of the past four years is that our collective commitment to democratic values needs, to put it mildly, some shoring up. A recent [study](#) by Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svolik of Yale University found that taking an undemocratic stance is likely to cost a candidate just 3.5 percent of his or her vote share. The authors' depressing conclusion: "Americans value democracy, but not much." Pundits and historians from the left, right and center have spent the past four years warning that our democracy is in danger of fraying beyond repair.

Could the two collapses — the religious and the political — be related? Many people will, I know, find this suggestion absurd on its face. A quick tour of both history and the contemporary world would, after all, yield no shortage of examples of religion, especially dogmatic religion, acting as democracy's foe, rather than its ally.

But maybe things aren't so simple. Religion encompasses a vast range of instincts and values — and it shapes our lives in ways we may not even be aware of. Too often, our discussions about religion and politics focus only on hot-button moments —

the Amy Coney Barrett confirmation hearings, President Trump brandishing a Bible across from Lafayette Square — or specific policy issues like abortion, gay rights or religious-school vouchers. Rarely do we talk about the more intangible influence of religion on our polity: the way the presence or absence of faith can shape our minds, our mores and, ultimately, how each of us approaches the task of being a citizen in a democracy. I've always had a healthy skepticism toward organized religion, but as I've read and learned and practiced more in recent years, I've started to think: Could some of the areas where religion excels — the wonder, the mystery — help to repair the intangible corners of American democracy, at a time when American democracy could use all the help it can get?



**T**he idea that widespread religious belief can improve the functioning of democracy dates at least to Alexis de Tocqueville, the French writer who, in his book “[Democracy in America](#),” sought to explain the underpinnings of our nation’s political system. Published in two volumes — in 1835 and 1840 — the book was, to be sure, about a very narrow form of democracy: one that was available only to white men. Yet some of de Tocqueville’s basic insights about human nature and democratic norms are still worth considering today. And one of them concerned the role of religion in a free society.

De Tocqueville thought faith exerted a crucial moderating force in a democracy. He argued that though “the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything.”

But it was another of his observations that I think has particular relevance now: “When authority in the matter of religion no longer exists, nor in the matter of politics, men are soon frightened at the aspect of this limitless independence. This perpetual agitation of all things makes them restive and fatigues them. As everything is moving in the world of the intellect, they want at least that all be firm and stable in the material order; and as they are no longer able to recapture their former beliefs, they give themselves a master.”

De Tocqueville was worried, essentially, that if we didn't worship God, we might exercise our instinct to worship through politics or politicians themselves. If this concern resonates with you — if you fear that some of our politicians have, in the past few years, become can-do-no-wrong cult-like figures in the eyes of their supporters — then you're not alone. As Quincy Howard — a Dominican Sister of Sinsinawa and coordinating director for Faithful Democracy, a multifaith coalition advocating democracy reform — put it to me recently, American politics is arguably “on the brink of being idolatrous at this point, and this goes for the left as well as the right.”

There is, however, a more complicated element of de Tocqueville's warning that is also worth taking seriously today. It has to do with inner peace. Imam Yahya Hendi, the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown,

recently told me that he sees a sense of personal calm as one of the key contributions religion can make to our national life. “Religion offers peace. Serenity, if you will. And people want that too,” he said. “How do you deal with undesired uncertainties and fears and worries and doubt?”

When I put the question of whether and how religion could benefit democracy to the Rev. Michael Bledsoe, the now-retired longtime pastor of Riverside Baptist Church in Washington, he spoke about how “authentic communities” can help to “leaven societies.” They provide us with emotional comfort when we are sick, and with life markers from birth to death. “This is a tapestry that’s being woven almost unseen by the rest of the culture,” he said.

Look around our society, and it’s obvious: We are living not with a surfeit of serenity or leavening, but with its exact opposite — a mass outbreak of the “perpetual agitation of all things” that de Tocqueville knew could gravely wound democracy. Think of the “MSNBC Mom,” an archetype [described](#) by journalist Kat Stoeffel in the New York Times as “a liberal woman whose retirement years have coincided with the rise of Donald Trump and who seeks solace, companionship and righteous indignation in cable news.” (Sarah Sobieraj, a Tufts University sociologist, told Stoeffel that watching this kind of media is like “going to a political church.”) Think of the senior citizens — according to various [media reports](#), there are a lot of them — whose younger relatives are convinced that they’ve been brainwashed into anger and fear in their old age by Fox News.



But think, too, of the late nights that so many of us have spent over the past four years in bed on our phones, clicking endlessly through news or punditry or social media — that is, feeding our agitation by seeking solace through politics. The more we seek solace through politics — the more cable news we watch, the more screaming punditry we consume — the more unhinged American politics becomes; and the more unhinged American politics becomes, the more solace we need; and on the cycle goes, spinning us endlessly away from the baseline level of inner peace that is a prerequisite to the functioning of a normal, rational, pragmatic democratic citizenry — and that the best kind of religion can provide.

**“Religion offers peace. Serenity, if you will. And people want that too,” said Imam Yahya Hendi. “How do you deal with undesired uncertainties and fears and worries and doubt?”**

**O**ne value that is found in all the major religions is, of course, humility. “Believing in a higher power,” Hendi told me, “must make us humble in God’s presence, and make us realize that only God is perfect. We are not.” Faith, he added, instructs us to say, “I am right, and I know I’m right, but I could be wrong.

My opponent is absolutely wrong but could be right.”

The thing that has surprised me most as I learned more about my own faith in recent years was how consistently inconsistent — how proudly riddled with uncertainties and outright contradictions — religious Judaism is. Consider this passage from Martin Buber’s 1923 book “[I and Thou](#),” a touchstone of modern Jewish thinking about God: “One does not find God if one remains in the world; one does not find God if one leaves the world. ... Of course, God is ‘the wholly other’; but he is also the wholly same: the wholly present. Of course, he is the *mysterium tremendum* that appears and overwhelms; but he is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I.” Every sentence about God here is essentially an argument with itself.

Temple Micah’s rabbi, Daniel Zemel, likes to say that a synagogue should be “messy” — and the deeper you go in Jewish theology, the more gloriously messy it looks. He introduced me to a beautiful 1965 essay by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called “[The Lonely Man of Faith](#),” which looks at how the Bible tells the creation-of-the-world story twice, with two different versions of Adam, whom Soloveitchik calls “Adam the first” and “Adam the second.” Adam the first is a builder and achiever, a model for practical human ambition; Adam the second is a man of faith, inclined toward the existential mystery of life.

Humans are, Soloveitchik argues, supposed to live out both of these mutually contradictory trajectories — which is to say that, from the very first words of

the Bible, confusion and enigma reign supreme. And things don't get any less cloudy in the pages that follow. The former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, Jonathan Sacks, has [written](#) that the "stories of Genesis are often morally perplexing. Rarely does the Torah pass an explicit, unequivocal verdict on people's conduct."

This isn't what many secular people think of when they mull the influence of religion on politics. They often think of religion as creating dogma, not undermining it. And there's good reason for this: The voices most loudly trumpeting religion in our politics also tend to be the most orthodox — the most likely to see faith, and politics, in black-and-white terms.

But because religion is fundamentally a mystery, it can also be a profound source of analytical humility and existential uncertainty. It can teach us to value, even celebrate, contradictions, to think constantly about how we might be wrong — an ethic that is the very opposite of the perpetual certainty now running rampant in American politics.

"We have to cherish our doubts," Zemel told me recently when we spoke about faith and democracy. To illustrate his argument, he pointed to the story of the binding of Isaac, in which Abraham, following God's command, prepares to execute his son — until an angel stays his hand. I had always assumed that this parable was essentially an exhortation to trust God's will, but Zemel — focusing on the fact that it was an angel who intervenes to stop the murder — offered a different interpretation. "Who's an angel to countermand God's order?" he asked. "Well, you always have to be open to hear another voice."



**A**s I spoke to D.C.-based religious leaders in recent weeks, I heard no shortage of persuasive theories about how faith might help us to exercise muscles we need to practice democracy. The Rev. Leslie Copeland-Tune is associate minister at Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va., and chief operating officer of the National Council of Churches (though she spoke only for herself). Citing a verse from Philippians — which advises “forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before” — she argued that religion can help us learn how to let go of the past. The art of forgetting isn’t often extolled as a civic virtue, but, in a country so riven by years of grotesque politics, we may soon come to value it. “Honestly, we’re in a bad place. We cannot go on like this,” she told me, citing in



particular racism that has been fueled by the president. “None of us is perfect. We’ve all sometimes hurt somebody or not done the right thing.” She added, “I can forgive you sometimes even when you don’t ask for it” — and so “we can move forward.”

Then there is the issue of trust, a key intangible force in any well-functioning democracy and one that has weakened in recent years. (According to [Pew](#), 71 percent of Americans “think people are less confident in each other than they were 20 years ago.”) Tara Brach, a D.C.-based Buddhist meditation teacher and author, pointed out to me that religious communities — because they speak “to our deepest yearnings and our deepest fears,” because they give us a sense of belonging, and because they address “what really matters to people” — are essentially incubators of interpersonal trust. That makes them especially good spaces to work out the thorniest issues our democracy confronts.

I also heard, understandably, some very good reasons to be skeptical, even cynical, about what religion can do for democracy. The Rev. Starlette Thomas, who teaches, trains and preaches at churches in the Washington area for the D.C. Baptist Convention, told me she is deeply pessimistic that there can be any role for religion in improving democratic norms. Christianity in America, she argued, is too “compromised,” too complicit in some of the worst aspects of our society, to hold itself out as any kind of model. American Christians, she lamented, have long believed that they are “ordained to rule the earth.”

“I still have immense love for the church and what it could be,” she explained. But she is extremely “disappointed with the church as an institution.”

The largest problem, in her view, is segregation. Churches continue to reflect the racial segregation of society as a whole. And how can institutions that drive people apart be a useful source for democratic values? The point goes beyond Christianity: To many secular Americans, religions of all kinds appear to be just one more marker of identity that separates us from one another.

It’s a major challenge, and one that isn’t likely to be solved anytime soon. Yet in the long run, religion doesn’t have to be a divisive, rather than a unifying, force. Hendi told me that he thinks this is a crucial contribution that Islamic theology can make to our democratic mores. Islam, he explained, “is very particular about how God created us to be different and God wants us to be different, and that differences do not mean animosity or hatreds or negativity.” He added: “Our closeness to the divine depends on our ability to value those differences.”

But the emotional preconditions for a multiethnic democracy can be found in all major faiths. Buddhism, Brach said, asks people to “attune” to others and to see their vulnerability, which “takes away some of the hatred and blame that’s swirling around.” Thomas, despite her overall pessimism, pointed to agape, the Christian concept of unconditional love. And Howard noted that, because so many religions share “common core values,” interfaith work can be a particularly effective way for people to model the bridging of identities — which, as she put it, is “what democracy

is about.” At least in theory, all of these ideas could light the way to a healthy pluralism. And in America, where we increasingly seem to have an unhealthy pluralism — a pluralism filled with resentment of the other — that would be a valuable contribution indeed.

There is, too, the danger of religion becoming closely linked to the state. Historically, so many people have suffered when politics and religion have merged. But Bledsoe proposed a way to think about religion’s role that threads this needle: We need religion to stay out of government but to stay active in the “public square.” That isn’t always an easy distinction to make in practice, but it potentially provides a map for us to extract and accentuate the things we need from religion in order to promote healthy democratic instincts — without religion harming politics or vice versa.

None of this will necessarily assuage the worries of ardent secularists, many of whom may intuitively fear that religion correlates with an authoritarian mind-set. But academic studies suggest the situation is more complicated. One [study](#), published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* in 1995, found that “authoritarianism was positively related to several different facets of less mature faith development, and negatively related to several aspects of relatively mature faith development.” Another [study](#) from the same publication reached a similar conclusion in 2007: It found a positive association between authoritarianism and religiousness, but a negative association between authoritarianism and “spiritual seeking.” In other words, yes, religion can line up neatly with anti-

democratic forces — and it often has — but faith that is undergirded by the right kind of values can serve as democracy’s partner.

**To many secular Americans, religions of all kinds appear to be just one more marker of identity that separates us from one another. Yet in the long run, religion doesn’t have to be a divisive, rather than a unifying, force.**

**T**here’s one final way in which, I think, a revival of religion could potentially help our democracy, and it revolves around time. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great mid-century Jewish theologian — who himself made a foray into politics by famously marching with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. — wrote a book called [“The Sabbath”](#) in 1951 that is still widely read by Jews. The book’s argument about time is one of the reasons that so many of us find meaning in those Friday night services.

For Heschel, we are meant to live in the world of space — the material world — six days a week, but on Shabbat, we are meant to celebrate the holiness of time. “Time,” he wrote, “has independent



ultimate significance; it is of more majesty and more provocative of awe than even a sky studded with stars. ... It is the dimension of time wherein man meets God, wherein man becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations.”

In the past few years, I have often felt that politics, with its never-ending loop of can't-look-away ugliness, was stealing my time. Perhaps you have too. If our time is holy, then we simply have to figure out a better politics — one that is saner, more measured, more humble, more humane. Religion can't solve every problem facing our democracy, but maybe, if we step into the mystery, it can help.

*Richard Just is the editor of The Washington Post Magazine.*

*Design by Christian Font and Suzette Moyer.*