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Religion and the New Politics

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Introduction

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Little more evidence is needed that the United States has a new political landscape than the recent storming of the Capitol by a mob on January 6, 2021, with the intent of stopping the Congress' certification of the Electoral College votes for Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election, and perhaps also the killing of Vice President Mike Pence and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi for fulfilling their constitutional duty in acknowledging his victory. Although at the time of this writing the full story of the riot is unknown, some facts are clear. President Trump began calling his supporters to a rally in Washington, D.C., weeks in advance to protest Congress' constitutionally mandated certification. The rally, attracting racist, White supremacist, and antisemitic voices and not a few conspiracy mongers, was organized by some of Trump's campaign staffers. It was incited by speeches from Trump's son, Don Jr., and his lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and then finally by the president himself. And the justification for the whole event – the rally and the storming of the Capitol – was that the election, overwhelmingly won by Joe Biden, was somehow stolen from Trump: a claim based on lies, falsehoods, and distortions, many of which were repeatedly propagated by the president himself.

When Congress resumed session after the Capitol was cleared of the rioters and after the death of four people, including a Capitol police officer (another officer died after the riot), seven Republican senators and over one hundred Republican representatives voted to reject Biden's victory in multiple states. Continuing to embrace unfounded lies and accusations, these members of Congress either chose cynical political pandering over their constitutional duty or were hopelessly self-deluded by the lies. In either case, when the House of Representatives impeached Trump for a second time a week later on the single charge of inciting insurrection, these Republican members of the House were joined by most of the caucus in voting against impeachment. Only ten Republicans joined all the Democrat representatives in impeaching the president, though several reports claim that more Republicans would have endorsed impeachment if they and their families had not been threatened by some Trump supporters. How the impeachment will fair in the Senate is uncertain. Now, the FBI is investigating whether some members of Congress aided and supported the mob that stormed the Capitol.

As Trump leaves office, he leaves behind a democracy that is shaken to its core. Presidential transitions have always been peaceful and generally times of celebration – not only for the incoming administration but also for the democratic transfer of power. But this year, at the inauguration of Joe Biden to be the nation's 46th president, Washington, D.C., is like a military fortress with barricades, razor wire, and thousands of National Guard troops. The inauguration was already going to be muted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the recent riot at the Capitol further chilled the celebrations – the threats of further violence are too many to ignore. And although Trump will be gone from power, the new politics initiated by Trump appear to be here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future.

The United States was founded on the proposition that “all men are created equal,” but has struggled since before it was penned in the Declaration of Independence to live up to this liberal ideal (see Losurdo 2011) – issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation continue to distort the actualization of this ideal. Southern Democrats before and during the Civil War sought to limit this ideal to Whites and primarily to property owners. Republicans following Robert A. Taft and William F. Buckley, Jr., during the middle of the twentieth century would similarly limit the impact of this ideal – the masses could only benefit from what trickled down from the elite. The United States has always had its illiberal forces – those who favored oligarchy and the betterment of some over others – but such forces were generally limited to narrow, elite sectors of the American public, even when in power (Richardson 2014, 2020). What is different about the illiberalism of Trump, at least in recent history, and the foundation for the new politics of today, is its broad, populist appeal. Although he never had an approval rate over 50 percent, as many as 90 percent of Republicans supported Trump and he received over 74 million votes for reelection – the second largest number of votes received by any presidential candidate, second only to Biden's 81 million votes. As president, with such strong support from Republicans, he was able to enact policies challenging and undermining liberal values, some of which are addressed in the essays of this volume. The attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election was simply the most dramatic example of the illiberal new politics that has characterized the Trump era. Trump did not create the illiberal new politics, but he embodied and united many of the diverse illiberal forces within American society.

Religion has never been far from illiberalism. Whether it is used in the defense of slavery and Jim Crow laws, patriarchy and the oppression of women, rejection of foreigners, or

absolutist gender and sexual norms, religion has been used as a force for harm in society – dividing people and pitting some people against others. Many of the supporters of Trump are explicitly religious – namely, White Evangelicals and some conservative sectors of Roman Catholicism (including a significant number of U.S. bishops) – and they have drawn on some of the illiberal aspects of their tradition in their support (see du Mez 2020). Indeed, it is to these religious adherents that Trump owed his presidential victory in the 2016 election. At the “Stop the Steal” rally on January 6, televangelist Paula White led the crowd in prayer, asking God to “let every adversary against democracy, against freedom, against life, against liberty, against justice, against peace, against righteousness be overturned right now in the name of Jesus.” A Nebraska priest performed an exorcism at the capitol, casting out a demon who was “dissolving the country” (Conley 2021). Religious symbols and flags could be seen throughout the mob, and when they broke into the senate chamber, a group standing on the rostrum, after ransacking the room, prayed “in Christ’s holy name.” In fact, Evangelical Christian nationalists were instrumental in perpetuating the “big lie” of a stolen election and were central in fomenting the insurrection (Posner 2021).

Nevertheless, religion in general, and Christianity in particular, does not belong to illiberalism; it provides much of the ideological foundation for liberal democracy, including the fundamental truth of the equality of all humans – that all humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). On February 13–14, 2020, the Kripke Center at Creighton University sponsored a symposium on Religion and the New Politics to consider the role that religion can play in relation to what I have called here “the new politics” – namely, the politics spawned by the illiberalism of Trump’s nationalism. The essays address some of the issues at the center of this new politics – immigration, gender and sexual identity, racism, environmental care, and free speech – but also the illiberal assault on Western civilization more broadly. Other essays explore the shifting demographics of the new politics and the privileged contempt of the Trump administration. Together, these essays articulate how religion in the liberal tradition has and will continue to engage with the new politics of the Trump years and beyond.

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