



Excerpt

FAULTLINES

The Sixties, the Culture War, and the Return of the Divine Feminine

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Taken from Chapter One: Secular Modernity and the Historical Roots of Our Crisis

Today the American middle class is shrinking, political partisanship is at its highest level since the Civil War, and religious divisions dominate the country. Profound shifts in the cultural and spiritual strata underlying what seemed a stable American political landscape have shattered the optimistic expectations of those times and are threatening to tear the nation apart. There are both economic and cultural dimensions to this crisis, but their cultural dimension cuts most deeply. Economic issues involve money, and money facilitates compromises, because dollars can be divided many ways. Cultural issues are not so easily compromised. Worse, economic interests can manipulate them to strengthen their own positions.

Contemporary American discussions of our crisis are usually framed in terms of a “right” versus a “left.” On the American “right” we have a religious component, characterized by politicized Baptists, Pentecostals, conservative Catholics, and Mormons, and a secular right dominated by neoconservatives and their allies. On the “left” we have secular New Deal liberals and progressives, also largely liberal, that arose to oppose that same New Deal establishment. Within the “left” we also can observe spiritual

communities usually identifying with liberal Christianity or with what are often termed “new religious movements.” The ‘right’ and ‘left’ alike are remarkably diverse. But virtually all, particularly on the right: a preoccupation with gender.

Our culture war’s major protagonists can be distinguished by the contrasting roles played by masculine and feminine values in their self-images. “Culture warriors” use strongly gendered language claiming to exemplify a “manly” competitive warrior ethos while “liberals” are effeminate men and masculine women. The “right’s” religious movements emphasize a purely masculine image of the Sacred transcendence. Secular American liberals see themselves as defending women’s rights. Religious groups on the “left” give greater emphasis to divine immanence and a focus on both masculine and feminine images of the Sacred. However few of these groups see themselves as primarily feminine, more often describing themselves as “balanced.”

This cultural and spiritual distinction is not all we need to understand America’s contemporary crisis. There is also the increasing consolidation of wealth into a new plutocratic aristocracy and America’s overwhelming military power after the Cold War ended. But America’s reaction to these latter events is powerfully influenced by the culture war. A large majority of Americans want higher taxes on the super wealthy rather than cutbacks on basic social services, yet they have not come together effectively on that issue. Both progressives and rank and file Tea Partyers worry about excessive corporate dominance, yet again they do not cooperate, seeing themselves as separated by more basic cultural issues. We will return to these more traditional political and economic

concerns but important as they are, oligarchy, aristocracy, and empire are familiar patterns in history.

The culture war is something else again.

I begin exploring America's shifting cultural geology by examining secularization. It played a pivotal role in modernity's rise, and is challenged today by religious movements in the US and worldwide.

The modern world is characterized by liberal democracy, science, and previously unimagined physical health and material prosperity. Central to its animating vision is the belief that human action can make life better for all through the use of reason. Progress is real. This modern view is largely the result of the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment that followed. It has born some very sweet fruits indeed.

The issue is different regarding modernity's vision of the meaning of human life. The religious and secular right as well as the secular and spiritual left grew out of the successive waves of secularization that transformed 17th and 18th century Europe and the new United States. All are modern phenomena. None are truly traditional. Nearly all are victims of the collapse of the traditional moral world and the failure of a new moral order to take its place.

History is a complex tapestry. Many story threads are unfolding at any one time. But for Americans today, this story, this thread, is among the most important. To understand both the inner tensions within modernity and the secular and spiritual reactions to them we need to understand secular modernity in the context from which it

emerged.

I. The Secularization of Politics and the Blessings of Diversity

Secularization refers to the gradual pushing of religious belief out of our political and social institutions and, for some, out of their lives. Secularization therefore exists in three dimensions: the political, the social, and the personal. The secularization of politics removes religion from being a goal of public policy and, as much as possible, it removes religious doctrines from political debate. The secularization of society removes religion as a basic social organizing force though it can remain personally important and a strong force in community solidarity. The secularization of our selves removes religion and spirituality as significant forces in our personal lives.⁴ The first two are compatible with strong personal and community spiritual and religious beliefs. The third rejects those beliefs.

Political secularization is the most visible, least contested, and easiest to understand. Visiting the United States in the 1840s, Alexis deTocqueville, himself a religious man, remarked on the unusually peaceful relations he observed between different religions in contrast to Europe. Upon asking clergymen why, he wrote "I found that they differed upon matters of detail alone; and that they mainly attributed the peaceful dominion of religion in their country, to the separation of Church and State. I do not hesitate to affirm that during my stay in America, I did not meet with a single individual, of the clergy or the laity, who was not of the same opinion on this point."