

The Catholic Experience in America From Orestes Brownson to the Bozells: A Precedent for Muslims?

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Abstract

Muslim Americans confront the challenges of adapting to a liberal culture that is both formally tolerant and ideologically compelling; a culture often understood as growing out of the individualistic and anti-authoritarian features of the Protestant Reformation. Scholars such as Harold Bloom and Alan Wolfe have argued that due to its appeal, this dominant culture—what may be called the American creed—transforms all other faiths

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into variants of itself. They predict that a similar liberalizing assimilation will take place with Islam. In order to assess the validity of this prediction and its implications, this article looks at the experience of another religion that also came to America resistant to the individualistic focus of the American creed. It does so by tracing the evolution of American Catholicism beginning with perhaps its most influential exponent, the nineteenth-century convert Orestes Brownson. After reviewing—through demographic and public opinion data as well as the analyses of some leading contemporary Catholic thinkers—how successfully Catholicism has maintained its identity in the American context since Brownson’s time, the article concludes by considering the implications for Muslim Americans.

Keywords: Muslim Americans, Catholicism, Orestes Brownson, American Creed, Liberalism

Introduction

Life in America poses exceptional challenges for Muslims. Here they cannot live in uncomplicated accord with their conventional verities, yet they are not forced to submit to an alien value system. Instead, like the adherents of many other faiths before them, they are drawn into the embrace of a liberal ethos or creed that asserts a freedom empowering every individual to seek meaning and salvation within himself or herself. The appeal of this American creed—in Harold Bloom’s words, a “religion of the self” so liberating that it “tends to exclude a sense of the communal”—is such that, although rooted in Protestantism, it has “ceased to be Christian” and relentlessly transforms all religions arriving in America, including Judaism and Islam, into variants of itself.¹ Similarly, Alan Wolfe has predicted an “Americanization of Islam” that will transform it “into something for which there is little or no historical precedent.”²

Are Bloom and Wolfe correct? In order to get a better handle on this question and its ramifications, it is worth looking at the experience of another universal faith initially resistant to the atomizing tendencies of

the liberal American creed, beginning with the writings of one who has been called “the Catholic thinker *par excellence* of the United States. There are no rivals.”³ His religious and intellectual journey—encapsulating the tension between appreciation for liberalism’s egalitarian tolerance and concern about its potentially corrosive effects on social morality and solidarity—prefigures a central challenge for all subsequent Catholic thinkers in America. As such, however, it also constitutes an instructive comparative case study for Muslims eagerly seeking acceptance in this country but anxious to uphold their conception of the common good.

Orestes Brownson

Orestes Augustus Brownson was born in 1803 to poor Protestant farmers in Stockbridge, Vermont. At the age of six, following his father’s death, he was given over to be raised by Congregationalist neighbors. After rejoining his mother and siblings in western New York at the age of fifteen, he embarked on an idealistic odyssey that initially followed the conventional trajectory of liberal-minded Protestants recoiling from the strictures of Calvinism: becoming first a Presbyterian in 1822, then a Universalist in 1824, and then a Unitarian pastor by the early 1830s. All along, however, his central animating drive remained a fierce egalitarianism committed to the elevation of the impoverished and downtrodden. As one student of his thought put it: “Brownson had come to spiritualism as Mazzini had come to it, to find a lever for moving the masses.”⁴ He himself much later acknowledged the anthropocentric focus of his early piety: “The only God I recognized was the divine in man, which I supposed to be the real meaning of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.”⁵ In 1836 he took several further steps that both reflected his ongoing adherence to the American creed—self-exalting, egalitarian, optimistic—in its liberalizing progression, and at the same time reinforced his conviction that this creed had to remain grounded in a religious framework. This was because, he explained in an essay published that year, religion “is natural to man” and the “religious sentiment is universal, permanent, and indestructible.”⁶ Disappointed by what he viewed as its neglect both of spiritual rigor and of the common good, however, Brownson came to

fear that the institutional form of Christianity called Protestantism is “no longer animated by a living soul. The sentiment of the Holy has deserted it, and it is a by-word and a mockery.”⁷ American Unitarianism, the latest articulation of Protestantism, “being, as it were, the jumping-off place from the Church to absolute infidelity, is evidently on the decline. [...] Men go out from our midst to Europe, and come back half Catholics.”⁸

While denying “that I profess to bring forward a new religion,” Brownson explained that the church he had founded earlier in the year—the “Society for Christian Union and Progress [...] of which I am the minister”—aimed to restore the harmony of spirit (holiness) and matter (equity and social justice) characterizing true Christianity. This true Christianity, he argued, is incarnated in the “symbol of the God-Man” Jesus. For Brownson, this symbol “teaches all who comprehend it, to find Divinity in Humanity, and Humanity in Divinity. By presenting us God and Man united in one person, it shows us that both are holy.”⁹ The realization of humanity’s divine nature would in turn abolish all evil: “Slavery will cease. [...] Wars will fail. [...] Education will destroy the empire of ignorance. [...] All will be seen to be brothers and equals in the sight of their common Father.”¹⁰ Brownson emphasized the egalitarianism of his conception: “The time is not far distant when our whole population will be philosophers.”¹¹ Small wonder then that he joined Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Ellery Channing—whose sermon asserting humanity’s “likeness” to God Brownson celebrated as “the most remarkable since the Sermon on the Mount”¹²—in the Transcendental Club he helped found in September 1836. It was a logical next step in the conventional liberal trajectory.

Politically, Brownson at this point naturally inclined toward the Jacksonian Democrats. President Martin Van Buren, who had been Andrew Jackson’s vice president, appointed the historian George Bancroft as Boston’s Collector of Customs in 1837, and Bancroft promptly secured a lucrative position for Brownson as well. The following year Brownson founded a journal—the *Boston* (later renamed *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*)—to, as he put it, “support” the Democratic Party and “imbue” it “with our ideas of Christian Democracy.”¹³ An early book review in that journal displayed an egalitarianism well beyond mere

equality of opportunity. After asserting, somewhat contradictorily, both that “he, who has yet to learn that no human being is or can be ignoble, is in our judgment a sorry democrat,” and that those who are “really and intrinsically superior to the common mass will always be permitted to tower above them,” Brownson concluded: “The democrat of to-day [...] does not lop off the heads of kings and priests, but he seeks to arrive at equality by making *every* man a king and a priest. He is a leveller, but he levels upward not downward. He is not affected by the fact that some are higher than others, but by the fact that some are lower than others.”¹⁴

In another essay in 1839, Brownson made his populist partisanship still more explicit, distinguishing between the Hamiltonian “party of Privilege” seeking “a strong government, one capable of holding the people in awe, in check, in submission,” and the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian “party of Equality” grounded in “the primitive fact, that all men are born essentially equal, and that there is something divine in every man” and accordingly demanding “a weak government and a strong people.”¹⁵ He stood with this latter Democratic Party, which “speaks [...] the voice of the people; and the voice of the people is the voice of God.”¹⁶ By July 1840, however, with presidential elections looming, Brownson’s inability to abide deepening socio-economic inequities led him to publish an essay that edged him beyond the liberal mainstream. “The Laboring Classes” mounted a withering critique of American capitalism, arguing that the country’s workers suffered under a system of wage slavery enforced by a too-powerful central state and legitimized by a priesthood that denigrated worldly activism.¹⁷ Even now, however, Brownson’s confidence that the wisdom of the masses ultimately conforms to divine justice kept him anchored in the sometimes conflicting egalitarian and libertarian principles of the American creed. Thus, while political reform still required smaller and less centralized government, economic reform mandated sweeping (and presumably state-imposed) checks on income inequality such as “abolishing hereditary property.”¹⁸

But perhaps the most salient of the tensions in Brownson’s 1840 essay relates to religious reform. On the one hand, he rejected as inadequate the Protestant emphasis on private, self-focused virtue: “we deny in the outset that a man, who seeks merely to save his own soul, merely

to perfect his own individual nature, can be a good Christian. [...] No man can be a Christian who does not begin his career by making war on the mischievous social arrangements from which his brethren suffer.”¹⁹ In its embrace of the “principle of authority” and substitution of “dead works for true righteousness,” the Protestant Church embodies oppressive priesthood no less than the Catholic Church. “Both therefore ought to go by the board.”²⁰ On the other hand, Brownson not only maintained but extended the libertarian and egalitarian tendencies that lie at the heart of Protestantism. Thus, the locus of law is found “within the [individual] soul,” so that: “There must be no class of men set apart and authorized, either by law or fashion, to speak to us in the name of God, or to be the interpreters of the word of God.”²¹ Likewise, true Christianity, “the Christianity of Christ” as opposed to that of the priests, aims “to bring down the high, and bring up the low,” to “secure to all men the equality of position and condition, which it is already acknowledged they possess in relation to their rights.”²² Once again, then, the grounding and guarantee of a virtuous regime for Brownson lay in the innate goodness and wisdom of the masses rather than in the political engagement of any elites.

It is widely recognized that the presidential election of 1840, which Van Buren lost apparently in part because he was tarred by the radicalism of “The Laboring Classes,” catalyzed a decisive shift in Brownson’s thinking. As he himself later put it in an autobiographical essay: “I took [...] even as late as 1840, the democratic premises as true and unquestionable. [...] I had taken them in with my mother’s milk.”²³ But the election caused him to recoil from “this Protestant and Democratic theory of man and society, to which the world seems tending.” It “disgusted me with Democracy as distinguished from Constitutional Republicanism, destroyed what little confidence I had in popular elections, and made me distrust both the intelligence and the instincts of ‘the masses’.”²⁴ Brownson’s anti-populist turn intensified during the following years. A July 1845 essay in his journal declared: “Say not blasphemously, *Vox populi vox Dei*; but say rather [...] *Vox populi vox Diaboli*. Who condemned our blessed Saviour to the cross, – Socrates to drink the hemlock? Who [...] but your wise *vox populi* [...] as arrant a knave, as

vain, fickle, conceited, malicious, and murderous a rascal, as ever walked the earth?" Notwithstanding his penchant for radical changes of mind, Brownson's core political and religious views for the rest of his life would all grow out of this fundamental realization.

At the political level, his allegiance shifted now to "Washington, [...] Adams, Hamilton, and all the distinguished men of the old Federal party, – men who, though decried by Mr. Jefferson and the French Jacobins, were the great men of their times, and whose practical political views contrast favorably with the brilliant and fanciful theories of their opponents."²⁵ The inadequacy of those fanciful theories arises from their consonance with the selfishness debilitating American social relations, a "selfishness, which our institutions themselves naturally generate."²⁶ What is the antidote? "Do not answer by referring us to the virtue and intelligence of the people. We are writing seriously, and have no leisure to enjoy a joke."²⁷ The only "solution" according to Brownson is "religion"—and not just any religion, but one "free from popular control, above the people [...] and able to command them."²⁸

At the religious level, accordingly, Brownson executed a turn away from Protestantism at least as radical as his political turn away from Jefferson and Jackson. Protestantism will not do, because instead of being "given to man from above," it is "spider-like, spun out of his own bowels."²⁹ Its "fundamental principle is, PRIVATE JUDGMENT," which "necessarily implies that each and every man is in himself the exact measure of truth and goodness," so that each individual "decides, with the Bible as without it, what is and what is not God's word, what God has and has not revealed; and therefore what he is and what he is not bound to believe, what he is and what he is not bound to do."³⁰ Such a conception inevitably led to the idolatrous self-exaltation of Transcendentalism, the "logical termination" and "*reductio ad absurdum* of Protestantism."³¹ And what lies beyond, finally, is full-fledged nihilism: the progressive corruption of religion initiated by the Reformation—"incited by the Devil [...] born of hell"³²—"in Transcendentalism reaches its termination, exhausts itself, and can go no farther; for there is no farther. Beyond Transcendentalism [...] there is no place. Transcendentalism is the last stage this side of NOWHERE."³³

Such are the conclusions that led Brownson to convert to Catholicism in 1844. He believed his new religion more capable of exerting “a moral check” because its Church could command believers into obeying God’s law, and more capable of counteracting selfishness because it promoted a social solidarity, “a fellowship of feeling among all classes which is utterly wanting in Protestant countries.”³⁴ Most fundamentally, Brownson had come to view it as more realistic. Protestantism, because it denigrates “reason and free-will” is “no less unsound as philosophy than it is in faith.”³⁵ Catholicism seeks to propagate virtue in accordance with naturally varying human capabilities: “the Church works with man as she finds him, and only wants to make him what he can really be,” in contrast to an understanding of equality as the “process of cutting off the heads of the tall men, and in pulling out the small men, as one might do a spy-glass, so that both become of a size.”³⁶ Brownson, however, never adequately developed his thoughts on equality as it relates to political action. In 1853 he lectured students that “The entire universe [...] is hierarchically organized and governed, and save in the sense of justice between man and man, and man and society, equality is an idle dream, an empty word [...] Whoso seeks to reduce all men to the same level, whether by levelling downwards or by levelling upwards, wars against God and nature.”³⁷ Yet two years later he was still affirming “the natural equality of all men” and resting his hopes for a better world on “a change in the people” rather than on political reform from above.³⁸

Brownson might have benefited here from the insights of the medieval Muslim *falāsifa* on the implications of varying human capabilities for the relationship between religion and politics. Ibn Rushd in particular emphasized the difference between an Islamic egalitarianism blind to distinctions of ethnicity, race, or class on the one hand, and an Islamic recognition of natural rank order at the individual level—reflected in the Qur’anic verse: “And it is He who has made you viceroys of the earth, and has raised some of you above others in degrees” (6:165)—on the other. It is this recognition, he argued, that allows sound Islamic governance to convey the same truths about moral discipline, social solidarity, and political responsibility in a variety of discourses, ranging from the philosophic to the poetic, to each human being in accordance with his or

her capabilities. But Brownson showed no indication of familiarity with the *falāsifa* and his comments on Islam—beyond noting the religion’s claim to “the purest theism” and identifying it as a fearsome challenger to the Catholic Church—reflect his era’s conventional dismissals of it as sensual, anti-intellectual, and belligerent.³⁹

Between Accommodation and Resistance

Orestes Brownson maintained to the end of his days the consonance of Catholicism with the American Republic’s founding principles as he understood them.⁴⁰ Successive waves of Catholic immigration—mainly from Europe around the middle of the nineteenth century, and again from Latin America after the mid-1960s—reinforced the inclination to blur incompatibilities to better promote social harmony. As a result, American Catholic thought continued to exhibit an unresolved tension between accommodation and opposition to central elements of the American creed. The Cold War, and the imperative of bolstering the liberal democracies against their communist adversaries, further sustained this tension.

As thinkers such as France’s Jacques Maritain and Germany’s Karl Rahner worked to reconcile Catholic theology with emergent democratic norms in Europe, their most prominent American counterpart was the Jesuit priest John Courtney Murray.⁴¹ After years of attacks by more conservative Catholic theologians who “arranged to have his work censored by the Vatican authorities in 1955,”⁴² Murray gained a decisive upper hand in the more democratic climate leading up to the Second Vatican Council, publishing an influential book in 1960 that followed Orestes Brownson in claiming the ground of social equity and justice for Catholicism. Because of its “individualistic exigencies,” Murray argued, Protestantism constitutes “not only a heresy in the order of religion but also [...] a corrosive solvent in the order of civilization, whose intentions lead to chaos.”⁴³ A state “wherein every individual is a sort of little god almighty, whose power to preserve himself is checked only at the point where another little god almighty starts preserving *himself*” can only lead to the “knaveish denial that there is any such thing as public morality”

at home, and an extreme “pacifism” that cannot bestir itself to combat injustice and aggression abroad.⁴⁴

In order to assert what he called a “providential” convergence between Catholicism and the liberal American creed, however, Murray had to adopt the historicist critique of “conceptualist classicism” elaborated by the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, “who in an enormously influential phrasing described the trajectory of modern Catholicism as that of an institution moving away from a classicist worldview to one possessed of ‘historical consciousness.’ The classicist worldview understood human nature as ‘always the same’ and applied universal principles to ‘concrete singularity.’”⁴⁵ In line with Lonergan’s alternative view that human nature—and with it therefore the religious strictures required to discipline it—is variable, Murray helped shape the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty propelling the Catholic Church in the liberal direction it continues to follow today.

A less accommodating engagement with liberalism, however, took place on the right wing of American Catholic thought. One of its leading practitioners, contemporary with John Courtney Murray, was Brent L. Bozell Jr., a convert from Episcopalianism who went on to work for the “red-baiting” Senator Joseph McCarthy. In a collection of essays from the 1960s to the 1980s, Bozell – like Brownson and Murray before him—decried the “urge to [...] divinize man” and the consequent “poison of self-love which has produced the cancer of libertarianism.”⁴⁶ And like Brownson, Bozell did not hesitate to break with many of his conservative American colleagues in denouncing capitalism as a destructive outgrowth of “the command to seek self.”⁴⁷ Unlike both Brownson and Murray, however, he identified those pathologies with what he himself called “the American creed”⁴⁸: “The reason the authors of the Declaration [of Independence] did not mention a limitation on the people’s authority is that they did not, in any serious sense, recognize any limitation.” As a result, Bozell concluded: “The Constitution has not only failed; it was bound to fail. The architects of our constitutional order built a house in which secular liberalism could live, and given the dominant urges of the age, would live. The time has come to leave that house and head for home.”⁴⁹ A renewed outburst of liberal “creedal passion” in the 1960s and

1970s seemed to relegate Bozell permanently to the margins of American political thought as a “conservative kook” and to confirm the hegemony of Murray’s approach.⁵⁰ But Murray’s would quickly prove a pyrrhic victory, for that same resurgence of liberalism would catalyze both a quantitative and a qualitative erosion of the alternative that Catholicism hoped to offer America.

Quantitatively, the influx of Catholics following the easing of immigration restrictions in 1965 raised their proportion of the American population from 5 percent as late as 1850 and 17 percent at the end of the nineteenth century to about 25 percent in the early 1970s. After then plateauing for a number of decades, however, that proportion began to decline in the mid-2000s, falling back to 20 percent by 2024.⁵¹ The fact that among young adults (aged 18-29) an even lower proportion—only 15 percent—still identified as Catholic in 2016 indicates that the downward trend is a long-term one.⁵² Beyond lower birth rates due to increasing use of contraception and birth control among Catholics in the West (despite Church doctrine) and the decline in American mainstream religiosity more generally, the Catholic Church is losing believers at a higher rate than is the case with other major religions: already by 2015, according to the Pew Research Center, 28 percent of all Americans raised Catholic no longer considered themselves Catholic.⁵³ Moreover, Catholicism has been in retreat even in Latin America, where its share of the population dropped from 92 percent in 1970 to 69 percent in 2014 to 57 percent by 2020 – primarily due to conversions to Protestantism, and especially to Pentecostalism, which now claims two-thirds of Latin American Protestants. Asked about the reasons for their conversion, 81 percent of respondents invoked a central feature of Protestantism by saying “they were seeking a more personal connection with God.”⁵⁴ As a result, the role of Hispanic immigrants in sustaining Catholicism’s share of the American population has also diminished: “Nearly a quarter of Hispanic adults in the United States were raised Catholic but have since left the faith,” and the overall proportion of U.S. Hispanic adults identifying as Catholic fell from 67 percent in 2010 to 43 percent in 2022.⁵⁵

These figures point to the second, qualitative, reason Catholicism seems to be in decline: it is itself being assimilated into the overarching

American creed. If anything distinguished it from Protestantism in the past, it was the principle that every man is *not* his own priest; that there needs to be an intermediate agency qualified to interpret and implement religious doctrine. For Catholics, this agency is supposed to be the Roman Catholic Church. And yet, according to Pew Research Center polling, only 32 percent of Americans self-identifying as Catholic in 2019 said they have “a lot” of confidence in the clergy to provide useful guidance about their religion’s teachings (compared to 45 percent of American Protestants who felt that way).⁵⁶ Even on a social issue to which the Catholic Church is particularly sensitive, abortion, and even among more active Catholic practitioners (those “who attend religious services a few times a year or more often”), only 34 percent expressed “a lot” of confidence in clerical guidance, compared to 46 percent of such Protestants.⁵⁷ Finally, while 73 percent of all American Protestants say churches and religious organizations “do more good than harm,” the proportion of American Catholics who agree is 10 percentage points lower.⁵⁸ The point seems clear: Catholicism in America is losing its ability to sustain a hierarchy of interpretive judgment.

Small wonder, then, that the boundary between Catholicism and Protestantism is blurring. “Evangelical” as an umbrella term covering all articulations of American religion which emphasize the personal, individualized conversion experience of being “born again,” includes Pentecostal Protestants and pentecostalized “charismatics” of formally non-Protestant religious traditions who “have experienced the ‘in-filling’ of the Holy Spirit” as manifested in practices such as speaking in tongues and faith healing. According to the Pew Research Center, 23 percent of all Americans in 2006 were either Pentecostals or charismatics so defined; with 54 percent of Pentecostals and 39 percent of charismatics (26 percent of all Americans) reporting having “received direct revelations from God,” 59 percent of charismatics (and 46 percent of all Americans) affirming that God grants believers material prosperity, and 71 percent of charismatics (and 56 percent of all Americans) affirming that God grants believers good health.⁵⁹

Here, then, is the real beating heart of the American creed. As early as 1967 it began to resonate among American Catholics with the formation

of “Roman Catholic Pentecostal prayer groups” at Duquesne and Notre Dame universities, and by the early 1970s attracted over 350,000 followers nationwide, activated by the movement’s “greater emphasis on lay participation” and their own “disillusionment with political action on college campuses and [...] heightened concern with personal growth.”⁶⁰ By 2006, fully 36 percent of all American Catholics identified themselves as charismatics; a rate higher even than among Protestants, 28 percent of whom identified as either Pentecostal or charismatic.⁶¹ Among Hispanic-American Catholics the trend is still more pronounced, with 54 percent identifying as charismatics, and 31 percent claiming “to have received a direct revelation from God.” Again, these figures do not include the 20 percent or so of Hispanic-Americans who formally embraced Protestantism.⁶² In short, the evidence seems to support Harold Bloom’s contention that “Americanized Catholicism” has itself evolved into yet another manifestation of the self-focused American creed.⁶³

A Catholic Alternative Today?

Contemplating the acute political and economic cleavages of his time and what he viewed as the failure of mainstream religions to offer effective remedies, Orestes Brownson predicted that Protestantism would continue to devolve into ever more extreme subjectivist deviations and warned that should Catholicism falter as well, “a new principle of social and religious organization, capable of engaging all minds and hearts [...] will present itself. Men will not live always in a religious anarchy.”⁶⁴ Today, a sharp decline in mainstream religiosity at a time of renewed political polarization would seem to bear out Brownson’s warnings. One indicator is the general turn away from organized religion: the proportion of Americans saying they are Christian declined from an average of 89.6 percent during the 1970s to 85.2 percent during the 1990s to 73.6 percent during the 2010s, dropping to a low of 63 percent in 2021. At the same time, the percentage of those professing “no religion” has risen dramatically, from 6.7 percent in the 1970s to 20.8 percent in the 2010s and 26.0 percent by 2019.⁶⁵ Among Americans between the ages of 20 and 34, “More than 40% [...] are religiously unaffiliated.”⁶⁶ While such

statistics have encouraged opponents of religion to believe that the tide may be turning in their favor here, as it already seems to have done in many European societies, there may be reasons to temper their optimism. In the first place, the decline in mainstream religiosity does not translate into a significant increase in atheism. The proportion of Americans polled who describe themselves as atheists only rose from 2 percent in 2009 to 4 percent in 2019. While none believe in “God as described in the Bible,” moreover, 18 percent of these self-described atheists say “they do believe in some kind of higher power.”⁶⁷ Where, then, have the rest of the 26 percent of Americans professing “no religion” gone? One study suggests: “Rising rates of disaffiliation may not necessarily indicate an increasingly secular orientation but rather an abandonment of traditional religious practices in favor of a more personalized and customizable spirituality”⁶⁸—in other words, in favor of purer, even more individualized articulations of the fundamental American creed.

An earlier Pew poll sought to elaborate. It found that the proportion of Americans who say they have had a “religious or mystical experience” has been rising steadily: from 22 percent in 1962 to 49 percent in 2009, when for the first time they outnumbered those saying they have not had such an experience. Moreover, such experiences are “more common today among those who are unaffiliated with any particular religion (30%) than they were in the 1960s among the public as a whole,” and also more common among those below 65 years of age. Even among atheists, agnostics and the “secular unaffiliated,” 18 percent reported having them.⁶⁹ Finally, the study revealed that those American “unaffiliateds” professing no religion gave either exactly the same or slightly higher positive responses on a range of supernatural questions as did the general population: belief in reincarnation (25 percent); belief in astrology (25 percent); communication with the dead (31 percent); and experience with a ghost (19 percent).⁷⁰

In a country where 38 percent of Americans still reject evolution, and where the number of those who believe it is “very important for parents to have their children vaccinated” actually dropped from 82 percent in 2008 to 71 percent a decade later, the persistence of supernaturalism coupled with the erosion of orthodox religion could present significant social

and political challenges.⁷¹ If, as Orestes Brownson suggested, some form of religious belief really is a recurring, chronic characteristic of all human societies, no matter at what stage of economic or social development, might he also have been correct that the failure of existing hegemonic religions could end up paving the way for the rise of some new dogma with uncertain consequences for rational inquiry? Catholicism remains a powerful force in American society today. It continues to provide solace and inspire good works in millions of followers. It also continues to gain converts, including prominent intellectuals and politicians, and counts six of the nine current Supreme Court justices as believers. Confronted by the challenges outlined above, however, its most thoughtful exponents struggle to find ways of sustaining the faith of its adherents while still preserving doctrinal integrity and the Church's corrective role in national morality. While most remain anchored in the liberal grounding of the American creed and its internal tensions, accordingly, a growing number have begun to seek solutions elsewhere.

In his 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed*, Notre Dame University's Patrick J. Deneen for one blamed the dominant American ideology for being simultaneously atomizing—"The loosening of social bonds in nearly every aspect of life [...] reflects the advancing logic of liberalism and is the source of its deepest instability"—and centralizing, as the state's "extensive capacities for surveillance and control of movement, finances, and even deeds and thought" expand without limit; all while promoting an unjust and spiritually degraded culture of hedonistic "immediate gratification."⁷² Now, as a result, a crisis point has been reached where liberalism will transition either into "an administrative state run by a small minority who increasingly disdain democracy" or "some form of populist nationalist authoritarianism or military autocracy."⁷³ Since "revolution" will likely only generate more "disorder and misery," Deneen instead prescribed one of the characteristic Catholic responses to the crisis: "a fundamental withdrawal from American society into updated forms of Benedictine monastic communities" which can offer "smaller, local forms of resistance" as well as "practices fostered in local settings, focused on the creation of new and viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life."⁷⁴

Fragmentation may yet turn out to be the ultimate outcome for America, but what exactly will sustain each subculture against the overarching “anticulture of liberalism”?⁷⁵ This question underlay the otherwise laudatory review of Deneen’s book by Adrian Vermeule, professor of constitutional law at Harvard. Lacking “any substantive comprehensive theory of the common good” with which to supplant liberal dogma nationwide, he argued, Deneen’s communitarian enclaves have no hope of surviving.⁷⁶ Vermeule, a convert from Episcopalianism in 2016, therefore advocated an alternative Catholic response: rather than “retreating to a nostalgic localism, nonliberal actors” need to “strategically locate themselves within liberal institutions and work to undo the liberalism of the state from within.”⁷⁷ What such a statist or “integralist” alternative might look like is spelled out in a 2020 manifesto by two other like-minded Catholics, which affirmed equality—“the capacity for the fundamental moral reasoning in which, among other things, politics consists, does not vary among men, unless there be some positive malady”—but rejected individualistic conceptions of freedom on the grounds that “the common good is better and more divine than the good of one.”⁷⁸ Both the economic (“usuriously” capitalist) and political (secular) premises of liberalism are thus repudiated, leaving the “two powers, spiritual and temporal [...] hierarchically arranged” so that “all temporal rulers must be subject to the authority of the Catholic Church.”⁷⁹

In his own 2022 book *Common Good Constitutionalism*, Vermeule draws from his field of scholarship to argue against both the “progressivist” and “originalist” approaches to public law contending for dominance today. While the former seeks to expand relentlessly the “individualist, autonomy-based, and libertarian” principles he holds responsible for many contemporary social ills, the latter remains at best a merely “disruptive” response, “an essentially Protestant method of hermeneutic that [...] invokes *sola scriptura*” to rebel against progressive legislation without being able to articulate a coherent moral and communal alternative.⁸⁰ Vermeule propounds instead a “common good constitutionalism” rooted in Western—classical and Christian—natural law tradition and reflected, as he sees it, in the true aims of the American Constitutional order.⁸¹ Such a regime requires a powerful state, entailing (as he put it in

an earlier piece) “a powerful presidency ruling over a powerful bureaucracy” tasked with “protecting the weak from pandemics and scourges of many kinds—biological, social, and economic—even when doing so requires overriding the selfish claims of individuals to private ‘rights’.”⁸² Vermeule is clear about brooking neither liberal nor libertarian values: “The claim, from the notorious joint opinion in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, that each individual may ‘define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life’ should be not only rejected but stamped as abominable, beyond the realm of the acceptable forever after. So too, the libertarian assumptions central to free speech law and free speech ideology [...] Libertarian conceptions of property rights and economic rights will also have to go, insofar as they bar the state from enforcing duties of community and solidarity in the use and distribution of resources.”⁸³

Apparently partly in response to Vermeule’s friendly critique, Patrick Deneen followed up with a second book that drops “Benedictine” retreat from society for an “aristopopulism” in which a “relatively small [...] elite cadre skilled at directing and elevating popular resentments” seeks to ride a populist wave to power.⁸⁴ Drawing on “the classical and Christian tradition of the West—a common-good political order,” it will then implement “forms of legislation that promote public morality, and forbid its intentional corruption.”⁸⁵ The effective extent of Deneen’s envisaged “regime change” from liberalism, however is called into question by the unexpected acknowledgment at the end of his book that “the unseen theological foundations of liberalism were originally Christian.”⁸⁶

Deneen takes care to warn against populist demagoguery of the kind whose current “nominal champion in the United States” is “a deeply flawed narcissist.”⁸⁷ He and fellow Catholics such as Adrian Vermeule are serious thinkers trying to address a real crisis in American political culture. Once again, however, we are confronted by a series of daunting questions about their school of resistance to the prevailing American creed. Can Roman Catholicism reverse its numerical decline? Vermeule suggests that U.S. immigration authorities give “priority to confirmed Catholics, all of whom will jump immediately to the head of the queue. Yes, some will convert in order to gain admission; this is a feature, not

a bug.”⁸⁸ But we have already seen Catholicism retreat even within its Latin American wellspring. Again, can Roman Catholicism overcome its own progressive transmogrification into just another variant of the American creed in this country, and its accelerating liberalization even within the Vatican, given Deneen’s recognition of its role in shaping the very ideology he now seeks to overthrow? Most fundamentally, can a Catholic Church which in 1964 reaffirmed that “by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system” really supply the legal basis for any alternative to secular liberalism?⁸⁹ These are weighty questions, because of all Christian sects Catholicism would seem to possess the most formidable resources for addressing the pitfalls of liberalism.

The concern that an effective Catholic critique of American liberalism going beyond either monastic retreat or capitulation to Trumpism has yet to take shape is highlighted by the legacy of an earlier exponent we have already encountered: L. Brent Bozell Jr., who has been described as the “true source” of contemporary religious radicalism.⁹⁰ Beset by illness and by disappointment at his alienation from mainstream American conservatism, he faded into relative obscurity by the 1970s. One of his sons, however, became a Benedictine monk, while another, L. Brent Bozell III, emerged as a conservative activist in the 1980s later associated with the far-right Tea Party movement. His son, L. Brent Bozell IV, in turn gained notoriety after being arrested for participating in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, and then sentenced to prison for nearly four years.

Implications for Islam

Are American Muslims destined to traverse the same path? Public opinion indicators might suggest an exceptional ability to combine adherence to core values—even when they run counter to prevailing liberal tendencies—with continued vigor and dynamism. Thus, a 2001 poll showed that 68 percent of American Muslims favored the death penalty, 71 percent opposed gay marriage, 65 percent favored banning the display or sale of pornography, 53 percent favored allowing non-denominational

prayer in classrooms, and—illustrating the fact that most prefer even their non-Muslim neighbors to be God-fearing—59 percent favored allowing public schools to display the Ten Commandments. The same poll also showed wide support for big-government policies such as universal health care (94 percent), more government assistance to the poor (93 percent), stricter environmental regulations (92 percent), stronger anti-terrorism laws (84 percent), and stricter gun regulations (79 percent).⁹¹ Most of these findings seem compatible with “common-good” conservatism. At the same time, such relatively counter-cultural attitudes do not appear to be generating a drop-off in religious commitment. American Muslims have the lowest median age (33) of any major religious grouping, and their numbers are projected to more than double between 2017 and 2050.⁹²

Moreover, 92 percent of American Muslims said they were “proud to be an American” in 2017, and 80 percent expressed satisfaction with their lives here.⁹³ Although three-quarters said there is “a lot of discrimination against Muslims,” a minority (48 percent) reported being personally subjected to any intolerance or discrimination—with most of these saying only that they had been “treated or viewed with suspicion” at some point during the past year. By contrast, 49 percent said “someone expressed support” for them because they are Muslim during the previous year, and 55 percent described the American people as “generally friendly toward Muslim Americans” while only 14 percent described them as “generally unfriendly.”⁹⁴ Overall, then, a picture emerged of a young and thriving community holding on to its core values even as it finds a congenial home in the United States.

A closer look, however, reveals an important shift in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The majority population’s forbearance diminished in ensuing years so that by 2016, 25 percent of American adults believed that most Muslims in this country are “anti-American” while another 24 percent thought at least “some” of them are.⁹⁵ In part because of the proliferation of such sentiments, many Muslim Americans came—as Jewish Americans had done before—to appreciate the virtues of liberal tolerance around this time. Already by 2009, Gallup polling found that 29 percent of American Muslims now described their political views as

“very liberal” or “liberal,” a proportion higher than that among self-described Protestants (16 percent) or Catholics (20 percent), though not Jews (45 percent).⁹⁶ At the same time, the number of Muslims favoring bigger and more powerful government declined from 79 percent in 2007 to 67 percent in 2017, further indicating a shift toward more properly liberal or libertarian attitudes. A parallel turn occurred on social issues, with the proportion of American Muslims who believe homosexuality should be accepted by society, for example, rising from 27 percent (2007) to 39 percent (2011) to 52 percent (2017).⁹⁷

Many American Muslim leaders welcome this trend. M.A. Muqtedar Khan, former president of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America, for example, celebrated in 2003 the emergence of “a liberal understanding of Islam more in tune with dominant American values,” and declared it the “manifest destiny” of American Muslims to inculcate that understanding back to the rest of the Muslim world.⁹⁸ Khan’s enthusiasm was shared by Feisal Abdul Rauf, imam of a Sufi mosque in New York City and prominent advocate of interfaith dialogue, who argued in 2004 that the Declaration of Independence “embodies and restates the core values of the Abrahamic, and thus also the Islamic, ethic.”⁹⁹ More generally, therefore, “the American creed [...] individualistic [...] affirming the supreme value and dignity of the individual [...] at its core [...] expresses the [...] *Islamic* ethic.”¹⁰⁰ Underscoring the parallelism with Protestant subjectivity at the core of that American creed, Abdul Rauf invoked the Sufi image of the believer polishing “his or her mirror to become the best, most accurate, and transparent divine reflector possible, which is the best way to love God back. What better offering can we offer God other than the best possible mirror in which He sees Himself reflected?”¹⁰¹ After urging Muslims “to find their American identity through learning from the immigrant experience of American Catholics and Jews,” finally, he echoed Muqtedar Khan in calling on them to participate in an American campaign to “actively support the development of an Islamic democratic capitalism” that “ushers in” the Muslim world’s “last stage or ‘end’ of history.”¹⁰²

Even when a sanguine view of convergence between Islamic and American values is complemented by progressive critiques drawing

attention to gender or race inequities, a liberal articulation of Islam is often envisaged as spearheading positive worldwide change. Thus, in her introduction to a 2005 anthology of pieces by American Muslim women, Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur wrote: "I believe that Islam is in the midst of global transformation. This transformation is being led largely by Muslims in the West because we have certain academic freedoms along with freedom of speech and freedom to worship. [...] Now more than ever, the world needs to hear our voices."¹⁰³ Mohja Kahf adds in the denunciation of sexism that is her contribution to the volume: "our job now is to birth a new Islam, a new Islamic culture."¹⁰⁴

More recently, however, perhaps partly in reaction to escalating Islamophobia, questions are being raised about liberalism itself, whether in its conservative or progressive manifestations. Arguing that "dominant forms of American liberalism have prevented the political assimilation of Muslim Americans," Edward Curtis, for example, questions whether "liberal states may be structurally incapable" of sustaining the "kind of democracy" that is "committed to justice and equity."¹⁰⁵ Others such as Nadia Marzouki by contrast worry that liberalism is all too capable of assimilating Muslim Americans, but in a way that "depoliticizes" them into a docile and blandly universal "spirituality."¹⁰⁶ Still others hone in on the individualistic and libertarian core of liberalism. In her fascinating study of the transfiguration of hijab-wearing in America from a display of submission to higher law into an assertion of personal autonomy, Butheina Hamdah quotes a Muslim fashion designer for whom wearing the hijab represents "the freedom to choose my lifestyle," while for the founder of *MuslimGirl* online magazine it reflects a "Muslim feminist" desire to "empower women's individual choices and autonomy of their own lives."¹⁰⁷ Hamdah observes that insofar as wearing the hijab functions "as a path to self-fulfillment or self-actualization" for such women, "they have effectuated liberalism's aim to transform the Muslim identity to one that aligns with liberal ideas." As a result, she worries, "[w]ithin a liberal paradigm in which principles such as autonomy, individualism, and public reason have become self-evident truths, there is now a normalization of a particular type of acceptable Muslim identity (i.e., an increasingly secular, liberal one)."¹⁰⁸

Tracing the essential problem back to liberalism's roots in the American creed, as so many Catholic thinkers before have done, Sherman Jackson, a Muslim professor of religion and American Studies at the University of Southern California, likewise expresses alarm: "In its quest to affirm the priesthood of all believers [...] Protestantism would raise the value and authority of private, interiorized belief over those forms of religious conviction and practice that recognized the community as a source of religious authority." By also proving so effective in "its effort to empty the socio-cultural eco-system of all supernatural or mystical elements," Protestantism in America contributed to an increasingly secular liberal culture that "privileges the individual self [...] and] its right to pursue individual fulfillment" beyond the authority of any religion. Since "the notion that religion is or should be irrelevant to life outside the home runs counter to the whole point of the mosque as a public, religious institution," the implications for Islam in America are dire: "There is simply no way to sustain the long-term health and welfare of a fish in contaminated water, no matter what or how much we feed the fish."¹⁰⁹

Hamdah's and Jackson's concerns can be further developed by looking at two of the most sustained recent defenses of Islamic liberalism. In *Islam without Extremes*, Mustafa Akyol reaffirms liberalism's two core principles. *Equality* in modern times has demolished the old hierarchical order: "In medieval times, only a tiny group of Muslim elites [...] had the chance to find a library to study foreign philosophies. Now, almost everyone can do that – it just takes an Internet connection. The world now has many individuals who have both the mindset to think independently and the means to act accordingly."¹¹⁰ *Individual autonomy* can therefore be freely asserted: "Today, the same question haunts the minds of millions of my coreligionists [...] Is Islam a religion of coercion and repression? Or is it compatible with the idea of liberty – that individuals have full control over their lives and are free to be religious, irreligious, or whatever they wish to be?"¹¹¹ From these two modern advances it follows that religion can only be a subjective, private pursuit divorced from political authority or contestation: "Everyone should have freedom from both the state and the society, in other words, to have genuine religiosity."¹¹²

In *What is an American Muslim?*, Abdullahi An-Na'im asserts that a "secular state" (which is "required by – not merely tolerated or accepted by – Islam and Sharia") "neither depoliticizes Islam nor relegates it to the so-called private domain."¹¹³ Yet no less than with Akyol that is where the logic of his argument leads, rooted as it is in the radical "self-determination" of every individual: "I am particularly concerned about the part that the human subject does for herself; what the 'self' needs to be and do in order to realize the 'determination' it wishes to have. The *subjects* of change must be the ones to determine [...] this process of self-transformation."¹¹⁴ This being the case, no "human being or institution" is entitled "to adjudicate among competing views, or to decide by majority vote, on the religious truth or fallacy of any view." Instead: "Religious truth to each believer is what she or he believes it to be."¹¹⁵ An-Na'im finally arrives at the same conclusion Orestes Brownson had reached about Protestantism: "Judgments about what is religiously permissible or prohibited [...] or what is required or merely permitted [...] need to be made by believers. Whatever Sharia norms a Muslim accepts according to the interpretation he or she accepts [...] are always determined by believers personally."¹¹⁶

It is therefore noteworthy that both Akyol and An-Na'im express anxiety about Protestantization; the former by agreeing that conservative Muslim thinkers who fear such a development "have a point," the latter by describing its earlier effect on Jews, Catholics, and Mormons as "negative."¹¹⁷ Orestes Brownson by contrast—like Hamdah and Jackson after him—had no difficulty discerning the direct correlation between Protestantism and liberalism, to say nothing of the pitfalls lying beyond. Recent indicators would seem to bear out the relevance of his prognoses for American Islam as well. The proportion of Muslims polled who say religion is "very" important in their lives dipped from 72 percent in 2007 to 69 percent in 2011 and then again to 65 percent in 2017, while about 23 percent of Americans born Muslim "no longer identify with their childhood religion."¹¹⁸ This willingness to explore alternatives, coupled with the undeniable appeal of self-expression and self-empowerment proffered by the liberal American creed, raise questions about the future trajectory of Islam in the United States.

As Muslims weigh the costs and benefits of assimilation into the American creed, and as they contemplate the alternatives available to them, they might benefit from a careful review of how their Catholic predecessors here have struggled with those same questions before turning to some of their own traditions of political philosophy for guidance. There they will find insights and resources that can help them contribute to the political and social health of the country where they have found a new home.

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