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The Challenge of Christian Leadership

— JOSEPH P. HESTER

Background

I write this essay with some hesitancy. Being reared in a Christian home and educated in both Christian theology and secular philosophy, I am aware of the many pitfalls when discussing Christian ethics. We can be sure there will be many disagreements and versions of Christian ethics as there is about ethics in general. Several years ago, I published *A Summoned Life*, which is my own interpretation of the Golden Rule. In the Introduction I wrote:

When talking with my Christian friends, I've had difficulty separating what they call "Christian Ethics" from other ethical sources, the laws and admonitions of the ancient Hebrews, or even words from our own American Constitution. For many, the teachings of Jesus about ethics are often reinterpreted through these sources, even Paul's letters. Christian ethics has been issue-oriented and we hear this through someone seeking to condemn others for their sins and set themselves on the high plain of perfectibility. In this writing, issues are set in the background as I seek a foundation for Christian ethics that possibly has been neglected by many.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans, "for we consider that a person is justified by faith [alone] apart from works of the law. Does God belong to Jews alone? Does he not belong to Gentiles, too? Yes, also to Gentiles, for God is one and will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised through faith" (Rom 3:28-29).

Looking back, the Reformation (1517-1750) did little to change this narrative. From the onset, Martin Luther reflected much of the medieval church's spirit when he ignored James' statement, "By their works you will know them," and replaced it with faith, belief, and salvation by the grace of God. And by the way, in Paul's letter to the Romans, in order to ensure his message was heard, in his German translation of the New Testament, Luther, added "alone" after the word "faith," and evangelicalism was born.¹

And so, quite naturally Christian ethics has played a secondary role in the history of the modern church. It is to this stupefying Christianity I react. We live in turbulent times; times of disinformation, value disputes, and religion becoming intertwined with politics making Christian leadership a difficult and foreboding task. This is nothing new, but without the support of Christian leadership, democracy will be left swinging in the air of hyperbole and finger pointing offering little more than "thoughts & prayers." In all honesty the question must be asked, "Has Christianity become just another political commodity, a failed product — awash with sports and TV personalities — to be bargained for?"

¹ <http://catholicmilwaukee.com/luther-added-the-word-alone-to-rom-3-28.html#:~:text=Luther%20added%20the%20word%2022alone%22%20to%20his%20Bible.and%20ass%20are%20one%20and%20the%20same%20thing.>

We live in a time when Christianity is on a numerical decline in America; yet, undoubtedly, it still remains a potent social and political force. But Christianity in America is divided, perhaps splintered, frayed by illogical rhetoric, politico-moral issues, and a plethora of ministers whose commercial interests seemingly outweigh their more spiritual and moral responsibilities. Some, perhaps too many, cognitively unaware and emotionally unprepared, are caught in a vortex of wrapping both their political and religious beliefs in the magical clothing of a domineering political ideology leaving little room for critical judgment and honest inquiry.

It's not that ethics, even Christian ethics, is relative losing its toehold on Western Civilization. Rather, our faith has become so commercialized that we see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear becoming masters of our own incongruity. This is a form of ethical ethnocentrism bending our judgment and rendering our ethic a narcissistic adventure in self-promotion and media manipulation as we are mesmerized and transformed by personalities larger than self, ostensibly looking for a modern-day messiah. Seemingly, there are no answers to this dilemma as the illusions of "truth," strained through accepted ideologies and maligned information, including national and religious myths, diminish any hope for civil discourse.

Two Levels to this Conversation

That Christianity in America is fading is not an assertion made lightly; it is driven neither by theory nor theology, but by observation and data. Without a doubt, some clarity about Christian ethics is needed as Christian leadership can become a positive voice in this otherwise values muddle. Even so, trying to be objective about such matters is an arduous task as the church and its message remain a moving target.

There are at least two levels to this observation: the first level for most Christians is personal. They see falling attendance in their churches – mostly traditional churches – and their denominations are beginning to show signs of age and disintegration. This has opened the door for media ministers to squeeze valuable resources from them and for smaller congregations, with no traditional denominational connections, to crop up, mostly evangelical,

mining their congregations for members.

Fundamentally and generally, morality is an intentional awareness of self and others, our dignity and their dignity and the demands such recognition signifies. It is an acknowledgement of the inclusiveness of humanity, of humanity as community, deeply felt and spiritual, directing our attention to the worthiness of others. Thus, morality and the behaviors morality signify are recognizably social as well as cognitive, deeply felt and religious. They display the imprint of our thinking, social intuitions, practical decision making, religious beliefs, and the affairs of everyday life. Hence, being moral is an everyday experience — cognitive, spiritual, and social.

Thus, local churches, no matter their type, have been weakened, but not by external forces only, internally as well. This is seen in the dividing conflict within the United Methodist Church — mainly the question of LGBTQ inclusion — discussions of which go back as far as 1972.² Traditional, long-established churches, large and small, seem to be in a survival mode doing what they can to stabilize their numbers in order to keep young people in the fold and to

² <https://religionnews.com/2022/06/29/what-happened-to-united-methodists-proposal-to-split-the-denomination/#:~:text=The%20dividing%20conflict%20within%20the%20United%20Methodists%20Church,practice%20of%20homosexuality%20is%20incompatible%20with%20Christian%20teaching.%E2%80%9D>

attract new members. But, as the numbers tell us, these measures are not working.

The second level involves sets of numbers, demonstrated below and provided by research on a regular basis, including (1) falling church attendance, (2) more and more people saying they are not religious or are not connected to any organized faith, and (3) many saying they are “spiritual” but not religious in an organized sense. Evaluating this data is important for the numerical fading of Christianity in America is pushing many Christian evangelicals into a desperate situation accompanied by negative political rhetoric, further dividing our nation.

From the Middle Out

The point being made is that faith, including Christian ethics, doesn’t grow from the top down. No denomination and no minister can “make” a person believe or live a faith imbued life. Like the economy talked about by Michael Tomasky in his book, *The Middle Out*,³ Christian ethics emerges not from the top down, but from the bottom up or as Tomasky says, it grows from the middle out. Noticeably, President Biden during the 2022 mid-term elections used Tomasky’s phrase to signal how he plans to slow inflation and grow the economy. Another way of saying this is that Christian ethics is personal and individual before it becomes communal and denominational. This was a theme in my two books: *An Ethic of Hope* and *A Summoned Life*, both of which are grounded in Christian theology and moral philosophy. As I wrote in “A Summoned Life”:

Unapologetically, I assert that my awareness of God as my moral consciousness is natural and meaningful. It is an experience that cannot be questioned, only lived in moral awareness. I must admit that this moral awareness has evolved in me and reveals a rocky and uneven road to maturity. Even so, we must stand constantly aware of our experience of God and how we live our lives as Christians. Like our commitment to democracy, the moral principles set down by Jesus require our faithful attention. So, before we get too troubled about what we believe, who we think is going to heaven and whom we condemn to hell, perhaps we should ask, ‘Are we reaching for the stars, or, like Jesus, are we tilling the fertile ground of human experience with the love that God continues to give us?’ It is this ground where we meet others; where God is experienced, and where moral awareness comes to fruition. This is why I acknowledge that God’s love for me provides a moral awareness of others, and that I am challenged to live in the love that God is.’⁴

Consequently, and borrowing from Tomasky’s comments about the economy, Christianity will begin to grow when the “moral (love) message” of Jesus is broadly shared, coupled with Christian leaders *tilling the fertile ground of human experience with service, kindness, and benevolence*. Noticeably, I speak from a moral point of view. The institutional church can play a vital role in this, but for the most part, it will be individuals — fathers and mothers, leaders in business, the community, and in politics — who will drive this growth as its substance lies in the individual conscience, internalized and with a wider view of the Christian message.

Consequently, ethical growth, especially Christian ethical growth will be enhanced when Christianity becomes broadly written, inclusive, and non-discriminatory. As Tomasky says, “...greater inclusiveness means greater growth.” The responsibility is for individual Christians to articulate, live, and tie their beliefs to the larger vision of a moral society. As we read in the Book of James: “Faith without works is a dead faith,” James 2: 26.

³ Tomasky, Michael (2022) *The middle out*. New York: Doubleday.

⁴ Hester, Joseph P. (2017) *A summoned life*. W. Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishers, p.p. 17-18.

What the Numbers Tell Us

Today, there are roughly 23 million more adults in the U.S. than there were in 2009. According to 2018 and 2019 Pew Research Center RDD estimates, about two-thirds of them (65%) identify as Christians. This means that there are now roughly 167 million Christian adults in the U.S.⁵ A more recent study⁶ found that as recently as 50 years ago Christians accounted for about 90 percent of the population, but as of 2020 that figure had slumped to about 64 percent. It is estimated that Christians could make up between 35 percent and 46 percent of the U.S. population in 2070. Over that same period, “nones”⁷ would rise from the current 30 percent to somewhere between 34 percent and 52 percent of the U.S. population.

But these numbers don’t tell the entire store. The data shows a wide gap between older Americans (Baby Boomers and members of the Silent Generation – those born between 1928 and 1945) and Millennials in their levels of religious affiliation and attendance. More than eight-in-ten members of the Silent Generation describe themselves as Christians (84%), as do three-quarters of Baby Boomers (76%). In stark contrast, only half of Millennials (49%) describe themselves as Christians; four-in-ten are religious “nones,” and one-in-ten Millennials identify with non-Christian faiths.

In addition, only about one-in-three Millennials say they attend religious services at least once

In a society in which the narrow pursuit of material self-interest is the norm, the shift to an ethical stance is more radical than many people realize. ... An ethical approach to life doesn't forbid having fun or enjoying food and wine, but it changes our sense of priorities. ... We have to take the first step. We must reinstate the idea of living an ethical life as a realistic and viable alternative to the present dominance of materialist self-interest.

— Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life*, pp. 270-271

or twice a month. Roughly two-thirds of Millennials (64%) attend worship services a few times a year or less often, including about four-in-ten who say they seldom or never go. Indeed, there are as many Millennials who say they “never” attend religious services (22%) as there are who say they go at least once a week (22%).

So, what do these numbers tell us? For starters, the Church’s influence on Americans is noticeably fading. There is a growing number of Americans who are giving up on God – at least the “God” depicted by the organized church. Research is seeing more and more “Nones” on surveys of church affiliation. According to a 2007 Religious Landscape study, out of the 35,000 people surveyed, sixteen percent had no religious affiliation. By 2015, that sixteen percent increased to twenty-three percent, which is almost one in every four Americans. According to Gallup, “Nones” are on the rise. In 1967, two percent of Americans, or one out of every fifty people claimed to have no religious preference. But in 2014, that number grew to sixteen percent or one in every seven people.⁸

These numbers show a consistent increase in Americans who are disengaged from organized religion or a church. But in 2022, one could argue that America is strongly religious. Many

⁵ See the following: <https://baltimorepostexaminer.com/christianity-in-america-the-present-state-and-what-to-expect-in-the-future/2019/06/15/>; <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>; <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/christians/christian/>; <https://www.visionroom.com/the-future-of-christianity-in-the-usa/>.

⁶ <https://www.breitbart.com/faith/2022/09/18/faith-no-more-americas-christian-majority-in-terminal-decline/>.

⁷ No Religious Affiliation.

⁸ Gallop Poll: <https://news.gallup.com/.../267920/millennials-religiosity-amidst-rise-nones.aspx>.

Evangelicals are siding with the political right and condemning any who disagree as anti-Christian and anti-American. Their influence was revealed in the Supreme Court's decision about *Roe v. Wade*, an evangelical issue for many decades, and more is promised to come. This has given the Christian right a sense of power and perhaps has restored its hope in an America they wish to "recreate."

On the face of it, Christianity seems to be on the rise again, but with the facts displayed above, this could be an illusion, something some wish to believe, but, with organized (institutionalized) Christianity in America declining, not as widespread as it appears. This has been brought to public attention, in part, by the Supreme Court's decision and, in part, by pro-choice demonstrations for women's rights. These collective efforts to restore a woman's freedom to choose draws attention to the moral issues involved – women's rights versus the rights of a fetus. As an ethicist, and having had many discussions with students and colleagues about this, I must admit the right of a "fetus" versus the right of a woman requires considerable judgment, especially for Christian leaders.⁹

David French says Christian politics America are upside down and perhaps it is. He comments,

American political culture is a toxic, hyper partisan, corrupt, and increasingly violent mess. ... this should not be. After all, Jesus could not have been more clear. In John 13, he declared, 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' That's the dream. Here's the reality: Growing shares of both Republicans and Democrats say members of the other party are more immoral, dishonest, and closed-minded than other Americans.

Again, remember that both of these coalitions are chock-full of Christians. It is not the case (at least not yet) that America has one religious party and one secular party. The mutual loathing you see comes from people who could recite every syllable of the Apostles' Creed side-by-side and believe wholeheartedly in the divine inspiration of scripture.

How does this happen? The longer I live the more convinced I am that our Christian political ethic is upside down. On a bipartisan basis, the church has formed its members to be adamant about policies that are difficult and contingent and flexible about virtues that are clear and mandatory.¹⁰

On Being Spiritual

So, the difficulties of Christian moral leadership are clear, posing a problem for parents and teachers, as well as, church, business, and civic leaders. Giving the combobulation of Christianity in America, caution is recommended when referring to "faith" and "belief." Identifying *either* with the political right or left is a precarious position as the research shows. Even within particular denominations and churches, "faith" and "belief" carry different meanings. Notably, many Americans identify themselves as "spiritual" but not necessarily "religious" in the traditional or institutional sense. According to PRRI, the relationship between spirituality and *religiosity* among Americans is complex.

⁹ <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-rights/roe-v-wade>.

¹⁰ French, David (August 21, 2022). Christian Political Ethics Are Upside Down. *The French Press*, <https://frenchpress.the-dispatch.com/p/christian-political-ethics-are-upside>.

These are difficult waters to navigate, but the PRRI study merits a quick look. To measure the correlations between these two, PRRI developed two composite indexes.¹¹ One measures *spirituality* using self-reported experiences of *being connected to something larger than oneself*. The other measures *religiosity* using *frequency of religious attendance and the personal importance of religion*. Both of these rubrics are sufficiently broad requiring some specificity. Based on this analysis, Americans fall into the following four categories:

- 29% are both spiritual and religious;
- 18% are spiritual but not religious;
- 22% are not spiritual but religious; and
- 31% are neither spiritual nor religious.

Unclear is general agreement on the definition of “spirituality” and how to interpret the phrase “something larger than oneself.” Suffice it to say, it’s the cultural context (the social environment or situation) that is relevant to the beliefs, values, and practices of the everyday

Being spiritual to them implies seeking to better understand one’s inner life in order to act more wisely in the world. For many, becoming more contemplative or aware of their inner life allows them to interact with others in a way that is less reactive, less harmful and more authentic to who they think themselves to be.

— “The Conversation,” November 15, 2017

Christian. This is not to say that the context (say the family or church) of acquiring a belief is the sole determinate of an individual holding that belief or that individual Christians, when uttering a belief, are merely mimicking the voice of others.

Context is a positive contributing factor to what is believed and how faith is practiced,¹² but causal correlations are difficult to achieve, leaving us many times with guesses based on statistical variability.

Moral Identity

Both religion and politics have played a strong role in shaping our values and it’s impossible to overlook either. As we have seen, many have aligned their values, even their faith, with one political pundit or another while compromising the moral value of democracy and the moral precepts of their own faith. No longer is being inconsistent and irrational an option and obviously, we can’t hide behind a wall of “fake news” forever nor ignore either our personal or national histories. We must rid ourselves of such foolishness. On the other hand, this doesn’t mean we must interpret every action or every word uttered by either without thorough examination. This further exasperates our differences and inhibits communication.

The *nexus* of religion, race, sexuality, such issues as abortion, and Constitutional law is an obvious factor in explaining and understanding our values. In this chaos and with the church faltering, by what measures does the Christian leader discover his or her Christian identity? How do we interpret our faith in its contemporary setting and what role does racial, ethnic, and sexual bias play in our daily lives?

¹¹ Pew Research (21 January 2016). “Americans may be getting less religious, but feelings of spirituality are on the rise.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/21/americans-spirituality/>.

¹² See, Preyer, Gerhard and Georg Peter (eds.) (2005). *Contextualism in philosophy: knowledge, meaning, and truth*. Oxford University Press. See also: Travis, Charles (2001). *Unshadowed thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Travis rejects the idea that thoughts are essentially representational items whose content is independent of context, that there is no particular way one must structure what one relates to, no one way one must represent it.

Answering these questions will involve cultivating the skill of discerning the deep-seated principles and meanings indigenous to a Christian values-based life, which, as Aldous Huxley says, is the “...transformation of character which is the necessary prerequisite of a total, complete, and spiritually fruitful transformation of consciousness.”¹³ Admitting that morality is often narrowed by belief and creed, denominational loyalties and political affiliations, doesn’t negate the task of *spiritual refinement*. “Spirituality” is expansive of the moral life and provides room for a broadening of Christian identity.

Spiritual refinement is a part of our essential moral self. A closer look reveals the “spiritual” as identifying with the *moral mind* or *conscience* and it seems to be, but this idea remains a bit fuzzy yielding to personal and even institutional variations. Plainly, given the many versions heard and read about, “spiritual” or “being spiritual” is difficult to explain. Given that 29% are both spiritual and religious on the PRRI survey acknowledges the unclear line separating them. *A more general path* recognizes “spiritual” as connected but not limited to any form of religious expression. *It is an intrinsic predisposition indigenous to all humanity stirring within the human conscience recognition of humanity’s moral center, its sacred self.* This is consistent with the Pew Research definition, *being connected to something larger than oneself*, but it might not clearly delineate the *spiritual* from the *religious*. Both share in the moral meaning of reaching beyond “self” with benevolent intentions.

There is no simple correlation between the moral sense and religion. People with no religious belief can have just as strong a moral sense as religious believers, and believers often find that there is a conflict between the moral teaching of their religion and their own innate sense of right and wrong.
—Henry Haslam, *The Moral Mind*

Notably, “religion” is a common term denoting particular beliefs and practices of a group of people; a specific system of faith and worship. On the other hand, “spirituality” or “being spiritual” cuts across institutionalized beliefs and practices and is more *a gathering place within the human conscience of humanity’s sacred dimensions*. This is supportive of Christian leadership in the public square as it steers a path free of institutional limitations and suffocating theologies. Thus, it can be said:

The spiritual then is a creative moral energy indigenous to human life. It may lay dormant in some but for others the spiritual quickens their expanding awareness of and need for others. This emphatic sensitivity and ethical aptitude is a dynamic and motivating source evolving within as our relationships mature; it comes through connection with others, personal investment, and communal accountability. Ethical comprehension is definitive of the spiritual and opens us to a life of possibility freeing us from the past, from mistakes made and regrets harbored. In time we learn that our lives are largely built on a scaffolding of relationships. Understanding this takes many years as most of us learn this lesson late in life. Relationships — good and bad—create the web of our lives. Finding purpose in our web is difficult for much that happens to us is either incidental or accidental. Purpose is intentional and a difficult and foreboding task. When we discover our purpose we are able

¹³ Huxley, Aldous (1945) *The perennial philosophy*. New York: HarperPrennial, p. 23.

to maneuver through life in more productive ways. The spiritual enlivens our moral lives and is a sustaining energy supporting our communal values.¹⁴

A Lived Experience

Plowing deeper, because 40% of respondents seemed to “know” the difference between being spiritual and being religious, a focus on the more universal dimensions of spirituality is

Robert Greenleaf defines ‘servant leadership’ as ‘a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better organizations and ultimately creates a more just and caring world.

—www.purdueglobal.edu/blog/business/what-is-servant-leadership/

suggested. Spirituality is a lived experience revealed in a meeting of persons revealing the confluence of human respect and dignity and dispelling the over-accentuated diversity that separates and divides us. Spirituality denotes an inclusive love and respect for others, a desire to provide for and support those in need and to help stop

unnneeded suffering. Consequently, *the spiritual is the connective tissue of moral life* able to enhance the quality and productivity of any organization uniting human life in an inseparable web of supportive human affiliations.

Implied by this conclusion is that values-based leadership — religious or secular — is innately spiritual, albeit, not in the traditional religious sense only, but, importantly, in a moral sense. The moral future envisioned by values-based leadership represents identifiable cultural furrows tilled by those who understand the physical and non-physical needs of humanity and the moral dimensions of common experience. They are women and men, young and old, secular and religious, who understand the sacred dimensions of humanity.

Robert Greenleaf’s idea of “servant leadership”¹⁵ encapsulates this idea and is, perhaps, more unambiguous and simplistic:

This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions – often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.

The Language of Morality

Given the apparent decline of the traditional church in America, it’s fair to ask, “Along with this decline, has the Christian message of benevolence and service lost its meaning?” This seems to be an appropriate question given it is Christian ethical leadership that is being discussed. If “benevolence” or “love” is defined in terms of “morality,” of servant leadership and self-giving behaviors, of being spiritual in the broadest and most personal or sacred sense, then perhaps Christian ethics is still meaningful. Admittedly, “spiritual” is more energy

¹⁴ Hester, Joseph P. (2020) The salience and substance of spiritual leadership. *Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, Volume 13, Issue 1 Winter/Spring 2020.

¹⁵ Greenleaf, Robert (2018) <https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/>.

than thing, not something possessed, but meaningful in a *self-referential way* compelling introspection and service to others. This provides “spiritual” with its normative and valuational import.

Humanity’s Normative Consciousness

The spiritual then is representative of humanity’s moral consciousness, a practical disposition, responding to what is happening around us and expressing in the language of morality what is considered “right” and “wrong,” “good” and “bad” and what is ethically acceptable and what is not. In real life this represents a kind of balancing affair—an interplay of feelings and purposes, of emotion and reason, which issues in choices of goals and actions. Being moral is beyond a doubt intrinsic, sometimes spontaneous and other times reasoned and influenced by others, but not something that can be easily compelled.

It was James in the New Testament who wrote: “Faith without works is dead.” and “By their works you will know them.” Herein James is encouraging commitment to the practical benefits of Christian ethics. In I Corinthians 13:13, the Apostle Paul accentuates *love or charity* (service and self-giving behaviors) as a pillar of Christianity. This he called a “quickening spirit” denoting freely giving moral life or energy to something or someone (1 Corinthians 15:45). For the Christian leader this requires no church and no book of disciple, doctrine, or creed to understand or follow. It is and will always be internally motivated, an action of the Spirit within and without, a sacred experience which identifies Christians.

Discovered through experience is that *the tyranny of the majority can lead in many unethical directions*.¹⁶ Being insecure and seeking security in numbers, rather than through reflective consideration, some will jump on the band wagon of popular opinion and mask their personal views through the opinions of others. As in Jesus today, the Pharisees and other religious leaders were doing the “thinking” for them. For many, joining the “herd” is paramount, but Jesus provided a different WAY. His was a pathway of Spiritual Wisdom, a positive moral voice asking that we re-gift our self-love in service to others.

The kind of religious faith which seems to me to lie behind the attractions of both utilitarianism and pragmatism is...a faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community.

— Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 169.

And no matter how “being religious” is defined, no suggestion is being made that there is no association between “being spiritual” and “being religious.” Surely, as the Pew Survey indicates, many people are both. Subsequently, spiritual energy is the essence of life, a *natural proclivity*, and we can be sure that nature does nothing in vain. Yet, given the social and communal nature of spirituality, any comment about its intrinsic nature will be suspect, as many times we are receptive more to what people may think of us rather than to personal introspection, rational inquiry, and the courage moral veracity compels. This can hardly be avoided, but an effort should be made.

The spiritual speaks of the sanctity of human life. It asks, as Peter Singer said, “How are we to live?”¹⁷

¹⁶ See, Mill, John Stewart (1859). *On Liberty*. Longmans, Green, 1913.

¹⁷ Singer, Peter (2000). *Writings on the Ethical Life*. New York: Harper, p. xix.

This question leads us to think about ultimate values, the deepest goals, by which we live our lives. ... Were we incapable of empathy — of putting ourselves in the position of others and seeing that their suffering is like our own — then ethical reasoning would lead nowhere. If emotion without reason is blind, then reason without emotion is impotent.

The energy gathered by the leader's spirituality enables giving and sharing, the ability to communicate with others, and to build and sustain families, businesses, and communities of moral strength. Being moral is contagious. It is friendship-enabling and provides cohesion within and without, but there are inherent dangers in this for being intrinsic, the spiritual is malleable, easily manipulated, and sometimes yielding to self-centered and selfish behaviors.¹⁸ Consequently, moral commitment and courage as well as wisdom and forethought are required of Christian leaders.

Spirituality and Moral Growth

Contemporizing this discussion, *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson, who claims he is a religious person on his “better days,” suggests that “white, conservative” Christians are misinterpreting their own faith's ideals when it comes to our former president. He described the United States as feeling like “two nations,” claiming that, “cosmopolitan America holds to a progressive framework of bodily autonomy, boundless tolerance and group rights — a largely post-religious morality applied with near-religious intensity.” Gerson warned, “Much of what considers itself Christian America has assumed the symbols and identity of white authoritarian populism — an alliance that is a serious, unfolding threat to liberal democracy.”¹⁹

If justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public, then patience is what mercy sounds like out loud, and forgiveness is the accent with which grace speaks.

— Michael Eric Dyson, author of *Long Time Coming*

About this Kenneth Woodward predicts greater diverseness in American politics saying,

What these political scientists see — indeed, what they worry about — is the emergence of ‘a new fault line in American politics’ with the Republicans perceived as the party hospitable to religious Americans and the Democrats seen as the home of the non-religious. This may seem implausible with a Democratic president, Joe Biden, who regularly attends Sunday mass succeeding a Republican, Donald Trump, who was more at home in a casino than a pew. But this is where we’re heading: an alignment in our politics, and not one to be wished for, a world where elections are tantamount to a referendum on the existence of a God whose work on earth, as President Kennedy said, ‘must truly be our own.’ A house so sharply divided does not look like one that would long stand.”²⁰

So, where is America heading? Will Christian leadership play a role in America's future? Some have suggested with the demise of Christian America, the idea and hope of American

¹⁸ Hester, Joseph P. (2021). Spiritual Leadership, the Challenge. Editorial Comment: Volume 14, Issue 1 (2021) Winter/Spring 2021. *Journal of Values-Based Leadership*.

¹⁹ Hall, Alexander (1 September 2022). *Washington Post* columnist condemns “White, conservative Christians” for allying with Trump. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/opinion/washington-post-columnist-condemns-e2-80-98white-conservative-christians-e2-80-99-for-allying-with-trump/ar-AA11mCcJ>.

²⁰ Woodward, Kenneth (28 March 2021). Evangelicals, Trump, and How Politics Shapes Religion—Not the Other Way Around. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2021/05/28/evangelicals-trump-and-how-politics-shapes-religion-not-the-other-way-around/>.

exceptionalism will forever be lost. In his essay, *The End of American Exceptionalism*, the sociologist Daniel Bell wrote, “Today, the belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation’s future.”²¹ That was 1975. Today, with critical race theory calling attention to America’s racial past, with overt reactions by the political right, with history and value being adjusted to fit ideology, and with a more recent brush with anti-democratic voices, a reconsideration of Bell’s words is needed.

Suzy Hansen remarks,

*In the past few years, Americans have been engaged in a deep reconsideration of their racist history, their damaging myths and gauzy national narratives. But to a large degree, that project of interrogation has been a domestic one, eliding the extent to which some myths, perpetuated by conservatives and liberals alike, have been constructed by America’s attitude toward the rest of the world.*²²

But we can’t live with contradictions forever. In his classic study of the American race question, *An American Dilemma*, published in 1944, Gunnar Myrdal described the process of ethical reasoning reminding us that one does not act in moral isolation. And this should be a reminder to all Christian, values-based leaders, as Myrdal said,

*He is not left alone to manage his rationalizations as he pleases without interference from outside. His valuations will, instead, be questioned and disputed. The feeling of need for logical consistency within the hierarchy of moral valuations — and the embarrassed and sometimes distressed feeling that the moral order is shaky — is, in its modern intensity, a rather new phenomenon.*²³

In his 2009 book, *Empire of Illusion*, Pulitzer Prize winner Chris Hedges brings this theme to the forefront of public attention offering a portrait of American culture under the rubric of “illusion”: the illusion of literacy, of love, of wisdom, of happiness, and of America in general. In his opening chapter he says,

*Established truths, mores, rules, and authenticity mean nothing. Good and evil mean nothing. The idea of permanent personalities and permanent values, as in the culture at large, has evaporated. It is all about winning. It is all about personal pain, vendettas, hedonism, and fantasies of revenge, while inflicting pain on others. It is a cult of victimhood.*²⁴

Of course, some don’t want to believe what Hedges is saying. Many have a different version of truth than logic suggests. QAnon conspiracy theories and anti-democratic voices have convinced some, perhaps too many, that our *established* institutions, especially our government, are corrupt. They wish to destroy the moral foundations of not only democracy, but religious institutions as well.²⁵ Speaking “truth to fact,” once considered a mark of honesty, is today a challenge and silence is not the answer.²⁶

²¹ Bell, Daniel (1975). The end of American exceptionalism. https://nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/the-end-of-american-exceptionalism.

²² Hansen, Suzy (2 July 2021). *The end of the end of American exceptionalism*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/07/american-exceptionalism-insurrection.html#:~:text=In%20his%20essay%20%E2%80%9CThe%20End%20of%20American%20Exceptionalism%2C%E2%80%9D,1975.%20It%20turned%20out%20Bell%20was%20being%20optimistic>.

²³ Myrdal, Gunnar (1944). *An American Dilemma*. New York: Harper & Row, app. 1

²⁴ Hedges, Chris (2009). *Empire of Illusion*. New York: Bold Type Books. p. 10.

²⁵ Hester, Joseph P. (2023). A voice of democracy, illuminating a moral vision. Pittsburg, PA: Dorrance Publishing Company, Inc. (Forthcoming).

²⁶ Hester, Joseph P. (2020). The expression of value in a world of fact, *Humanities Bulletin* Vol. 3 No. 1, May 2020.

Conclusion: Hope, the Condition for Growth

We Americans have always been idealists, but we have to admit, the events of the past six years have tarnished our belief in the so-called “American dream.” Many feel powerless, says Chris Hedges, perhaps hopeless as they live and depend upon the great institutions that have been created — education, business, industry, religion, and government. These have been, are, and can be destructive of individualism and personal identity as well as one’s sense of ethics and morality.

But Hedges is not all negativity; he provides some reason to hope, commenting,

All ages, all cultures, and all religions produce those who challenge the oppressor and fight for the oppressed. Ours is no exception. The ability to stand as ‘an ironic point of light’ that ‘flashes out wherever the just exchange their messages,’ is the ability to sustain a life of meaning.²⁷

An example is provided,

I am not naïve about violence, tyranny, and war. I have seen enough of human cruelty. But I have also seen in conflict after conflict that we underestimate the power of love, the power of a Salvadorian archbishop, even though he was assassinated, to defy the killing, the power of a mayor in a small Balkan village to halt the attacks on his Muslim neighbors. These champions of the sacred, even long after they are gone, become invisible witnesses to those who follow, condemning through their courage their own executioners.

They may be few in number but their voices ripple outward over time. The mediocrities who mask their feelings of worthlessness and emptiness behind the ideologies, fear most those who speak in the language of love. They seek, as others have sought throughout human history, to silence these lonely voices, and yet these voices always rise in magnificent defiance.²⁸

If nothing else, Christian leadership can be a voice of hope – “an ironic point of light” – in a values-confused world. Excuse me if I’m wrong, but this will not happen through pious platitudes, quoting Scripture, or unhinged sermonizing. Rather, it is service to others where hope takes root and the message of Christian leadership is identified.

“Hope” defines who and why we are. Its foundation was laid in a pragmatic assessment of our collective needs. Its sustaining power has been the power of benevolence and empathy definitive of our spirituality. As our two major political parties have become more divisive, the ideal of democracy as a moral vision seems to be losing its luster and importance causing many, even devoted Christians, to distance themselves from the message of the Golden Rule and from others in a political morass of values’ uncertainty and social disorder. Surely hope is the condition of our moral growth as Paul indicated in I Corinthians 13:13 – hope anchors both faith and love in a binding relationship.

About the Author

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²⁷ Hedges, *Op. Cit.*, p. 192

²⁸ Hedges, *Ibid.*

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