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OPINION

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OTHER VIEWS

Merkley must choose between Oregon, presidential campaign

The Bend Bulletin

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Portland, really, really wants to be president. He's enough of a realist, however, to recognize that his chances of winning are slim, and he'd like to hold on to his Senate seat as well, in case things don't work out.

Winning a third term in the Senate might be nice for Merkley, but in those circumstances it's far from nice for Oregon voters. We deserve a senator who wants the Senate seat as much as Merkley wants to be president.

There have been hints about Merkley's ambition for over a year now, and he's done nothing to squelch them. Rather, he's ramped them up in a variety of ways, from visiting New Hampshire to creating political action committees.

Among the most important, he's talked with Oregon lawmakers to see if they're willing to change a state law barring a candidate from running for more than one "lucrative" office at a time. Both the Senate and the presidency are considered lucrative. Unfortunately for Merkley, change is unlikely. That doesn't prevent him from running in presidential primaries in other states, however, and running for the Senate in Oregon. It's an idea he has yet to dismiss.

Oregonians should expect more from a U.S. senator. We may be a relatively small state but surely we deserve a candidate whose interest in Oregon and Oregonians goes beyond our value as a stepping stone to higher office or as a safety net if presidential ambitions don't pan out.

If Merkley wants to be president, fine. He should do everything in his power to get the job. First on his list, however, must be a public announcement that he won't seek re-election to the Senate. That way Democrats, Republicans and others can look for candidates who really want the job.

AP Photo/Don Ryan

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., speaks during a rally in Portland on Oct. 17, 2018.

OTHER VIEWS

The return of paganism

Here are some generally agreed-upon facts about religious trends in the United States. Institutional Christianity has weakened drastically since the 1960s. Lots of people who once would have been lukewarm Christmas-and-Easter churchgoers now identify as having "no religion" or being "spiritual but not religious." The mainline-Protestant establishment is an establishment no more. Religious belief and practice now polarizes our politics in a way they didn't a few generations back.

Ross Douthat
COMMENT

What kind of general religious reality should be discerned from all these facts, though, is much more uncertain, and there are various plausible stories about what early-21st century Americans increasingly believe. The simplest of these is the secularization story — in which modern societies inevitably put away religious ideas as they advance in wealth and science and reason, and the decline of institutional religion is just a predictable feature of a general late-modern turn away from supernatural belief.

But the secularization narrative is insufficient, because even with America's churches in decline, the religious impulse has hardly disappeared. In the early 2000s, over 40 percent of Americans answered with an emphatic "yes" when Gallup asked them if "a profound religious experience or awakening" had redirected their lives; that number had doubled since the 1960s, when institutional religion was more vigorous. A recent Pew survey on secularization likewise found increases in the share of Americans who have regular feelings of "spiritual peace and well-being." And the resilience of religious impulses and rhetoric in contemporary political movements, even (or especially) on the officially secular left, is an obvious feature of our politics.

So perhaps instead of secularization it makes sense to talk about the fragmentation and personalization of Christianity — to describe America as a nation of Christian heretics, if you will, in which traditional churches have been supplanted by self-help gurus and spiritual-political entrepreneurs. These figures cobble together pieces of the old orthodoxies, take out the inconvenient bits and pitch them to mass audiences that want part of the old-time religion but nothing too unsettling or challenging or ascetic. The result is a nation where Protestant awakenings have given way to post-Protestant wokeness, where Reinhold Niebuhr and Fulton Sheen have ceded pulpits to Joel Osteen and Oprah Winfrey, where the prosperity gospel and Christian nationalism rule the right and a social gospel denuded of theological content rules the left.

I wrote a whole book on this theme, but in the years since it came out I've wondered if it, too, was incomplete. There has to come a point at which a heresy becomes simply post-Christian, a moment when you should just believe people who claim they have left the biblical world-picture behind, a context where the new spiritualities add up to a new religion.

Which is why lately I've become interested in books and arguments that suggest that there actually is, or might be, a genuinely post-Christian future for America — and that the term "paganism" might be reasonably revived to describe the new American religion, currently struggling to be born.

A fascinating version of this argument is put forward by Steven D. Smith, a law professor at the University of San Diego, in his new book, "Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars From the Tiber to the Potomac." Smith argues that much of what we understand as the march of secularism is something of an illusion, and that behind the scenes what's actually happening in the modern culture war is the return of a pagan religious conception, which was half-buried (though never fully so) by the rise of Christianity.

What is that conception? Simply this: that divinity is fundamentally inside the world rather than outside it, that God or the gods or Being are ultimately part of nature rather than an external creator, and that meaning and morality and metaphysical experience are to be sought in a fuller communion with the immanent world rather than a leap toward the transcendent.

This paganism is not materialist or atheistic; it allows for belief in spiritual and supernatural realities. It even accepts the possibility of an afterlife. But it is deliberately agnostic about final things, what awaits beyond the shores of this world, and it is skeptical of the idea that there exists some ascetic, world-denying moral standard to which we should aspire. Instead, it sees the purpose of religion and spirituality as more therapeutic, a means of seeking harmony with nature and happiness in the everyday — while unlike atheism, it insists that this everyday is divinely endowed and shaped, meaningful and not random, a place where we can truly hope to be at home.

In popular religious practice there isn't always a clean line between this "immanent" religion and the transcendent alternative offered by Christianity and Judaism. But clearly religious cultures can tend toward one option or the other, and you can build a plausible case for a "pagan" (by Smith's definition) tradition in Western and American religion, which in his account takes two major forms.

First, there is a tradition of intellectual and aesthetic pantheism that includes figures like Spinoza, Nietzsche, Emerson and Whitman, and that's manifest in certain highbrow spiritual-but-not-religious writers today. Smith recruits Sam Harris, Barbara Ehrenreich and even Ronald Dworkin to this club; he notes that we even have an explicit framing of this tradition as paganism, in former Yale Law School dean Anthony Kronman's rich 2016 work "Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan."

Second, there is a civic religion that like the civic paganism of old makes religious and political duties identical, and treats the city of man as the city of God (or the gods), the place where we make heaven ourselves instead of waiting for the next life or the apocalypse. This immanent civic religion, Smith argues, is gradually replacing the more biblical form of civil religion that stamped American history down to the Protestant-Catholic-Jew 1950s. Whether in the social-justice theology of contemporary progressive politics or the transhumanist projects of Silicon Valley, we are watching attempts to revive a religion of this-world, a new-model paganism, to "reclaim the city that Christianity wrested away from it centuries ago."

These descriptions are debatable, but suppose Smith is right. Is the combination of intellectual pantheism and a this-world-focused civil religion enough to declare the rebirth of paganism as a faith unto itself, rather than just a cultural tendency within a still-Christian order?

It seems to me that the answer is not quite, because this new religion would lack a clear cultic aspect, a set of popular devotions, a practice of ritual and prayer of the kind that the paganism of antiquity offered in abundance. And that absence points to the essential weakness of a purely intellectualized pantheism: It invites its adherents to commune with a universe that offers suffering and misery in abundance, which means that it has a strong appeal to the privileged but a much weaker appeal to people who need not only sense of wonder from their spiritual lives but also, well, help.

However, there are forms of modern paganism that do promise this help, that do offer ritual and observance, augury and prayer, that do promise that in some form gods or spirits really might exist and might offer succor or help if appropriately invoked. I have in mind the countless New Age practices that promise health and well-being and good fortune, the psychics and mediums who promise communication with the spirit world, and also the world of explicit neo-paganism, Wiccan and otherwise. Its adherents may not all be equally convinced of the realities that they're trying to appeal to and manipulate (I don't know how many of the witches who publicly hexed Brett Kavanaugh really expected it to work), but their numbers are growing rapidly; there may soon be more witches in the United States than members of the United Church of Christ.

What ancient paganism did successfully was to unite this kind of popular supernaturalism with its own forms of highbrow pantheism and civil-religiosity. Thus the elites of ancient Rome might reject the myths about their pantheon of deities as just crude stories, but they would join enthusiastically in public rituals that assumed that gods or spirits could be appealed to, propitiated, honored, worshipped.

To get a fully revived paganism in contemporary America, that's what would have to happen again — the philosophers of pantheism and civil religion would need to build a religious bridge to the New Agers and neo-pagans, and together they would need to create a more fully realized cult of the immanent divine, an actual way to worship, not just to appreciate, the pantheistic order they discern.

It seems like we're some distance from that happening — from the intellectuals whom Smith describes as pagan actually donning druidic robes, or from Jeff Bezos playing pontifex maximus for a post-Christian civic cult. The 1970s, when a D.C. establishment figure like Sally Quinn was hexing her enemies, were a high-water mark for those kinds of experiments among elites. Now, occasional experiments in woke witchcraft and astrology notwithstanding, there's a more elite embarrassment about the popular side of post-Christian spirituality.

That embarrassment may not last forever; perhaps a prophet of a new harmonized paganism is waiting in the wings. Until then, those of us who still believe in a divine that made the universe rather than just pervading it — and who have a certain fear of what more immanent spirits have to offer us — should be able to recognize the outlines of a possible successor to our world-picture, while taking comfort that it is not yet fully formed.

YOUR VIEWS

Amsberry showed respect for inmate families

I wanted to share my experience knowing Ms. Amsberry while I was at EOCI from 2011 until 2015.

I remember having a family lunch in which inmates' families come to visit and are able to have a lunch together. I remember Ms. Amsberry passing through the visitation and requested, "Mr. Castro, is it all right if I sit in on a visit with you and your family?" I was very happy so we did that so we had our visit and she gathered her info on how visits can be more welcoming to our families.

She showed her respect always and made sure things went well with inmates, even when we would have like a Valentine's Day card making for family and loved ones, also Mother's Day! In my 18 years I've been incarcerated I've never come across such a caring superintendent.

Most recently, just last year, she was superintendent here at TRCI and she did her walk-around through each unit. When she entered Unit 4 AHU (administrative housing unit), I approached Ms. Amsberry. She smiled, and I smiled, because of course we knew each other when I was at EOCI. I quickly mentioned to her about us not having enough jobs for the unit, and Ms. Amsberry quickly told me, "I'll look into it, I promise." A week later, Ms. Amsberry got us jobs in our unit folding sheets for the institution.

She is compassionate — a small woman with a huge heart! She always resolved any issue anyone had. She was a true blessing, and a gift beyond doubt. She will be truly missed when she retires at the end of December.

Jose Castro
Umatilla (TRCI)

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