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## Religion in America: Why Many Democrats and Europeans Don't Get It

I'm an atheist liberal academic who strongly leans Democrat. But I'm stunned at how blind so many of my colleagues and soul mates are to the historical underpinnings of American political culture and the genuine appeal of religious conservatism for so many of our fellow citizens.

Recent economic studies (most notably *Unequal Democracy* by Larry Bartels, a professor of political science at Princeton) show that when Democrats were in the White House, lower-income American families experienced slightly faster income growth than higher-income families, and that the reverse was true when Republicans were in control. If people vote rationally for their economic interests, one would expect Democrats to be perennial favorites among working poor and middle class, and especially so in this year of economic downturn. Why then does polling show the election a tossup?

Conservative whites who vote Republican generally cite patriotism and national security as the most important issues in deciding who should be president. Over the last few generations, it's only when these voters perceive economy to be in dire straits, or when a previous Democratic administration has been successful in palpably increasing their prosperity, do patriotism and national security take on slightly less value than usual. Patriotism and national security are about binding and preserving what has become the primary reference group for political identity in the modern world, the nation.

In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin wrote that:

"The rudest savages feel the sentiment of glory... A man who was not impelled by any

deep, instinctive feeling, to sacrifice his life for the good of others, yet was roused to such action by a sense of glory, would by his example excite the same wish for glory in other men, and would strengthen by his exercise the noble feeling of admiration."

The official website for John McCain's candidacy headlines a quote from his book *Faith of My Fathers* as his banner:

"Glory is not a conceit. It is not a prize for being the most clever, the strongest, or the boldest. Glory belongs to the act of being constant to something greater than yourself, to a cause, to your principles, to the people on whom you rely, and who rely on you in return. No misfortune, no injury, no humiliation can destroy it."

As cross-cultural findings by psychologist Jonathan Haidt show, morality is (pretty universally) not just about treating others fairly, but also "about living in a sanctified and noble way." That's a reason why John McCain's appeal is powerful.

Among many Republican conservatives, one factor strongly correlates with patriotism and national security, is of even more overriding concern in daily life, and stands inseparable from love of country. Religion. A Gallup poll found, for example, that nearly two thirds (65%) of highly religious American white voters would vote Republican, no matter what their interests in other issues are. If one looks at recent Gallup polls inquiring into religious devotion in the USA, as indicated by belief in the Bible and church activity, the classic division between the blue states of the east and west versus the red states of the south and Middle America is apparent.

A culture's moral compass is not an innate or logical determination, but an underdetermined product of historical contingency and willful choice. Belief in moral "rightness" or "truth" is always a matter of faith rather than reason. Only some professional philosophers, jurists, scientists and academics believe that the principal point of political argument (or most any argument) is, or ought to be, truth rather than persuasion, and that an argument's principal appeal should be reason rather than passion. To paraphrase Karl Rove: reason may be fine for studying and analyzing history and politics, but not for living or making them. Faith in what is felt and hoped for but cannot be proven or demonstrated in the here and now is vastly more effective in mobilizing people to create change. Barack Obama's appeal to many people who previously voted Republican, and upon whom victory depends, requires inciting such hope, not harping back to traditional democratic "issues."

### ***What's Universal about Morality and What's not?***

Primatologist Frans de Waal finds that even capuchin monkeys have a sense of fairness: if an experimenter offers cucumbers to a pair of capuchin monkeys, both eagerly grab the cucumbers; but if one of the monkeys is offered grapes, the other will throw the cucumber in the experimenter's face. This is a primitive version of the outcome to an "Ultimatum Game" that all human cultures seem to subscribe to. Anthropologist Joe Heinrich and his colleagues went to more than 20 small-scale and large-scale societies with offers to split the equivalent of a day's wage between two anonymous players who had done no work for the money. The researchers found that there is always some lower bound that one of the players finds unacceptable, although this varies across cultures (average cutoff may be close to 50-50 in some societies, as in America and China, but only 80-20 in others, as in some native cultures of the Amazon and New Guinea).

Studies by social psychologist Richard Nisbett and colleagues suggest that human cultures fall into two broad categories, individualist (mainly the U.S. and Western Europe) and collectivist (the rest of the world). Anthropologist Richard Shweder argues that for so-called collectivist societies there is also a strong "ethics of community" (authority / respect, duty / loyalty); often there is an "ethics of divinity" (purity / sanctity) as well. Experiments by Haidt involving thousands of subjects suggests that all of these elements may be part of every culture, but each element to a different degree. In our

own society, liberals tend to insist on individual rights and are uncomfortable with pronouncements and institutions built on "the ethics of community" and the "ethics of divinity" because they often lead to patriotic jingoism (overblown loyalty), inequality (subordination of the weak or disadvantaged) and exclusion (racism, proscriptive nationalism and other forms of purification). Conservatives want a richer, more interdependent social life, which requires a regulation of relationships that goes beyond harm and fairness to individuals. This includes limits to sexual relations, management of obligations and authority, and control of group boundaries and borders. Liberals see conservatives as "repressive." Conservatives see liberals as "irresponsible."

The original American revolutionaries mixed the universal elements of morality in a very particular way. The "self-evident" aspects of "human nature" that The Creator supposedly endowed us with -- including "inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" -- are anything but inherently self-evident and natural in the life of our species: cannibalism, infanticide, slavery, racism and the subordination of women are vastly more prevalent over the course of history than "human rights." It wasn't inevitable or even reasonable that conceptions of freedom and equality should emerge, much less prevail. Nevertheless, the new ideal of individual liberty required upgrading the element of individuality, that is, our innate awareness of individuals as self-motivated agents who can act on their own to achieve goals. The focus of empathy shifted to people as individuals and voluntary participants in civic communities.

The Americans also downgraded elements of authority, loyalty and purity then current in European politics. The French revolutionaries who followed lowered the importance of the individual while raising that of one group, the nation. That's why whole classes of counter-revolutionaries, rather than individuals alone, could be collectively condemned and punished regardless of any individual crimes they may have committed. Most modern revolutions and regimes follow the French example more than the American.

### ***Why Sarah Palin Appeals to the Religious Community and Traditional Mainstream America***

Unlike the centralized European and Canadian churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, American congregations were, and still are, concretely rooted in local communities with strong personal ties. Americans voluntarily chose and supported their community church, internalizing and shaping the community's egalitarian moral values, instead of being compelled to belong to a state-subsidized, hierarchical institution. Where American churches have emphasized the God-given individual impulsion to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England in Canada have stressed the social virtues of that country's first constitution (The British North American Act): "peace, order and good government." American churches have been more risk prone, preaching practical working values over humanistic doctrines. "American denominations had to compete like business for customers, for support for income," noted political sociologist Seymour Lipset.

Unlike in other countries, Americans often opt to go to different churches depending on changing personal social, economic or political preferences. It's as acceptable to change churches as it is to change shopping brands provided that your choice is also motivated by moral conscience rather than mere personal opportunity and benefit. For example, Obama has changed churches a few times. But the last change almost derailed his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination. This was both because of his long-term association with a church that tolerated seemingly anti-nationalist preachings, and because people felt that the political pressure for him to leave the church trumped his pronounced reasons of conscience for leaving it.

Sarah Palin grew up as a member of the Assemblies of God, the largest Christian Pentacostal movement (about 66 million members worldwide). The movement consists of a self-described "cooperative fellowship" of self-propagating, self-supporting, and self-governing churches. All profess faith in the deity of Christ, the original fall and final salvation of man through belief in Christ's blood sacrifice and his Second Coming, and the evangelical mission to spread this belief in order to save

as many other souls as possible. The movement also acknowledges loyalty to the national government, but allows each church and believer to take the stance they feel most appropriate, and to support or not support national wars as their conscience tells them.

Although Palin grew up as a Pentacostalist, in her adult life she attended a number of different churches. She is now part of the evangelical movement of Christian Charismatics, the fastest growing religious movement in the world (over 450 million adherents). The Charismatic movement is noteworthy for how it sees the relationship between individuals and institutions. Charismatics tend to be more wary of institutional authority than classic Pentacostalists, more causal in their attire, more innovative and modern in their forms of outreach. Sports, the media, advertisement and public education are all useful means for bringing lost and scattered souls into the flock. But towards those who consciously choose to remain outside and reject salvation, like many secular liberal Democrats, there can be little room for concession or compromise.

Charismatics also tend to believe that religious experience shouldn't be restricted to church-related activities, but ought to morally motivate and infuse as much of a person's social, economic and political life as possible, even as Church and State remain separate. "Action," "challenge" and "change" are watchwords of the Charismatic movement, which encourages people to "leave the comfort zone" to wage "spiritual combat" in any realm of life where the forces of good and evil, God and Satan, may battle. In this sense, the Charismatic movement is arguably both revivalist and "conservative" in the traditional sense of seeking to be consistent with the founding organizational principles and moral ethos of the Republic. "Change" is not a politically expedient notion for Charismatics, but a guiding principle of life and renewal.

America's vigorous religious ethic not only allows novelty and surprise, but encourages them as long as they give profit and competitive advantage to sectarian interests. A Gallup poll some years back asked: "Some people are attracted to new things and new ideas, while others are more cautious about things. What's your own attitude?" Nearly half the Americans (49%) said they were attracted to novelty, only 13% favored caution. Canadians preferred caution (35%) over newness (30%). As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently put it: "From voters, the demand is: Surprise Me Most." That's something which makes a Frenchman cringe.

In Europe, there has been a spate of academic analyses of religion in America on the heels of Sarah Palin's nomination for the vice presidency under the Republican banner. What's stunning is how well the analysts describe the trees but miss the forest. In a September 11 article in the leading French newspaper *Le Monde*, titled "Sarah Palin, a funny kind of parishioner" (*Sarah Palin, une drôle de paroissienne*) sociologist Yannick Fer gives a competent overview of the Charismatic movement to which Palin belongs, but his conclusion is widely off the mark:

"The [political] positions inspired by this religious conviction are conservative, to the point opposing the autonomy of the individual in the quest to impose 'the values of the Bible' on all of society; for, it is a matter of "saving" the nation as much as individuals. The Charismatic creed here reaches the point of contradiction: everyone is free and responsible for their choice, but there is only one path — A fundamental ambiguity that makes for a political object that is poorly defined, unstable and problematic."

In fact, a 2006 survey by the Pew Research Foundation in Washington found that a majority of U.S. Charismatics believe that Bible and the right path in life are open to interpretation.

In France, ever since 18th century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau proclaimed the secular sanctity of the "social contract," successive French leaders from the French revolution to the present have repeated the mantra that, beyond the individual, "the only community is the nation." That's why notions of multiculturalism and religious sectarianism have little place in French political philosophy. Although European Enlightenment values of individual freedom and choice also entered strongly into

the American Republic's political constitution (especially via Thomas Jefferson & friends), the fundamental social constituent of economic and political culture in the United States was neither the individual nor the state, but the sectarian community. The religious community in the USA was a civic as well as moral community, a combination which infused American economic and political culture with particular dynamism.

Ironically, it was a French nobleman who first noted this novel historical condition. Alexis de Tocqueville stressed in *Democracy in America*, his masterful analysis of our young republic written in 1835, that religious conservatism in America does *not* mean sacrifice of individual interest for group interest, or subservience of the individual to the state or any other ruling collectivity. Rather, religion mitigates the selfishness of unbridled individualism and "private animosities," while shoring up free institutions that engage "aspiring hopes" as against "general despotism [that] gives rise to indifference."

"It must be acknowledged that equality, which brings great benefits to the world, nevertheless... tends to isolate them from each other, to concentrate every man's attention on himself; and it lay open the soul to an inordinate love of material gratification.... Religious nations are thus naturally strong on the very point on which democratic nations are weak, which shows of what importance it is for men to preserve their religion as their conditions become more equal.... Thus it is, that, by respecting all democratic tendencies not absolutely contrary to herself, and by making use of several of them for her own purposes, Religion sustains a successful struggle of that spirit of individual independence which is her most dangerous opponent.... As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or feeling which they wish to promote, they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found out each other they combine. From that moment they are not longer isolated men, but a power seen from afar, whose actions serve as an example, and whose language is listened to."

De Tocqueville surmised, correctly it seems, that religion in America would give its democracy greater vigor, endurance, cooperative power and competitive force than any strictly authoritarian regime or unbridled democracy.

In 1852, communism's co-founder Frederich Engels wrote to Karl Marx that California's sudden rise as a social and economic force "out of nothing" showed was "not provided for in the [*Communist Manifesto*]... We shall have to allow for this." He puzzled over the apparent exception of "Yankee blood" to the universal rule of "historical determinism." During a brief visit to North America in 1888, Engels observed that unlike the case for Canada or Europe: "Here one sees how necessary the feverish spirit of the Americans is for the rapid development of a new country."

The great German political economist Max Weber attributed this "feverish spirit" to American capitalism's peculiar "Protestant ethic." An anecdote of his illustrates the religious sentiment that seemed to pervade American business life which depended on personal trust and long-term credit relations. In 1904, on a long railroad journey through what was then U.S. Indian territory, Weber sat next to a traveling salesman of "undertaker's hardware" (iron letters for tombstones) and casually mentioned the strong church-mindedness of Americans. The salesman responded:

"Sir, for my part everybody may believe or not believe as he pleases; but if I saw a farmer or a businessman not belonging to any church at all, I wouldn't trust him with fifty cents. Why pay me, if he doesn't believe in anything?"

Americans have traditionally tended to build economies on credit and trust in the future and others, rather than with cash and legal contracts. (Although involvements with cultural strangers in a global economy are changing things. More generally, Americans rank at the top in terms of how fairly people treat members of their own culture. But Americans -- at least policymakers and negotiators --

tend to treat members of other cultures, such as political rival Russia or economic rival Japan, with greater distrust and self-serving bias -- "our side is inherently fairer than yours" -- than some other cultures treat one another.)

### ***American Religion: Cooperate to Compete***

Humans often use religion to cooperate to compete. (For example, it was only in the 1950s during height of the Cold War, that the Pledge of Allegiance was altered to include God). As Darwin noted, in competition between groups with similar levels of technology and population size, those groups will tend to win out that favor and transmit willingness to sacrifice some self interest for group interests (that also promote individual interests in the long run). Religions with morally concerned deities arguably made the rise of civilization and large-scale cooperation between genetic strangers possible (historical and cross-cultural analyses of 186 societies finds that the larger the population, the more likely it has deities who are concerned with management of morality and the mitigation of selfishness).

Most cultures celebrate costly personal commitments as morally good and glorious. Many such celebrations are time-worn collective rituals -- including quasi-religious religious national celebrations -- with proven success in fostering cooperation within the group and making it more competitive with other groups. That basic dynamic is still with us and is unlikely to go away. It is especially palpable in traditional mainstream America, even more so than in other modern societies. Republicans intuitively get it; Democrats often don't. But Democrats do get more the meaning and message of the Enlightenment, which may allow in a wider world if only they can learn better from Republicans how to gather up the country first.

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