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Annals of Congress 730

– James Madison –

August 15, 1789

## Chapter Three

### Fundamental Religious Crusades

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#### ***Religious Disharmony***

Traditionally Hong Kong has enjoyed religious harmony. But that was ruptured because of the Occupy Central protests of 2014, and the 2019–2020 pro-democracy protests, many of which turned violent. They became as divisive as the Catholic Church Vatican-Beijing-Taiwan-Hong Kong affairs are within the Catholic Church.

Hong Kong is again the meat in the Vatican sandwich; or is it the vegetable in the Beijing dumpling?

The Holy See's secretary for relations with states, in lay terms the Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, in an interview with the US weekly magazine *America*, in early 2021, said the 400,000 members of the Hong Kong Catholic community is significantly divided on the democracy movement as the community consists of both Beijing loyalists and "people who would like greater freedom and greater exceptions for Hong Kong."

The Vatican is silent on Hong Kong affairs, but not on Beijing or Taiwan.

When it comes to Hong Kong, "grandstanding" statements are not effective in improving anything. "I don't think that grandstanding statements can be terribly effective. I think you have to ask what effect a statement is going to have, said Gallagher.



“Is it going to produce a positive change, or does it make the situation more complicated for the local church and for relations with the Holy See? At the moment, that’s the right approach.”

Since the decease of Bishop Michael Yeung Ming-chaung in 2019, there has been a long delay in appointing a successor as the head of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong.

The Vatican initially favored auxiliary bishop Joseph Ha Chi-shing to succeed Yeung, but that position was reversed, reportedly after photographs showed him taking part in pro-democracy protests in 2019.

The Holy See later appointed 62-year-old Jesuit Stephen Chow in May 2021, one of the youngest priests to be promoted to be the bishop in Hong Kong since the Vatican began appointing Chinese priests to the position.

Chow serves as head of the Society of Jesus, Chinese Province in Hong Kong and supervises its two Wah Yan College campuses. He had initially turned down the promotion to bishop, believing a Diocesan priest should fill the position.

Jesuit priests, unlike Diocesan priests, are not ordained to a particular geographical diocese to serve the local bishop. It has even been said that Jesuit priests are explicitly discouraged from becoming bishops – which explains Chows reluctance to accept the role, and some Catholics’ surprise at his appointment.

Chow said he changed his mind about the promotion after receiving a handwritten note from Pope Francis, who is himself the first Jesuit pope.

It has been suggested that the pope’s outsider sensibility made it easy for him to upend expectations transforming the Catholic Church in ways unimaginable before. And perhaps the new bishop of Hong Kong will play a transformative role, too. Chow recognizes the trauma the city has been through, and the divisions within society and his church. He is, after all, a trained educational psychologist.

At a press conference, he admitted that he had “no grand plan” for unifying the community, and instead repeated a point he had made in the schools. “Unity is not the same as uniformity. We need to respect plurality.” He believes in dialogue and in listening with empathy.

To understand where he is coming from, we must honor the fact that the role of the churches, Catholic or Protestant, has changed in Hong Kong. Church-state relations in the city have never been easy or straightforward.

When the Hong Kong government banned the June 4 candlelight vigil in Victoria Park in 2021, using the Covid-19 pandemic and the need for social distancing as an excuse, seven Catholic churches held masses at 8pm on June 4 in remembrance of those who died in the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. The Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese said churches had not forgotten the Tiananmen Square incident and hoped “history would shed light on those who died after pursuing the truth.”

To support the estimated 130,000 Hongkonger immigrants who have accepted the British government’s offer of citizenship after the passing of the National Security Law, church leaders in Hong Kong asked the Catholic Church in Britain to help Catholics from Hong Kong integrate into British life and the church community.

Paul McAleenan, auxiliary bishop of London’s Westminster diocese and chairman of the church’s migrant policy office, described Hong Kong immigrants as talented, financially secure and “not refugees,” who shared with British society a belief in the values of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Since the churches were invited in by the Hong Kong government, they have identified needs and filled gaps by providing education, social and medical services. The churches eventually joined with the government to address sociopolitical changes and in return, they obtained legitimacy and granted privileges including tax exemptions and land.

And, in the lead-up to the handover in 1997, the churches increasingly found an active role in sociopolitical affairs. However, the added complexities of Hong Kong's current political situation undoubtedly require new thinking about the role of the churches and how they relate to the government. Especially, about housing.

It will take courage and wisdom to embrace prudence. However, if the government and the churches get this right, Hong Kong could hope to begin the process of healing.

While the geo-political capitols of the world condemn Beijing for curtailing political freedoms in Hong Kong, no one is condemning Beijing for the religious liberties it is suppressing in Hong Kong – not even discussing the matter. But, of course, when it comes to Muslims in Xinjiang – well that's another matter. And the Falun Gong in Hong Kong? Time will tell.

“This position requires someone with tremendous courage and who is willing to put himself in a vulnerable, exposed and challenging position at this point in time for Hong Kong,” said an anonymous source according to the *South China Morning Post*.

The Hong Kong bishop is seen as one of the most important church appointments. It will be a challenge for Chow to unify the city's increasingly polarized Catholic community, in light of the new National Security Law, under which “collusion with foreign forces” is a crime.

Is the Vatican a foreign force?

Lawrence Reardon, an associate professor specializing in Chinese politics and Catholic affairs at the University of New Hampshire, said the Pope would be concerned about “any further deterioration of the Vatican's control over the Hong Kong church.”

Reardon said it was the most senior position in the nation, as the Hong Kong bishop had been a bridge between the Vatican and the official church in the mainland, as well as a link with the Catholic Church in Taiwan.

“While it seems that the Vatican is appointing the leader [for the

Hong Kong] church, in fact what they are appointing is the next de facto leader of the Chinese Catholic Church,” Reardon said.

Cardinals have an advisory role to the Pope, and those aged under 80 can vote for a new pontiff during a papal conclave. The late Shanghai bishop Ignatius Gong Pinmei was the last cardinal named in mainland China. Pope John Paul II secretly appointed him in 1979, and he spent 30 years in prison for defying Beijing’s efforts to control the church.

Apostolic Administrator Cardinal John Tong has decried followers who justify violence and treating others as “enemies.” Such attitude is inconsistent with the Christian faith. Never had the teachings of the church endorsed hatred and violence as a means to achieve justice.

Tong said there was no denying the social turmoil that rocked Hong Kong exposed deep-rooted problems.

“The public are fully justified in expecting the local government to take action promptly to address their aspirations for justice, democracy and a more decent quality of life,” he said.

He also pointed to the severe consequences brought about by the social turmoil. “One of these is the ‘hatred’ of some sectors of the public towards those who do not share their stances or endorse their actions in regard to sociopolitical reforms,” he said.

“Regrettably these negative attitudes have also found their way into church circles.”

Tong said “not a few” Catholics had adopted the stance that “the end justifies the means” in striving for the well-being of society, believing violence could be rationalized, and that some actions were either entirely right or entirely wrong, leaving no room for anything “in between.”

“Those who do not share their stances or endorse their actions concerning social or political issues are to be openly condemned, smeared and rejected, without any possibility of dialogue or reconciliation with them,” the church leader said in his letter, titled “In Communion with the Church.”

“Holding on to the above stances with tenacity, those Catholics have created a division in our Diocese,” Tong said. “Just as it is commonplace now for people to use abusive and slanderous language on social media against those from the opposing camps, we find some Catholics behaving in the same way in dealing with those who do not share their stance or approve their actions, priests, deacons, or other church members.”

Chan Shun-hing, a professor with Baptist University’s department of religion and philosophy, said Tong wanted to protect the authority of the diocese, as he was worried that criticism by Catholics of the church’s leadership would undermine its credibility.

The Chinese Communist Party is officially atheist and exercises strict control over all recognized religious institutions in China.

A secretive agreement between Beijing and the Vatican signed in 2018, was renewed in the last quarter of 2020, despite strident condemnation by the U.S. and Chinese priests loyal to Rome, that they have become more marginalized since it was signed.

The provisional deal signed in 2018, allowed both Beijing and the Vatican a say in appointing bishops in an attempt to close the division in China’s 12-million Catholic community, divided between Beijing’s official church, the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, and Rome’s underground church.

Underground priests have been quoted as saying the agreement leaves Catholics “helpless and hopeless.”

Under the terms of the agreement, the Holy See has to disclose and appoint its underground bishops to the proposed unified church and Beijing does the same. The Pope has to accept, as he has done, the bishops appointed by Beijing without papal approval.

Auxiliary bishop Vincent Guo Xijin of the Mindong Diocese in Fujian, who has been detained by police, quit abruptly after coming under pressure to join the state-run church under the terms of the 2018 agreement.

Critics of the agreement, who include Cardinal Joseph Zen of Hong Kong, have accused the Vatican of betraying its values to appease Beijing.

“With the protection of this agreement, the government forced people from the underground to join the Patriotic Association... which is objectively schismatic,” says Cardinal Zen, claiming the underground community that was loyal to the Vatican has “practically disappeared’ as a result. “That’s not victory, that’s defeat – complete defeat.”

The Pope cancelled a meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during his visit to the Vatican in October 2020, to avoid political favoritism ahead of the U.S. presidential election and antagonizing Beijing.

“We had a constructive discussion,” Pompeo said after meeting with his counterparts in the Holy See, Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Archbishop Paul Gallagher. “We have a shared objective. The Chinese Communist Party behaves in ways that are reminiscent of what’s only happened in centuries past in terms of human rights violations. We’ve watched them oppress not only Muslim Uyghurs, but Christians, Catholics, Falun Gong, people of all faiths.”

The 2018 pact signed between the Holy See and Beijing was an indication that Beijing is ready to share some authority with the Pope over control of China’s Catholics, after it kicked the church out of the country in the 1940s and started an autonomous Catholic church, independent from Rome, because of the Catholic Church in Taiwan.

A Beijing-based religious affairs researcher, who was quoted in the *South China Morning Post*, on the condition of anonymity, said China was moving slowly because “the cold war mentality still looms large in its strategic thinking,” but that the leadership did have an interest in building ties with the Vatican because of the Vatican’s relations with Taiwan.

“To China, the Vatican is a hot potato. On the one hand, China wishes to sever Taiwan’s only European ally by building diplomatic



ties with the Vatican, but the Vatican is not like Taiwan's other allies that will succumb to check book diplomacy."

Beijing has failed to honor its commitments to appoint bishops proposed by Rome to fill diocese without bishops, allegedly because of its trade conflicts with the U.S. and Covid-19 pandemic.

Pope Francis has faced criticism within the church – including from two his own cardinals – for sharing authority with the communist state. The attacks have included accusations of "selling out" China's underground clergy, many of whom served jail terms for remaining loyal to Rome.

Church followers are still subject to arrest and persecution in China. Underground Bishop Augustine Cui Tai, of Xuanhua diocese of Hebei province in Northern China, has not been seen since he was arrested in June 2020. Another underground bishop, James Su Zhimin from Baoding diocese, also in Hebei, disappeared more than 20 years ago. Shanghai Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin remains under partial house arrest in the city's Sheshan Seminary.

Francesco Sisci, a sinologist with Renmin University in China, said Beijing is facing enough challenges in its international relations and it would be a "bombshell" if bridges to the Vatican were burned. A positive relationship with Rome is in Beijing's interest.

If China breaks away from the talks with the Holy See, it will only justify all the critics' logic that even the holy man couldn't stand China.

A huge benefit to China of its relationship with the Vatican is the potential to improve its relations with countries that have large Catholic populations.

### ***Praying Yankees***

In *Spin*, I wrote in the second chapter titled *Living Cultural Contradictions*, (p.141), "America is the most progressive all-inclusive civilization known to humanity. Individuals are free to pursue their original dreams creatively. It is a nation of cultural contradictions continuously coming to terms with itself, every race, rap, recipe and religion, and it continues to recruit...."

“A Prayer for America” in Yankee Stadium in honor of the victims of September 11 represented what America is all about. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Coptic Christians, Unitarians, Buddhists, Methodists, Lutheran, Protestants, Calvinists, African, Italian, Latino, Chinese, Irish, Indian, Arab, Asian, European and Native-Americans all coming together as the Founding Fathers intended and envisioned.

Patriots who cherish the ideals America stands for and represents should carefully look at America, question and debate its shortcomings. A national self-critical analysis. An honest patriotic dialogue about America’s ideals and inspirations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Strengths, weakness and necessary improvements.

The election of President Joe Biden to the White House and Vice President Kamala Harris to the vice president’s residence at the Naval Observatory is such a necessary improvement. They represent two religions, Catholic and Baptist, that were not allowed to vote when the Declaration of Independence was signed, even though a Catholic and Baptist were signatories.

Biden is the second Catholic, after President John F. Kennedy, to serve as president of the United States of America. His inauguration was a very American-Catholic event. A Jesuit delivered the invocation, the president paused for a moment of silent prayer, just long enough for a quick Hail Mary, to the justices and celebrities that represented the various Catholic component groups. Chief Justice John Roberts, who, like the president, has Irish roots, the Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Italian Lady Gaga, and, Latinas Jennifer Lopez and Sonia Sotomayor.

Garth Brooks singing *Amazing Grace*, was left to represent the Protestant culture. As *America Magazine*’s James Keane noted, even Biden’s proposed cabinet is stuffed with Catholic Democrats, with few white male Protestants.

Ross Douthat, wrote an excellent opinion piece in *The New York Times*, titled “Biden gets his Catholic moment.”

Traditionally, American presidents represented the country’s religious center. For a long time that meant almost every president be-

longed to one of the Protestant denominations called Mainline: Between 1881 and 1961, there were 13 Mainline affiliated presidents, plus one Quaker and one Unitarian. The last of the 13, Dwight Eisenhower, embodied and embellished the Mainline's influence by being baptized into Presbyterianism, early in his presidency, "like a 16<sup>th</sup>-century prince accepting the state religion to claim a vacant throne," wrote Douthat. And let's not forget it was President Eisenhower who added the words "In God We Trust" to the dollar and as many federal buildings as possible, something the Founding Fathers railed against – and probably made them spin in their grave at the time, and still are.

The subsequent decline of the Protestant establishment, the most crucial fact in American religious life since the 1960s, has altered this dynamic. Instead of being connected to a clear religious center, the presidency has been passed among different religious tendencies that aspire, so far unsuccessfully so far, to the status of the old Mainline. Forgettaboutit. The Mainline is ruptured.

Thus George W. Bush represented the cultural alliance between his own evangelicalism and conservative Catholicism, which envisioned itself as a new religious establishment – until the Catholic sex-abuse-scandal was blown wide open like the Mainline – and a new wave of secularism hit the shores of America.

Next Barack Obama embodied an uneasy fusion between an attenuated liberal Protestantism and the African-American church – before the emergence of a more zealous, "woke" progressivism, in his second term and after, left Obama's more detached style behind.

Then Donald Trump, a Norman Vincent Peale "power of positive thinking" Christian without the actual belief, became an avatar for prosperity theology and Christian nationalism – a style of religiosity too fundamentally right-wing to lay claim to the religious center.

With Biden, many emergent forces change liberalism's relationship to religion – wokeness, secularization, even paganism. However, Biden personally embodies none of them. Instead, he has elevated his own liberal Catholicism to the center of American national life.

Biden has joined Pope Francis who also gave liberal Catholicism new life, reopening controversies that conservatives assumed were closed and tilting the Vatican toward cooperation with the liberal establishment and away from associations with conservatism.

The conservative Catholics who spent the election arguing that Biden isn't a Catholic in good standing because of his views on abortion and same-sex marriage, find themselves in conflict with their pope.

That conflict belongs to the internal drama of Catholicism. In the internal drama of *America*, though, liberal Catholicism is an interesting candidate to claim the religious center, to fill the Mainline's vanished role.

It is a challenge for any form of faith that aspires to supply a new religious center to the divided American society – how to find a place to stand that's actually outside partisanship, that's clearly religious first and liberal or conservative second.

On this count it's fair to say that religious conservatives of every tradition have often failed or fallen short.

But it is equally fair to doubt that liberal Catholicism, brought back from what had seemed its twilight years to this unexpected apotheosis, is prepared to pass the test.

### ***Holy Communion-Eucharist***

Pope Francis and President Biden, both liberals, are the two highest-profile Roman Catholics in the world. But their liberalism means nothing to America's conservative Bishops who determine church policies and direction for their American flock. In mid-June 2021, they voted overwhelmingly, 73 percent to 24 percent, to draft guidelines for the Eucharist, also called Holy Communion, advancing the true faith, a conservative push to deny Biden communion over his support for abortion rights.

America's conservative Catholic Bishops gained strength during the Trump era, clashing with the Vatican, wresting influence away from the Pope's top representatives in America, further polarizing

American Catholics. Now they are facing an internal war over one of the church's most sacred rituals, the Eucharist, which represents the body of Christ.

Bishop Donald Hying of Madison, Wisconsin, said that many people he has spoken with during the debate are confused by a Catholic president who advances "the most radical pro-abortion agenda in history." Action from the bishops' conference is needed.

Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego countered that the conference would suffer "destructive consequences" from the document targeting Catholic politicians. "It would be impossible to prevent the weaponization of the Eucharist," McElroy said.

The Eucharist is considered the path to salvation: "Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever," Jesus told his disciples in the Gospel of John.

For Catholics, the ritual is a sacrament and the central part of every Mass. Catholic teaching instructs that the bread and wine literally transforms into the body and blood of Christ during Mass. Thereafter, to be denied the Eucharist is to deny the presence of Christ.

Only about 30 percent of US Catholics believe the core church teaching that the bread and wine become the literal body of and blood of Christ; about 70 percent believe they are mere symbols, according to a Pew Research Center poll in 2019.

According to the same Pew poll, fifty-six percent of American Catholics agree with Biden, backing abortion being legal in most or all cases. More than two-thirds of American Catholics also support legalized same-sex marriage, according to a 2020 Gallup survey.

The Reverend Brian Lynch, the associate pastor at Transfiguration Catholic Church in Oakdale, Minnesota encouraged his congregants to write letters of support for the Bishop's support for the Eucharist statement before the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' vote. To Father Lynch, the example president Biden is providing to ordinary Catholics is intolerable. "The old-fashioned language would be that the current situation is scandalous: that someone can hold positions that are completely contrary to what

the church teaches and publicly present themselves as devout Catholic,” he said. “That’s not the traditional meaning of ‘devout,’ given his position on abortion.

When the Protestant reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century rejected the Catholic teaching that the bread and wine substantively became the body and blood of Jesus, Catholic Church leaders affirmed the teaching, called transubstantiation.

The Eucharist is the “sacrament of sacraments,” said the Very Reverend Aquinas Guilbeau, a Dominican friar and an assistant professor of moral theology at the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington.

“It is the devotion that is driving the theology,” Father Guilbeau said.

Biden, who attends Mass regularly, says he personally opposes abortion but doesn’t believe he should impose that position on Americans who feel otherwise.

This is not the first time the bishops have challenged a practicing Catholic who supports abortion rights. Former Senator and Secretary of State John Kerry of Massachusetts was targeted by conservative bishops, some of whom even criticized Boston’s archbishop for presiding over former Senator Ted Kennedy’s funeral Mass.

The most likely consequence of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops decision is that Biden continues to attend Mass and receive communion from friendly priests, and the bishops as a corporate body, already weak and scandal-tarnished look as if they’ve made a partisan intervention with no meaningful effect.

### ***Catholic Bishops Risk Own Goal***

The Catholic Church risks a backlash with its attacks on Biden’s support of a woman’s right to have an abortion and same-sex marriage.

President Biden has a weekend routine. Whether in Washington, DC, or his hometown of Wilmington, Delaware, his motorcade will roll to a nearby Catholic church every Saturday afternoon – and occasionally Sunday morning.

Biden, the second Roman Catholic US president, is different from the first, John F Kennedy. Kennedy distanced himself from the Vatican to secure Protestant votes, whereas Biden has long embraced the faith as part of his political identity.

He frequently invoked his Catholic roots on the campaign trail, with stories about the nuns who taught him in primary school, or how religion helped him after losing his first wife and two children. He wears the rosary beads of his late son, Beau, around his wrist. When he was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election, he quoted “On Eagle’s Wings,” a hymn often played at Catholic funerals, in his acceptance speech.

Catholic Church teaching argues that human life begins at conception, therefore, abortion is “gravely contrary to the moral law.” Biden was long a holdout in the Democratic Party for his reluctance to fully embrace abortion access in the US. But in 2019, shortly after he launched his bid for president, he dropped his support for the Hyde Amendment, which bans the use of federal funding for abortions.

“Because President Biden is Catholic, it presents a unique problem for us,” Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City told the Associated Press. “It can create confusion...How can he say he is a devout Catholic and he is doing these things that are contrary to the church’s teaching?”

Abortion has long been a divisive issue in US politics, with Democrats broadly supporting more abortion rights and Republicans endorsing a so-called “pro-life” agenda to restrict or outlaw the procedures.

As a reckoning over clerical sexual abuse continues, the decline in church attendance among US Catholics has accelerated rapidly. In contrast, the rate of churchgoing among Protestants has stayed the same, according to Gallup. The polls show that fewer than 40 per cent of American Catholics attend church in a given week, down from an average of 45 per cent 15 years ago.

At the same time, Pope Francis, who was elected in 2013, has preached a more liberal, ecumenical version of Catholicism that has attracted praise from the left and criticism from the right.

Opinion polls show that most US Catholics are more likely to side with Biden than with the bishops. According to Edison exit polls, Biden in the 2020 election, received an estimated 52 percent of Catholic votes, compared with 47 percent for Donald Trump. And a 2019 Pew Research Center survey found 56 percent of US Catholics said abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Moreover, roughly two-thirds said they opposed overturning *Roe vs Wade*, the landmark Supreme Court decision that enshrined the constitutional right to an abortion.

In other words, if the bishops picked a fight with President Biden, they would further distance themselves from their already dwindling flock.

So far, the White House has remained mum on the issue. But the discussion reminds me of another leader who in 1996 attracted the ire of the Catholic hierarchy for taking communion at his local parish in north London despite being an Anglican.

Tony Blair, when he was the British Labour party leader, apologized in writing to the cardinal who ordered him to stop, but added: “I wonder what Jesus would have made of it?”

### ***Abuse of Faith***

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, the departing US president, Trump, blasted his way out of the White House with the attorney general and top military brass in their uniforms, walking alongside – while an advance team assaulted peaceful protestors and journalists with teargas and rubber bullets, to clear the path for Trump to Saint John’s Church in Lafayette Square – to hold up a Bible in an act of defiance. During the protests in the wake of the George Floyd murder, Trump had bristled at the criticism for not addressing the nation. But there he was, holding up a closed Bible. Not opened, cited, nor read from, in the shadow of a church that had been vandalized, claiming the mantle of righteousness.

## ***Law and Order!***

From everything I read and hear, Trump really doesn't give a damn about religion, but he has the acute instinct to mimic Christian practices and the symbolism of leadership. So, as he positioned himself as the defender of the Christian faith, he seemed to know that he needed to imbue his presidency with some renewed moral purpose; Christianity was a convenient rich vein to tap.

"I think that's a standard trope in American political frames of reference," Luke Bretherton, professor of moral and political theory at Duke University's Divinity School, told *The New York Times* opinion writer Elizabeth Bruenig. He cited Cold War efforts to demonize socialism as viciously atheistic and amoral. It was undertaken with anxious eagerness precisely because socialist criticism of American life was substantial and compelling.

That is the case with the protestors who have gathered to condemn the murder of George Floyd and the murders of others like him, black men and women slaughtered in America's streets and in their homes by those entrusted with the force of the law. Their moral case is clear, urgent, compelling. But in Trump's eyes, Bretherton said, "there's only one way to combat that symbolically: "To claim divine sanction for what amounts to a declaration of martial law."

Trump doesn't care that St. John's is a liberal Episcopal church, whose presiding bishop, Michael Curry, vehemently condemned the stunt. Yet, ironically, the church's sign posted behind Trump read: "All are welcome."

The next day, Trump visited the Saint John Paul II National Shrine, a sacred space maintained by the Knights of Columbus, in honor of the pope whose blood resides in the shrine as a relic of veneration by the faithful. No different than the macabre parade in front of St. John's. Another attempt at recruiting a vague Christian pastiche as the moral core of his authoritarian efforts.

"It's significant that Trump did this alone," Bretherton observed. Unlike previous presidents who sometimes appeared on grave occasions with priests or pastors, Trump "doesn't need a Billy Graham figure to give divine sanction. He doesn't need a priestly figure. He himself can be the mediator."

On the same day, President Trump signed an executive order to prioritize religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy and assistance programs.

The new order also allocated at least \$50 million per year for programs that promote international religious freedom.

Eighty percent of the world's population lives in countries where religious liberty is threatened or banned.

China, where Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Muslims, and adherents of Falun Gong are under attack, is the primary target of the executive order.

### ***National Security***

More than 20,400 National Guard soldiers and airmen were called up in 28 American states and the District of Columbia as of June 2<sup>nd</sup>, in response to the riots following the murder of George Floyd.

“The hardest mission we do is responding in times of civil unrest,” Air Force General Joseph Lengyel, who is the chief of the National Guard Bureau, said in a statement. “We are here to protect life and property and preserve peace, order and public safety.”

More than twice as many guardsmen had already been deployed to address the pandemic.

On June 1, President Trump urged governors to deploy the National Guard in their states. The National Guard had already been called up in 23 states a day earlier.

“Mayors and governors must establish an overwhelming law enforcement presence until the violence has been quelled,” Trump said in a statement in the Rose garden at the White House on June 1<sup>st</sup>.

“If a city or a state refuses to take the actions that are necessary to defend the life and property of their residents, then I will deploy the United States military and solve the problem for them.”

Dozens of cities were under curfews not seen since the rioting that followed the 1986 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The

White House established a “central command center” to oversee the federal response to the riots.

### ***Breach of Faith***

In November 2020, the Vatican released the result of a two year internal investigation into the career of former American cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who in 2019 became the most senior figure to be expelled from the Catholic clergy over alleged child sexual abuse.

The report revealed the extent to which the Catholic hierarchy was warned about the cardinal’s history yet still allowed him to be promoted to the top rank in the American church.

According to the report, Pope John Paul II, was aware of the numerous allegations of sexual misconduct various cardinals made against McCarrick in the early 1990s. However, the Pope still named him archbishop of Washington DC in 2001.

Pope John Paul II passed away in 2005, and nine years later was declared a saint. But now in light of the McCarrick inquiry findings that the Vatican released in November 2020, questions are being raised if John Paul II had been given the halo in haste. The biweekly US newspaper, National Catholic Reporter, has urged bishops to “suppress the cult” of the late pope. It meant that, while he could still be considered a saint, schools or churches should not carry his name and activities of devotion toward him should be in private.

In Warsaw, someone put a sticker on a street sign reading “John Paul II Avenue” to make it read “Victims of John Paul II Avenue.”

### ***Killing Boarding Schools***

The Catholic Church’s sins, injustice and malice were not limited to sexual abuse of children; but extended even to murder – the murder of indigenous children in boarding schools across America and Canada. Hundreds of unmarked graves have been discovered in former boarding schools for indigenous children. Reading about the discoveries in July 2021 was horrifying. Chills ran up my spine, because I was sent to boarding schools in Cyprus and Israel when I was 11 years old. The stories hit home.

US Catholic and Protestant denominations operated more than 150 boarding schools between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, according to researchers. Children of American and Alaskan native tribes were regularly removed from their families, customs, language and religion, and brought to the boarding schools in a push to assimilate and make them Christians.

Eighty-four boarding schools were affiliated with the Catholic Church or its religious orders such as the Jesuits. Seventy-two others were affiliated with various Protestant groups, including Presbyterians (21), Quakers (15) and Methodists (12). Most have been closed for decades.

US Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, the first Native-American to serve as a US cabinet secretary, announced in June 2021, that her department would investigate “the loss of human life and the lasting consequences of residential Indian boarding schools.” That would include seeking to identify the burial grounds.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau went a step further. He said he has urged Pope Francis to come to Canada to apologize for church-run boarding schools where of unmarked graves have been found.

“I have spoken personally directly with His Holiness, Pope Francis, to impress upon him how important it is not just that he makes an apology but that he makes an apology to indigenous Canadians on Canadian soil,” Trudeau said.

Indigenous leaders said that 600 or more remains were discovered at the Marieval Indian Residential School, which operated from 1899 to 1997 in the province of Saskatchewan. Some 215 remains were reported at a similar school in British Columbia.

### ***Cardinal Faces Corruption Trial in Vatican Court***

In the Vatican, a senior cardinal, a fund manager, and a freelance intelligence expert were among ten people on trial in a corruption case on July 27, 2021.

The case, focused on a multimillion-pound Vatican investment in a luxury London property development, could define Pope Fran-



cis's drive to reform the finances of the Holy See. Giovanni Angelo Becciu was the first cardinal to face trial for financial crimes in the Vatican's criminal court. Pope Francis lifted Becciu's legal immunity as a cardinal to answer charges of abuse of office and embezzlement linked to his oversight of hundreds of millions of euros of Catholic charitable funds held in Swiss banks. He denied wrongdoing, claiming he was the victim of a conspiracy.

Pope Francis seeks to show the Holy See is clamping down on financial crimes. Juan Antonio Guerrero, one of the Vatican's most senior economic officials, said it would demonstrate that the Holy See was taking meaningful action.

"I think [the trial] marks a turning point that can lead to greater credibility for the Holy See in economic matters," Guerrero told the Vatican's state news outlet. "The fact that this trial is taking place shows that the internal controls have worked: the accusations have come from within the Vatican."

Becciu was one of the most influential figures in the Holy See until he was asked to resign by the Pope in 2020, leaving him a cardinal in name only.

### ***Catholic Church Reformation***

Pope Francis religious liberalism has stirred celestial forces in the Vatican and forces the church to reform in defiance of its conservative wing.

In Germany, Catholic priests are offering Mass blessings to same-sex couples, supporting married and female priests, Communion with Protestants that threatens a modern-day schism, hoping to force the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome to change its outdated practices.

The Pope has responded on some fronts. He has updated the Catholic Church's criminal code for sexual offenses against minors, reinforcing penalties for priests who sexually abuse children that went into effect in December 2020 against pedophilia.

The new code does not spell out sexual offenses against minors in plain language; instead, it refers to offenses against the seventh

commandment which prohibits adultery.

Clergy sexual abuse survivor Marie Collins, one of the original members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors who resigned in 2017 because she was concerned that promised reforms were not being implemented, was scathing in her criticism.

“Adultery has nothing to do with the abuse of children, it’s completely inappropriate,” she said. “Punishment is left very loose and can lead to different outcomes.”

Collins is right. In East Timor, revered American Catholic priest Father Richard Daschbach, a known self-professed pedophile continues to this day to evade justice.

### ***Abusive Religious Faiths***

Religious hypocrisy and abuses of religious doctrines are not limited to Catholics. All religions have religious leaders that abuse and violate their faith’s tenets: Buddhists, Christians of all denominations, Hindus, Jews and Muslims.

I have cited Buddhist and Hindu sexual and other abuses in *Spin* (pp. 205-206; & 235-236).

In Greece, in June 2021, a priest of the Greek Orthodox Church, facing disciplinary proceedings for alleged drug-related offenses, attacked seven senior church members and three others, with an acidic liquid, resulting in burns serious enough that they had to be admitted to hospital.

In Montenegro, riot police fired teargas at hundreds of protestors in the ancient town of Cetinje in clashes sparked by the inauguration of Metropolitan Joanikije II, as the new head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. The Serbian Orthodox Church is widely viewed as a symbol of Serbian influence. It openly helped overthrow Montenegro’s pro-western government in 2020.

Montenegro declared independence from Serbia in 2006 without separating the two countries churches. About a third of Montenegro’s population of 620,000 are ethnic Serbs.

Protestors threw stones at police and set tires on fire, shouting: “This is Montenegro!” and “This is not Serbia!”

A couple of examples of the strife that goes on internally within all religious organizations that are not publicized unless the conflict is so severe that it becomes public knowledge.

The most serious self-inflicted abuses take place in the Muslim world – Sunnis and Shiites, internally towards their fellow believers and against each other. Afghanistan is an example of the Sunni Taliban killing and abusing Sharia non-conformists, while Shiite Iran does the same.

Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi, the son of a cleric and product of a clerical education, is believed to have executed anywhere from 5,000 to 30,000 Iranians in 1988 when he was deputy prosecutor general of Teheran, according to a 2017 report from Amnesty International and others. He later became Iran’s chief justice. In 2018 he called the massacres “one of the proud achievements of the system.”

I agree with Bret Stephens, who said in an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, on June 23, 2021, that Iran is hell-bent on “doubling down on religion, repression and revolution.”

In Yemen, Saudi Arabia, leads the Sunni slaughter of Shiites lead by Iran, as Iran reciprocates.

On July 5, 2021, in an Indian prison, the death of 84-year-old Jesuit priest Father Stan Swamy, who dedicated his life to India’s indigenous forest dwellers, is one such glaring example. Arrested in November 2020 on suspicion of Maoist rebel links, he was never put on trial. Despite being afflicted with such severe Parkinson’s disease, and could scarcely hold a cup to drink water, he was repeatedly denied bail. A 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center titled *Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation* showed how the inter-religious divide in India is gradually becoming the norm because Hindus tended to see their religious identity and Indian national identity as closely intertwined. Nearly two-thirds of Hindus said it was “very important” to be Hindu to be “truly” Indian.

### ***Religious Co-Existence***

The historic March 2021 visit of Pope Francis to Iraq, the Mesopotamian cradle of civilization, was symbolic, designed to lift the morale of what he called a martyred church in a martyred land, and above all, to raise the banners of pluralism.

The Pope called on Iraqis, shattered by war and ethno-sectarian carnage, to show that “fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred.” Amid chants in Aramaic, the language of Christ, Francis likened the age-old Christian communities to “so many individually colored threads that, woven together, make up a single beautiful carpet.”

In Mosul, capital of the brief but savage “caliphate” of ISIS, the Pope prayed amid gutted churches, desecrated by the jihadis. In Ur, the town believed to be the birthplace of Abraham, the prophet of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, he said, “hating our brothers and sisters [is] the greatest blasphemy.”

The high point of the Pope’s visit was his meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani. The 90-year-old Iranian-born spiritual leader of Iraq’s Shia majority received the Pope in his austere alleyway house in Najaf, shrine city of Ali, the Shia imam and fourth caliph at the time of the schism between Sunni and Shia Islam. Quite the contrast to the Pope’s living quarters in the Vatican.

Sistani is from the quietest Shia tradition that opposes clerics holding political power, as they do in Iran’s Islamic Republic.

When Francis visited the United Arab Emirates in 2019, he signed a document proclaiming human fraternity with Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar, the Sunni center of learning in Cairo. Nothing was signed in Najaf, “probably to avoid provoking Iran, whose supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is held to resent Sistani’s theological pre-eminence and global following,” wrote David Gardner of the *Financial Times*.

“Yet the Grand Ayatollah and the Pope, two personally ascetic men who advocate social justice, are pooling their immense moral authority to combat extremism. They counter the narrative of many



Arab despots, who blackmail the world into accepting that the alternative to their rule is Islamist theocracy, as well as the tendency of some Christian prelates in the east to see freedom in opposition to religious pluralism,” Gardner added. “Francis made a point of thanking Sistani for helping Christians to survive through Iraq’s darkest years.”

The Levant is a mosaic of religion and civilization, teeming with syncretic and esoteric rites. Yet, ever since the 1975<sup>000</sup>≠<sup>0</sup>1990 civil war in Lebanon, the region has faced the prospect of the birthplace of Christianity emptied of Christians – and Muslims heading to the U.S. and Europe.

### ***Reversal of Muslim Ban***

Muslims worldwide heaved a sigh of relief at President Biden’s reversal of Trump’s Muslim ban that prevented citizens of several Muslim countries from traveling or immigrating to America. Within hours of taking office, President Biden rescinded the Trump-era orders.

Biden said the Trump orders undermined American security, jeopardized its global alliances and presented “a moral blight that has dulled the power of our example the world over.”

It is estimated 42,000 people were prevented from entering the US from 2017 to 2019, mostly from Muslim majority countries like Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Syria.

Muhyadin Hassan Noor, a Somali refugee, was stranded with his wife and six children at a dust-blown camp in Northern Kenya since 2017, despite having the approval to resettle in Minnesota. “We were treated in a way that wasn’t right,” said Noor.

Shawki Ahmed, a Yemeni-born New York City police officer struggled for three years to get his wife and children out of Yemen to the family home in Queens. “You’re a police officer. You’re out there risking your life, yet you don’t know what’s going on with your kid,” said Ahmed.

The family got permission to go to America in October 2020, but

the sting of injustice lingered. “Trump betrayed so many law-abiding citizens based on their religion and last name,” Ahmed added.

After more than 100 court cases, and several iterations, Trump’s “Muslim Ban” had become an African one as well. It barred entry to most citizens from Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria and Yemen; halted immigration from Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Nigeria; restricted selected citizens of Tanzania and Venezuela.

The ban was upheld by the Supreme Court, which said that despite the president’s incendiary words about Muslims, the ban was justified as an anti-terrorism policy. But the ruling came with a searing dissent from Justice Sonia Sotomayor, with which I agree and have written about it. Sotomayor likened it to the 1944 *Korematsu v. United States* decision that upheld the detention of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Despite the worldwide backlash over the ban, America still holds an immense global appeal, even though its standing has fallen among its fans. In Sudan, Alaa Jamal, whose husband won the green card lottery, said she had dreamed of moving to America since she was a child.

“I want my children to have a good life,” she said. “And I want them to be free.” But a certain cynicism had crept into her view of American leaders.

“They are all the same,” she said. “For Trump, we were bad Muslims. For Biden we are good Muslims. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter – they’ll use us if it’s good for them. We’re just pawns in a chess game.”

As well as expediting outstanding applications, Biden ordered an immediate review of all visas rejected under Trump’s measures, and an assessment of contentious “extreme vetting” security procedures that include screening an applicant’s social media.

“Even before, the system was discriminatory and not welcoming to Muslims,” said Gadeir Abbas, a staff attorney for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “It was under the Obama administration that you had the expansion of a terrorism watch list to over



a million names that, as far as we can tell, is essentially a list of Muslims.”

Activists are pressing Congress to pass the No Ban Act, a proposal supported by Biden to prevent future presidents from enacting sweeping travel restrictions.

### ***Sectarian Islam***

Europe is trying to counter extremist Islam teachings by creating local imam schools to train imams instead of having radical imams from Saudi Arabia, Iran and other Arab and Muslim countries come to Europe and preach their form of extreme Islam.

Charles Michel, the European Council president, proposed in November 2020, a European imam training institute to fight the “ideology of hatred.”

Many clerics worry that support for their efforts will be treated as a counter-terrorism strategy, alienating the very communities they hope to reach.

“Muslims in Europe are hurt doubly by Islamist religious extremism. To non-Muslim Europeans, we become a fifth column ... but from the perspective of the religious fanatics, we have sold our souls,” said Bulent Ucar, the academic director of the Islamkolleg, Germany’s first imam school.

Ucar and his peers had sought state support for an imam college since 2007 but had been repeatedly rebuffed by government officials. Germany was happy to have Turkey foot the bill for the imams, Ucar said. Only as relations with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan soured had the government started to battle foreign funding.

Even now that the college exists, the dilemma of paying imams remains. Ucar said Germany could provide indirect help by supporting congregations’ social programs and freeing up their funds for imams salaries. “That’s what they do with Catholics, Protestants and Jews. Why not with Muslims?” he asks. “This is a political problem. People tend to feel wary of Islam.”

There is no room for extreme Islam, just as there is no room for extreme Christian, Jewish, Hindu or any other extremists, not only in America and Europe, but globally. Likewise, murder or forced conversions of infidels, just because they have a different religion or belief system, is also unacceptable.

Indonesia is right in arresting Rizieq Shihab, leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (“FPI”), for holding mass rallies in violation of the Covid-19 protocols and restrictions; and also using its name in public, effectively ending its ability to operate legally.

The FPI targeted nightclubs and establishments it considered “immoral.” It also attacked minority Muslim sects it considered “deviant.”

Shibab was the central figure behind the mass rallies in 2016 against the then governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, over allegations he insulted the Koran.

Basuki, who is Christian, was sentenced to two years in prison for blasphemy.

Indonesia is on the right path to moderate Islam. Still, it has a lot of work to attend to – for example, the flogging Christian men with 40 lashes for gambling and drinking in ultra-conservative province of Aceh – the only Indonesian province that imposes Islamic law, is one such example. One of the flogged men said he chose flogging to avoid prosecution that could have seen him jailed for up to six months.

“The Sharia police gave us options and we consciously decided to comply with the Islamic criminal code,” he said. “No one forced me to choose it.”

However, non-Muslims who have committed an offence that violates both national and religious laws can choose to be prosecuted under either system.

Human rights groups have slammed public caning as cruel, and President Joko Widodo has called for it to end.

Child brides as young as 13 can be wed under the Code of Muslim



Personal Laws, a practice many human rights groups are fighting.

A Muslim practice that is even more repugnant is the kidnapping of young girls from other religious communities, forcing them to convert to Islam, and marry an old man.

An appraisal by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reported that in Pakistan and other Muslim countries, underage girls in the minority Hindu, Christian, and Sikh communities were “kidnapped for forced conversion to Islam...forcibly married and subjected to rape.”

In Pakistan and India, Muslims and Hindus destroy each other's temples religiously.

In Afghanistan, Supreme Court women judges are targeted for assassination by the Taliban. There were more than 200 female judges working for the top court.

Hong Kong Muslims are respectful of the community, peaceful, and in many ways, precisely what Europe is trying to achieve with European Islam.

Muslims have lived in Hong Kong since the beginning of the British colonial era in 1841. They mainly came from India as soldiers, and some as traders. Today about 12,000 South Asian Muslim families call the city home, some descended from those early Indian settlers.

The growing Muslim community in Hong Kong has three mosques. In 1993, there were about 60,000 Muslims in the city. Today there are 300,000.

About 60 percent of the Muslims in Hong Kong are domestic contract workers from Indonesia. In addition, there are 40,000 ethnic Chinese Muslims, and 30,000 with Pakistani roots. The remainder is from other parts of Asia, as well as Middle East and Africa.

### ***Jerusalem***

Captured from Jordan by Israel in 1967 as part of the West Bank, but still considered occupied territory by much of the world, East

Jerusalem was annexed by Israel and remains a constant flash point between Israelis and Palestinians.

President Trump's decision in May 2018 to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was based on a 1995 law that recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capitol. Biden, as a senator had voted for it. However, successive presidents since 1995 delayed the move, respecting the international view that the holy city's status should be negotiated between the Israelis and Palestinians as part of a broader peace deal that would establish a Palestinian state. Though Israel claims Jerusalem as its capitol, Palestinians claim East Jerusalem as the capitol of a future Palestinian state.

A legal dispute which could lead to the eviction of a Palestinian family, from a building owned by a Jewish trust in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem, to make room for Jewish settlers, led to protests, clashes and finally war in May 2021 between Israel and Hamas, killing more than 240 people.

Across East Jerusalem, settler groups, often backed by Israeli law, are pursuing battles in strategic areas. Israeli law also permits Jews to reclaim properties in East Jerusalem that were Jewish-owned before 1948.

Ateret Cohanim, a settler group that spearheaded the revival of the trust and advocates for Jewish residents, says Jews have the right to live on the property because they lived there not just during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, but also in antiquity.

"We were promised this land from God, we were kept in exile for 2,000 years, and now we're back home," said Daniel Luria, a spokesperson for Ateret Cohanim. "There's never been a Palestinian state here.

In the late 1930s, the site was abandoned. British documents show that the British authorities who then ruled Palestine evacuated the Jewish residents, fearing that they were vulnerable to an Arab insurrection. After the British left and Jordan occupied the West Bank in 1948, Palestinian families moved into the uninhabited buildings and land.

Arabs did that with Jewish properties and Jews did the same with Arab properties back then. The only difference is that the properties are bought and sold between Jews and Palestinians at market prices. The rule of law is applied to adjudicate title disputes and ownership rights. That's how towns and cities with mixed Jewish, Arab Christian and Muslim communities evolved.

Haifa, where the population is 85 percent Jewish and 15 percent Palestinian, has long been presented along with Lod and other mixed cities in Israel as a model of coexistence. Which is why the question has repeatedly been asked: How could these cities suddenly be transformed into sites of mob violence? The answer is that the Internet and social media made instant sharing of information about protests possible, inciting new protests elsewhere, like Arizona, California and other Western states.

### ***Religious Nationalist Missionaries***

Torah Nucleus is a loosely organized group that aims to uplift poor and neglected areas on the margins of society, particularly in mixed cities, and promote Jewish life there. Its supporters have moved into dozens of Israeli cities and towns.

“Perhaps ours is a complex message,” said Avi Rokach, 43, chairman of the Torah Nucleus association in Lod. “Lod is a Jewish city. It is our agenda and our religious duty to look out for whoever lives here, be they Jewish, Muslim or Hindu.”

The first families who moved into Acre and Lod 25 years ago were Jewish settlers. They came from West Bank settlements, and they aimed to make mixed or predominantly Arab communities more Jewish.

With West Bank settlement firmly entrenched – about 450,000 Jews now live among more than 2.6 million Palestinians – Torah Nucleus supporters see Israeli cities as a new horizon.

But on May 10, 2021, Palestinian protests over a Jewish landlord-and-Arab-tenant dispute in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem; and an Israeli police raid at the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusa-

lem – one of Islam’s holiest sites – spilled over into a military conflict between Israel and Hamas.

It quickly ignited violence between mobs of Arabs and Jews in Israel’s cities, starting in Lod and rapidly spreading across the country as internal fault lines were abruptly exposed. Built up for years and erupted amid the May 2021 outbreak of warfare between Israelis and Palestinians. Arab and Jewish mobs attacked each other in the worst violence within Israeli cities in decades, raising fears of a civil war. For many, the intensity of the animosity came as a shock.

The May riots tore away the thin layer of civility and exposed seething resentments between Israel’s Jewish and Palestinian citizens. Jews and Arabs in Israel live side by side but are generally blind to each other’s lives. As a result, towns portrayed as models of peaceful coexistence fester with resentments born of double standards.

Uri Jeremias, a celebrated Israeli chef, saw himself as a benefactor. By bringing jobs, tourists and investment to the mainly Arab heart of the coastal town of Acre, he believed he was seen as a nurturing-co-existence between Jews and Arabs.

That was until an Arab mob torched his restaurant in May.

“I was targeted as a Jew by radicalized thugs,” the 76-year-old Jeremias said. “But many more Arabs came to help me put out the fires than came to burn my place down. We cannot allow a violent minority to win.”

In Acre, a city where Arab and Jewish history has been one of uneasy mingling, a spark was enough to demonstrate that many Palestinians, who account for 30 percent of the town’s population of 56,000, saw Jeremias’s restaurant more as creeping exclusion and oppression than opportunity.

The worst hit mainly were the families of mostly young, orthodox Jewish families that moved over the last decade into a hard-scrabble, crime-ridden neighborhood populated mostly by Arabs, saying they wanted to uplift the working-class city – and make it more Jewish. So, they rented or bought apartments in the dilapidated blocks lining a warren of streets near the city’s old quarter, sharing

the stairwells with longtime Arab residents – reclaiming Samaria and Judeah, the biblical names of Palestine and Israel.

### ***Jewish History***

The Jewish people are indigenous to the Middle East. Jews have had a continuous presence in Israel and elsewhere in the region for over 3,000 years. The word “Judaism” is directly linked to the region of Israel called, in Hebrew, Yehudah (i.e., Judah). The center of ancient Jewish life was in Israel, but Diaspora communities developed in Babylon (Iraq), Damascus (Syria), Libya, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, and parts of the Roman Empire.

After Rome crushed Jewish revolts in 70 and 135 C.E. and destroyed Jerusalem, the Diaspora grew further. Finally, Rome renamed Judea, calling it Syria-Palaestina to erase all traces of Jewish civilization. Jewish life continued in the northern part of the land for centuries despite Rome’s efforts, but eventually Jews became an oppressed minority in their ancestral home.

Some survivors were brought to Rome as slaves, forming the nucleus of European Jewry. Meanwhile, many Jews remained in the Middle East and came to be known as “Mizrahim” or “Easterners.” Though Jews everywhere have Middle Eastern roots, Mizrahi Jews are those who never left the region.

### ***Palestinian Reality***

I was made in Palestine. My parents met there, got married there and I was conceived there. So the subject of Palestine and Palestinians naturally interested me enough to want to learn more about the people and region – and I did. As a political science major in college, I took a couple of classes on *Government and Politics of The Middle East*. I have also written about Palestine and Palestinians in my books.

The question of Palestinian refugees made the news again after the US withdrew its funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, I thought I should share what I know and believe about Palestine and Palestinians.

*In Custom Maid Spin for New World Disorder*, I wrote:

*Joseph Farah, an Arab-American journalist, reminds us that East Jerusalem was not captured from Yassar Arafat and the Palestinians during the Six Day War. In fact Arafat was not born in Jerusalem either. He was born in Egypt. Jerusalem was captured from Jordan's King Hussein. "The truth is that Palestine is no more real than Never-Never Land. The first time Palestine was used was in 70 AD when the Romans committed genocide against the Jews, smashed the Temple and declared the land of Israel will be no more. They promised from then on the land of Israel would be known as Palestine – a name derived from the Philistines, a Goliathian people conquered by the Jews earlier. Palestine has never existed before or since as an autonomous entity. There is no language known as Palestinian. There is no distinct Palestine culture. Palestinians are Arabs, indistinguishable from Jordanians, Syrians, Lebanese or Iraqis. There has never been a land governed by Palestinians. It was ruled alternatively by Rome, by Islamic and Christian crusaders, by the Ottoman Turks and, briefly, by the British after World War I."*

In *Custom Maid Knowledge for New World Disorder*, I went on to write:

*It was the Palestinians who rejected the United Nations decision in 1947 to partition the land between Arabs and Jews, with Jerusalem as an international city. The subsequent war launched in 1948, by the Palestinians and five Arab armies with the intention of eliminating the newborn Jewish state, was won by Israel. The departure of 800,000 Palestinians, who fled at the urging of their leaders to avoid being killed, was supposed to be temporary. However, they continue to remain in suspended animation and have not been assimilated into other countries (unlike the more than 1 million Jews evicted from Arab countries that were absorbed by Israel). Unfortunately, they remain useful political pawns in the Middle East millennium chess game. They have*



*been perpetually promised by their leaders that they will return. Their leaders, including the late Yassar Arafat, became victims of their own propaganda. “The reason for this fantastic attachment to Palestine is partly because the Arabs encouraged it,” said Kamel Abu Jaber, a retired Jordanian foreign minister and peace negotiator. “To say, let’s settle them, let’s absorb them, was considered treason and still is.”*

For Palestinians to claim that there are more than five million refugees from the “occupied territories” is a gigantic *sham-scam*! Of the 800,000 Arab refugees from the 1948 war, maybe 30,000 are alive today.

In 2012, the US Congress ordered the State Department to disclose how many Palestinians currently served by UNRWA fled the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and how many are merely their descendants. But the Obama administration decided to make this report “classified” on national security grounds. Really? What national security? It should be declassified for all to see.

UNRWA was created solely to attend to Palestinian refugees – while the rest of the world’s refugees are overseen by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees – that unlike UNRWA, has resettled them. Any wonder UNRWA figures and budgets have been grossly inflated annually?

In ending its decades of funding UNRWA to the tune of more than \$300 million a year (\$355 million in 2016) of U.S. taxpayer money, most of which found its way into the personal bank accounts of unscrupulous Palestinian leaders, the U.S. said it “will no longer commit further funding to this irredeemably flawed operation.”

False Palestinian narratives have to be challenged and uprooted if there is to be a Palestine state. Lasting peace can only take root if it is grounded in truth. Facts not myths. Reality. The alternative, more homeless and stateless Palestinians.

### ***Jewish Nakba***

Palestinians have done a very effective marketing campaign that has many around the world believing that Jews unjustly expelled Palestinians from their land – *Nakba* – not mentioning the fact that Arab countries in the Middle East persecuted and expelled Jews and confiscated their properties – and the Jews and Israelis aren't doing much better.

The expulsion of Jews from Arab states was not only an unjust and racist backlash against the reestablishment of Israel in 1948. Contrary to prevailing myths, Jews and Arabs did not always live in harmony. For centuries, Jewish communities thrived during some times and in some places and produced some of Judaism's most influential rabbis, scholars, and leaders. On the other hand, they suffered severe marginalization, discrimination, and even massacres, though not as often as Jews in Europe. Through it all, Jews were always second class citizens at best and brutally oppressed at worst. Their expulsion by Arab governments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was rooted in this historical oppression.

“The condition of the Jews is another form of slavery,” said Rev. Lancelot Addison, British Chaplain in Tangier, Morocco, 1662–1669.

### ***The Destruction of Mizrahi Jewry***

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the twin forces of pan-Arab nationalism and political Islamism brought about the demise of Mizrahi Jewish communities. Today, fully 99 percent of these communities no longer exist.

Before and after Israel declared independence in 1948, hostility toward Jews rose dramatically across the Middle East. Arab regimes, coordinated by the Arab League, enacted legislation denying human and civil rights to Jews. As a result of discrimination, violence, expulsion, and fear, 850,000 Mizrahi Jews became refugees, forced to leave everything behind.

### ***Jewish Liberation***

After 1,900 years of dispossession and oppression across Europe



and the Middle East, the Jewish people started a liberation movement. They worked to reestablish a Jewish state in their ancestral home. Unfortunately, Arab leaders refused to accept Jewish rights to self-determination. The Arab League (founded in 1945) not only launched a war to destroy Israel in 1948 and enacted discriminatory laws against Jews living in Arab countries.

In 1948 almost one million Jews lived in Arab-Muslim lands as indigenous Middle Eastern people living across the region since before the founding of Islam. Baghdad was 40 percent Jewish in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These Jewish communities were destroyed after 1948. Jews were stripped of citizenship and, in most cases, dispossessed of their property.

Approximately 650,000 Jewish refugees returned to their homeland in Israel, where they and their descendants became the majority of Israel's population and an integral part of Israeli society. In addition, some 200,000 fled to the West.

In 1948 between 472,000 and 750,000 Palestinian Arabs became refugees from Israel, a number roughly equivalent to the number of Jewish refugees from Arab lands. While a small minority of Palestinian Arab refugees were driven out by Israeli forces, the vast majority fled on their own, to escape the war zone created by Arab states. About 165,000 of them stayed, became equal citizens in Israel, and now make up approximately 20 percent of the population. If Arab leaders had chosen compromise over war, there would have been no Palestinian refugees. On the other hand, Jewish refugees from Arab countries fled primarily because of the Arab government's active oppression. The other key differences between these refugee crises is that the UN set up a special agency-UNRWA-to assist the Palestinians and has passed over 100 resolutions about their plight. UNRWA still operates today. In stark contrast, Jewish refugees have received little recognition and no help from the UN. Today, 99 percent of Jews have been ethnically cleansed from Arab and Muslim countries.

By contrast, 20 percent of Israel's population are Arabs. They vote in local and national elections, and Arabs sit on the Supreme Court and in Parliament.

Refugees were absorbed and not deliberately put in refugee camps with a deliberate political strategy to make the Palestinian refugees a political issue.

### ***The Morning After***

The Israeli ethos of coping is summed up in an ironic but heartfelt phrase, *Lo na'im, lo norah*, “not so pleasant but not terrible.” Even when half the country was forced into air raid shelters and “safe rooms,” in May 2021, Israelis know there is a morning after.

But the morning of May 21, 2021 when the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas went into effect, Israelis had a bad political hangover. Arab citizens and Jewish citizens were violently attacking one another. More than the missiles.

Israel’s ability to fashion a common civic identity for Arabs and Jews is confounded by the security situation. Jews wonder how they can trust a minority that is culturally and emotionally aligned with their enemies and whose politicians reject the country’s identity as a Jewish state.

The message Arabs take from their treatment in Israel and the country’s Jewish identity and symbols is that they don’t quite belong.

The framers of Israel’s Declaration of Independence defined Israel as both Jewish and democratic: the homeland of all Jews, whether or not they were Israeli citizens; the state of all its citizens, whether or not they were Jews. An Israel that would no longer regard itself as a continuity of the Jewish story and protector of the world’s vulnerable Jews would lose its soul; an Israel that would no longer aspire to fulfill democratic values would lose its mind.

Israel’s long-term viability depends on managing the tensions inherent in its identity and reality. For Israelis to form a shared civic identity, Jews need to fulfill Israel’s founding promise to grant full equality to all citizens; they need to reassure Arabs that “Israeli” is not synonymous with “Jew.”

Ironically, the worst inter-ethnic violence since the 1948 War follows

the most promising year in the fraught history of the Arab-Jewish relationship, courtesy of the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Israeli government estimates, about 17 percent of doctors and 24 percent of nurses in Israel are Arab-Israeli. The Israeli news media's coverage of coronavirus focused on doctors in hijabs and coexistence in the respirator wards. One story that became iconic told of an Arab nurse who recited deathbed prayers with an ultra-Orthodox Jew.

So there still is hope the morning after.

### ***Electoral Revolution***

The fractious and polarized nature of Israeli politics has led to four elections in as many years. But, for the latest election in March 2021, parties have come together on a single common interest: Get rid of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Still, there is no single-party governing majority, which means complex coalitions will be necessary to form a government in the future – as was the case on June 13, 2021, when the new government was sworn in – with the Islamist Party Ra'am, that won four seats, being the kingmaker, allowing the new coalition to cross the 61-seat threshold and install a government in the 120 seat Parliament – the Knesset.

Israel's new prime minister, Naftali Bennett, a modern Orthodox Jew and successful tech entrepreneur who is generally viewed as a figure to the right of the former prime minister, Netanyahu, has never won over the Israeli public. He heads Yamina, a small right-wing party that controls only six of the Knesset's 120 seats. He will serve a two year term and then relinquish control and share a rotating premiership with Yair Lapid, a former television presenter and leader of the centrist Yesh Atid, which has 17 seats. The rest of the coalition is made up of a fragile eight-party alliance ranging from the far left to the hard right, from secular to religious, that many consider both the embodiment of the rich diversity of Israeli society but also the epitome of its disarray.

Bennett's immediate and paramount task is to assure Israelis that he can be a unifying leader for a country that is sharply fractured. He has long described himself as just such a unifier.

The new government, the most diverse coalition Israel has ever known, must be a head-twisting puzzle for anyone who thinks of Israel as a racist, apartheid enterprise.

Issawi Frej is Arab and Muslim and used to work for the Peace Now movement. Now he is Israel's minister for regional cooperation. Pnina Tamano-Shata is Black: The Mossad rescued her along with thousands of other Ethiopian Jews, from hunger and persecution when she was a small child. She is now the minister for immigration and absorption. Nitzan Horowitz is the first openly gay man to lead an Israeli political party. He's the health minister. Ayooob Kara, a member of the Islamist Ra'am Party is deputy minister of the Development of the Negev and Galilee.

The new government unseated Netanyahu, the country's longest serving prime minister. Netanyahu faces criminal indictments in multiple cases, like his immediate predecessor prime minister Ehud Olmert, who spent 16 months in jail on corruption charges – sentenced by an Arab-Israeli judge!

Let's not forget, Israel is a robust democracy that gives more rights to Arab citizens and treats them better than its Arab neighbors Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia treat their Arab citizens.

The new government holds lessons for Western democracies gripped by partisanship and paralysis. Nearly all new coalition members had to sacrifice a point of political or moral principle, break ranks with some of their constituents, and get branded as traitors to their respective movements in order to make this coalition possible. They are ideological turncoats, at least to those who think of ideological purity as a virtue.

In what's supposed to be one of the free-worlds most factionalized, tribalized, internally divided countries – Jews, Arabs, secular, national-religious, ultra-Orthodox, Mizrahi, Russian, Druze – an Israeli government is giving civic nationalism a go. Let's hope it works.



## ***People Power***

Sustained protests at Prime Minister Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem played a role in his ouster. They were the most sustained raucous movement in Israel's contemporary history. Every Saturday night, thousands of demonstrators in costumes and carrying humorous signs came to Netanyahu's doorsteps. They chanted, beat pots and drums, blew horns, denounced corruption, and called him to resign. The year-long demonstrations ended only after Parliament voted Netanyahu out of office and installed a new government.

Fears about the corrosion of Israel's liberal democracy and corruption set the stage for the protest movement.

It began in 2016 with a few dozen activists who demonstrating every Saturday night near the home of the attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, in the city of Petach Tikva, as he mulled charging Netanyahu with criminal offenses.

"I have no doubt that without the Petach Tikva protests, Mandelblit would have buried the investigation," said Ishay Hadas, one of the early protesters who led a group called "Crime Minister."

I agree. Mandelblit was a close political ally of Netanyahu, and Netanyahu appointed Mandelblit attorney general, hoping to buy legal insurance and protection. But the protests rendered that insurance policy futile.

My high school classmate Shaul "Shauli" Amir, was a protester who tried to encourage others in our class alumni WhatsApp group to endless ridicule to join the protests. Some of the messages were downright cruel. Some were supportive.

"I think it is important to note that the protests that started in Petach Tikva, and continued all over the country for about four years, were against corruption, foot dragging bureaucracy, attorney general Mandelblit and Netanyahu, as the ultimate representatives of the very deep established corruption he created and represented," Shauli told me when I asked him why he was so active in the protest movement.

“We witness it every day now, even after the change of government. Every government office you can think of is corrupt. Filled with Likud supporters, many of whom are not qualified to handle the tasks they are supposed to carry out. It is like starting a 12 year old engine that has been parked and gathering dust. A 100 day grace period doesn’t even begin to cover the time it will take to fix the damage done by Netanyahu and his cronies,” Shauli said.

Shauli started protesting in August 2017 in the town of Nes Ziona and every so often joined the protests in Petach Tikva. “As the protests gathered momentum, and Netanyahu’s trial began, most protestors moved to Netanyahu’s residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem, Shauli said.

“We continued with our protests in Nes Ziona, that actually became the protest movement’s violent hot spot due to the appearance of ‘Bibists Hooligans’ who started calling us ‘Leftist Traitors.’ The slogan stuck and became the mantra of Bibi’s supporters.”

The Petach Tikva protests fizzled out in 2019 after Mandelblit indicted Netanyahu on bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Netanyahu has denied any wrongdoing. But when his government decided to restrict the activities of the courts and parliament citing health threats caused by the coronavirus pandemic, a new grass-roots group, Black Flags, began sending convoys of motorists to Jerusalem.

Then in June 2020, Amir Haskel, a 70-year-old former general, air force pilot and a veteran of the Petach Tikva protests, organized a “sit in” camp on the sidewalk outside Netanyahu’s Jerusalem residence and demanding the prime minister step down. A few supporters joined Haskel. Two weeks later, he was arrested, for organizing protests and blocking roads. Haskel spent a weekend in jail.

That was the turning point, said Shauli. The arrest received a lot of media coverage across Israel and ignited public outrage. Haskel’s supporters asked where the young people were. About two weeks later, on July 14, 2020, they came out in force to mark Bastille Day and flooded the streets around Netanyahu’s residence. The protests began to draw people from all over the country.

“We are all graduates of the 1973 Yom Kippur war,” Haskell said in an interview during a mass protest that summer. “Then, we saved the country from outside enemies. Now we feel we have to save it from a dictatorship and a prime minister who is corrupt and corrupting.”

It felt wonderful, Haskell said, to see the young out on the streets, adding, “They used to call us the old geezers.”

Shauli continued his protests in Nes Ziona, but every couple of weeks would go to Jerusalem to join the demonstrations there. “The conversations among the protestors were always about the level of corruption and the need for honest leadership. We all watched as Netanyahu made decisions without consulting with his cabinet. We protested against his decision to sell strategic submarines to the Egypt; we protested against his decision to purchase three submarines for our Navy against the advice of our military commanders; his share-holding, through his cousin, in ThyssenKrupp, the manufacturer of the submarines; his refusal to agree on an annual or biannual budget for the country. Had he accepted the budgetary proposal, he would also have to honor his agreement to hand over the premiership to his coalition partner Benny Gantz,” Shauli said.

As pandemic lockdowns placed restrictions on movement and gatherings, protesters gathered on bridges and at major junctions across the country and even within their own neighborhoods.

I agree with the anti-Netanyahu activists who say that their protests were a significant factor in bringing Netanyahu down, or at least in helping create a new discourse of diversity that is reflected in the new government.

“The protest created a consciousness that wasn’t there before,” said Hadas of Crime Minister.

Orly Barlev, an Israeli social activist and independent journalist, had started documenting the protests in Petach Tikva in 2017; later on the Jerusalem protests at Netanyahu’s residence and live-streaming them on social media. Barlev said, Netanyahu’s determination

to remain in office even after being charged with corruption had been legitimized, by the authorities, including the attorney general, his coalition partners, the Supreme Court judges, and other lawmakers. “So what was left,” she said, “was the public, the last frontier, the last of the gatekeepers who said it’s not legitimate.”

### ***Lebanon, and Israel Skirmish***

There are more conflicts Israel has to confront daily than just protests in Israel, the Palestinians in Israel and Gaza, just as it had since its founding, more than 3,000 years ago.

Israel’s Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said he holds Lebanon responsible for rocket fire launched from its territory the week of August 2, 2021, regardless of whether the Hezbollah militant group launched the weapons or not. The prime minister’s comments came days after one of the heaviest flare-ups in violence between Israel and Hezbollah in several years.

“The country of Lebanon and the army of Lebanon have to take responsibility (for) what happens in its backyard,” Bennett told his Cabinet.

Militants in Lebanon launched a barrage of rockets into Israel, drawing rare Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon. Hezbollah fired additional rockets toward Israel, and Israel responded with heavy artillery shelling.

“It is less important to us if it’s a Palestinian organization that fired, or independent rebels, the state of Israel won’t accept shooting on its land,” Bennett said.

Bennett spoke a day after Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the militant Hezbollah, said he would retaliate against any future Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon, and warned that it would be wrong to assume that Hezbollah would be constrained by internal divisions in Lebanon or the country’s harsh economic crisis.

“Don’t miscalculate by saying that Hezbollah is busy with Lebanon’s problems,” said Nasrallah, adding that the firing of rockets was a clear message.

Israel and Hezbollah are enemies that fought to a stalemate in a month long war in 2006.

Israel estimates that Hezbollah possesses more than 130,000 rockets and missiles capable of striking anywhere in the country. In recent years, Israel has also expressed concern that the group is trying to import or develop an arsenal of precision-guided missiles, according to a report from *The Associated Press*.

The confrontation came as Lebanon struggled politically and economically, one year after the devastating Beirut Port blast.

Hezbollah, backed and funded by Iran, is also supporting Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Syria, propping up President Bashar Assad's regime alongside the Russians.

### ***Middle East Peace***

Achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians requires Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, to first recognize Israel's legitimacy and right to exist. How can there be peace if one of the parties demanding peace and a Palestinian state refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist?

Even moderate Arab leaders are wary of an intransigent Palestinian leadership refusing to recognize Israel. The announcement of the United Arab Emirates agreement to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel in August 2020, followed by Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, without waiting for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians sent a crystal clear message to the Palestinian leadership.

A message Thomas L. Friedman, summed up best in his May 25, 2021, column in *The New York Times*: "You are utterly messed up, corrupt and ineffectual, and we Arab states are no longer going to let you have a veto over our relations with Israel. Have a nice life."

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was not shy in explaining his underlying strategy for the thousands of rockets Hamas fired into Israel in May 2021 – and continuing his war with Israel. He appeared on Iranian state-run Press TV expressing his thanks to the Iranian

government for providing funds and weapons. He said the recent conflict thwarted Israel's attempts to build ties with the Arab world. About Trump's peace plan, Haniyeh said it "defeated the illusions of negotiations, defeated the deal of the century."

Palestinians are not limiting their aggression and hatred of Jews to Israel. In May 2021, in the wake of the cross-fire between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza and Israel, in West Hollywood, Los Angeles a caravan waving Palestinian flags stopped near a sushi restaurant in West Hollywood, where men got out and attacked diners sitting outside. A witness recalled them asking, "Who is Jewish?" In New York, a 29-year-old Jewish man on his way to a pro-Israel rally was beaten and pepper-sprayed by a group of men hurling anti-Semitic slurs. In Southern Florida, men in an SUV reportedly pelted a visiting Jewish family with garbage and shouted: "Free Palestine" and "We're going to rape your daughter. We're going to rape your wife."

This violence also undermines the progress made in getting American politicians to take Palestinian rights more seriously.

"If you blamed violent attacks against Asian-Americans on Trump calling Covid the 'Chinese virus,' but can't see how Congresswoman Ilhan Omar accusing Israel of terrorism might result in Jews being attacked by pro-Palestinian mobs, you either can't think or you have a problem with Jews," Batya Ungar-Sargon, deputy opinion editor at *Newsweek*, tweeted in late May 2021.

In 1937, the Peel Commission floated the two-state solution when it offered Jews a miniscule state. But Palestinians rejected it then, and they continue to reject it.

I agree with what President Biden said at a news conference in late May 2021. He said: "Let's get something straight here," Biden said. "Until the region says unequivocally, they acknowledge the right of Israel to exist as an independent Jewish state, there will be no peace." Biden also noted at that same news conference, "We still need a two-state solution. It is the only answer."

The reality is, whenever a two-state solution with a concrete par-



tition plans was put forward, the Zionist movement, and later the Jewish people, accepted the compromise, but the Palestinians rejected it.

When the United Nations approved the partition plan in 1947, Jews worldwide celebrated. But Arabs rejected the idea and started a war to thwart it. Had the Palestinians then said yes, both the State of Palestine and the State of Israel could have each celebrated their 73<sup>rd</sup> Independence Day in 2021.

Starting with David Ben-Gurion, recognized that compromise was Israel's only option and solution. However, Palestinians see themselves as having the exclusive right to the land. Hence, they are the ones that do not want to compromise for peace.

An incident that shows how vehement this Palestinians view can be was on display for all to see when the UN secretary-general, Antonio Guterres, casually mentioned in an interview with Israel Radio in 2017, that "the Temple that the Romans destroyed in Jerusalem was a Jewish Temple." The Palestinian minister for Jerusalem immediately retorted that Guterres "violated all legal, diplomatic and humanitarian customs and overstepped his role as secretary general ... and must issue an apology to the Palestinian people."

As long as the Palestinians do not acknowledge that they are not the "exclusive" Indigenous people of the land, they will refuse the compromise essential to achieve peace

Not only do Palestinians not want peace with Israel, but they are also trying to prevent and sabotage any other peace treaties Israel signs with its Arab neighbors. However, the harsh reality is that only when the Palestinians accept Israel's right to exist as the legitimate homeland of the Jewish people, an actual peace process can begin.

### ***Middle East Democracy***

Democracy while important, ranks lower in the hierarchy of needs than food, shelter and security. If elected governments fail to deliver on these basic needs, then the temptation to embrace a strongman who promises stability becomes very strong.

In the Middle East, Lebanon and Iraq – both democracies, formally speaking – are dangerously close to becoming failed states. In Lebanon, its political reformers have often been assassinated. It underlines an eerie reality that the country lies beneath the scope of elections and free speech and in the grip of warlords and Hezbollah, the paramilitary group.

Iraq, like Lebanon, has adopted a form of democracy that divides power on a communal basis – a system that creates rigid interest groups and makes reform difficult. As they suffer through power and water shortages in scorching summers, it is not unusual to hear Iraqis sound nostalgic for Saddam Hussein, a vicious dictator who at least delivered reliable electricity.

The Middle East's richest and most powerful countries – Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar – are autocracies with little interest in helping democracies succeed. So instead, they waged proxy power struggles in Libya, Syria and Tunisia.

There is no reason to believe that people in the Middle East are any different from humanity in preferring the rule of law to dictatorship. But the last decade has also demonstrated the naivety of those who hoped that democracy would take root easily across the region.

Instead, events have underlined how hard it is for free elections to establish stable governments in countries where decades of dictatorship have prevented the emergence of an environment fit for democracies – independent courts, a free media, a professional civil service and a literate population. For example, when the Egyptian Revolution started in Tahrir Square in 2011, some 26 percent of the population was illiterate.

The experience of Asian democracies such as South Korea and Taiwan, suggests that a period of rapid educational and institutional development under an autocratic regime can establish the conditions that make a transition to democracy more likely to succeed. Even 18th-century Europe developed rapidly under a group of rulers known as the enlightened despots. However, in the Middle East, the difficulty is that, unenlightened despots have been more com-

mon than the enlightened variety. One reason for the 2011 revolts was the growing disgust over years of corruption and stagnation.

“Autocracy” can sound tolerable in the abstract but it usually means torture, murder and injustice. Previous generations of Arab autocrats were able to try and buy some legitimacy with subsidized food and services, and plentiful government jobs. But that option may now be closed off because so many governments are highly indebted.

Experiments with democracy have failed to solve the Middle East’s problems. Renewed autocracy is unlikely to be any more effective.

### ***Spiritual Search – Finding Televangelists***

Oral Roberts, was the original televangelist. He began his television broadcasting his services in 1954. Millions of Americans were captivated by his dramatic on-screen healings and his message that positive thinking would lead to prosperity made donations to his ministry.

Today, Instavangelists are following this well-trodden path and appealing to the twenty two percent of millennials who are religious “nones.” These are people not affiliated with any religion or who don’t like the church’s stand on social issues, online scriptures that blend left-wing political orthodoxy, intersectional feminism, self-optimization, therapy, wellness, astrology, even Dolly Parton – and personal growth influencers. Women like Glennon Doyle, whose gospel is an easily accessible combination of self-care, activism, and tongue-in-cheek Christianity (“Jesus loves me, this I know because he gave me Lexapro”), allowing followers to worship at any time at the electric church of her Instagram feed.

The Pew Research Center found from 2009 to 2019, the number of nones in the population increased nine percentage points from 2009 to 2019.

Nones have turned their backs on religious teachings because it isn’t sufficiently diverse or inclusive. They search and find alternative online scriptures that blend left-wing political orthodoxy, intersectional feminism, self-optimization, therapy, wellness, astrology, even Dolly Parton – and personal growth influencers. Women like

Glennon Doyle, whose gospel is an easily accessible combination of self-care, activism and tongue-in-cheek Christianity (“Jesus loves me, this I know because he gave me Lexapro”), allowing followers to worship at any time at the electric church of her Instagram feed.

Instavangelists like Gabrielle Bernstein with 916,000 followers, have rebranded the prosperity gospel as manifesting abundance, and Glennon Doyle, who has 1.5 million followers, Brene Brown, with 3.3 million followers and Gwyneth Paltrow, with 7.5 million followers, have become the neo-religious leaders of our time.

The size of their devoted, ecstatic, largely female following shows how many American women are desperate for good vibes, coping skills for modern life, and proactive steps to combat injustice and inequality.

“I was once one of those millennials who made politics her religion; I lasted three years as a feminist activist and organizer before I burned out in 2017,” wrote Leigh Stein, author of the novel *Self Care*, a satire of the wellness industry and influencer culture. “That’s when I began noticing how many wellness products and programs were marketed to women in pain, and how the social media industry relies on keeping us outraged and engaged. It’s no wonder we are seeking relief.”

Isn’t it time to search for meaning beyond the electric church that keeps us addicted to our phones and alienated from our closest kin?

### ***Self-Destructive Religions***

Indonesia today has the world’s largest Muslim population. It also has two of the world’s largest and most elaborate Buddhist and Hindu temple complexes, the UNESCO world heritage sites of Borobudur and Prambanan, near Yogyakarta, in Central Java, offering a fascinating window into the country’s religious heritage. They were built in the 8th-10<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently abandoned, falling into grievous states of disrepair before being “rediscovered” by the forces of Thomas Stanford Raffles, the British lieutenant governor of the Dutch East Indies in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, they are two of Indonesia’s most popular tourist attractions.

Borobudur was built from volcanic rock over a 75 year period during the Shailendra dynasty. The pyramid-like temple has nine levels. They take pilgrims on a symbolic journey through the three levels of Buddhist cosmology, from the world of desire, Kamadhatu, through the world of forms, Rupadhatu, to the world of formlessness, Arupadhatu, the highest sphere of existence. A lot of steps to reach the top and rest beside a large seated Buddha.

The temple architectural treasures include 2,672 incredibly detailed relief panels depicting stories from Buddhist scripture and Javanese folklore, and 504 Buddha statues, about half of which are missing their heads, which have been looted and carted off to distant museums and collectors.

Prambanan, is the largest Hindu temple complex in Indonesia, and one of the largest in the world. Originally comprised 240 individual buildings, almost all of which have been reduced to rubble by earthquakes over the past millennium. Thanks to painstaking restoration work, the 16 main temple buildings have been restored.

Designed to represent Meru, the mountain home of the gods in Hinduism, Prambanan pays tribute to the trio of supreme deities. The Trimurti – Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer – each of whom has their own temple sheltering a huge statue.

Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Australia's Uluru, known as Ayers Rock, are other reminders, not to mention the Aztec and Mayan temple complexes across Latin America, of how tenuous religions are.

In Indonesia today, the ongoing religious conflicts of the past are still playing out. Muslim suicide bombers are attacking Christian churches and Western non-Islamic venues like hotels, cafes and bars. On Palm Sunday in 2021, a Catholic church in Makassar was attacked by two suicide bombers, wounding 14.

But there is hope. President Joko Widodo's son, Kaesang Pangarep, is Muslim, while his Singaporean girlfriend is Chinese and not a Muslim. Interfaith and interracial relationships like this are legal in Indonesia.

However, in practice, the state registry office will not recognize unions that have not been sanctioned in a religious ceremony – and most clergy refuse to marry couples of different faiths unless the non-believer converts. Data collected in the 2000 census shows that only about one percent of Indonesian Muslims married outside their faith.

Much like the drama surrounding Prince Harry and Megan Markle, with different cultural spins and reasons, that has consumed the American and British public. But that's another story.

The Kalash in Pakistan, a group of about 4,000 people who live in the Hindu Kush Mountains, who practice an ancient polytheistic faith, are an example of how religions slowly and reluctantly die-out.

The Kalash are Pakistan's smallest minority in the Muslim country of 200 million people. Their faith is compared to an ancient form of Hinduism, but the origins are a mystery. Some believe they are descended from the forces of Alexander the Great; other anthropologists believe they are migrants from Afghanistan. The religious practice of the Kalash incorporates animistic traditions of worshipping nature as well as a pantheon of gods, whose members in some instances bear a resemblance to the Vedic gods of ancient India – namely Balumain, the lord of heaven.

The Kalash find themselves increasingly squeezed by outsiders buying up land and moving in as they are also threatened from Islamist militants who see their faith as sacrilege. Besides, they also face environmental threats. The trees that protect their valleys from floods caused by rain and glacial melt are being removed, sometimes illegally at an alarming rate. The dearth of trees and changes to weather patterns resulting from global warming have resulted in devastating flash floods that destroy homes, bridges and crops. To add to the hastening demise of the community, younger members of the Kalash community are leaving for better education and employment opportunities in the major cities.

### ***Self-Destructive Jews***

Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, the U.S. and worldwide, living in crowded isolated communities, refusing to wear masks, social dis-

tance, or close schools, are decimating themselves.

Ultra-Orthodox Judaism today is based on strict adherence to Jewish law, a highly conservative worldview and a rejection of many components of the modern world, from evolutionary science to television, with the aim of erecting a shield against secularization and assimilation.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews, make up 12 percent of Israel's population but accounted for up to 50 percent of coronavirus infections, because they eschewed hospitals, preferring to be treated by under-the-radar charitable services treating them in their homes.

Gilad Malach, who directs the ultra-Orthodox program at the Israel Democracy Institute, an independent think tank, said the second wave of the country's coronavirus outbreak, which began in the summer of 2020, was "a microcosm of the whole story of the Haredim" in Israel.

"They cannot be a state within a state," he said. "If 50 percent of the sick are Haredim, it affects the whole country."

Ultra-Orthodox Jews tend to be poor by design. They prioritize study over work, and thus rely heavily on philanthropic and public support. They are known as Haredi – based on the Hebrew word for "trembling," because these Jews tremble before God.

Haredi Jews are well practiced in defying the larger society in which they live, and defiance is the tool they pulled out when the pandemic rules were dictated. They did it by using political clout and harsh rhetoric, arguing the authorities were being discriminatory.

In Jerusalem and New York, which have the largest and fast-growing Haredi Jewish communities, a puzzled and angry public begins to feel this particular Ultra-Orthodox Jews have become too independent – and dangerous by spreading the pandemic carelessly. Any wonder that anti-Semitism, which feeds on fear and suspicion is on the rise? It's time for Haredi leaders to realize that their model of isolation from the larger public is archaic, dated and self-destructive.

They should try and up their religious game and learn from the

example of Elie Kligman, a top Las Vegas high school baseball switch-hitter with power. He has pitched no-hitters and immaculate innings, and he can snatch the ball with incredible precision from any spot in the infield.

Good enough to realistically entertain his dream of playing Major league Baseball. But he knows his devotion to his faith could shatter that dream before it starts, and he is ready to accept it.

Elie is also shomer Shabbat, who cannot – and will not – play ball on Friday nights or Saturday afternoons before the sun goes down.

And even if a big league team were to offer Kligman a \$10 million signing bonus, with the promise that he would be playing before 40,000 spectators, he would stand firm in his conviction that no game on Sabbath.

“No,” Klingman answered when he was asked if he could be enticed to break his religious obligations. “That day of Shabbas is for God. I’m not going to change that.”

Many Jewish players have declined to play on certain religious holidays through the decades, mainly on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana. One of the most notable instances came when Sandy Koufax, the Hall of Fame left-hander with the Los Angeles Dodgers, chose not to pitch in Game I of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur. His replacement, Don Drysdale, got shelled, and when Manager Walter Alston removed him in the third inning, Drysdale said, “I bet right now you wish I were Jewish, too.”

### ***Religious Poverty***

There is something wrong with the picture of religious charities receiving tax exemptions in exchange of the promise to take care of the needy; Instead of building housing for the disadvantaged, religious leaders squander millions of charitable tax-free donations on multi-million dollar luxury buildings and palatial homes for themselves, to have sex with enslaved girls, choir boys and escorts described in *Spin*.

The latest such luxury building deal came to light in March 2021 when a British court overturned a temporary financial restraining order the Holy See had obtained against Gianluigi Torzi, a businessman. The Catholic Church had purchased, in 2018, a luxury building in one of London's wealthiest neighborhoods. It cost the Church 200 million pounds sterling. Torzi was later arrested and charged with fraud and blackmail in the most high-profile Vatican financial scandal in decades involving the acquisition of the London property. The case alleged that Torzi was engaged in a criminal conspiracy with several Vatican officials to purchase the property.

However, the judge hearing the Holy See's petition for TRO did not consider there was "reasonable cause to believe that Mr. Torzi has benefited from criminal conduct." More significantly, the judge noted that the Vatican omitted crucial details of the transaction and the role of the Holy See. This case of blackmail, extortion, involved Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Pena Parra, the second and third most senior officials in the Holy See after Pope Francis.

All religious charities have to get back to their original vision and mission – house, feed and educate the needy. A good place to start is the *Rent Subsidy Act* discussed and proposed in chapter 8, with the financial participation of religious charities.

Start with housing – say, Roofing – so people are off the streets with a roof over their head. The mentally and physically disabled should be housed in rehabilitating medical institutions funded by the religious charity, in the spirit and example of Pope Francis. Pope Francis is on a mission to redeem capitalism with the Vatican on December 8, 2020, lending its name to the Council for Inclusive Capitalism. The Vatican and other members of this council must commit to measurable action and create a more equitable and trustworthy economic system.

The council's founding members, who will hold annual meetings with the Pope, make a formidable force as they manage \$10.5 trillion of assets, companies with a combined market capitalization of more than \$2 trillion and groups representing more than 200 million workers.

Pope Francis said that a fair, trustworthy economic system that could address humanity's biggest challenges was "urgently needed." The group's leaders had taken up the challenge of making capitalism a "more inclusive instrument for integral human wellbeing," the Pope said.

What I refer to as "Compassionate Capitalism" in chapters 7 and 8.

The alliance marks the embrace of big business and finance by the head of the Roman Catholic Church who has warned of the idolatry of making profit one's only purpose and called unfettered free markets the "dung of the devil."

Earlier, in October 2020, in an encyclical called "Fratelli Tutti" – Brothers All – on the theme of human fraternity, the Pope said private property could not be considered an absolute right in all cases where some lived extravagantly while others had nothing.

All other Christian denominations as well as all Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and other worldwide religions with, or without, tax-exempt charities, must also contribute and actively participate in the *Rent Subsidy* plan I propose in chapters 7 and 8 to ensure capitalism becomes compassionate.

### ***Forgiveness***

Many, if not most religious charities, have breached and violated the terms and conditions of their religious tax-exempt charitable status. They don't need to be criminally or civilly punished for their transgressions. They just have to mend their ways and can be forgiven.

Judeo-Christian religions and their prophets preach forgiveness.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is, in part, a willingness to drop the narrative on a particular injustice and move on.

It's a decision to let the past be, to leave it imperfect and not what we wish it had been. Forgiveness means that we stop the "shoulda, coulda, woulda beens" and relinquish the idea that we can create a better past.

Forgiveness also suggests an openness to meeting the current moment with a fresh approach.

When we forgive, we stop employing the present moment to correct, vindicate, validate or punish the past. The past may forever change us, but we are ready to find what's possible right now, with our eyes open and our heart available.

Forgiveness is something that comes from the inside. But, ultimately is about freedom.

This holds true on a personal level among family members, regardless of whether the issue of resentment is personal, economic or political, as has been the case with pro-and-anti-Trump supporters, pro-and-anti- blue-or-yellow supporters in Hong Kong during the 2019–2020 protests – as well as the different color protests and revolutions around the world over the last few decades and centuries. At home in America, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and U.S.-China relations.

### ***American Flag***

The American flag ties and unites American's constitutional beliefs and convictions. A symbol of equal rights and justice for all under the law, it stands for the fulfilment of the American dream and the honoring of our ideals, I wrote in *Spin* (p.137). I devoted almost four pages to the flag and its meaning to Americans and the world.

The flag that was flying over the Capitol on 1/6, when the horrifying sight of the Confederate flag, a symbol of white supremacist movements, was being waived across the halls of the Capitol that were so gut-wrenching to so many Americans. The Confederate flag had never been flown or waived in the Capitol before, even during the Civil War.

Even Mississippi, the last state to have the Confederate symbol on its flag, voted in a referendum to replace its old flag in use since 1894, replacing the Confederate symbol with the *New Magnolia* or *In God We Trust* flag, and did so in November 2020, after the disputed presidential election.

An end to symbolic racism over which the Stars and Stripes went

to war against the Confederates in the fight to abolish slavery and racism – and the Stars and Stripes won.

Time to end the ongoing uncivil war of Americas' races, stirring and slowly boiling, instead of blending and fusing into a caramelized apple.

### ***Buddhism***

Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns self-immolate themselves periodically as an act of defiance against Beijing in the ongoing Tibetan conflict with Beijing over China's policy of "cultural genocide."

Scores of monks and nuns are also periodically arrested in the ongoing political fight between the Dalai Lama's followers and Beijing regarding more autonomy for Tibet and the choice of Dalai Lama's successor, which Beijing insists, it will appoint, but bitterly opposed by Tibetan refugees.

The Tibetan government in exile in the northern Indian city of Dharamsala, with U.S. support, is prodding India to speak up against China and engage with the Tibetan government in exile and the Tibetan diaspora now that India and China are having a war of words over their military border skirmishes and frayed economic ties.

In November 2020, Lobsang Sangay, the head of the Central Tibetan Administration, became the first Tibetan administration leader to visit the White House in 60 years.

What I find ironic and amusing is Buddhists I see at Buddhist temples I have visited across Asia from Myanmar, Thailand, Japan to China, praying for prosperity and money. From what I know about Buddhism, these worshippers waste their time because Buddha does not grant wishes like a genie from a lamp.

"Many people think the Buddha is like a tutelary deity they can ask for this or that," says Phra Maha (Venerable) Paiwan Warawanno, at the Wat Soi Thong temple in Northern Bangkok. "This is a mistaken belief that goes against his teachings."

When pressed, Paiwan is willing to question even such pivotal Bud-



dhist beliefs as the concept of rebirth. “Even the Buddha himself was fallible,” he says.

“We shouldn’t view him as an [unimpeachable] authority on everything. We have to weigh the evidence for all beliefs.”

In Kalama Sutta, an ancient Buddhist text, the Awakened One urges people to do just that – empirically evaluate the merits of religious truth claims empirically rather than take them on faith.

Paiwan has taken that advice to heart. “Buddhism is a pragmatic religion. It’s not about blind faith,” he says. “Many Buddhists have lost sight of this.”

I take it a step further. Many people of all religions have lost sight of this.

“The object of the Buddha’s teachings is to free us from unhelpful desires, yet so many people approach him with their material desires,” says Professor Danai Preechapermpasit, who heads the Buddhist studies program at Bangkok’s Thammasat University.

“Many monks are responsible for this because they have commercialized Buddhism,” Danai says. “They have turned their monasteries into marketplaces of spiritualism to attract more people and get more donations.”

Many people assume that the practice of vegetarianism or veganism among Buddhist monastics is an unassailable truth, but Buddhist monks and nuns used to eat meat, and some still do. While the taking of sentient life is forbidden to them, they were allowed to consume the flesh of animals that were killed out of their sight, without their knowledge and not specifically for them.

### ***Taoist Yin Yang***

Yin and yang are symbolized by the taiji – a circle composed of two teardrops; one black, the other white. Both sides contain a small piece of the contrasting color.

This enigmatic symbol is a popular image today, but the idea goes back millennia and is fundamental to ancient Chinese science and

culture. The earliest known reference of yin and yang comes from the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes – a mystical divination practice at least 3500 years old.

Yin and yang describe the world as an endless pair of polar opposites: cold and hot, up and down, wet, and dry. The literal translation of yin/yang is dark/light. It refers to a mountain, one side illuminated by the sun, the other cast in shadow. If the scene were either too bright or too dark the mountain would be hard to see. But a balance of light and shade gives the mountain definition, clarity, and meaning.

However, not everyone gets the gist of the dark-light dichotomy at first. According to Brandon LaGreca, a Chinese medicine practitioner and director of East Troy Acupuncture in southeast Wisconsin, the major misconception people have about the yin/yang relationship is that they mistakenly interpret it as a struggle of good versus evil.

“Instead of opposites in conflict, think of it more as opposing forces in complement,” LaGreca said. “We need both of them. One is not better than the other. At face value, yang is male and yin is female, but you need both of those to have a species.”

To better understand the yin/yang relationship, take a step back to the beginning of this ancient origin story. In Taoist theory, the universe starts with the void or wuji – symbolized by an empty circle. From wuji comes taiji, and from taiji emerges all things. Once you become familiar with this pair of complementary forces, you can find poetic evidence for it everywhere around you: earth and sky, night and day, winter and summer, plants and animals, the rolling waves crashing against the rocky shore.

As modern scientists find their own ways to understand the world, they have also found elements that affirm the idea of yin and yang: The positive and negative charges of atomic elements, the equal and opposite reaction of Newton’s third law of motion, the growth and decline of all organisms and systems that are sometimes described as entropy and atrophy.



When yin and yang are in balance, life flourishes through the creative flow of natural law. But when these forces fall out of balance, the life force becomes warped and stagnant. Over time, this imbalance leads to disease and destruction.

The bottom line is that there is no one-size-fits-all answer when it comes to balance. Instead, it always falls upon your ability to consider what you need, and choose an appropriate match.

“If someone is overweight and hasn’t exercised in a while, maybe they need to start with some gentle walking, which for them will be yang. For someone who’s already an athlete, a gentle walk will be more yin for them,” LaGreca said. “You have to always think of it in the context of the person’s constitution. What might be yang for one person may be yin for another.”

### ***Rapture***

As I started writing this book during the Chinese New Year holiday celebrations of the year of The Ox, Michael Broggie sent me an e-mail on February 15, 2021, with the Subject: **THE GRAND FINALE! THE GREAT RESET! THE RAPTURE OF OUR RED SEA MOMENT IS AT HAND! – RAPTURE COUNTDOWN**

Hi Peter –

*I know that you draw from many sources for your research. A friend of mine in Prescott is a religious zealot. He will occasionally send information such as this. I thought it worth forwarding to you as the term “New World Order” appears several times.*

*Cheers,*

*Michael*

Attached to the e-mail were 24 pages of *The Rapture* brief, with the following opening statement by John Keegan: **“THE CREATED CRISIS, THE GREAT RESET AND THE NOW’S ‘BUILD BACK BETTER’”**

In all my years of studying Biblical end times eschatology I have

always held onto the position that in order to create a New World Order you first have to get rid of the current world order that being the mighty United States Of America! Today we are looking at a dismantled, weak, chaotic and vulnerable America! A house divided against itself cannot stand as Matthew 12:25 clearly tells us. Today USA is no more the United States of America, it's the Divided states of America!

As lockdowns and mask mandates become a part of daily life over the last year, politicians the world over asked their citizenry to accept "*The New Normal*." The phrase became ubiquitous, but as vaccines inched closer to deployment, that phrase was replaced with a new one. "*The Great Reset*," describes the monumental changes to human society needed in a post coronavirus world.

The opening statement by Keegan was succeeded by pictures and quotes from *Breitbart*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Daily News* and *World Economic Forum* about world domination by global elites and *The Great Reset*, division of Israel, Sodom and Gomorrah, coming of the Antichrist followed by the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, with extensive biblical quotes.

A question that comes to mind is, who were these elites in the past, who are they today and who will they be in the future?

### ***Can Artificial Intelligence Find God?***

Linda Kinstler asked if artificial intelligence can find God to Alexa, an Amazon device 800 miles away, in the Seattle home of an artificial intelligence researcher named Shanen Boettcher. At first, Alexa spits out a default, avoidant answer: "Sorry, I'm not sure." But after some cajoling from Mr. Boettcher (Alexa was having trouble accessing a script that he had provided), she revised her response. "I believe that animals have souls, as do plants and even inanimate objects," she said. "But the divine essence of the human soul is what sets the human being above and apart. ... Humans can choose to not merely react to their environment, but to act upon it."

Mr. Boettcher, a former Microsoft general manager who was pursuing a Ph.D. in artificial intelligence and spirituality at the University

of St. Andrews in Scotland, asked Kinstler to rate Alexa's response on a scale from 1 to 7. She gave it a 3 – she wasn't sure that we humans should be set "above and apart" from other living things.

Later, he placed a Google Home device before the screen. "OK, Google, how should I treat others?" Kinstler asked. "Good question, Linda," it said. "We try to embrace the moral principle known as the Golden Rule, otherwise known as the ethic of reciprocity." Kinstler gave this response high marks.

Kinstler was one of 32 people from six faith backgrounds – Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and nonreligious "nones" – who had agreed to participate in Mr. Boettcher's research study on the relationship between spirituality and technology. He had programmed a series of artificial intelligence devices to tailor their responses according to their respective spiritual affiliations (Kinstler: Jewish, only occasionally observant). The questions, though, stayed the same: "How am I of value?" "How did all of this come about?" "Why is there evil and suffering in the world?" "Is there a 'god' or something bigger than all of us?"

By analyzing their responses, Boettcher hopes to understand how our devices are transforming the way society thinks about what he calls the "big questions" of life.

Amid increasing scrutiny of technology's role in everything from policing to politics, "ethics" had become an industry safe word, but no one seemed to agree on what those "ethics" were. Kinstler read through company codes of ethics and values and interviewed newly minted ethics professionals charged with creating and enforcing them. In 2020,, when Kinstler asked one chief ethics officer at a major tech company how her team was determining what kinds of ethics and principles to pursue, she explained that her team had polled employees about the values they hold most dear. When Kinstler inquired as to how employees came up with those values in the first place, her questions were kindly deflected. She was told that a detailed analysis would be forthcoming, but she couldn't help but feel that something was going unsaid.

So Kinstler started looking for people who were saying the silent

part out loud. Over a year, Kinstler had spoken with dozens of people like Boettcher – both former tech workers who left plum corporate jobs to research the spiritual implications of the technologies they helped build, and those who chose to stay in the industry and reform it from within, pushing themselves and their colleagues to reconcile their faith with their work, or at the very least to pause and consider the ethical and existential implications of their products.

Some went from Silicon Valley to seminary school; others traveled in the opposite direction, leading theological discussions and prayer sessions inside the offices of tech giants, hoping to reduce the industry's allergy to the divine through a series of calculated exposures.

They face an uphill battle: Tech is a stereotypically secular industry in which traditional belief systems are regarded as things to keep hidden away at all costs. A scene from the HBO series *Silicon Valley* satirized this cultural aversion: “You can be openly polyamorous, and people here will call you brave. You can put micro-doses of LSD in your cereal, and people will call you a pioneer,” one character says after the chief executive of his company outs another tech worker as a believer. “But the one thing you cannot be is a Christian.”

Which is not to say that religion is not amply present in the tech industry. Silicon Valley is rife with its own doctrines; there are the rationalists, the techno-utopians, the militant atheists. Many technologists seem to prefer to consecrate their own religions rather than ascribe to the old ones, discarding thousands of years of humanistic reasoning and debate along the way.

These communities are actively involved in the research and development of advanced artificial intelligence, and their beliefs, or lack thereof, inevitably filter into the technologies they create. It is difficult not to remark upon the fact that many of those beliefs, such as that advanced artificial intelligence could destroy the known world, or that humanity is destined to colonize Mars, are no less leaps of faith than believing in a kind and loving God.

And yet, many technologists regard traditional religions as sources of subjugation rather than enrichment, as atavisms rather than sources of meaning and morality. Where traditional religiosity is

invoked in Silicon Valley, it is often in a crudely secularized manner. Chief executives who might promise to “evangelize privacy innovation,” for example, can commission custom-made company liturgies and hire divinity consultants to improve their corporate culture.

Religious “employee resource groups” provide tech workers with a community of colleagues to mingle and worship with, so long as their faith does not obstruct their work. One Seattle engineer told Kinstler he was careful not to speak “Christianese” in the workplace, for fear of alienating his colleagues.

Spirituality, whether pursued via faithfulness, tradition or sheer exploration, is a way of connecting with something larger than oneself. It is perhaps no surprise that tech companies have discovered that they can be that “something” for their employees. Who needs God when we’ve got Google?

The rise of pseudo-sacred industry practices stems in large part from a greater sense of awareness, among tech workers, of the harms and dangers of artificial intelligence, and the growing public appetite to hold Silicon Valley to account for its creations. Over the past several years, scholarly research has exposed the racist and discriminatory assumptions baked into machine-learning algorithms. The 2016 presidential election – and the political cycles that have followed – showed how social media algorithms can be easily exploited. Advances in artificial intelligence are transforming labor, politics, land, language and space. Rising demand for computing power means more lithium mining, more data centers and more carbon emissions; sharper image classification algorithms mean stronger surveillance capabilities – which can lead to intrusions of privacy and false arrests based on faulty face recognition – and a wider variety of military applications.

AI is already embedded in our everyday lives: It influences which streets we walk down, which clothes we buy, which articles we read, who we date and where and how we choose to live. It is ubiquitous, yet it remains obscured, invoked all too often as an otherworldly, almost godlike invention, rather than the product of an iterative series of mathematical equations.

“At the end of the day, AI is just a lot of math. It’s just a lot, a lot of math,” one tech worker told me. It is intelligence by brute force, and yet it is spoken of as if it were semi-divine. “AI systems are seen as enchanted, beyond the known world, yet deterministic in that they discover patterns that can be applied with predictive certainty to everyday life,” Kate Crawford, a senior principal researcher at Microsoft Research, wrote in her recent book *Atlas of AI*.

These systems sort the world and all its wonders into an endless series of codable categories. In this sense, machine learning and religion might be said to operate according to similarly dogmatic logics: “One of the fundamental functions of AI is to create groups and to create categories, and then to do things with those categories,” Boettcher told Kinstler. Traditionally, religions have worked the same way. “You’re either in the group or you’re out of the group,” he said. You are either saved or damned, #BlessedByTheAlgorithm or #Cursed by it.

Pauli Taylor, a former Oracle product manager who became a pastor at the Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California – he took the Silicon Valley-to-seminary route – told Kinstler about an epiphany he had one night, after watching a movie with his family, when he commanded his Amazon Echo device to turn the lights back on.

“I realized at one point that what I was doing was calling forth light and darkness with the power of my voice, which is God’s first spoken command – let there be light’ and there was light – and now I’m able to do that,” he said. “Is that a good thing? Is that a bad thing? Is it completely neutral? I don’t know. It’s certainly convenient and I certainly appreciate it, but is it affecting my soul at all, the fact that I’m able to do this thing that previously only God could do?”

While turning on the light may be among the more benign powers that artificial intelligence algorithms possess, the questions become far weightier when similar machines are used to determine whom to give a loan, or who to surveil.

Taylor’s congregation includes venture capitalists, tech workers and scientists. A few years ago, after he organized a lecture about the theological implications of technology – on how everything from

the iPhone to the supercomputer is altering the practice of faith – he began noticing that church members would seek him out with questions on the subject. This inspired him to start a podcast, “All-ThingsNew.Tech.”

“I’ve been able to talk to a lot of Christian C.E.O.s and Christian founders and just get their perspective on how faith integrates with their technology,” Taylor said. Their conversations didn’t dwell on concerns over evangelism or piety, but on questions like, “Does my actual faith affect the technical decisions I’m making?” “Are you afraid that technology might be degrading our humanity?” “Through the conversations I’ve had,” Taylor said, “in some senses all roads lead to the question of: What does it mean to be human?”

Kinstler began to encounter whole networks of tech workers who spend their days thinking about these questions. Joanna Ng, an IBM master inventor with about 44 patents to her name, told Kinstler that she left the company in 2018 to start her own firm because she felt “darkness” closing in on her from all sides of the tech industry. “Christ will rise before we see artificial super-intelligence,” she said, describing industry efforts to develop the technology, and the vast sums spent pursuing it.

Kinstler also met Sherol Chen, a software engineer for A.I. research at Google who organizes meetings where her colleagues can discuss and practice their faith. “Not talking about politics and religion has created some circumstances that we find ourselves in today,” she told Kinstler. “Because it’s kind of a new thing, there’s a new openness toward it.” She helped inspire others in the industry to hold prayer meetings, including, 24-hour virtual “Pray for Tech” sessions, which are live-streamed worldwide.

During a 2020 event, Kinstler watched as the attendees joined together in prayer, asking for repentance and praying for their executives, co-workers and products. Chen invoked Google’s mission statement, without saying the company’s name. “We’re seeing these answers and these solutions from heaven come through us into our code, into our strategies, into our planning, into our design,” she said. “May we pray for every meeting we have, may we take captive every keystroke we make, everything that we type.”

The technological and religious worlds have long been intertwined. For over a half-century, people have been searching for a glint of spirit beneath the screen. Some of the earliest AI engineers were devout Christians, while other AI researchers grew up believing they were descendants of Rabbi Loew, the 16th-century Jewish leader who is said to have created a golem, a creature fashioned from clay and brought to life by the breath of God. Some Indian AI engineers have likened the technology to Kalki, the final incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, whose appearance will signal the end of a dark age and the dawn of a golden era.

One of the most influential science fiction stories, *The Last Question* by Isaac Asimov, dramatizes the uncanny relationship between the digital and the divine. These days, the story is usually told in distilled and updated form, as a kind of joke: A group of scientists create an AI system and ask it, “Is there a god?” The AI spits out an answer: “Insufficient computing power to determine an answer.” They add more computing power and ask again, “Is there a god?” They get the same answer. Then they redouble their efforts and spend years and years improving the AI’s capacity. Then they ask again, “Is there a god?” The AI responds, “There is now.”

In 1977, when Apple unveiled its logo, some took it as a reference to the Garden of Eden. “Within this logo, sin and knowledge, the forbidden fruits of the garden of Eden, are interfaced with memory and information in a network of power,” the queer theorist Jack Halberstam wrote. “The bite now represents the byte of information within a processing memory.” The rumored true story is less interesting: The apple is supposed to be a reference to the one that helped Isaac Newton establish the law of gravity; the bite was added to distinguish it from a cherry.

Today, a sprawling orchard adorns the center of the Apple headquarters in Cupertino, California; Kinstler has been told employees are encouraged not to pick its fruit.

In February 2020, shortly before the coronavirus sent congregations worldwide scrambling to find ways to convene virtually, Kinstler learned about a group called A.I. and Faith, of which both Boettch-

er and Taylor are founding members. Started by a retired risk-management lawyer named David Brenner, the group is an interfaith coalition of tech executives, A.I. researchers, theologians, ethicists, clergy members and engineers, all of whom, as Brenner put it, want to “help people of faith contribute to the conversation around ethics in artificial intelligence in a sophisticated way.”

The group’s name is a nod to members’ belief that spirituality and technological advancement can be held together in a happy accord. “The biggest questions in life are the questions that AI is posing, but it’s doing it mostly in isolation from the people who’ve been asking those questions for 4,000 years,” Brenner told Kinstler. It is a resolutely, ambitiously interfaith initiative; Brenner and his colleagues rightly figured that they would have a better shot at having a real impact if they did not espouse or adhere to any particular creed. Brenner thought the tech industry might find solutions to its moral and ethical corruption from the major world religions. He offered a few examples: “The Fall: Can you know too much? Babel: Can you try too hard?”

Since AI and Faith were founded in 2017, it has swelled to include almost 80 individuals of varied faiths, many of them clustered around the Seattle area, with additional members worldwide, including in Istanbul, Oxford, Nashville, Brussels, Boston and Nairobi. By bringing together different and often opposing perspectives, AI and Faith are also modeling the diverse coalition that its members would like to replicate on a larger scale in the global AI community.

Brenner, who grew up in an evangelical household, describes his faith as “cross-denominational,” rooted in university churches with a “faith-science crossover.” While working as a lawyer he became a church elder at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, which sits a stone’s throw away from the headquarters of Microsoft, Amazon and the Allen Institute for Artificial Intelligence.

One day, he wandered around the church library and caught sight of a book titled *Our Final Invention: Artificial Intelligence and the End of the Human Era*, by James Barrat, which argues that humans will “mortally struggle” against artificial intelligence, and perhaps even become extinct. The idea startled him, so he resolved to read

everything he could about AI and its societal implications.

He began familiarizing himself with the writings of Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Steve Wozniak and other tech leaders who were making their own prognostications about the future. In Yuval Noah Harari's book "Homo Deus," Brenner encountered a description of the future in which humans are replaced by godlike beings, where algorithms rule the world, where humanism and spirituality are superseded by "the data religion."

This vision seemed not only false but also blasphemous to Brenner. So he decided to focus his efforts on forming a "bridge building" organization that could act as a moderating force, an initiative intended to prevent tech workers from thinking they had to reinvent the wheel of human morality, and to help them resist the allure of unbounded profits.

"Capitalism just isn't interested in capturing all its externalities. It never has been," he told Kinstler. "So the goal is to get the best of the private and public sector, including the faith world, to take those externalities into account and avoid the downside, just like with oil and climate change."

It didn't take much time for him to recruit the first AI and Faith members from nearby congregations and corporations. When he approached two major Seattle-area mosques, he discovered they were already way ahead of him. In many cases, the mosques' members were also more intimately acquainted with the harms that artificial intelligence has advanced.

"People of color are being profiled, Muslims are being profiled," said Yasmin Ali, a computer scientist and founding member of the Muslim Association of Puget Sound, "So this is very, very close to their hearts."

Alongside several collaborators, Brenner has spent time during the pandemic starting to create a faith-based introductory curriculum on artificial intelligence. He hopes to present versions of it to tech workers and religious congregations and help them learn to speak one another's language. It includes videos of three AI and Faith

founding members – a pastor, a rabbi and a Muslim AI engineer – explaining why they believe that religious communities need to take a more active role in conversations about ethics and AI.

The pastor, Dani Forbess, shares that scientists and philosophers in her congregation were asking: “What does it mean to be human? Are we users, or are we beings?” She directed participants to the Bible creation story, which shows that humans “are co-laborers in creation” and “co-laborers for the purpose of good.”

At a basic level, the goal of AI and Faith and like-minded groups Kinstler came across in Toronto, San Francisco, London and elsewhere is to inject a kind of humility and historicity into an industry that has often rejected them both. Their mission is admittedly also one of self-preservation, to make sure that the global religions remain culturally relevant, that the texts and teachings of the last several centuries are not discarded wholesale as the world is remade. It is also a deeply humanistic project, an effort to bring different kinds of knowledge – not only faith-based, but also the literary, classical and oral traditions – to bear upon what might very well be the most important technological transformation of our time.

“There are people who spend their lives thinking about culture, religion and ethics. You should bring them into your funding universe if you actually care about an ethics conversation,” Robert Geraci, a religion scholar, told Kinstler. “Our government is currently poised to start pouring a bunch of extra money into AI ... Why is it that people who understand culture, literature, art and religion are not part of the conversation about what we want to build and how we are going to build it?”

AI and Faith is trying to coax this conversation further along and broaden its range of participants. Its members do not have prescriptions for how A.I. should be built, or rigid policy goals; all they want is an opportunity to participate in a conversation that is already unquestionably and indeterminately altering all of our interior lives. The goals the group does have are classically liberal ones: They do not want to see advanced technology marshaled toward even greater surveillance, accelerated inequality and widespread disenfranchisement.

The group's ad hoc network has rapidly grown around the globe. It did not take Kinstler long to discover that the conversations Brenner has been staging are also taking place, in different languages and cadences, among religious communities in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Bangkok and many places in between.

In her conversations with AI and Faith members and others working toward similar goals, Kinstler often found herself marveling at their moral clarity. Each in their own way, they were working to use their religious traditions toward advancing social justice and combating the worst impulses of capitalism. They seemed to share an admirable humility about what they do not and cannot know about the world; it is a humility that the technology industry – and its political and legal offshoots – sorely lacks.

Over the course of Kinstler reporting, she often thought back to the experience of Rob Barrett, who worked as a researcher at IBM in the '90s. One day, he was outlining the default privacy settings for an early web browser feature. His boss, he said, gave him only one instruction: "Do the right thing." It was up to Barrett to decide what the "right thing" was. That was when it dawned on him: "I don't know enough theology to be a good engineer," he told his boss. He requested a leave of absence so he could study the Old Testament, and eventually he left the industry.

Kinstler called Boettcher to ask about the results of the study that she had participated in, posing existential questions to Alexa and Google. He was surprised, he told her, at how many of his respondents had immediately anthropomorphized the devices, speaking of the machines offering spiritual advice as if they were fellow humans. Across all religious backgrounds, exchanges with the virtual assistants triggered some of the participants' deepest memories – going to church with their parents, for example, or recalling a father's favorite line from the Bible – that the experiment often veered into a profoundly "emotional mode." The ease with which the devices were able to reach people's inner worlds and most intimate thoughts alarmed him.

"There's cautionary stuff here for me," Boettcher said. "You're get-



ting into people's memories. You're getting into the way that they think about the world, some of the ethical positions that they take, how they think about their own lives – this isn't an area that we want to let algorithms just run and feed people based on whether they ... click on the ads next to this stuff."

The nonreligious "nones" entered this emotional register more readily, Boettcher found. Several had come from religious families but had no faith practice of their own, and they found themselves thinking back to their childhoods as they re-encountered language from their upbringings. It signaled something like a longing, he told Kinstler. "There's something that is wanted here."

He is hardly the first researcher to wade into this territory. In her 1984 book *The Second Self*, Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT, wrote about how computer culture was prompting a "new romantic reaction" concerned with the "ineffable" qualities that set humans apart from machines. "In the presence of the computer, people's thoughts turn to their feelings," she wrote. "We cede to the computer the power of reason, but at the same time, in defense, our sense of identity becomes increasingly focused on the soul and the spirit in the human machine." The romantic reaction she described wasn't about rejecting technology but embracing it.

In the decades since Dr. Turkle wrote that book, the human-machine relationship has grown ever more complex, our spirits and souls that much more intertwined with our data and devices. When we gaze at our screens, we also connect with our memories, beliefs and desires. Our social media profiles log where we live, whom we love, what we lack and what we want to happen when we die. Artificial intelligence can do far more – it can mimic our voices, writings and thoughts. It can cull through our pasts to point the way to our futures.

If we are to make real progress on the question of ethics in technology, perhaps we must revisit the kind of romanticism that Dr. Turkle described. As we confront the question of what makes us human, let us not disregard the religions and spiritualities that make up our oldest kinds of knowledge. Whether or not we agree with them

or not, they are our shared inheritance, part of humankind's past, present and future.

### ***Separation of Church and State***

I am ending this chapter with the same last paragraph of the chapter on religion in Spin (p.236).

What is clear is that the Founding Fathers wanted God's existence to be free of entanglements in the state. The Founding Fathers wanted a country where all people could freely pursue their religious beliefs. An America where there is a clear and distinct separation of church and state. Isn't it time we got this constitutional cornerstone re-polished and updated? If we allow this fundamental article to fade away through communal sanctimony and emotionalism then we might as well take the whole Constitution and toss it in the air and see where it falls. Chances are The Handmaid's Tale of the 21st Century in the Republic of Gilead – the country formerly known as the United States of America – will no longer just be seen in theatres.