Grateful for the God of Powerlessness
Psalm 46

Of the many interesting insights analysts have gleaned from the presidential election, one that generates discussion is, what role did religion play in the outcome? Who voted for whom and for what reason and, in the end, did it really matter? These are intriguing questions because religion and politics are very potent forces in American life and have had an undue influence upon each other more than our Founders ever envisioned.

In this election, it would appear the Republicans maintained the upper hand on the "God-gap." The voting data suggests that President-elect Trump did the best among white evangelicals (who this year made up a quarter of the entire electorate); he garnered 81% of their vote.[1] This may have been expected, since in general they tend to vote Republican, except that Trump actually did better among them than did George W. Bush in 2004 (78%), John McCain in 2008 (74%) and Mitt Romney in 2012 (78%).[2] This is surprising given how turned off so many were over some of his comments and behaviors and since notable conservative Christian leaders publicly spoke out against Trump given his character issues, even though many others downplayed the concern. So what happened? Were his character issues of secondary concern to conservative evangelical voters who came out in droves in support of the President-elect? It would appear so.

White evangelicals weren't the only religious group to swing more to Donald Trump. A majority of Roman Catholics also voted for him (52% to 45%), even though he was chastised by Pope Francis for his immigration

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rhetoric and the lion's share of Hispanic Catholics voted for Hillary Clinton. The logical explanation is that Trump benefitted from a very high turnout among white Catholics (60%).

In contrast, Clinton had a clear majority of Jewish and Muslim voters supporting her, as well as a large part of the African- and Caribbean-American communities. Those who claim no particular religious affiliation (or "Nones" as they're called) overwhelmingly went for the Democratic candidate (68%-26%). Though she was the first female candidate for president, Clinton earned less support among white women than did her opponent (53%-43%), even while garnering a higher percentage among women in general.

So, what does this data suggest? Well, if it isn't clear what role religious beliefs played in the outcome of the election, it does appear that race and ethnicity were influencing factors. As several commentators have noted, White Christian America is what tipped the balance in this election to Trump, but not necessarily for religious reasons.

Robert Jones, CEO of Public Religious Research Institute and the author of the recent book, *The End of White Christian America*, wrote his assessment of the election in an op-ed in *The New York Times*:

> The choice before the country was starkly clear. Donald J. Trump's Republican Party looked back wistfully to a monochromatic vision of 1950s America, while the major party fronting the first female presidential candidate celebrated the pluralistic future of 2050, when the Census Bureau first projected the United States would become a majority nonwhite nation.
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> My organization's American Values Survey, released a few weeks before the election, found deep divides in the country on this issue. Americans are nearly evenly divided on whether American culture and way of life have changed for worse (51 percent) or better (48 percent) since the 1950s. Roughly two-thirds (66 percent) of Democrats say American culture has generally changed for the better

since the 1950s, while roughly two-thirds (68 percent) of Republicans say American society and way of life have changed for the worse.[3]

Among white evangelicals, three out of four claim it's worse today than in the past (74%).

So, was this election about desiring change in the way government works, or was it a reaction to the ongoing cultural changes in American society? Did the election of Donald Trump come about because of his promise to bring political change to Washington or because many of his supporters were frustrated by the state of society (and their own lives) and yearned to return to a time when the conventional norms and order of our society were more commonly defined by a white, middle-class, male-dominated, Christian majority?

That may be a provocative way to pose it, but I'm not sure it's far off the mark. The call to "Make America Great Again" never defined what "great" was, or when it occurred, but those who responded positively to the slogan had an inkling of what it meant—those who likely sense an underlying loss of identity and social order, harkening back to a time when manufacturing jobs were good, everyone spoke English, and most people were in church on Sunday morning, i.e., what Jones called "the monochromatic vision of 1950s America." What likely appealed to many Americans of European descent (the immigration wave of the 19th and early 20th centuries) was the sense of security when much of this population shared the same faith and language, with similar outlooks, experiences, and employment; looking back, it's easy to assume that's the way America was meant to be. It was a time when immigrants were expected to assimilate into the dominant norms of the country, not to rival or alter them in any

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[3] Robert P. Jones, "The Rage of White, Christian America, *The New York Times,* November 10, 2016.

way. This homogenous sense of cultural identity runs deep in the souls of small towns and changing cities.

In all fairness, not everyone voted for Donald Trump with this in mind. This election was widely cast as a choice between two unappealing candidates which swayed voters' minds all across the political spectrum. Still, there is something to be said about the cultural trends that loom large in our society. We are moving away from the era when "Father Knows Best" and "Beaver Cleaver" portrayed what we thought America was— where Americans were defined more by their European ancestry and Christian culture and social order—to one that reflects global pluralism on every level and immigrants are more likely to arrive from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. This is the change that many who remember the old ways are concerned about—this isn't the country they knew in their youth. We've seen similar protests in Russia, in the UK, and throughout Europe, where the dominant culture and population have been giving way to a complex mix of races, languages, and religions. Social trust predicated on shared identity is being lost and both fear and defiance fuel the reaction.

Historians and cultural anthropologists will argue this is nothing new—tribal defenses always rise whenever empires fall or nations are in conflict or populations feel threatened. One important difference, though, is the America we may be losing is not actually a loss for what the ideals of our democracy stand for today and, perhaps, as they were intended to be.

When the Founders formed this democratic republic, equality of power with checks and balances were written right into the constitution. Equality of status, however, was not, so it has taken the 14th Amendment and over two hundred years to implement gender and racial equality to the degree we have. Our sense of democracy has evolved over the last century

to where equal protection under the law is now almost universally interpreted to mean equal status in society as well. To deny anyone their rights relative to others is increasingly viewed as "un-American."

This hasn't been a linear advance by any means. It's often been two steps forward and one step back, usually in political cycles that rival each other. Yet, when there is social progress, American democracy always evolves to become more inclusive rather than less, serving as a vital protest against human oppression—against all the tribal instincts and social hierarchies which have characterized human civilization for thousands of years—compelling us to recognize the dignity and worth of every person, not just those with whom we share an identity. We've continually appealed to freedom and equality and human dignity, not dominance and submission of one gender, race, or religion over another.

Against the backdrop of history, American democracy has been a remarkable experiment in recognizing freedom (of conscience, religion, press, assembly, etc.)—a radical departure from imperial realms of the past. As we affirm the rights of individuals and increasingly reflect the desires of the world's population for freedom to be who they are—not to be subject to a dominant culture's rule—invariably it moves us away from a previous generations' conventions and norms toward a more respectful and inclusive society, simply due to the increasing diversity that is recognized and acknowledged. Diversity, of course, benefits our economy and society on a variety of levels. So, returning to the past with its worldview and norms is not only unrealistic, it doesn't do much to advance us toward being truly free or equal as a people.

With that said, let me acknowledge in another way this sense of loss in White Christian America. Last week, I spoke of when Jerusalem and the

Second Temple were destroyed in 70 CE and how from then on it was viewed as the great divide between Jewish political power and domination and their subsequent powerlessness. I hadn't really grasped the extent to which this period in history ultimately shaped the Jewish identity.

From the first century until 1948 (nearly 2000 years), Jews have existed without being a political nation—surviving and enduring through time as subcultures and minority communities, dominated and frequently threatened over their racial identity (often at the hands of European Christians). Yet, throughout the ages, they not only survived, they prevailed and prospered even while being relatively powerless over their destiny.

As Christians, our experience has been quite different, as for centuries we've been the dominant religious culture in Europe, Russia, North and South America. We might rightly wonder: where was the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus in the Jews' collective pain, loss, and powerlessness throughout the centuries? Why weren't they allowed to rise again as a political power? We, who worship the same deity, might honestly question the belief and trust they would invest in a sovereign God if powerlessness would be the norm for their existence.

Powerlessness has not been our experience with faith, at least on a collective basis—instead, quite the opposite. For us, our religious sensibilities have been shaped by a dominant status and culture. At most, we can point to our various religious heritages as originating along the margins (e.g., Baptist, Quaker, Methodist, etc.). But even though our forebears were out on the margins, our status has changed significantly over time in American culture. Our sense of powerlessness was at most temporary. We might rightly wonder: how does our trending loss of status

and power offer any hope for survival? How will we maintain faith when we no longer rule the world?

To answer these questions, we'd have to reckon with the very nature of faith itself. Our own Christian faith was birthed in powerlessness; our central religious themes and symbols are of godforsakenness on the cross, of serving the poor and outcast, and humbly sharing a single loaf and cup among many. Our Christian faith doesn't represent a position of power. Political and cultural dominance are not common themes written into the biblical experience or narrative. Powerlessness is the norm of biblical faith.

Why is it that God chooses human powerlessness to be the character of faithfulness and ultimate survival? Powerlessness is not a pleasant or preferred state, to be sure, but God knows when we are in it we understand out status and limits; because of that we often become more honest about ourselves, of what we are truly like, and how much we need help from others. Powerlessness is a condition where the human heart is more able to overcome the arrogance and deceptions that lie with any sense of superiority and pride. Twelve-step programs understand this well. Losing power is not only the way to become more genuinely human, in the image of Christ, we also become more like God (Phil. 2:1-11).

That's not to say powerlessness can't and won't be manipulated and abused by those who are powerful. It happens all the time. But power will invariably corrupt the human soul, because people become objects to control and manipulate, and the powerful will eventually disgrace themselves and fall out of their own doing. In contrast, powerlessness leads us to value others as a source of God's strength, as the arms of refuge and comfort, and as the source of love in our beleaguered condition. Powerlessness makes us yearn for justice and wholeness for, in a powerless

state, we often recognize others like us who are powerless and in need of justice.

Psalm 46 is a psalm for the powerless, not the powerful. The tone is quite different from other more warlike Psalms. Scholars disagree over whether it is one of the earliest Psalms, originating before ancient Israel became a dominant regional power under David and Solomon, or if it was composed later when the kingdoms were collapsing before going into exile. Either way, it's a time of insecurity and fear over what the future will bring, calling for trust in God's protection for those who need strength and refuge, who need comfort when their world comes undone—those who gain stability knowing that God is still present and with them in the midst of all the humiliation they experience and the losses they suffer. It is an encouragement to trust in the One who in the arc of human history calls the unjust to account and aids the powerless to prevail in time. Those who do trust are ultimately satisfied and truly grateful for the God who honors, sustains, and saves the powerless. It's the basic hope of the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In this time and place, such a message may be helpful to those who fear the future and are left pining for the past. The world constantly changes all around us and God never shields the just or the unjust from new and challenging realities. In the coming decades, White Christian America will have little choice other than to accept and adapt to a loss of privilege and status, with less control and influence over the institutions of our society and culture, as we share the American dream and democracy with those who did not immigrate from Europe, or grow up Christian, or speak the same language or, most certainly, who tell a different story of what it was like here in the 1950s. The ballot box will reflect this in time.

Yet, it won't be the end of our world. In truth, powerlessness may be the best hope for American Christians of all walks, who have seen their faith so corrupted and exploited by politics and power, racism and privilege. If there is a sense of loss and grief, it's time to prepare to let it go—angry defiance has no place; a loss is the only way to refocus ourselves on what we have overlooked in the past and what we gain in the future. For a sense of powerlessness brings with it an awareness and appreciation of those who stand with us who have been powerless all along.

Together, through the wisdom of our faith and through our commitment to human equality and democracy, we will become a larger nation of the powerless—a wiser and greater nation of people who will prevail over time in our united mission and commitment to seek justice for all. With God's everpresent help, may that be the American dream to which all citizens will aspire.

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