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# Introduction

RARELY IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY have so many thoughtful observers voiced so many urgent messages about the need to understand and better protect the foundations of American democracy. To the familiar challenges of partisan polarization and gridlock has now been added the troubling prospect of cherished democratic traditions being subverted by far-right nationalistic extremism, plutocracy, self-dealing, and sheer incompetence. The warnings are credible. Democracy is in danger unless the citizens it seeks to protect work for its preservation.

Religion—how it is practiced, what it impels people to do—is again at the center of debate about our collective well-being. We are a nation of many religions and of many views about religion. Some of America's faith communities imagine God to be visiting us with difficulties to teach us a lesson. Others hope for an end to the nonsense they see perpetrated by religious leaders. And if religion is troubling, some argue, things could be much worse without it. Democracy would wither, they contend, without the leavening influences of faith.

How do the diverse practices that characterize religion in the United States strengthen democracy? Or do they strengthen it? What do these practices contribute, if anything, to public advocacy about democracy's basic principles—fair representation, liberty of conscience, freedom of assembly, human dignity, and equality?

The claim I make in the following pages is that religion is good for American democracy less because of the unifying values it might provide and more because of religion's capacity to bring diverse values,

interests, and moral claims into juxtaposition with one another. Through its diversity, religion contributes to the contending beliefs, values, arguments, and counterarguments that constitute the debate about how to order our lives together. People who care about religion—including those who doubt its value—vehemently disagree with one another and take adversarial positions toward one another. This diversity—these diverging practices and the moral convictions they imply—animates American democracy, sometimes in ways that pose questions about whether we can agree on anything, but more often with robust outcomes that reflect advocacy and counteradvocacy. Contention about what we hold dear is central to democratic processes: voicing strong convictions about what is unequivocally right, advocating for conflicting definitions of the common good, affirming and modifying basic points of agreement, and refining the procedures that make living together possible. Religious diversity is woven into this contention, augmenting it and supplying it with competing ideas, practices, and values.

Conceived in this manner, religious groups' potential to benefit American democracy occurs in several ways. They can mobilize resistance to the authoritarian threats of autocratic leaders, support efforts to uphold freedom of conscience, organize voluntary associations, and defend these associations' independence. Additionally, religious groups can advocate for human dignity, provide social services and support, champion the value of inclusive orientations, and address the threat to democracy of economic inequality. The key to understanding these potential benefits is how religious groups with diverging convictions understand their civic roles and relate to one another. Differing groups bring multiple perspectives to bear on social issues, articulate claims and counterclaims, mobilize in opposition to one another, check one another's aspirations, and give voice to constituencies with differing values and interests. None of this follows a set pattern. It happens in historical contexts—where religion's diverse contributions are most clearly seen.

The historical episodes I discuss begin with an examination of how the most influential religious groups in the early 1930s—predominantly

Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish organizations—drew on their differing locations and beliefs to warn constructively about the imminent threat of authoritarianism. I then discuss religious diversity's role in redefining freedom of conscience in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the 1950s we see religious groups advocating for freedom of assembly and from the 1960s through the end of the century contending about human dignity and welfare provision. In recent decades a further role of religious diversity is evident in discussions of immigrant rights, the wealth gap, and the response to COVID-19. In each instance, the details of what happened are broadly familiar, documented by journalists and social scientists. Building on this information, I show why it mattered that religious practices were present and why it was significant that leaders and the groups they served so often took adversarial positions toward one another.

Democracy's strength depends on the rule of law, the Constitution, freedom of speech and assembly, fair elections, and the nation's system of government checks and balances. These principles and institutions have served democracy well. The multilayered complexity of these arrangements, frustrating as it often is, safeguards American democracy. When democracy is threatened, Americans historically have trusted the laws, the lawmakers, the courts, and the press to protect it. Today, no less than in the past, democracy's resilience depends on responsive representative institutions, fair elections, active civic participation, freedom of expression, and adherence to constitutional norms. Unless these institutions and norms are respected, democratic governance is weakened.

Religious advocacy is not the answer to the political challenges confronting the United States at this critical juncture in its history, any more than religious conviction is their cause. But religious organizations are so thoroughly intertwined with our national traditions and the foundations of our democracy that they too must be scrutinized. Whether we are among those who think democracy was founded on religious principles or are convinced that reasonable people would be better off putting religious convictions aside, the reality is that millions

of Americans practice religion in one form or another. They enact it in churches, synagogues, mosques, ashrams, and temples, coming together in hundreds of thousands of places of worship large and small. Additionally, many Americans who do not identify with any religion hold considered opinions about how religion should or should not be practiced. And, although religious faith for many is a matter of the heart, it is also demonstrably influential in public affairs. Faith perspectives inform whom people trust, the issues they care about, and in many cases how they vote.

One might think that everything possible to say about religion's place in the life of our nation has already been said. Histories about it abound, polls measure it, and ethicists ask whether it could be practiced better than it is. We know that religious beliefs have inspired both good and ill. Religiously inspired activism has both mobilized social reform and resisted it. We also know that religious practices in the United States have always been diverse and that they are now more diverse than they have ever been. Diversity is one of religious practices' most salient features. Indeed, it is impossible to understand American religion without closely considering its diversity. The best descriptions of American religion emphasize this diversity. And yet, although many arguments have celebrated (or deplored) religious diversity, much confusion remains.

The reasons for this confusion are not new. A century ago, when organized religion in the United States was less diverse than it is today, it was taken for granted that Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and the leaders of other denominational and interfaith groups would speak to the issues of the day. Yet by the middle of the twentieth century, a prevailing view among academics was that religious beliefs and values were either a kind of implicit cultural subfloor that quietly supported the basic democratic norms on which everyone agreed, or were so weakened by secularization that they served mainly as a palliative in personal life. When religious activism appeared to have reentered public life in the 1980s, its association with the antiabortion, antigay "Christian Right" concentrated interest in the twin questions of how such political engagement was possible and what could be done about it. Specifically, how was it conceivable that traditionalists of this sort had become so politically

active almost overnight? And how could those who disagreed with them counter their influence? These were interesting questions and they deserved to be studied, but they have not served us well in the long run. The very nature of the questions scholars asked about the Christian Right limited, rather than illuminated, the larger question of religious diversity's relation to democracy. Indeed, those questions implied that division is usually a problem rather than contemplating what it may contribute.

In the breach, two ways of thinking about religious diversity and democracy have taken hold, neither of which provides a satisfactory answer to the broad question of how diverse religious practices might contribute to democracy. On the one hand, much of the commentary focuses on organized religion but neglects the importance of its diversity. Such arguments include the view that religious commitment benefits democracy because this commitment generally undergirds a shared belief in justice, equality, human rights, and compassion; and that it encourages people to engage in civic activities—or that it is bad because it breeds intolerance, promotes irrationality, and inhibits the reasoned give-and-take democracy requires. "Religion" in these discussions usually means Christianity or, if not that, then Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic religion or some kind of organized religion, neglecting the fact that institutional religion in the United States takes many forms—some of which are highly individualized—and this diversity figures importantly in how people practice their various faiths. On the other hand, some discussions focus on diversity without paying much attention to religion per se. In these discussions, diversity—meaning differences of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation—is variously conceived as being good for democracy because it generates new ideas and sparks economic innovation, or else it is a problem that must be resolved for democracy to survive. Religious observance in its many varieties sometimes comes up as one of the many real but problematic diversities with which democratic governance has to contend. Whether it contributes is harder to say.

Examining what religiously oriented individuals and organizations have actually done puts the lie to these ways of thinking. Religious

conviction hasn't contributed to American democracy simply by providing a sacred umbrella under which to huddle with our fragile unifying beliefs. Religious claims certainly haven't been sidelined or excluded from public life. They haven't been reanimated only by the Christian Right. Nor have they been a positive influence on democracy only in those historical instances in which activists advocated for abolition and civil rights. And religious identities haven't contributed only by influencing elections or giving candidates and public officials a tool kit of sacred idioms with which to speak.

Investigating what has actually been done shows that religiously oriented citizens have played an active role when important national issues were being debated. They have acted because of their diversity, putting that diversity into practice by vigorously proposing and defending alternative ideas, mobilizing constituents to be engaged in civic activities, and checking one another through criticism and dissent. Over the past century, religious groups and their leaders have contributed to American democracy in these ways, not in spite of their diversity but because of it. People have been propelled into action because they vehemently disagreed with one another. They were forced to contend with their disagreements, seeking and sometimes finding common ground, but in the process posing the hard questions about who we want to be, what our values should be, and how to get along with those who see things differently.

"Religion" is often conceptualized as a system of beliefs that uniquely speaks of humans' relation to the sacred. However, for present purposes—without denying the value of that general idea—I want to think of it in a different way. Drawing on what we know from studies of how religion is practiced in ordinary life, we can conceptualize religious practices in terms of *action*, *conviction*, and *contention*, meaning that they are something people do because they are convinced that what they are doing is right, and they hold these convictions in contention with behavior considered less desirable and indeed wrong. Thought of in these terms, religious practices amount to a way of engaging with the world.

They consist not only of participating in sacred rites but also of taking action in the affairs of one's community and nation.

Religious practices, so considered, connect to democracy in ways best suggested in what Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe terms agonistic pluralism. Democracy, she argues, is fundamentally messy, divided, and of necessity representative of diverse interests and values that can never be fully reconciled. While it may be conceived of as an ideal, democracy must be understood concretely as the political practices in which groups contend with one another. For this reason, she says, democracy cannot be understood sufficiently as a set of procedures through which people deliberate in the hope of arriving at a rationally articulated consensus. It consists instead of people mixing it up, arguing, debating, mobilizing, and negotiating with those with whom they disagree and yet treating them as adversaries rather than as enemies. What distinguishes an effective democracy is thus not consensus on deeply held shared convictions but a willingness to abide by norms of respect and civility and truthfulness, thereby making it possible for people who disagree to nevertheless live and work together.[1]

Democracy is weakened by conditions that impede these processes of contentious disputation. Authoritarianism under which agreement is coerced or inspired from fear and resentment is the most serious threat to democracy. It cuts off the free expression of dissent and the give-and-take from which innovative ideas originate. Hegemonic subscription to a dominant taken-for-granted ideology, religion, or set of economic principles is a second threat. That, too, cuts off debate. Apathy and disenfranchisement, both of which enable rules to be set by the few against the interests of the many, constitute a third threat. Extremism that radically interdicts the civil back-and-forth of adversarial constituencies is a fourth. Democracy is endangered in each of these circumstances less by disagreements—even by heated contention about rights, representation, and the meanings of democracy—than by too much agreement with prevailing hierarchies of power.

Hegemonic, authoritarian religious practices undercut democracy in all these ways. Yet the reality of religious diversity is that in countries

that have experience with democracy it limits these dangerous tendencies even as they persist. Religious convictions threaten democracy mainly when adherents claim to have superior unquestionable knowledge from on high that derives from a particular source and yet applies to everyone in ways that define the common good. But under conditions of religious diversity, those arguments are subject to the criticism, debate, challenge, refutation, and revision that are essential to the health of a democracy. When diversity yields claims and counterclaims, even in instances when it generates factions and conflict, it is beneficial for democracy because it reduces the chance that any one majoritarian religion will command the bully pulpit that facilitates its hegemonic authority. Diversity's further contribution lies in bringing alternative ideas about the common good to the table, even ones that challenge received wisdom about the meanings of democracy, framing them less as incommensurable truths than as practical strategies of action. Democracy is strengthened by contention of this kind mobilizing civic participation, posing hard questions, and giving expression to dissent.[2]

Thinking of religious practices as groups of citizens acting and contending on the basis of their convictions necessitates acknowledging just how diverse American religion truly is. To be sure, many people look to religion for quiet solace, personal inspiration, and peace of mind in the midst of a world seemingly divided about everything else. Religion provides hope that everyone can live together in harmony. But religion is a source of disharmony, too, as it of necessity reflects its differing traditions and locations. It is the diversity of belief and practice that matters, not simply an underlying consensus. As Michael Kazin observes, "To take one's religion seriously almost requires a certain amount of conflict with those who seriously disagree."[3]

Diversity is the source of checks and balances, of skepticism toward moral hubris, and of dissent and counterdissent that propels religious organizations (and their opponents) to propose and aggressively defend their ideas about how Americans should live and be governed. Diversity among religious organizations provides the space in which unpopular perspectives can be kept alive and innovative ideas can incubate. By

participating in diverse religious organizations, groups with diverse interests and needs can feel they have a voice. At its best, this diverse participation invigorates democracy the way James Bryce anticipated more than a century ago when he wrote of groups that "rouse attention, excite discussion, formulate principles, submit plans, [and] embolden and stimulate their members."[4]

Despite all these benefits, religious diversity also extracts costs, especially the divisiveness that gets in the way of religious organizations having a stronger hand in public affairs when they fail to work together. Another cost is the faith-based prejudice, discrimination, and antidemocratic extremism that have been so much a part of American religion throughout its history. Even the time and energy expended on conflict management can be considered a cost. The freedom of religion that American democracy seeks to guarantee creates the space in which inefficient as well as unpalatable expressions of faith can thrive. These costs have often compelled observers to view the nation's religious diversity as a problem—a troublesome reality with which democracy has had to contend rather than anything from which to benefit. From that perspective, the good thing about religion in America is that separation of church and state has kept it as far from the public square as possible—a fact that would surely please James Madison and Thomas Jefferson alike. And yet, religious diversity early in the nation's history was the reality that propelled the founders to bring church-state separation into being. Religious diversity has continued to be the guardian both of freedom to practice religion and of protection from religion.

Against the view that conflict among religious groups is simply a problem for democracy, a long tradition in the social sciences has recognized the "integrative" role of institutionalized conflicts. "Integrative" means that contending groups provide regular channels through which constituencies express their various values and interests. Their participation confers a sense of inclusion, of being heard and of possibly making a difference, that contributes to the legitimacy of the arrangements that make this participation possible. Playing by the rules in this respect reinforces the legitimacy of the rules. In addition, the conflicting interests and perspectives of different religious groups have often mitigated

the severity of divisions based on social class, race, and region and have contributed to the formation of crosscutting alliances.[5]

The crucial aspect of this argument is the phrase "institutionalized conflicts." Religious conflicts in the United States take shape within a framework of institutions that consists, in the first place, of constitutional separation of church and state, which itself is subject to continuous testing and modification and yet sets boundaries on how religious groups exercise influence. Religious conflicts are further constrained by laws and regulations that protect against violence, hate crimes, and seizures of property. Traditions and norms also play an important role. These include the knowledge that past religious conflicts often resulted in violence and that democracy developed as a direct response to that history. Religious conflict is also constrained by norms of decorum and tolerance of diversity.[6]

To say that religious diversity is good for democracy is not to suggest a priori that a particular mix of contending religious traditions is optimal. How much or how little power one or another religious group should have is what religious leaders themselves argue about. The reality is that the United States has been religiously diverse from the start, and although concerns have always been expressed about the hegemonic aspirations of some and the rights of others, the constitutional protections of religious freedom and of separation of church and state provide the ground rules under which these interactions occur. These protections are never fully and finally adjudicated to everyone's satisfaction, which is one of the reasons why contention among religious groups is a constant forum for democratic deliberation. And the reality of these firm but evolving constitutional guarantees against religious establishment means that the question of religious diversity's contributions to democracy cannot be satisfactorily addressed simply in contrast to the default possibility of a single established theocracy. To argue only that religious diversity is better for democracy than a theocracy would miss the point. That view can be taken and still assert nothing about whether American religion in all its diversity mostly helps democracy or hurts it.

Religious diversity does mean that some organizations are necessarily more powerful and represent larger or more influential constituencies than others. Indeed, minority religions are of particular relevance to the practice of democracy. Under the American system, democracy's role includes upholding the rights and freedoms of minority religious groups. That in turn gives the leaders of minority religions an added incentive to advocate for democracy. The case can also be made that greater diversity overall increases the opportunities for leaders of minority religions to form coalitions and thereby increase their chances of winning arguments about democracy's protection of religious freedom.

It has been minority religions with which dissent has most often been associated. By virtue of being minority groups, religious minorities see things differently than majority religions do, especially because they have an enhanced stake in seeking acceptance for their distinct perspectives and interests. The dissenters best known in US history have been Puritans, Anabaptists, Quakers, and abolitionists, and, more recently, conscientious objectors, Jehovah's Witnesses, immigrants' rights activists, and antiracist advocacy groups. But dissent has not been limited to these groups; it has also been present in the larger, more established traditions. The past century has witnessed disagreements within every branch of American religion that manifest dissenting attitudes toward majorities, toward the practices of contending faith traditions and groups, and toward government. We have also seen the presence of religious dissent in organizations, movements, and individuals calling for elected officials to do a better job of upholding racial justice, protecting religious freedom, and checking government expansion.

Diversity of religious belief and practice must be understood, too, as the diversity represented in contention *against* religion. The story of religion's contribution to American democracy cannot be told without recognizing the critical influence of organizations that resisted what they saw as intolerance, indifference, hypocrisy, and subservience on the part of established religion. These voices of skepticism were part of the contention from the start and have remained so. Typically

they have organized to prevent religious thinking from having too much of a role in public affairs, offering an alternative platform from which to speak.

The crucial episodes I examine in the following chapters deal with perennial issues that democratic governance in the United States has had to address. Resisting autocracy, protecting freedom of conscience, guaranteeing liberty of assembly, upholding the dignity of persons, making room for inclusion, addressing economic inequality, and protecting the health and wellness of the population are all challenges that we as a nation confront continually. From looking at specific instances, it becomes possible to see concretely how religion in its diversity and because of this diversity has contributed.

The threat of autocracy—of a leader or party that disregards the basic tenets of democratic governance—is one that must be vigilantly guarded against. Other than during war, when democracy faces an external threat, few times have seemed as endangering to American democracy as the 1930s. Although many considered the New Deal necessary, others saw its expansion of the federal government as a threat to democracy. Religious organizations actively debated the New Deal and the changes it implied. Some groups regarded it as no threat to democracy at all; others found it deeply disturbing; still others convened forums in which its strengths and weaknesses were discussed. The role religious groups played in the debate illustrates the significance of religious diversity. Although the nation was profoundly concerned with economic recovery, religious diversity brought into the public arena valuable perspectives about freedom, values, and moral responsibility.

The pacifist movements that emerged during World War I—and that continued to argue for peace and against rearmament through the 1920s and 1930s—reveal a different role of religious diversity than the one demonstrated in debating the New Deal. Religious organizations representing different traditions worked together to promote pacifism. Despite their theological differences, their cooperation declared that they all considered pacifism important. Conscientious objection took pacifism a step further. It posed the difficult question of how someone

who refused to participate in war should be treated. During World War I, members of "historic peace churches" (Mennonites, Brethren, and Quakers) were generally granted an exemption of some kind, such as noncombatant service, because of their membership in those denominations. But by 1940, the courts recognized that conscientious objectors represented a wider variety of religious organizations and traditions. This recognition of diversity necessitated shifting the criterion for exemption from membership to claims made on behalf of individuals' own private beliefs. The story of how this happened is an illustration of religious diversity contributing to the clarification of freedom of conscience.

Like freedom of conscience, understandings of freedom of assembly were also sharpened by debates involving religious diversity. After World War II, America's reputation as a "nation of joiners" grew as more of the population moved to the suburbs, had children, and set records for membership in religious and community organizations. Commentators interpreted this enthusiasm for joining as an expression of Americans' desire for community. Participating in community organizations benefited American democracy, too, as Alexis de Tocqueville had argued years earlier. Community organizations were local, reflecting the diverse interests of their members and giving citizens a voice in public affairs. But members were not entirely at liberty to do and say whatever they wanted. Despite a constitutional guarantee of freedom to peaceably assemble, groups were subject to trespass and vagrancy laws, licensing ordinances, and restrictive covenants. Many of these laws and regulations had been advanced earlier in the century in support of Jim Crow segregation. In the 1950s similar laws and regulations were applied to civil rights organizations. With an interest of their own in freedom of assembly, religious groups were actively involved in litigating these laws and regulations. The groups took differing sides, arguing about different interpretations of "assembly," "speech," and "freedom," as well as about taxation and privacy. By the late 1960s, these discussions prepared the way for a significant enlargement of organizations engaged in political activism, protests, and efforts to promote new ideas about religion and democracy.

Another key issue in the defense of American democracy is embracing and upholding the dignity of the individual—which, among other things, has been especially debated in discussions of welfare policy. The late twentieth-century debate about welfare that consumed such a great deal of political energy arose on the heels of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and extended into the 1990s and early 2000s. The debate divided along partisan lines between advocates of private charity and advocates of government programs. Religious groups' arguments often separated along these lines as well. However, the religious community also contributed a wider variety of perspectives. Black churches, urban ministries, interfaith coalitions, and advocacy groups were often in the best position to work out creative solutions that combined private and public resources. When government-funded faith-based initiatives were introduced, these ministries and coalitions were able to contribute valuable perspectives on the essential questions of how best to serve the common good while also protecting the dignity of the individual.

Against the backdrop of the debates to which differing religious perspectives have contributed, a counternarrative best described as ethnoreligious nationalism—or simply as White Christian nationalism—also exists. Its argument is that whatever diversity exists within White Christian America, that diversity is inconsequential, at least among "true Christians," and is pitted against a heterodox bundle of threats that include African Americans, persons of no faith, Muslims, and immigrants.[7] Religious diversity challenges this nationalistic notion. Many religious groups take issue with it, arguing that nationalism is contrary to democracy. These groups argue for greater understanding of other traditions, an emphasis on rights, and respect for diversity. The arguments focus on race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. In recent decades they have also focused on immigrant rights. The arguments are contentious, prompting counterarguments and propelling civic engagement. They bring divergent views to bear on some of the most important questions about American democracy: Who counts as citizens and what are their rights?

Although the debates in which religious diversity has participated have dealt with inequality in other ways, these discussions have also

contributed directly to questions raised by the widening gap between the very rich and the rest of the American population. One strand of the debate stresses individual freedom, which means limiting the role of government intervention in the economy and looking to private philanthropy for remediation of the wealth gap. Some religious groups have found their voice in advocating for these views. A different approach has called attention to the social responsibilities of corporations. Drawing on the *Rerum Novarum* papal encyclical of 1891 and the Social Gospel of early twentieth-century Protestants, some religious groups have advocated for corporate social responsibility. Other religious groups have developed wealth ministries and faith-friendly leadership programs. And still others have been active supporters of community organizing and the living wage movement. Through their diverging perspectives, they have informed deliberations about public policy, arguing that it should take account not only of economic considerations but also of moral responsibilities.

Then, too, no democracy is free from periodic crises that come from unexpected sources—such as a global pandemic. Along with every other US institution, religious organizations were caught largely unprepared by the coronavirus that swept across the nation in early 2020. Most followed the shifting guidelines from public health officials as the virus spread. They canceled worship services, shut down in-person meetings, and crafted ways to offer services and hold meetings online. A few leaders resisted. They interpreted the closure directives as government interfering with religious freedom, and some preached that God would protect them from the virus. The pandemic also revived debates about vaccinations. These debates reflected deeper tensions between some religious groups' teachings and their attitudes toward science and scientific medicine. Some of the groups were deeply skeptical of science and even more suspicious when government was the source of scientific information. Yet these debates were not the whole story. Many religious groups redoubled their efforts to facilitate health and wellness, including blood drives, wellness fairs, mental health initiatives, and parish nursing ministries, and many advocated for expanded health insurance programs and medical research. Relative to the contribution of other

institutions, especially government and science, that of religious groups was small. Nevertheless, it was another instance in which religion's diversity reached diverse sectors of the population, illustrating that democracy requires both doing one's part and determining what that part should be.

Taking a historical view illuminates continuity but also brings into sharp relief a disturbing trend. Although religious diversity has in many ways increased, the vitality of its diverse expression has diminished in proportion to its alignment with partisan politics. Divisions between religious liberals and conservatives that corresponded with divisions between Democrats and Republicans were already present a century ago, but that alignment has become tighter in recent decades. The result has been a shift in the basis on which claims by religious authorities are made and a decrease in the capacity of religious organizations to facilitate discussions of varying perspectives toward government policies. Instead of constructive proposals being offered that bring groups with diverging views together, party loyalties dictate religious perspectives as well. Reference need only be made to discussions of healthcare, gun control, and racial equality to see how difficult it has become for religious groups to avoid political partisanship.

The partisanship along which religious diversity has become aligned has made it especially difficult to fully appreciate the contributions of recently arrived immigrant groups with diverse religious convictions of their own. Instead of accepting Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Hindus as epistemic communities with different styles of practice, a large swath of the Christian population has taken to denying its own internal diversities and treating the rest of the population as if it were alien. The alternative response of pretending that religious diversity is nonexistent except in superficial ways, while assuming that everyone is united by secular values, is little better.

My emphasis on the diversity of American religious beliefs and practices is meant as a challenge to the partisan way of thinking that afflicts some of the otherwise most reasoned discourse about how democracy is currently threatened and what to do about it. Implicit in many of

these discussions is the assumption that religious practice is essentially a unitary phenomenon that is traditional, sentimental, authoritarian, fundamentally autocratic, and most evident in conservative movements. To conceive of religious practice in these terms is to implicitly argue that only liberalism, whether secular or religious, can protect us from the threat religious convictions usually pose to democracy. This view suggests that liberalism counters the potentially undemocratic conservatizing tendencies inherent in religious convictions and that championing liberalism as an alternative to these convictions is the best way forward. However, such a view ignores the essential fact of American religious diversity. It misses the point that religious groups—even in their conservative manifestations—are always divided and are constrained by these divisions. In treating American religion as if it were alien to democracy, this interpretation of liberalism results in heated responses defending religion by extolling its democratic virtues, a view that is also deficient and sometimes equally dangerous. Defending religious groups on the grounds that their values are consistent with democracy is too easy. It foregrounds the good and opens the way to labeling any other religious or secular tradition with which one disagrees as an impediment of democracy. Both views, in representing religious practices simplistically, ignore how internally divisive and conflicted those practices are. Thus both views fail to appreciate how much the arguments advanced in the name of religion are shaped by that diversity.

If democracy is understood to be the practice through which contention is negotiated, religion's diverse, competing, dissenting, and sometimes divisive claims are best understood as part of the practice through which democracy reinvents itself. Religious organizations' role in this context is manifestly different from that of legislative bodies, the courts, political parties, science, and the press, partly because it sometimes speaks with divine authority, but also because it brings to the table alternative epistemic claims, visions, and possibilities that are rooted in moral precepts. Religious practices' influence in a democracy lies not in coercion but in articulating claims and counterclaims about what is right and good. Democracy benefits when these claims are voiced from

diverse quarters, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in sharp disagreement. The benefit is present even when claims are asserted dogmatically because religious diversity ensures that rebuttals and alternative claims are also voiced. We are protected from a religious establishment not only by the First Amendment but also by the disunity of religion itself. This disunity powerfully deters religious groups from speaking with one voice. At the same time, disunity facilitates the vigorous questioning of entrenched assumptions and the airing of alternative visions of the good.

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