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God Isn't Dead, Just Repurposed: How Political Cults Have Replaced Religion

Social Justice Warriors and Trump Supporters May Have More in Common Than They Think

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German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's pronouncement of God's death over a century ago may have been a tad premature. At that time, particularly in the United States, religion was still alive and well.

But Nietzsche correctly identified a trend that began during the scientific revolution, and has accelerated since then: namely, that the elevation of reason, philosophy and science was killing the centrality of traditional religion as a means of providing order, morality, and value to society.

Today in America, traditional religion and belief in God has been declining at a steady pace. While Americans continue to be far more religious than their European counterparts, the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing, from 16 percent in 2007 to 23 percent in 2014, while once-a-week attendance among the faithful has dropped from 28.5 percent in 1972 to 17.5 percent in 2014.

Meanwhile, we live in a society that provides all manner of pleasure and distraction. If you're so inclined, you could sit on your couch all day eating Krispy Kreme donuts and drinking beer while watching porn and scrolling your twitter feed.

But isn't this the apex of human existence? Isn't unlimited gratification, with no pesky God or morality framework around to get in the way of unbounded hedonism, what we all really want?

According to Nietzsche, no. While his famous "God is dead" line is often viewed as a declaration brimming with barely contained glee at the triumph of enlightenment values over traditional religion, this was not entirely true.

Although Nietzsche rejected the ideology of Christianity, he recognized that it played an important role in providing people with meaning. He recognized that without any sort of framework for meaning and morality, humans would be susceptible to nihilism, or vulnerable to other ideologies that promise to fill the void of the God-shaped hole.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, he wrote

When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident... Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together.

By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands."

Turns out, Nietzsche was prescient in his understanding of human nature. While science, progress, and reason are all wonderful things, they are not capable of filling the void of meaninglessness.

Therefore, in the absence of old idols, humans create new ones to take their place. In modern day America, political ideologies offer their adherents the meaning and purpose that is missing in a world without religion.

As Andrew Sullivan points out in his essay in *The Intelligencer*, this is true for both the right and the left sides of the political spectrum. He notes that both the "cult of Trump" and the social justice warrior philosophy fill the void that religion once filled, without any of the constraint that it provided.

The Religion of Trump

It is difficult to square traditional Christian values such as grace, love, justice, and service, with Donald Trump, a man who has been shown time and time again to be a pathological liar, an unapologetic narcissist, and hardly a paragon of conservative family values, with his multiple marriages, infidelities, porn-star liaisons, and foul language.

How is it, therefore, that so many people who consider themselves Christians, or at least, nominally adhere to traditional Christian values, are so able to support him?

The answer, according to Sullivan, lies in the fact that Christianity, while remaining a lived faith for some, has been turned by others into a political and social identity. He states:

They have tribalized a religion explicitly built by Jesus as anti-tribal. They have turned to idols ...They have embraced wealth and nationalism as core goods, two ideas utterly anathema to Christ. They are indifferent to the destruction of the creation they say they believe God made.

And because their faith is unmoored but their religious impulse is strong, they seek a replacement for religion. This is why they could suddenly rally to a cult called Trump. He may be the least Christian person in America, but his persona met the religious need their own faiths had ceased to provide.

Viewed through this lens, Trumpism makes sense. In a time of declining religion—even among the nominally religious—the “Make America Great Again” rallying cry provides a sense of purpose and meaning to those who feel forgotten and adrift in the modern world. Trump provides a devil to rail against—the “other,” whether that be foreign nations taking advantage of America’s generosity, illegal immigrants, or leftist socialists—and thus fills the hole that is left by an absence of traditional religion. The sense of purpose is provided by the shared understanding that there is good and evil, and adherents are fighting a just fight against evil.

The Cult of Social Justice

The other side of the coin, of course, is the social-justice ideology, which its adherents accept with equal fervor. Sullivan notes that the social-justice ideology also functions as a religion by claiming that all human society can be viewed through the single lens of social power structures (i.e. the oppressor versus the oppressed), and provides a methodology for punishing sinners. He states:

For many, especially the young, discovering a new meaning in the midst of the fallen world is thrilling. ..[T]he young adherents of the Great Awakening exhibit the zeal of the Great Awakening. Like early modern Christians, they punish heresy by banishing sinners from society or coercing them to public demonstrations of shame, and provide an avenue for redemption in the form of a thorough public confession of sin.

“Social justice” theory requires the admission of ... privilege in ways that are strikingly like the admission of original sin. A Christian is born again; an activist gets woke.

Thus, just as MAGA adherents believe they are fighting against those bent on tearing down the traditional structures of family, society, and government, adherents to social justice ideology also believe that they have found all the answers, that they are on the side of truth and justice, and that there is no room for debate.

The Problem with Political Ideologies as Religion

The framework of political ideology as religion provides a means for understanding why political debate has become so contentious. If political ideology is not just a viewpoint, but a means of providing meaning and purpose to your entire existence, then anyone who disagrees with you is not merely wrong or misinformed; rather, they are evil, wicked, the enemy. They deserve to be hated, shamed, shouted down, ridiculed, or ignored.

This sort of tribalism has hugely negative impacts on civil society and the future of our democracy. Further, while “meaning” is highly abstract and may mean different things to different people, it doesn’t appear that political ideologies are up to the task of answering the existential questions that have traditionally been answered by religion, whether it be Christianity, Buddhism, or any number of other religious philosophies.

Meaning may be found in many places. But it won’t be found in the places where are currently looking.