

19 Common Mass Religion

This chapter begins a series of chapters that describe religions. This material is not what you find in a text or popular book. These chapters assess the main points in the stances from my viewpoint. What does any stance offer? What do I have to look out for? How do believers act? These chapters do not point out hypocrisy. If you have read this far, you can see hypocrisy for yourself.

All the stances were formed in nation-states although they all have older roots. All the stances are lived now in states in a world that is mostly capitalist. I do not take account of cultural, national, or class differences. I do not separate states that try to be pluralistic and democratic, such as England, from states that do not, such as China and Indonesia. I do not assess according to a school called “the marketplace of religions” although I have sympathy with that school.

People all over the world have different official religions such as Christianity or Hinduism, but, if we look only a bit below the surface, we find that the huge majority of people in states hold the same religion-and-morality regardless of official religions. This chapter is about that common mass religion. Just because common mass religion is widespread does not mean that thinking, intelligent, educated people don't share it, that or it is the religion only of superstitious dolts. The very large majority of intelligent educated people share it, and often are its most vocal proponents.

Mass common religion has two main components. The first component is popular religion regardless of the official religion. Some of popular religion is due to human nature as it plays out in states while some of it is due to particular cultures, societies, economies, histories, etc. I cannot separate the factors that shape popular religion. Do not take my portrait to popular religion as a picture of religion in all societies in all places at all times; take it only as my view of popular religion in states.

The second component of mass common religion is called “state religion”: beliefs and practices that are like religion and have to do with the state, such as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and New Year's Eve in the United States. State religion often takes motifs from official religion, as, for example, Christmas is part of the state religion of the United States (and elsewhere) and Christmas takes motifs from Christianity.

Official religion does influence mass popular religion and state religion but not nearly as much as priests, politicians, and parents think. Mass popular religion is different in Italy from Indonesia but not nearly as much as Christians and Muslims think. State religion is different in the United States and China but not nearly as much as Christians and old-line Marxists-Maoists think. This chapter does not gauge relations and relative strengths of official religion, mass popular religion, and state religion.

If most people share the same de facto real religion, then why do people argue over religion? They argue for the same reasons that ethnic groups argue even when they live in the same place and are citizens of the same state, the same reasons that people from the American South and West argue although they speak the same language and supposedly share values, and why America has been fighting a “culture

war" since the 1920s, bitterly since the 1960s. People come already-in-groups, and feel forced to argue because of their groups. Some disputes are about pure religion but few. Few people fight over child baptism or which saint is most powerful. Most disputes are really about wealth, power, dominance, sex, success, and security; disputes use religion as a vehicle. People look back to their official religions for a source of points to use in arguments.

Disclaimer.

The values that I promote are not the property of Judaism or Christianity even though, for me, Jesus was the origin, and even though the values arose first in Europe from the fusion of Jewish and Western ideas. They are not the property of England, America, or European democracies even though they grew best in Western Europe. They are not the property of democracies even though they seem to go along with democracy. Any culture, society, ethnic group, religion, socio-economic class, gender, age, occupation, or nation can learn these values. Try to see the points, consider how adopting them requires a shift in your beliefs, and avoid most of the mistakes described in earlier chapters.

If you do not already share these values and want to adopt them, then you have to change regardless of your official religion. If you are a Christian but don't share these values, then you have to change. I don't know how compatible these values are with mass popular religion and state religion. I think most people can live these values and still carry on with the saints and some gods, but I am not sure. When saints become so important that they crowd out working hard to make the world better then you do not follow these values. These values are not compatible with staunch militarism, mercantilism (greed), or placing our state above all other groups. They are not compatible with doctrinaire Marxist atheism. They are not compatible with oppression and tyranny. They are compatible with national defense, modest nationalism, and fighting for a free world.

I don't think these values require drastic change if you already are basically a good decent person. You could learn most of these values and remain a Jew or a Muslim because you don't need to accept Jesus as God to accept these values. You might have to change some Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist ideas but not much. These values already appear in all religions although religions other than Western-European-and-American Christianity emphasize ideas other than these values.

It is hard to change values and views. We stick with what we learned as children. God does not require us to be perfect right away. The rest of this book can help you decide what to keep and what to let go. If you find worth in the values in this book, then see how they fit with your stances, and how the spirit of your religion could survive along with them. Consider that you really might have to change a bit what you believe.

If your culture does not stress these values, then your culture has to change, or you might have to leave the mainstream version of your culture for another version. Most cultures recognize these values but not all stress them. I do not give lists here. The idea that a culture might have to change to become better is completely against current dogma in social sciences and PC dogma. There is no way around this. Most people believe it but won't say it. This too was a hard lesson that I had to learn while growing up but one that is better accepted. Don't confuse ethnic pride with a good set of values. Don't think that adopting a variant of your culture that allies you with a powerful group is the same as changing your culture and

adopting a better set of values. You have not adopted a good set of values just because you discover your “Blackness” or you join the White Supremacists.

Brief Warning.

I have a good sense of the spirit of systems. I have no head at all for the details of systems, including rituals, holidays, clothing, bodily decoration, titles, ranks, hierarchy, etc. Once I use the details to see the sense of a system, I forget the details. I recover the details from the spirit of the system only when I am again in particular situations. I find wearing particular kinds of clothes, symbols, decorations, etc. to be confusing and often silly. I cannot remember the official differences between Protestant sects no matter how many times I have learned them and how hard I try. In Thailand, I understood both Buddhism and vigorous animism right away, but I had to keep relearning the holidays each year and the details of the holidays. As part of Western American culture in my youth, I learned disdain for formality, rank, and pretence. I cannot lose my disdain no matter how important formality and rank are to other people. My disdain helps me forget the details of systems, including rank and pretence. I hope my ability to see the spirit of a system makes up for my inability to deal with details and my annoyance at rank and pretence. Please keep my limitations in mind.

I need to be clear. I find much of common mass popular religion silly and annoying. I wish people would stop all that damn stupid silliness. Mass common religion pushes out better ideas and so makes people inept by default. Still, the large majority of people can be good most of the time despite mass popular religion. Most people become bad about religion only when they mix mass popular religion with doctrinal rigidity from official religion or official ideology. I hope my limited empathy and sympathy still leave room for me to be fair enough.

PART 1: COMMON MORALITY AND MORAL RELATIONS

Most groups recognize universal moral principles such as “do unto others as you want them to do unto you” and “applies equally to everyone” but those principles are not applied consistently and are not vital in daily life.

Instead, people have a set of morals that they apply within their “in-group” of reference at the moment, a set for relations between known groups, a set for people-in-general who are in the same state but are not necessarily in any group we can identify, another set for strangers and strange groups who probably are not in our overall state system right now, and another set for enemies. All these sets are related but that is not an issue in this book.

People might belong to several in-groups: family, job, profession, church, sport, “service” group such as Scouts, ethnic group, etc. The moral rules that people use within each group differ slightly so that you behave differently toward your family than on your job, but the rules do not differ drastically. Simply, the ideals almost apply within the in-group, with allowances for different roles such as “parent and child”, “worker and co-worker”, or “worker and boss”. We try to treat people as we want to be treated, and we expect them to do the same. We consider the general welfare, and we are willing to contain our own needs a bit for the general welfare. People do not generalize this kind of moral behavior outside the immediate in-group, and, in fact, keep the best version for their families.

Relations between groups do not have to be bad. In fact, contrary to modern misconception, relations between groups often are good as long as groups know their mutual relations, stick to it most of the time, do not change without proper notice, and do not change quickly in ways that would be seen as immoral betrayal by the other group. I am not saying relations are always fair, only that relations work best when steady. Relations between groups get nasty when groups think other groups are changing relations without proper consultation, think other groups are cheating, or think the relations are so unfair that they undermine the ability to raise any family.

Relations between groups tend to be tit-for-tat, equal exchange, or what anthropologists call “balanced reciprocity”. If groups have about equal power, when members of a group interact, they both get about the same benefit even if they don’t get the same things. When an Italian baker exchanges with a Greek wine maker, both get about the same value. When groups do not have similar power, some imbalances are built into relations, such as Black people in the American South often did work for important White people without pay or for less pay than White workers would have gotten. Black people hoped to get some protection in return.

Once we get past groups with which we have regular relations, relations tend to deteriorate the further away the other groups are. There is no point going into many details.

The Tanakh (Old Testament) knew of these situations and made provisions for them. It forbade Israelites from treating strangers badly as long as strangers behaved well and did not knowingly break the laws of Israel. That does not mean Israelites actually treated strangers better than Romans treated strangers but it least they had the ideal. It was this kind of ideal that Jesus generalized. The Tanakh also allowed that Israelites could treat non-Israelites worse, in some ways, than they treated Israelites. Israelites could not charge interest on loans to other Israelites but could charge interest to non-Israelites. Israelite law gave priests privileges that non-priests did not have such as a share of taxes, a share of sacrifices, and sexual access to girl and women war captives. Israelite law, supposedly from God, allowed Israelites to treat war enemies terribly, murdering the men and raping the women – which was a common practice in most war by most ethnic and religious groups.

Later Muslim law followed Israelite law on many points, especially taxation. Non-Muslims were taxed more heavily than Muslims. This provision probably accounted for more conversions to Islam than any forced conversions or “conversions at the point of a sword”.

The order within groups and between groups was not just a practical relation, it was a moral relation and a result of God’s will. The attitudes of Israelites and Muslims show that people believed the rules were moral and came from God even when they were unfair by our standards and by the idea of “applies equally”. God rewards people who keep to the rules and punishes groups when people in the groups that break the rules even when the rules are unfair. Judaism and Muslim are more theistic than most religions but that only makes the ideas clearer, it does not change the basic ideas. If you do not believe in God, you can substitute “Dharma”, “Heaven”, or “Tao” for “God” and nothing changes.

The identity of groups, and relations between groups, usually are based on a division of economic and political resources-and-roles. A breach of these normal relations is a breach of the moral rules, and of

God's will. For example, ruling families rule while subjects obey. Warriors carry out the orders of the rulers while merchants move goods. In India, this social order was clearly religious but China, Europe, and the Middle East thought the order was moral-religious even if it was not spelled out in a religious text. Merchants with their own armies make rulers and soldiers uneasy. Rulers and soldiers complain not about the power imbalance but about the moral breach. In Thai society, when Chinese first began to immigrate to Thailand in the middle 1700s, Thais farmed or governed while Chinese ran commerce. All over the world, in one city or large urban neighborhood, only one ethnic group can be the dominant gangsters. After World War 1, Jews in America moved into professions such as law and medicine. Since about 1980, immigrants to America from India and Pakistan have done the same. After World War 2, Blacks in America moved into semi-skilled and skilled jobs in building and manufacturing although often at a level just below Whites at the same factory or job site.

Relations between occupations-and-ethnic-groups reinforce the mix of economics, power, and morality. Since about 1980, Blacks have looked at Asians and Hispanics as competitors who break the rules of ethnic group relations, and Blacks have grown more hostile toward them. They see Asians and Hispanics as taking traditional (since World War 2) Black jobs, and see this as a breach of moral relations. Because shifts in economics and power are common in the modern international world economy, conflicts between religious-ethnic-gender-and-power groups are constant, varying only in their intensity.

PART 2: COMMON RELIGION

The common religion is a variation on animism (a lively world) under state societies.

-There is a single high God (Dharma, Heaven, or Tao) who originated everything and who could control everything if he-she wished. The single high God created beings of various types, including many who are more spiritual and powerful than we are.

-The single high God has relinquished some control to the lesser spiritual beings and to us here as well. They have power and free will. We have some free will. Some of the lesser beings have effective control over some spheres of this world, and are like the high gods of small arenas.

-Lesser gods include not only gods with personalities but also gods that embody spiritual principles and ideals, such as the god democracy, the god justice, the god freedom, etc. Although we might think of these ideas as abstract principles, in fact they are more like personalities, and we can relate to them as personalities.

-Sometimes this world is quite fair (just) and pleasant, but sometimes it is not. We seek the situations in which it is fair and pleasant.

-The single high God is too distant and odd for us to appeal directly to him-her. Instead, we appeal to the lesser spiritual powers for help. We try to forge a relation with them.

-The single high God had a wife (husband) and a family. The wife and children have good friends among the spirits. We appeal to the family of the high God if we can. We appeal to Jesus and Mary rather than to Yahweh.

-If we can't appeal to the family, we appeal to friends of the divine family or appeal to the most important of the lesser gods.

-We appeal especially for help for our family. Our family is a good upstanding family. It is like the family of the high god and the high gods. We have family values, and we know that the good gods have family values as well.

-After help for our family, we appeal for help for our church, business, friends, ethnic group, city, and nation.

-Wealth, health, good marriages, success, and power help our family, so an appeal for them is justified.

-Worldly success, especially family success, is a sign of good relations with the gods and saints. Failure is a sign that something is wrong.

-We give what we can to the gods and to appropriate places for giving (in-groups, church, and state) in the hope that we get what we need and what we ask for.

-The religion has specialists, like priests, monks, magicians, and witches. They can explain how the gods work, what they want, what they can give, and what we can do. We pay the specialists for their services, either directly or through contributions to their organization.

-If the gods or the church abandoned us, we would be in terrible shape.

-We know of abstract moral principles, and we know that they should prevail among our groups and among various groups. We try to follow them when we can but we cannot always follow them and we don't worry too much when we don't.

-We attend the festivals and rituals. We expect other people to do so too.

-We all make mistakes. Fortunately, the high god has made provisions for atoning for our mistakes. That is part of what rituals are for. That is what the other gods help us with.

-Sometimes adept people become close to the family of the high god, or to the lesser gods. They are "saints". Some of them become like the lesser gods, or like a member of the family of god.

-Now saints include states-people such as Thomas Jefferson and Ronald Reagan, scientists such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, business leaders such as Henry Ford and Bill Gates, sports figures such as Knut Rockne and Joe Namath, and workers in a cause such as Ralph Nader and Karl Rove. Their ideas, the events of their lives, their achievements, the places they have been, and relics from their lives, all have spiritual power. People can appeal to them and to those things.

-Even great institutions such as Notre Dame University or the Church can take on a personality and become enough like a saint so we can appeal to it.

-Dead people become close to the gods and especially to the family of the high god. Good dead people become closest but any dead people can become close. Maybe bad dead people cannot become close to the gods but that is not for us to decide. Dead people are like the saints, and so we can include them with the saints. Dead people have spiritual power.

-We can appeal to the saints, perhaps more than to the lesser gods, even after the saints die, especially because they were once like us. Our dead family members are likely to help us in particular.

-We forge a relation with saints, especially dead family members, as a way to get their help.

-Various members of the holy family, lesser gods, and saints all have particular interests, abilities, likes, and dislike. They have particular skills or lack of skills. They have personalities. We have to take that into account when we forge a relation with them.

-Different people appeal to different members of the holy family, different lesser gods, or saints, according to the personalities of the applier, the group to which the applier belongs, and the personalities of the gods and saints. People have different "patron" gods and-or saints. Particular groups, such as families, towns, and occupational groups, have different gods and-or saints.

-Sometimes the different patrons of various people and groups do not overlap much. One family appeals to the son of the high god while another family appeals to a woman saint. That does not matter too much because we know there is some common ground. The priests explain this to us.

-Power can reside in places, things, objects, situations, events, and processes. Often a particular god or saint is associated with one of these, as, for example, the god of a waterfall or the saint of a church.

-We can appeal to the power that resides in one of these.

-Priests (or other religious adepts) can recognize the power of an object, can bring out the power of an object, or can instill power in an object. Objects that were associated with gods, saints, or other power can take on their own power. They become amulets. We can borrow this power when we need for such needs as healing and the attainment of success. Even the strictest Protestant Christians treat some things like this.

-Some people can abuse spiritual power. We fear those people and avoid them.

-Sometimes, in a dire emergency, we can appeal to the abusers of spiritual power. There is always a price, familial, material, or spiritual.

-One god keeps track of our deeds and misdeeds. It is like a tax ledger for spiritual merit and demerit. We are rewarded or punished according to our deeds and misdeeds. Sometimes we are rewarded or punished in this life. More often we are judged after we die.

- The highest reward is heaven, the lowest is hell. It is not clear if everybody will go to one place or the other, but we all strive for heaven.
- Spiritual merit is like spiritual power. It can help.
- We can transfer from our account of spiritual merit to another account of spiritual merit. If we think we have any merit surplus, we can transfer our surplus merit to help another person heal or to help a cause succeed. We can give our merit to our aged mother, sick child, or important social-political cause.
- We might be able to go into spiritual merit debt for a while so we can get something now for which we do not have enough merit now. If a god or saint heals our sick child now, we can promise to do something for that god or saint in the future such as tend his-her shrine or work for democracy.
- We can bargain with the gods and saints.
- The gods and saints warn us personally when we are on the wrong track through signs or moderate punishment. If we think about investing in a particular stock but a similar stock begins to “tank”, that loss might be a sign from our god or saint that we should invest elsewhere.
- The gods and saints warn our group collectively when we are on the wrong track. The gods and saints collectively reward our group when we are on the right track. The gods and saints collectively punish our group when we persist on the wrong track.
- The gods and saints have different plans for individuals and groups, including different nations. We try to discover the plan our god or saint has for us, and to follow it.
- Sometimes the gods want to raise up a particular nation to leadership. The help that nation to get on the right track for leadership, and they punish that nation when it gets on the wrong track. Fortunately for us and our nation, our nation has been selected for great leadership.
- The single high god would not have made the world a mess. The world has problems, so something happened. Probably some god, below the high god but still quite powerful, screwed it up. There are many ways in which this might have happened, including emanation, descent, pride, etc.
- Only people who are deeply concerned with power, who might consider getting power from the bad high god, or who have to protect us, worry about this issue much. For ordinary people, it is best to accept the situation, and then get past it.
- Normal people only have to worry about not getting hurt too much and about not inadvertently falling under the control of this aberrant god.
- There are many ways to live. Some are good, some not so good, and some bad. The gods and saints know which are good and which are bad. The gods and saints have told us which ways are good and which are bad. The good ways are “the right track” while the bad ways are the “wrong track”. The gods and saints let us know when we are living as they intended and when not.

-One way the gods let us know is to send particularly gifted people. These are the prophets, the great religious teachers, the great moral teachers, and the great adepts whose example we can follow even if they did not directly teach. The prophets become like gods, among the saints, even if they deny that they are like gods and like the saints. The Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammad became gods.

-In the long run, what matters is family and friends. If your family succeeds, you are alright with the gods and saints. If your family fails, then all fails.

-There are particular kinds of family that the gods and saints approve of and particular kinds of family that the gods and saints dislike. Of course, we all live in the right kinds of families. The approved family is the most moral family, in fact, probably the only family that is really moral.

-The right kind of family changes with the times. Most people live only in their own times so they are not likely to know that their kind of best family is not the same as the best family of previous times. At one time, the best family might have been a large extended family with several generations and collateral kin all under one roof. Now it might be isolated nuclear families.

-The right kind of family changes with socio-economic-power class. The ruling elites might have one kind of family while urban workers might have another. The fact that they differ does not matter. The gods and saints approve of various kinds of families for different kinds of people.

-Each kind of family has particular best kinds of sex-age roles. These roles are given by the gods and saints. These are moral relations. Any deviation from these roles is punished by the gods and saints.

-Relations between socio-economic-power classes, and between ethnic groups, are given by the gods and saints. These are moral relations. Any deviation from these relations is punished by the gods and saints.

-The church, temple, synagogue, etc. can be important for some people but it is not vital. You can be sufficiently religious without going to a meeting place regularly and even without belonging to a formal religious institution.

-If you do belong to a formal religious institution, and especially if you go to a meeting place regularly, it can make a big difference in your life and in the lives of the people around you. The differences between formal religious organizations, and even between particular meeting places within formal organizations, can make a difference too. I don't go into either topic.

-The nation is an important group.

-Some people seek other paths. Some people want a direct relation with the high god or with a member of the high god's family. Some people want the quiet monkish life. Some people are mystics. That is all fine as long as they do not disrupt the family-centered beliefs of the majority.

-The gods and various spiritual powers can know the future. Religious adepts might know the future, either through their own abilities or by tapping into the knowledge of religious powers. We can learn about the future by hiring religious adepts to tell us.

-Good might, or might not, win in the long run. That is not my concern. I help goodness whenever I can, but I do not take responsibility for goodness.

-I am a good citizen to the best of my ability, and as long as it does not conflict seriously with my own interests. I think the gods and saints would want that.

-The gods, the saints, and the highest god, understand that humans are not perfect. They allow us ways to make up for our faults. An important way we make up for our faults is by participating in the standard religions, such as, for example, by going to church and by giving to the right charities.

-As people get older, naturally they become less concerned with worldly success and more concerned with what will happen after they die. That is when people participate more in formal religions and causes. The gods and the saints understand this and accept it.

The Dying and Rising Savior Mediator God.

One theme in common religion recurs so often, and is so important, that it bears repeating. People want a god that knows the human situation well, is sympathetic to people, wants to help people, and has a lot of power to help people. People want a god they can talk to and relate to, and who can relate to them. People want a god who can assure them that they will be saved to heaven when they are dead even if they have a hard time on Earth and perhaps even if they have a good time on Earth now. People want to feel that the good life will go on forever, and that this god can assure them in particular of participation in the good life forever. The best life they can think of is a good successful family life as it is on Earth, so people want that kind of life forever, and they want a god who can assure them of this.

The best kind of god to do all this is one who has been a human but who is also very closely tied to the highest god. People want a god who has been human but who is also the highest god, the spouse of the highest god, or the child of the highest god.

The worst things in this life are suffering and death. People want a god who has experienced suffering and death first hand but who also has transcended suffering and death, a god who has more power than death and suffering. People want a god who has suffered and died, and then been born again or who has risen from the dead.

It was not hard to imagine this kind of god in traditional agricultural (agrarian) societies because these facts were part of the annual cycle. Every year, the weather-Earth seemed to die and be reborn. The plants seemed to be reborn, die, and be reborn. To live again, a seed first has to die by being put into the ground. The rains bring nutrition and life, but there is a cyclic season to the rains. The mediator human-god was like the Earth, rains, seasons, and plants by dying and being reborn in a context in which he-she was familiar with the details of everyday human life.

The common people both love and fear the aristocracy and the bureaucrats. People both despise the aristocracy and want to be like them. We see the same attitude today toward media stars. People want a god who is both of the common people like themselves and of the aristocracy at the same time. People want a god who is really of the royal lineage but was born and reared among commoners.

It is not hard to see that many gods in many traditional religions satisfy these requirements, such as Isis and Osiris in Egypt, Moses for Israel, Orpheus in ancient Greece, Dionysius-Bacchus in Greece and Rome, Jesus for Christianity, to some extent Heracles, bodhisattvas in Buddhism, and many good and heroes in Hinduism. I cannot here go into details.

I find it easy to understand the popular appeal of this kind of figure and why most people believe in this kind of god, especially if they were born into a strong state religion that focuses on this figure. It has a strong emotional appeal for me. I find it harder to understand why smart people continue to believe in this kind of figure and continue to produce amazing works of theology and philosophy to defend this kind of figure. Whether I fully understand or not, it is so, and I have to accept it.

Unlike some of the other figures, Jesus was a real person. Christians argued that, unlike other figures, Jesus really was both fully God and fully human, really did die and rise again, and other aspects of the story are really true of him as well such as being of the highest lineage but being reared among common people. Christians said versions of this figure in other religions were reflections, imitations, shadows, or fore-shadows of Jesus. Jesus was the only real dying-and-rising-god-man. Some Christians argued that other figures were demons that imitated Jesus in an attempt to undo his good work. C.S. Lewis dwells on this argument in several places in his works. Here I make a point of it only to be clear about it. I disagree with the Christian view. People believe this about Jesus largely because they assimilated the life of a real man to the myths that prevailed in state societies for reasons that had little to do with the mission of the real human Jesus.

My view remains that it does not matter. If Jesus was God, fine. If not, then I think he will forgive me and others for not believing in him as God as long as we do as he taught. The same is true of the other divine figures. Whether they are divine does not matter as long as we do as they taught.

Personal Mediator Gods as Cosmic Principles.

People in all major religions turn major figures of their religion into a cosmic principle. More precisely, they turn major figures of their religion into a person who can become whatever cosmic principle is most useful at the time, and so turn their mediator semi-gods into many cosmic principles. A bodhisattva can become the principle of love, justice, hearing complaints, karma, salvation, unity with everything, etc. as people require. Jesus can become pretty much the same cosmic principles, and has. The human-divine figure mediates through assuming the appropriate personification of the handy principle. Even Jews see their God (Yahweh or El) primarily as a particular cosmic principle of the time such as Justice, Mercy, Vengeance, or Guidance. Even Muslims see Allah this way, and in addition, they see the Koran, and sometimes Mohammad, in the same way, as embodiment of a cosmic principle.

In Christianity, Jesus is both God and handy cosmic principle. I would object less to the idea of Jesus as God if Jesus did not also have to take on the role of various cosmic principles. For the one true God to

take on the role of any cosmic principle is to diminish the one true God, not to extol him. God teaches us principles. God is not a principle himself. Jesus taught us principles. Jesus is not a principle himself. Where Jesus is concerned, confusion over this point started even before the Gospel of John where John declared Jesus to be the Word made Flesh. Even if Jesus was flesh, he was not a cosmic principle, the Word. Even if Jesus taught principles, he was not one himself. Christians who see Jesus as the cosmic principle of Justification, Salvation, Love, or Gratitude make a basic, and common, mistake.

This idea that God is not reducible to a cosmic principle does not mean God is necessarily un-friendly, un-loving, un-just, not-saving, un-good, etc. God can act on the basis of any of those principles and can promulgate those principles. He does so often. This idea simply means that God is not reducible to any of those principles. The exact relation between God and any cosmic principle is like the relation between God and Good. I don't know what it is and I don't speculate here. We don't need to know the exact relation to value God and principles, and to use principles to guide our behavior. (This way of looking at the situation is like getting at God by being clear about what he is not, an approach common in all major religions, and into which I don't go here either.)

This use of a religious figure as a person who can become a cosmic-principle-as-needed is an example of how idea systems eat the world. The major religious figure is the "hole at the center", the "emptiness", around which the color splotches (cosmic principles) flow, and onto which we can project what we need at the time (attach cosmic principles as needed). The fact that this use of a major religious figure fits the pattern of an idea system that eats the world does not make it wrong or right but it does mean we have to be a bit suspicious. I happen to think it is wrong and badly misleading.

PART 3: STATE (CIVIC) RELIGION

The state is a large group composed of other groups. As with all groups, the state uses mass religion, ideology, and ritual. Power and wealth are not shared equally in the state. Groups that have power and wealth use religion, ideology, and ritual to maintain their power and wealth. They also use explicit tools of power and wealth such as the police and the financial system but that is not at issue here. State religion is largely about how the state uses religion, ideology, and ritual to maintain power and maintain relations among groups. State religion is a little bit about how some groups in the state use religion, ideology, and ritual to change power and wealth. For here, subsume "ideology" into "religion" so we need only consider religion and ritual.

It is tempting to reduce religion and ritual to nothing but tools of the state, and this attitude is convenient to use here, but ultimately this attitude is false. Religion and ritual exist apart from the state. The abilities for religion and ritual evolved before the rise of the state. Groups do not create religion and ritual, and groups must work within the logics of religion and ritual. Here, I cannot go into the evolution of religion and ritual and how their natural logic shapes what the state can do, so mostly I go along with the idea that the state has great ability in manipulating them.

The state is not one a harmonious set of groups. Instead of saying "the state uses religion and ritual", it is more accurate to say "groups vie for control of religion and ritual, and each group uses the motifs of religion and ritual to its own advantage". I don't have space here to be that exact. In the beginning of states, states were tied to agriculture, and so controlled the calendar. Since industrialism, states are

somewhat divorced from the calendar. They still retain some of their earlier ties, especially the holidays, such as Easter and Christmas in Christian states. States need cities. Most religions took definitive form in cities as urban movements. Thus “state religion” is sometimes also called “civic religion”. The terms are not important here but you need to remember them in case you read about these issues elsewhere.

-As much as possible, we want the state to be in accord with our personal groups and want our personal groups to be in accord with the state. We want our morality to be the morality of the state. If we are not the dominant group, we will adopt the morality of the state as long as it does not severely contradict our morality. We want our religion to be the religion of the state. If we are not the dominant group, we will adopt the religion of the state as long as it does not severely contradict our religion.

-Formal religion is not as important as the mass religion described above. We don't want the state to contradict the beliefs above. Fortunately, the beliefs given above allow the state huge latitude.

-If our personal groups conflict with other personal groups, we want the state to back us up. We will bend our beliefs a bit to be in accord with the state if it will back us up. A large reason we want accord between the state and our personal groups is so that the state will back us up in our conflicts.

-If we are not in the dominant group, we recognize that we must accept the beliefs of the dominant group a little bit, but, hopefully the contrast is not stark, and we can get along.

-State religions have their saints, usually the great states-people and military heroes, but sometimes also the great religious thinkers and great political thinkers: Socrates, Jesus, Mohammad, the Dukes of China, Marx, Lenin, etc.

-States have regular events to show their cohesion, power, organization, and values. The events are the holidays of the state. State holidays are large rituals.

-Participation in state events shows that your group accepts your relations with the state and that you support the state. Refusal to participate shows that you do not accept your relations with the state and that you do not support the state. If you do not support the state, you are an internal enemy, and so are dangerous. It is hard to be neutral.

-Some groups get a little latitude in participation, especially if they are small and weak. The larger and more powerful a group grows, the more important that its relations with the state be amicable.

-The values demonstrated in the state rituals (holidays) are both the official state values by which people might live but need not necessarily live, and the real underlying values by which people are expected to live. Sometimes the official values are made explicit but rarely are the real underlying values explicit. Still, people get it.

-The state recognizes higher spiritual powers. Even secular states do this, although they are likely to call them principles such as democracy, justice, and nature. What happens in the state has to be in accord with the higher powers. If the state falters, the higher powers try to correct the state. If the state falters

badly enough, the higher powers collectively punish the state. If the state does well, the higher powers reward the state.

-If any group has particularly close links to the higher powers, that group is especially important to the state. If any group offends the higher powers, that group is an enemy of the state and of all the proper groups within the state.

-Our nation is a favorite of the gods, is destined to be an important nation, and someday might be the ruler of the world.

-Our leaders must be in touch with the gods and their values. For this, they probably need to consult with priests and other religious adepts.

-Christmas illustrates most of the points about values and rituals. Christmas originally was not a Christian holiday about the birth of Jesus but a non-Christian holiday that celebrated the victory of light over dark and the return of the light through the lengthening of the day. Christmas now is not primarily about the birth of Jesus but about: First, the "Christmas Spirit" (value) of universal siblinghood; the links between people of all classes, races, etc; and the willingness of people to give. Second, it is about the role of commerce in keeping the nation strong and in allowing people to relate to each other properly without conflict. A prosperous nation is also strong, generous, and peaceful.

-Halloween carries many of the same messages. We vanquish devils with the candy of prosperity.

-The Fourth of July is an explicitly secular holiday in a nation that officially values individual choice, yet, if any group does not participate, that group is highly suspect. Libertarians and Unitarians might be "given a pass" as long as they remain minority "kooky" groups. The values shown during the Fourth of July are not just practical values about how to run a nation, they are moral-religious values about what humans are, what our world is like, and how we ought to live in our world. We have symbols of how a good moral life wins favor for our families from the gods, such as "Mom" and "apple pie". The act of eating the right foods together shows we are all one and share the same values. We have symbols of the transcendent strength of our nation and how we can deal with our enemies, such as fireworks in the sky.

PART 4: CHRISTIANITY AND CIVIL RELIGION

Christianity and civil religion merged in traditional Christian countries. The merger was tight until recently, when the rise of large-scale migration between nations and the rise of the pluralistic secular state made a tight merger harder. It is not yet clear whether modern pluralistic secular states can work. It is not yet clear how closely a state has to be tied to a particular dominant religion to work. Until recently, in China, the link between the state, Confucianism, and commerce was given. With the rise of Communism, the link was strained for a while but now seems to be coming to life again.

When Christianity first arose, it was not part of the civil religion of Rome, refused to participate in some ways, and so suffered moderate persecution. Christians would not sacrifice to the deified rulers of Rome or of particular city states, they would not sacrifice to the gods of the city states, they would not sacrifice to the city state if it were conceived as a god, and they would not eat foods (especially meat) that had

been used in sacrifices. They would not participate in the Roman versions of Christmas, Halloween, the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day, New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, and Presidents' Day.

The term "pagan" originally referred to a rural person in the Roman Empire, particularly one who held to the traditional Roman religion(s) and way of life, including the military. Pagans were modest landholders. They thought of themselves as nationalists and true Romans, and as true members of their particular city-state. They thought urban cults were degenerate, especially Christianity. Pagans were traditional religious, social, and nation-state conservatives. Christians were urban religious innovators. Christians deliberately contrasted themselves with rural pagans.

In a reversal, American Christians now are the religious conservatives, think of themselves as upholding the traditional religion of the countryside and nation-state, uphold the nation-state with its religion, support the military, and oppose innovations that come from the "degenerate" urban centers of New York, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Christians are the modern pagans. In fact, the rural population in the United States is so small that modern American pagans are not enough to form the same block as did Roman pagans. The real pagans now are wannabe suburbanites who have middle-level jobs, both blue collar and white collar, who support civic holidays, and who are religious at least a little sometimes. The modern real America pagans continue to identify with idealized traditional conservative nationalist country life, as, for example, in doggedly listening to supposed "country and western" music.

The original Christians would have been more like Unitarian-Universalists than like American Christian-pseudo-Pagans. It is not clear how Christians in Rome, would view modern American Christian pseudo-pagans. It is not clear how modern American Christian pseudo-pagans would view Roman anti-pagan urban original Christians if they could meet some real ones.

PART 5: BRIEF ASSESSMENT

We cannot get rid of state religion, common religion, or the mass religion that is their combination, so we might as well get the best versions we can. The best version of mass common religion is guided by the best morality. That is what a good secular pluralistic state aims for. That is what traditional religions can help us achieve.

Mass common religion makes nearly all the mistakes from the chapter on mistakes. I do not point them out. That does not necessarily make mass common religion bad.

Most of the time, there is nothing wrong with mass common religion. Most of the time it lets people get along, lets people know where they stand, lets people negotiate changes, and gives people quite a bit of comfort. I see no reason to complain about that. Mass common religion can be a good thing because it slows down changes and slows down bad movements – political, economic, and religious – that would spread quickly otherwise. Sometimes irrational conservatism is a good thing.

Mass common religion can support bad things such as prejudice and terrorism. That is what good people must guard against. That is what good politicians must stop. That topic is enough for many books in its own right, so I let it go here.

Mass common religion usually only goes bad when there are other conditions to fight about, as, for example, when ethnic groups think that wealth is shared unfairly. In those cases, it is important to correct the underlying problems. That is usually much harder than trying to correct the problems at the symbolic level of mass common religion.

Mass common religion lends itself too easily to abuse by religious movements, in particular demagogues. America now is full of examples but I don't list any for fear of being sued. Examples from the past usually don't carry the "punch" of current examples so I omit them here. It is easy to see Muslim Fundamentalism as this kind of take-over but American Christian Fundamentalism is just as bad. Intelligent thinkers need to devise ways to insulate mass common religion from easy take-over by bad people.

Mass common religion can serve as the vehicle to carry other doctrines. Sometimes it is the only way to carry other doctrines because the other doctrines need to be invested with the religious power that comes from mass common religion. Mass common religion supported Christianity after it merged with religions of the Classical world. Without the pagan spirit, ironically, Christianity might have died. Mass common religion, fused with Christianity, kept the message of Jesus when otherwise his message almost certainly would have been lost. Without mass common religion in England and its North American colonies, modern democracy would not have arisen and would not have been sustained in America even though democracy officially was a secular movement. The point here is to keep mass common religion from supporting bad ideas and not to fret if it supports good ideas. People should recognize the distinction between mass common religion and other doctrines but that does not mean they should work to drive a wedge between them. Explain the distinction to the children who can understand, and work to keep the other children on the right track.