Sephardic Heritage Update

***A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information***
***Impacting our community and our culture***
***A Publication of the Center for Sephardic Heritage***

“Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it.” -Marian Wright Edelman

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**More Trumpist Whataboutism: Let’s Play Connect-the-Dots with Tikvah Fund Chairman Elliott Abrams**

I decided to sign up for Elliott Abrams’ Council of Foreign Relations blog since he was appointed chairman of The Tikvah Fund:

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/pressure-points>

There was this excellent piece promoting Christian Zionism:

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/christians-and-israel>

Abrams wisely sent out a form letter addressed to the new Israeli PM that he wrote on behalf of his New Convivencia Evangelical friends:

**Dear Prime Minister Bennett:**

**It is with great pleasure that we write to congratulate you on the successful formation of a new government for the State of Israel, the world's only Jewish state.**

**We are Christian leaders from different traditions who feel a strong sense of friendship with Israel based on shared values that originate in the Hebrew Bible. Israel embodies these values every day in its commitment to democracy and human rights, and serves as a bold model of ethnic and religious pluralism for others to follow.**

**We are grateful for the work of your predecessor, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, for all he did to strengthen Israel and its alliances over the past twelve years, and look forward to all that you and your coalition will accomplish in the years to come. We want to thank you in advance for protecting our shared values as they apply to Israel’s citizens, whether Jews, Christians, Muslims, or Druze; for guarding the holy sites and welcoming religious pilgrims from around the world to discover the birthplace of their faith; for defending Israel from outside aggression; and for continuing to work toward peace with Israel’s neighbors. In return, we pledge to deepen our friendship with your country and its wonderful people.**

**For many centuries, the Jewish people did not have friends; indeed, Christians were often counted among their greatest enemies. But today the situation is different. Hundreds of millions of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia are united in their love for – and strong defense of – a sovereign Jewish state with Jerusalem as its capital.**

**As the heir of a great tradition of Jewish leadership going back thousands of years, you will be standing on the shoulders of giants. But now your shoulders, too, will be burdened by the responsibilities of statesmanship as you lead your country in difficult times. We pray that God grants you wisdom and strength as you make hard decisions that will affect the lives of millions, and we trust that He will answer those prayers.**

**May you, your family, and your coalition partners be blessed as you lead the people of Israel into a new phase of its history. Please consider us friends in the spirit of our common values and allies in a common mission. We look forward to meeting you in person the next time we are in Jerusalem.**

The voice of a White Jewish Supremacist as Evangelical Christian.

Derrida would have been very impressed!

Then he attacked the new American president for not being sufficiently solicitous of Colombian president Ivan Duque:

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-wont-biden-call-duque>

I was not up to date on the current situation in Colombia, so I googled it:

<http://thecitypaperbogota.com/news/duque-urged-to-replace-washington-ambassador-after-claims-of-trump-support/26350>

It seems that Biden wants the Colombian president to remove his very Trumpist Washington ambassador:

**While support for Trump by several high-ranking Colombian politicians was limited to social media during the campaign, Ambassador Santos has been critical of the peace process with FARC signed by his cousin and former President Juan Manuel Santos. On Monday, during a radio interview with La W, the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize recipient claimed that Ambassador Santos spoke with a Pentagon contractor to ask how he “could help Trump.”**

This “pressure point” is not good enough for “overthrow them” realpolitik Abrams:

**Why? Presumably because he thinks Duque got too close to Donald Trump. Perhaps he has forgotten that in 2019 Trump attacked Duque, prompting** [**Duque’s defense by Democrats as well as Republicans**](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/colombia/article228776274.html)**. Whatever the reason for Biden’s stance, it is worse than silly; it is damaging to U.S. interests. It suggests to Latin leaders and others that being a close ally of the United States may win no support in Washington.**

So, there is **that** PILPUL.

Now he is attacking AOC and the Squad, favorite targets of the Trump FOX Right:

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/democratic-socialists-america-embraces-maduro-dictatorship?utm_source=blognotification&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Blog%20Post%20Notification%20Pressure%20Points&utm_term=PressurePoints>

After a recitation of the problems with Venezuelan dictator Maduro, he goes at the usual suspects:

**There are two DSA members in Congress, Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Neither has ever uttered a single word of criticism of the Maduro regime, and now the DSA has given him its endorsement.**

As was the case with Colombia, I was not really keyed in to current AOC issues relating to Venezuela, so I looked it up, and got conflicting reports:

<https://www.newsweek.com/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-trish-regan-venezuela-nicolas-maduro-juan-guaido-bob-1349117>

<https://news.yahoo.com/ocasio-cortez-declines-denounce-maduro-202910844.html>

FOX News host Trish Regan was full of praise for AOC in March 2019:

**Ocasio-Cortez "deserves a little credit as well for recognizing that Venezuela is a total failure of democracy," Regan suggested. She was presumably referring to an Instagram live broadcast by the congresswoman at the end of February, in which Ocasio-Cortez said the debate over Venezuela is not about ideology, but rather "authoritarianism versus democracy." She went on to talk about "other failed states" including Zimbabwe, but she did not explicitly say Venezuela was in the same category.**

Abrams, like his bigwig Tikvah predecessors and current allies, is all about the guilt-by-association and Cancel Culture Right Wing Wokeness, even though in this case that guilt is about what someone did **not** say rather than what they **did** say.

So, let’s play Abrams’ game and see how **he** does.

First, we have his own shameless participation in the treasonous Trump Administration, which he has not apologized for:

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/08/elliott-abrams-convicted-in-iran-contra-is-now-trumps-iran-envoy.html>

Indeed, the New York magazine article reminds us that Abrams was convicted of lying under oath in the Iran-Contra Affair:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/08/us/elliott-abrams-admits-his-guilt-on-2-counts-in-contra-cover-up.html>

To make things even spicier, after it was clear that Trump had lost the recent election, he said that he was “unfit for office”:

[https://forward.com/news/463100/after-serving-in-his-administration-elliott-abrams-hasnt-changed-his/&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwic\_cimmczxAhUQXM0KHXTDCLsQFjAAegQIBRAC&usg=AOvVaw2my8WeFvIOmPCFcHB93ObA](https://forward.com/news/463100/after-serving-in-his-administration-elliott-abrams-hasnt-changed-his/%26sa%3DU%26ved%3D2ahUKEwic_cimmczxAhUQXM0KHXTDCLsQFjAAegQIBRAC%26usg%3DAOvVaw2my8WeFvIOmPCFcHB93ObA)

That is some **real** Neo-Con courage!

In addition to taking the job as Trump’s Iran envoy, he added Venezuela to his Lysol portfolio:

<https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/25/elliott-abrams-envoy-venezuela-1128562>

And who were his allies in the Swamp Trump Administration?

There was the slimy oilman Trumpscum Rex Tillerson, whose incompetence was so great that he reached out to Abrams when he needed a “seasoned pro” to be his Deputy Secretary of State:

<https://www.huffpost.com/entry/flynn-trump-and-elliott-abrams_b_58a72b33e4b0b0e1e0e209fa>

But Trump was not interested:

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/10/politics/elliott-abrams-trump-state-department-tillerson/index.html>

Until, as we have just seen, he was:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elliott_Abrams#Trump_administration>

I do not recall Abrams speaking out against the Trump Internationale set of Fascist allies:

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-modi-bolsonaro-obrado-lukashenko-were-5-worst-world-leaders-for-covid>

Modi:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-51638345>

Bolsonaro:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-brazil/brazils-bolsonaro-reaffirms-trump-ties-cites-baseless-vote-fraud-claims-idUSKBN29C01X>

Lukashenko:

<https://www.theglobalist.com/united-states-donald-trump-belarus-protests-alexander-lukashenko-democracy/>

Erdogan:

<https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-politics/trump-praises-erdogan-despite-incidents-violence-against-protesters>

And, last but not least, Orban:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/13/trump-latest-viktor-orban-hungary-prime-minister-white-house>

I am not sure what, if anything, Abrams said about Mike Flynn, who continues to run the Trump Big Lie dog-and-pony show, after his time as a paid Turkish operative, for which he was convicted:

<https://www.bradenton.com/news/local/article250892234.html>

We will recall that the two men running that Trumpist rally, Flynn and Roger Stone, were both given corrupt pardons for their crimes against America:

<https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/roger-stone-michael-flynn-trump-january-6-capitol-insurrection-20210207.html>

I cannot find anything that Abrams said about such Swamp Criminality.

But I **did** find an article on the Banana Republic AG getting one of those corrupt presidential pardons for Abrams himself back in the day:

<https://archive.thinkprogress.org/elliott-abrams-ilham-omar-pardon-william-barr-attorney-general-iran-contra-venezuela-5cbca426a978/>

The first paragraph of the Think Progress article puts its nicely:

**Elliott Abrams — hired by President Donald Trump to run United States policy toward one of the several Latin American countries where he previously engineered coups, broke U.S. laws, and encouraged right-wing political violence in the name of anti-communism — isn’t having a particularly good week.**

Abrams does have a very selective memory when it comes to speaking out on the matter of American Democracy and dictators:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/02/the-tragic-life-of-the-war-criminal-elliott-abrams>

Guns before butter.

Abrams is in **favor** of dictators – so long as they are on the “Right” side!

And, once again, let us review the current items of interest in our imperiled Democracy, which Abrams and his Tikvah allies are **not** talking about.

First and foremost, there is the Tikvah pledge not to speak directly of Donald Trump and his vast list of crimes against America:

<https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-criminal-investigations-evidence-before-prosecutors-2021-5>

We have the Lysol Insurrection and the refusal of Abrams’ Republican allies, led by Moscow Mitch, to deny **any** Congressional investigation into the Seditious Violence of 1/6:

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/26/politics/january-6-commission-mitch-mcconnell-chuck-schumer/index.html>

We have the Republican perpetuation of the Big Lie:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jun/13/republicans-big-lie-us-election-trump>

We have Trump’s attempt to “rig the election” by trying to interfere with legitimate vote counts:

<https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-donald-trump-georgia-elections-a7b4aa4d8ce3bf52301ddbe620c6bff6>

We have the Trumpist SCOTUS and its gleeful destruction of Voting Rights:

<https://www.npr.org/2021/07/01/998758022/the-supreme-court-upheld-upholds-arizona-measures-that-restrict-voting>

We have the ongoing New York investigation into the Trump Organization’s shady finances, which has already netted the indictment of [Trumpscum Jew](https://www.tucsonweekly.com/TheRange/archives/2019/04/16/yarmulkes-money-and-labels-trumps-antisemitism-and-racism) Allen Weisselberg:

<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/01/trump-organization-cfo-expected-in-court-after-indictment-497485>

We already know that the Tikvah world is apoplectic when it comes to Black Lives Matter and Critical Race Theory:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/gPteGeyFAsA/m/LK992JB1AwAJ>

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/9sNvRGoAK4E/m/so3wPrbFAwAJ>

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/cFN_vx6JdgA/m/vdb5ZrmJAgAJ>

And, of course, there is Bari Weiss, who has taken the Tikvah White Jewish Supremacy to new levels previously unimagined, and has made cancelling CRT her life’s work:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/YcYjhF9O_Bs/m/x87K8KFhAwAJ>

Finally, let us not forget the many Trumpublicans who refuse to get vaccinated:

<https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/558225-nearly-30-percent-of-republicans-say-they-wont-get-vaccinated-poll>

I want to focus particularly on the recent Tikvah Tablet article written by Lee Smith that repeated the Trumputin talking point on the Lysol Insurrection, claiming that the Alt-Right Neo-Nazis and Klansmen are “Political Prisoners”:

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/lee-smith-insurrectionists-january-6>

Moscow Lee went all in for the Conspiracy Theories:

**Indeed there is growing belief in some circles, left as well as right, that federal law enforcement not only infiltrated the Jan. 6 groups but may have directed some of their actions. That’s the argument made by Darren Beattie, another journalist who has been covering the Jan. 6 arrests and charges. A former professor of political philosophy who worked as a speechwriter in the Trump administration, Beattie is the publisher of Revolver News, an internet news site that aggregates stories from the conservative media and features original reporting. His recent article asks if the FBI played a role in stoking the violence during the Jan. 6 protest.**

Adding to this degeneracy was Tikvah Tablet James Kirchick who, in the midst of all the antinomian shenanigans, decided to call out Yale Professor Timothy Snyder:

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/james-kirchick-grifter-nation>

In his contemptuous Tikvah words:

**It was just a little over a week after the 2016 election when a Yale history professor put up a post on** [**Facebook**](https://www.facebook.com/timothy.david.snyder/posts/1206636702716110) **that became the ur-text of the Trump-as-fascist genre. Facebook is where it should have stayed. “Americans are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism,” warned Timothy Snyder, a specialist in 20th-century Central and Eastern Europe. “Our one advantage is that we might learn from their experience.” To this solemn pronouncement he appended a list of 20 easily digestible banalities (“Be calm when the unthinkable arrives,” “Believe in truth,” “Give regularly to good causes, if you can”) interspersed with the kind of stuff you’d find in a Sunday supplement advice column (“Don’t use the internet before bed. Charge your gadgets away from your bedroom, and read.”) Basically, Chicken Soup for the Would-Be Park Slope Dissident’s Soul.**

**A prescient New York editor, anticipating the fortune to be made peddling paranoia to the bourgeoisie, seized upon Snyder’s social media missive, and** [***On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the Twentieth Century***](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/558051/on-tyranny-by-timothy-snyder/)**was published within weeks of Trump’s inauguration. Almost immediately, it hit The New York Times bestseller list, where it has intermittently occupied a top spot ever since. The Fried Chicken Brownshirt Rebellion of Jan. 6, 2021, with its legions of deranged, costumed selfie-takers, has ensured that Snyder’s book delineating the perils of an American Hitler will enjoy popularity for the indefinite future.**

Kirchick then does the fake moral equivalence, both sides-ism, that has become endemic to Trumpworld, which naturally attacks the New Racial Consciousness – because that is what Tikvah does:

**What’s striking about Snyder’s homilies, however, is how much they apply not only to Trump’s depredations, but also to those of his most obsessive critics. “Establish a private life” is good advice for those who feel the need to announce to the world via Facebook that anyone who does not endorse the teachings of Dr. Ibram X. Kendi is a terrible human being. “Be kind to our language. Avoid pronouncing the phrases everyone else does” may be the sort of thing to consider the next time you feel pressured to nod along with the assertion—granted the imprimatur of The New York Times—that** [**“men menstruate,”**](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/opinion/trans-gender-language-trump.html) **or that the American penal system constitutes** [**“the most sprawling gulag known to man,”**](https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2020/08/september-2020-issue-the-great-fire) **or that “peaceful rioting” is anything other than an oxymoron. The opinion sections of the nation’s leading newspapers, the pages of its intellectual journals, and the faculties of its humanities departments would be enlivened mightily if more than just a handful of columnists, essayists, and professors heeded Snyder’s observation that “It is easy, in words and deeds, to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different.”**

All in a desperate PILPUL attempt to save Trump and his relentless attack on our country, which Snyder has so eloquently addressed:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/3fpwrnUmLVE>

I re-posted my article on Snyder and the Rule of Law along with his excellent new essay on History and Democracy:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/j2AduTaAdOQ>

In the article I remarked on the connection between the Sephardic Religious Humanism and the fight against lawless authoritarianism that is represented by the antinomian “New Talmudists,” like the Pauline Daniel Boyarin and his loyal disciple Rabbi Richard Hidary, who are both proud members of the vast Tikvah alliance:

<https://www.tabletmag.com/contributors/daniel-boyarin>

<https://www.tabletmag.com/contributors/richard-hidary>

And let us not forget Adam Kirsch and his ongoing degradation of the Talmud:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/fDOa6iBH0eU/m/Bfw5DQ30BQAJ>

It is indeed quite a dense web of Right Wing reactionary Intersectionality!

The following article from Jim Lobe’s Militarist Monitor lays out the full Neo-Con Tikvah megillah as it applies to Abrams and his cronies:

<https://militarist-monitor.org/profile/tikvah-fund/>

Both Smith and Kirchick are key players in this anatomy of Right Wing evil:

<https://militarist-monitor.org/profile/lee-smith/>

<https://militarist-monitor.org/profile/james-kirchick/>

Smith is a big fan of Abrams:

<https://www.hudson.org/research/6856-the-shadow-viceroy>

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323539804578259710239304142>

And Abrams is a big fan of Kirchick:

<https://www.newsweek.com/will-cuba-really-hand-over-killers-and-terrorists-323054>

All three of them are affiliated with the notorious Foundation in Defense of Democracies:

<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2011/11/02/fdd-welcomes-lee-smith-and-james-kirchick-as-fellows-2/>

<http://www.fddwashingtonforum.org/speakers.php>

And so it is that once again we see how **true** guilt-by-association works, as The Tikvah Fund keeps it all in the debased Trump MISHPOCHEH.

Abrams lashes out at AOC and the Squad for possible Leftist crimes of omission, while at the same time cozying up to the New Fascism as it seeks to destroy what little democracy remains after the scorched earth policy of his Trump Administration, which has left our country teetering on the abyss.

Do not expect Tikvah Elliott Abrams to rescue us.

He is far more likely to bury us deeper into that scorched earth, as he looks for more Central American governments to overthrow.

David Shasha

**“Gefilte in the Gulf”: The Ashkenazi ASF and YU Rabbi Elie Abadie Tell Us that the Next Chapter of Jewish Life in the Arab World is White Jewish Supremacy!**

It was pretty clear that the Trump-Kushner Gulf HASBARAH Accord was deeply tied to the failed Kushner Family purchase of 666 5th Avenue:

<https://www.justsecurity.org/69094/timeline-on-jared-kushner-qatar-666-fifth-avenue-and-white-house-policy/>

With a little Lysol Malfeasance, it all worked out in the end!

For the Kushners, that is:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/03/nyregion/kushners-building-fifth-avenue-brookfield-lease.html>

Here is my initial article on the Gulf HASBARAH Accord from August 2019:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/FhA365Wf4wQ/m/kOD_iLy_AQAJ>

Shortly after posting the article, I prepared a special newsletter with even more articles, explaining things in greater detail:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/tdbyFlzaAQc/m/AbTe-knZAwAJ>

The special newsletter kicked off with my article on the 2014 documentary “Of Many”; which introduced us to NYU – and now UAE – Chief Rabbi Yehuda Sarna and his close White Jewish ties to the Muslim world:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/wTIUp5rMcxs/m/D1H9wQsBCgAJ>

The White Jewish Convivencia was in full swing!

In October 2020 – over a year after the first announcement of the Trump-Kushner Gulf HASBARAH Accord – the Ashkenazim appointed Rabbi Elie Abadie as their token Arab Jew in the bold new Zionist alliance:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Council_of_the_Emirates>

No Palestinians welcome!

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/11/01/the-abraham-accords-and-the-palestinian-issue/>

The perfect HASBARAH solution.

Rabbi Abadie is, of course, a longtime ASF board member, and a true Washington Heights macher:

<https://blogs.yu.edu/news/rabbi-elie-abadie-appointed-director-of-the-jacob-e-safra-institute-of-sephardic-studies/>

<https://americansephardi.org/projects/asf-council-of-sephardic-sages/>

He has been a key player in the World Jewish Congress initiative, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries:

<http://www.justiceforjews.com/leadership.html>

The JJAC was run by Stanley Urman, another Ashkenazi:

<http://www.justiceforjews.com/stan_urman.html>

For those unfamiliar with the now-moribund JJAC, here is evidence of their HASBARAH handiwork:

<http://www.justiceforjews.com/canada2013.html>

<https://www.jweekly.com/2006/01/27/leader-of-mizrachi-jewish-rights-group-in-s-f/>

<https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/jewish-news/jewish-refugees-from-arab-countries-seek-compensation>

The Ashkenazi-run JIMENA was all in as well:

<https://www.jimena.org/justice-for-jews-from-arab-countries-with-dr-stanley-urman-6-18-20/>

The Arab Jewish Refugee issue was designed as a counterweight to Palestinian claims for restitution from Israel, as Yehouda Shenhav discussed in his critical article “Spineless Bookkeeping: The Use of Mizrahi Jews as Pawns Against Palestinian Refugees”:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/hHSlpH_1_Hk/m/NmoqvDC4BQcJ>

It is in this racist Ashkenazi context that we should understand who Rabbi Abadie is, and what he represents within the larger Jewish institutional world.

He was born in Lebanon, and is certainly familiar with the “Bourekas and Haminados” aspect of things, but his knowledge of the classical Sephardic literary-intellectual heritage is quite miniscule, and his antagonism towards the values of Jewish Humanism is well-known to those familiar with his ideological views.

You can read his personal story from the UAE press:

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/meet-the-uae-s-arabic-speaking-rabbi-in-residence-who-fled-lebanon-as-a-child-1.1099635>

His Arab-hatred and Islamophobia is pretty intense; making him the perfect stooge of the Ashkenazim.

It is something that I have sadly learned in a very personal way, because Abadie’s unhinged antagonism towards me and the SHU has led to some very ugly battles. And this because I have an intense love of Andalusian Convivencia and the promotion of the historic ties between Jews and Arabs, rather than the anti-Convivencia values espoused by Abadie and his allies Lyn Julius and Rabbi Marc Angel:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WXmmPlo2S1YQ7zpKkW8pbTqssJKkbEA7B78aRITmY1o/edit>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1V-uAEYS_aBAnDNMDPwvzIUFn9hbTy6n5jVknqrDTUN8/edit>

I have conveniently collected a number of these articles in the following file:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JtPX3hv4k6kIaTIMcK8dr4hzkLV1nyqKHtPnwXA2ewA/edit#heading=h.gjdgxs>

My tribute to the late Maria Rosa Menocal has often become a bone of contention with the Self-Hating Sephardim and the HASBARAH crowd, whose primary aim is to denigrate our cultural history and its Arabic elements:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e9Bi7Y12B3li38_PHne_JThpC67yhH1kJrSK48XXAX0/edit>

Abadie is certainly one of those Self-Hating Sephardim, and has been handsomely rewarded for his loyalty to the Ashkenazi racists.

One good turn always deserves another!

The ASF sent out the following e-mail announcement that puts it all into context:

<https://mailchi.mp/asf/jewish-life-in-the-arab-world?e=9f39c396e1>

Here is the official description:

**Jewish Life in the Arab World: A New Chapter?**

**Rabbi Abadie will discuss his personal journey and the significance of creating a rabbinic community on the Arabian Peninsula. The discussion will be introduce by Dr. Ronnie Perelis, Yeshiva University's Chief Rabbi Dr. Isaac Abraham and Jelena (Rachel) Alcalay Associate Professor of Sephardic Studies, and held in English (6 July) and en Español (7 Julio).**

The ASF, like the UAE Jewish Council, is led by Ashkenazim: Jason Guberman, founder of the HASBARAH institution DIARNA, who runs things with the help of Tikvah Straussian Aryeh Tepper, as I presented it in my article “Who Speaks for the Arab Jews?”:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/2HvxkcywnAU/m/I28hoxu-AwAJ>

The ASF now represents the slow and painful death of the Sephardim, caught in the lethal grip of the White Jewish Supremacy:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/jajhr47GRIg/m/rJCutt5sEwAJ>

The Abadie ASF program will be introduced by YU Sephardic Studies head Ronnie Perelis, yet another Ashkenazi:

<https://www.yu.edu/faculty/pages/perelis-ronnie>

He is also not much on promoting Convivencia and Sephardic culture, but apparently loves Leonard Cohen, as we saw in The Lehrhaus:

<https://www.thelehrhaus.com/culture/leonard-cohen-a-crack-in-everything-at-the-jewish-museum-a-review/>

If you are following all this repugnant White Jewish Supremacy so far, I would add the fact that Hebrew language instruction in the Gulf will also be in the hands of Ashkenazim:

<https://gulfnews.com/uae/uae-residents-begin-hebrew-courses-after-abraham-accords-1.77648224>

And, of course, the Kosher caterers are busy at work preparing Gefilte Fish:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/gefilte-in-the-gulf-abu-dhabi-tells-all-its-hotels-to-offer-kosher-food/>

It is a complete Ashkenazi-fest:

**The president of the Jewish Council of the Emirates, Ross Kriel, welcomed the news as a “wonderful expression of welcome and hospitality” by Abu Dhabi.**

**“This will benefit Jewish visitors as well as local residents who follow a kosher diet. As a long-time kosher resident of the UAE, this moment is reflective of the many ways in which our lives in the UAE are being transformed in the days since the Abraham Accord was announced.”**

It is all in the MISHPOCHEH for the Kriels:

**His wife, Elli Kriel, who owns the UAE’s first kosher catering business, hailed Abu Dhabi’s decision as well.**

**“The UAE is already known for its excellent service and standards for food production and this will ensure that it is extended to kosher travelers,” she said.**

**Elli’s Kosher Kitchen, her Dubai-based business, was responsible for food** [**served to Israeli journalists**](https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-kosher-banquet-and-a-paradigm-change-uae-signals-this-will-be-a-warm-peace/) **and some members of a joint US-Israel delegation to Abu Dhabi last week.**

And where we would be without the disgraced serial adulterer Rabbi Marc Schneier?

**“The announcement from Abu Dhabi demonstrates their commitment to building and growing Jewish life,” said Rabbi Marc Schneier of New York, who has close ties to several Gulf states and has been involved in efforts to provide kosher food to Jewish tourists in the region. “By instructing hotels to provide kosher food, they are opening their doors to Jewish travelers from around the world.”**

And, of course, the members of the Schneersohn-Christ community:

**Dubai-based Rabbi Levi Duchman, who is affiliated with the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, has for several months been bringing kosher food, including meat products, to the UAE for members of his community and Jewish visitors.**

Rest assured that the Kosher mafia is on the job:

**“As the Jewish community in the United Arab Emirates continues to grow and due to the influx of Jewish tourists, there is a need for kosher food and a certification that is internationally known,” said OU Kosher CEO Rabbi Menachem Genack. “We thank the UAE government for reaching out to us to provide this service and are looking forward to partnering with the local Jewish community to provide kosher food and certification.”**

**Rabbi Yissachar Krakowski of OU Kosher flew from Israel to the UAE to facilitate all of the kosher food approval for the Israeli delegation last week.**

**Krakowski has experience with kosher catering in the Gulf, having organized kosher meals for the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations when they visited the UAE and Saudi Arabia.**

**The group is one of the leading Orthodox Jewish organizations in the US and says that its kosher certification agency verifies over 1 million ingredients in over 100 countries.**

Indeed, it is hard to count all the Ashkenazim who will be profiting from the new arrangement!

But Kosher food is not all there is:

<https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/what-the-abraham-accords-has-changed/>

As we can clearly see from the article, the new arrangement is directly connected to Israeli business and tourism interests, rather than any real cultural engagement in the spirit of Andalusian Convivencia:

**People in Abu Dhabi and Dubai are studying Hebrew. Keffiyehs and kippahs are equally represented in myriad new professional and social forums. Etihad and El Al are crossing the same flight paths. Deals are being signed and investments made.**

**The next FedTalk sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey will explore the seismic regional shift set into motion by the Abraham Accords.**

**The speaker is Ze’ev Lavie, vice president for international relations and business development at the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce, Israel’s biggest and oldest business association.**

**Mr. Lavie said that when he flew to Bahrain with Israeli and American officials last September, it was the first time he’d ever taken off from Ben-Gurion International Airport and headed east. He marveled at Israelis’ sudden ability to travel over the vast sands of Saudi Arabia in airspace formerly forbidden to them. “I think one of the wonderful things about the Abraham Accords is how it changed the way we look at our region and Arabs in general,” he said.**

**“Israelis have had a certain type of encounter with Israeli Arabs and Palestinian Arabs, and haven’t had encounters with other Arabs, especially in very modern and developed countries like the UAE, which has an interesting and inspiring vision.”**

**His FedTalk will focus on the Abraham Accords’ regional economic implications for Israel, with an emphasis on tourism, investment, and trade with the UAE.**

Naturally, there is the Trumpscum Jewish connection:

**Mr. Lavie traveled to Bahrain with a delegation headed by then U.S. Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin. Bahrain, he learned, is the only country in the Middle East, other than Israel, that has a free trade agreement with the United States. Its proximity to Saudi Arabia can serve as a gateway for Israeli trade. In addition, he said, “The Bahrainis have a lot of motivation to create verticals like financial industries; they aim to be a global financial hub.” Israel has a strong fintech sector that is certain to figure into this equation.**

I hope this extensive review of the Gulf HASBARAH landscape makes the situation clear to you.

Apparently, the “New Chapter” of “Jewish Life in the Arab World” is fully controlled by the White Jewish Supremacy.

I could not have made it up even if I tried.

No Convivencia for you!

David Shasha

**Abraham Accords About People, Not Politicians**

By: Marc Schneier

There was no Benjamin Netanyahu, and no Donald Trump or Jared Kushner in Abu Dhabi or Dubai as an Israeli foreign minister set foot in the UAE for the first time.

But their absence in no way diminished the significance of Yair Lapid's historic visit. In fact, the shuffled deck of leaders now carrying the torch of Abraham Accords underscored the lasting value of last year's diplomatic breakthrough and put the focus on the benefits derived by the people of these two countries, and the region, and not the politicians.

In making the UAE an immediate priority, the message from Israel’s newly formed coalition government was clear: Its recent rapprochement with the UAE and three other Arab countries is bigger than any one government, president or prime minister, and will move forward.

By hosting Lapid, Emirati leaders delivered an equally powerful statement: Just as the new Middle East that suddenly burst into plain view last year has continued to develop after the end of the Trump presidency, so too will it broaden and deepen without Netanyahu as prime minister.

We are now truly living in a moment of great hope, and I say that not only because I have spent the last 15 years relentlessly pursuing the cause of Muslim-Jewish partnership, and Arab-Israeli understanding and coexistence. What has blossomed in recent months from the Mediterranean Sea to the Arab Gulf surpasses even these worthy causes.

We are seeing friendship and love. The atmosphere is more akin to a family reunion than the defrosting of ancient enmity. And these warm sentiments are having a positive effect throughout the world.

In recent weeks, I held meetings with the US-based ambassadors of the UAE, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan. One theme common to my discussions in Washington was the desire of many of these countries to maintain the momentum of the normalisation process from last September. No one described the passing of the baton from Netanyahu to Lapid and new Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett as cause for concern or lessened enthusiasm for a new regional dynamic.

Among the post-normalisation states, there is overwhelming interest in safeguarding their ties to Israel and leveraging these for the unique cultural and economic benefits they can yield. In those still holding out, there is greater hope for movement on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process that might allow them to explore a more public-facing position vis-à-vis Israel.

As one ambassador from the consortium I consulted told me, "Our relations with Israel are beyond leader-to-leader or even government-to-government; they are now about people-to-people. This relationship is built on our peoples."

The manifestations of a new people-to-people partnership are increasing daily, many of them behind the scenes. We all have seen – or even participated in – the previously unimaginable spectacle of tens of thousands of Israeli and Emirati tourists now able to visit each other’s country, or the manifold new startups, investments and business partnerships that have sprouted since the Accords.

But relationships are enrichening in subtler ways, too.

From North Africa through the Middle East to Central Asia, governments are more comfortably talking about a regional future that includes Israel. Arabs and Israelis are putting aside old stereotypes to familiarise themselves with each other’s cultural, historical and religious heritages, and how they can partner to advance tolerance, security and economic prosperity.

Contrary to many media misconceptions in the West, the process of rapprochement taking place is as much bottom-up as top-down in approach. And the gracious reception Lapid received in the UAE from government leaders and Emirati citizens and residents demonstrated the new spirit of unity emerging.

Countries across the world are closely watching the UAE's trailblazing efforts, gauging their next steps.

But as many ambassadors told me in recent days, something bigger than politics is stirring as governments and nations weigh the scenario for engaging Israel.

And as the UAE has shown the world, the people are ready for a new era of relations with Israel, and a more peaceful, tolerant and harmonious future.

Rabbi Marc Schneier is president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding and co-author with Imam Shamsi Ali of 'Sons of Abraham: A Candid Conversation About the Issues that Divide and Unite Muslims and Jews'.

*From The Khaleej Times, July 8, 2021*

**Kobi Oz: Israel’s Country Music Wizard**

By: Matti Friedman

Who is the most important Israeli musician of the last generation? Not the most gifted or popular, but the most influential, one without whom the country’s sound wouldn’t be the same?

My vote goes to Kobi Oz—the mix-track trickster, the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down, the Tunisian from a town of Moroccans who brought the South to Tel Aviv and changed what we mean by Israeli pop. Of course, more than one person is responsible for the rise of the once-disdained sound known by the generalization “Mizrahi,” or “Eastern,” which has become Israel’s spiritual equivalent of American country and western music, though the two genres sound absolutely nothing alike. If we must choose one musician responsible for the mainstreaming of the Israeli Eastern sound, it might be Oz.

Listening to Oz’s work over the past 30 years, you get a portrait of a changing country—one constantly in crisis but also one with an irrepressible life, a place that has given up on being someplace else and has come to terms with itself. Because Oz and his band broke through in the ’90s, the age of the music video, it’s actually possible to witness the crucial moments in their rise on YouTube, like the release of “In Newsprint” in 1993. The odds were stacked against the song, which has prickly lyrics about Israelis—describing them as people diverted by jokes, journalism, and self-delusion—and a complicated melody that changes rhythm abruptly in the middle and moves into explicitly Moroccan territory. The song was unlike anything people had heard before. It wasn’t immediately clear if the band was earnestly channeling the North African sound or laughing at it, as was common in those days, when Mizrahi culture was still mocked by the wardens of popular taste.

The record, the band’s second, was going nowhere at the time and the record company’s enthusiasm was flagging. As a lead singer, Oz was strange—small and antic with a braid, chunky glasses, and a smile that was engaging without quite being friendly, like he had a good joke but thought you might not get it. His band’s sound, the company was saying, was “too Arab.” He and his bandmates pooled most of the money they had, $600, and filmed [a video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRXOUwYVkeQ) in front of a live audience at a place in Jaffa that usually featured Greek singers. The crowd immediately hated both the band and the song—you can see it in the faces in the video. Were these guys Moroccan or Ashkenazi? What was this shit? Only when a popular Greek performer came onstage afterward did the crowd start dancing, relieved that Oz and his friends were gone. Oz told the cameraman to film that, then edited the clip so it looked like people were dancing to his own song. It worked: The video got airtime, “In Newsprint” became a classic, and the band never looked back.

“Humor is an incredible Israeli tool to win acceptance in society,” Oz said when we met in a Tel Aviv café; he ambled in with a leopard-print sunhat casting shade on his trademark glasses and goatee. He’s 51 now, nearly one of the elder statesmen of the pop scene, and everyone recognizes him on the street. “If you don’t want to be the kid who’s ignored,” he said, “it’s better to be the kid who people laugh at. If they laugh at you long enough, you’re one of the guys. You start laughing at yourself, and then you can laugh back at them.”

That observation has its roots in Sderot, the southern town where Oz was born in 1969. Sderot is now famous for being the favorite target of Palestinian rocket squads in nearby Gaza—many thousands of rockets have hit the town, and a child was killed there in the last round of fighting this spring. But when Oz was growing up in the ’70s and ’80s, Sderot was just a poor backwater whose residents were mostly a North African proletariat working in factories run by the socialists on nearby kibbutzim.

A working-class town with a rich culture spurned by the majority, containing talented musicians with no connections at any radio station or record company and no hope of getting anywhere near the mainstream—all of this seems to have created the electricity that put Sderot’s underground scene on the map. Hard rock was big in Sderot years before it made its mark in Tel Aviv. The town produced some important bands, a few of which made it and most of which broke up before any outsiders heard of them.

The town was also home to a second underground scene, inhabited by entertainers who’d play parties and weddings with Arabic songs and stage names like Sheikh Muijo and Filfel el-Masri. These were artists who’d come with the great migration to Israel from the Arab world and were doing their best to keep people’s spirits up in a country that was less welcoming than expected. They sang traditional music as well as protest songs coated in a kind of acid humor, which occasionally broke through as novelty hits. A good example from the 1950s was Filfel el-Masri’s [“Installments,”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1u0O640IoE) about people being convinced to buy now and pay later, or Jo Amar’s [“Unemployment Office,”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVzEmGq_wC8) about trying to catch a break as a Moroccan guy in a bureaucracy that favored people from Poland. Sderot was a small place, but it had a lot going on.

For Oz, the town’s key musical figure was (and remains) the guitarist Haim Uliel, son of Matatya, who was a cultural impresario and member of the Black Panthers, the anti-establishment Mizrahi protest group of the ’60s and ’70s. The younger Uliel started out in tight jeans and long hair playing Black Sabbath, then did a sharp U-turn back to the music he grew up with in his father’s café on the town’s main drag, Herzl Street. The café would host Jewish performers from North Africa and also Arab musicians who came over from nearby Gaza, which at the time wasn’t a ministate run by terrorists and surrounded by fences, but just a place down the road.

The scene at the Herzl Street café was sketchy, with uncouth men and women of disrepute, Uliel recalled when I met him at the little house next door where he grew up and still lives—an intense 65-year-old in shorts and flip-flops whose living room couch is occupied by a guitar case. But it was those people in low places who ended up keeping the old sounds alive. There was a door between the house and the café, and the denizens of the demimonde would sometimes wander into Haim’s kitchen. He’d wake up and find drummers asleep on the floor.

Uliel was, and remains, a combative character. He doesn’t have Oz’s drive for broad acceptance. Uliel’s band, Sfatayim (Lips), preserved the authentic Moroccan style, [playing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWrkfHv9A7M) with Western instruments but making few other efforts to draw the European ear. Uliel thought little not just of Ashkenazi music, but also of what passed for most “Mizrahi” music, which he disdained as nothing more than Greek songs played by Yemenis who were too eager to please the Man. His attitude was that if the mainstream wasn’t interested in real Moroccan music, the mainstream could take a hike.

“In those days there was this idea that the important thing was the Hebrew text, not the music,” Uliel said. “They thought music was education, but music doesn’t come to teach you—music wants to make you sad, or happy, or make you dance. If you want to educate people, do it in school.”

When Oz was 10, Uliel was in his 20s and running a local music festival. He brought Oz to perform, and then, when Oz was 15, signed him up to play keyboard for his band. The kid, Uliel recalls, was dedicated to music to the point of obsession. Oz, for his part, remembers that he was selected mainly “because I was there.” It was around this time that Kobi Oz became Kobi Oz; before adopting that stage name, he’d been Yaakov Uzan. They performed at Moroccan weddings across the country, and Oz remembers it as a kind of glorious boot camp. “As a kid, I had an amazing school of beat and groove—the thing was Africa, it was Morocco,” he said. “It was like playing with James Brown.”

At the same time, Oz was hanging out with a few teenage musicians from the kibbutzim around Sderot, which was rare—there wasn’t much contact between the two worlds. A few of them decided to form a band that would erase those borders, naming it for a brand of typewriter white-out, Tipp-Ex. (The joke, which is lost in the band’s English name, Teapacks, doesn’t make sense anyway to anyone under 40.) The kid from Sderot was going to be in charge, with the kibbutzniks backing him up.

They started playing kibbutz dining halls, the kind of gig where you had to sweep up afterward. By this time he’d bought a drum machine from one of the two stores in Israel that sold them, and a basic computer setup, and managed to convince the Sderot high school to let him matriculate in electronic music. The school didn’t have anyone who could test him on the subject, so they brought the closest thing, which was an electrician. Oz got 10 out of 10, which seemed great until his draft date came up and that perfect grade landed him a dead-end army job fixing electric systems in tanks. The band’s guitarist from Kibbutz Nir Am vanished into the Navy Commandos and they never saw him again, but when the army was done with them all, Gal Perelman from Kibbutz Nahal Oz was still there with the bass guitar, and Tamir Yemini from Kibbutz Ruhama on the drums, and Ram Yosifov signed up in Tel Aviv with a guitar and mandolin. All three are still with the band.

By now it was the late ’80s, and there were a few DJs at Army Radio who were interested in different sounds. Alon Olearchik, famous for playing guitar with the legendary comic-rock band Kaveret (Beehive), had come back from a few years playing in a Mediterranean club in Manhattan and scorched the local airwaves with a fusion hit about [a new kid on the block](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac33hnCIFvE). Oz got him to produce the band’s album, and they were off.

Their [first hit](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKjPO7YDa_0) was about a miracle-working charlatan, Rabbi Joe Kapara, a common type around the Israeli south. The idea was to sing specific songs about a specific place, like country music: You don’t drive a truck—you drive a flatbed Ford. You don’t sing about a woman, but about Jolene. And you’re not from just anywhere, you’re from Luckenbach, Texas, or Muskogee, or Sderot. (“When I hear country, I’m in my own country,” Oz said.)

What followed was a series of popular snapshots of a changing Israel: an [ode](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NblAQYrvHG8) to the grubby old bus station in Tel Aviv, which had been condemned in favor of a new station (which turned out to be worse); a [song](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TT9KHnj6Mes) about people sitting in cafés and jeeps, tuning everything out during a wave of suicide bombings; a funny-not-funny [“hora”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBnjY9mXNUQ) about the crass ills of Israel’s new prosperity. The Teapacks sound is immediately recognizable, and a lot of what’s common in the pop scene today can be traced to them—not just the normalizing of North African beats, but the ironic [accordion](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwpLIXdrHS0), or the employment of hip-hop verses followed by a Mizrahi [chorus](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuTap1mcUfc), which Oz can credibly claim to have pioneered with the 1993 song “[Monopoly Champion](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8omDfOhj9RU).”

Since then, while many Israeli musicians have drifted off to generic Western sounds (what Oz calls “disconnected post-Londonism”), the Mizrahi side of the music scene has become more unabashedly Jewish and Israeli. This is very much the Oz style, as is illustrated in one of his most important songs—one he didn’t write or compose, and which didn’t garner much attention when it appeared, or since.

It was a night in June 2001, and the band was performing with the Mizrahi pop queen Sarit Hadad, who’d become famous for singing with Teapacks a few years before. News began to arrive of a Palestinian suicide bombing at a nightclub in Tel Aviv; 21 people were dead, mostly teenagers. It’s the kind of situation Israeli artists have to deal with. Just this May, for example, I was at an outdoor concert in Jerusalem when a Hamas rocket barrage hit central Israel—half the audience got up to answer calls from frantic babysitters and the rest of us swiveled in our white plastic chairs to watch the little red explosions of Iron Dome interceptors in the sky to the west. The musicians kept playing. What else could they do?

Oz wasn’t going to call off the concert, but the situation needed to be addressed, so he decided to open with the national anthem, “Hatikva.” Why, I asked. “I always want to sing ‘Hatikva,’” he said. He and Hadad rehearsed a version that incorporated the style that Oz heard when his Tunisian grandfather sang the anthem. It was similar to what you can hear in a [remarkable recording](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iyfhu-xIRlw) from Tunis in 1932, which suggests not just a different kind of anthem, but a different Zionism.

Without adding a word, Oz’s version made a political point: The anthem might have been written by an East European but the song, and the country, belonged to people from Tunis as much as to anyone else.

The education minister, Limor Livnat of Likud, turned out to be in the crowd that night, and after the show, she asked them to record the song to be promoted in the country’s schools. Oz and Hadad duly rented a studio and sent her the recording, but never heard back; a committee of experts was apparently convened at the Education Ministry and was not amused. [Oz’s “Hatikva”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNvI9Fe-GM0) is my favorite version of the song, the one Israel needs now, as our society frays along ethnic and political lines and cries out for new ideas and sounds. When the officials turned up their nose, Oz released it anyway, including it as a bonus track on a greatest hits compilation in 2003. It will find the right ears.

*From Tablet magazine, July 8, 2021*

**The Perilous Path from Muslim to Christian**

By: Daniel Pipes

"More Muslims have come to faith in Jesus Christ over the last thirty years—and specifically over the last seven to ten years—than at any other time in human history" wrote [Joel Rosenberg](http://joshuafund.blogspot.com/2008/03/big-untold-story-in-middle-east-2008.html) in 2008, and the pace has intensified since then. [Uwe Siemon-Netto](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/where-muslim-dreams-may-lead-uwe-siemon-netto/) confirmed in 2016 that "a global phenomenon is underway: Muslims are converting to various Christian denominations in droves in every part of the world." Indeed, Christian missionaries have even coined a name and an abbreviation for them: Muslim-background believers, or MBBs.

Why is this trend taking place, what are the numbers involved, and what are the consequences?

### Background

Historically, nearly all conversions involved Christians becoming Muslim, not the reverse. Islam has for 1,400 years been the "[Hotel California](https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/eagles/hotel-california)" of religions ("You can check-out any time you like, But you can never leave"), as it prohibits adherents from either declaring themselves atheists or members of another faith, which from the Islamic point of view amount to the same thing. This attitude goes back to the religion's origins (a [Hadith](https://sunnah.com/search?q=Whoever+changes+religion+kill+him) quotes Muhammad, "Whoever changes his religion, kill him") and the sense that leaving Islam is akin joining the enemy and, thus, equals betrayal. Additionally, to live as a proper Muslim has a powerful social aspect, participating in the maintenance of communal solidarity.

Accordingly, apostate Muslims everywhere face rejection by their families, social ostracism, and loss of employment; in Muslim-majority countries, additionally, their governments may well persecute, imprison, torture, and kill them. Skeptical Muslims historically have therefore overwhelmingly stayed within the Islam's boundaries; even new religions deriving from Islam (the Druze, Nusayri/Alawi, Alevi, Babi, and Baha'i) initially do the same and long retain a murky relationship to it. The pattern still holds today, for example, with [Interuniversal Mysticism](https://de.qantara.de/content/abkehr-von-der-schia-im-iran-ein-tsunami-des-atheismus) (Erfan-e Halghe), a new-age version of Islam founded in Iran by Mohammad Ali Taheri.

As a result, historically only a trickle of [Muslims became Christians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_converts_to_Christianity_from_Islam). One accounting, by Church historian [David Garrison](https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/muslims-turning-to-christ-a-global-phenomenon/2056.article), finds 5 movements of Muslims to Christianity prior to the twentieth century and 69 such movements in just the first 12 years of the twenty-first. At least some of the first 5 movements occurred under duress or to gain a specific benefit. Most prominent of the former were the [Moriscos](http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/view?docId=ft958009jk&chunk.id=d0e4248&toc.depth=1&toc.id=&brand=eschol) in sixteenth-century Spain, pressured to convert by their Catholic rulers. On rare occasions, whole communities have converted to gain advantages, as I have [previously explained](https://books.google.com/books?id=bK00DwAAQBAJ&lpg=PT248&ots=UcUodlfWPG&dq=Muslims%20have%20become%20Christians%20russians%20rachmaninoff&pg=PT248#v=onepage&q=rachmaninoff&f=false):

In seventeenth-century Russia, a regulation prohibiting non-Christians from owning serfs led to the conversion of rich Tatars, including the ancestors of such luminaries as the musician Sergei Rachmaninoff, the poet and historian Nicholas Karamzin, and the novelist Ivan Turgenev. Around 1700, some ruling families among the Sunni Muslims in Lebanon converted to Christianity to increase their political standing.

Egypt's rule over Syria in 1831-41 was a time of mass conscription when "every eligible Syrian Muslim was recruited to the Egyptian army." [Yvette Talhamy](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00263206.2011.540380?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=fmes20) explains:

This was not welcomed by the local population. ... While some Syrians chose to flee the country or maim themselves in order to avoid conscription, others turned to the missionaries and declared their willingness to profess Christianity, since Christians were exempt from conscription in exchange for paying an exemption tax. The American Protestant missionaries were flooded with requests to accept Druze and others into their church.

(Sadly for the converts, this ploy failed, for they were conscripted "regardless of whether their conversion was real or feigned.")

The same disinclination held until recently. Visiting Sudan in February 1972, I stayed with an American missionary who had lived in Khartoum for twenty years, teaching and discreetly holding Sunday services. But he won only five converts in all that time, or one every four years. Similarly, in a 1984 book, [*Ten Muslims Meet Christ*](https://www.amazon.com/Muslims-Christ-William-McElwee-1984-12-03/dp/B01FGNDROQ), an American missionary tells the story of the meager results of missionizing in Iran.

### Numbers of Converts

MBBs can be notoriously difficult to quantify because of their discretion and even dissimulation. Still, some startling estimates exist. [Duane Alexander Miller and Patrick Johnstone](https://www.academia.edu/16338087/Believers_in_Christ_from_a_Muslim_Background_A_Global_Census) estimate the total number of MBBs in 2010 at nearly 10 million, marking a 50-fold increase over the fewer than 200,000 converts of fifty years earlier. Reports of widespread conversions of Muslims to Christianity come from regions as disparate as Algeria, [Albania](https://www.economist.com/europe/2008/12/30/conversion-rate), Syria, and [Kurdistan](http://www.washingtontimes.com/national/20060523-124029-4936r.htm). Countries with the largest indigenous numbers include Algeria, 380,000; Ethiopia, 400,000; [Iran](http://www.danielpipes.org/20489/iran-christian-boom), 500,000 (versus only 500 in 1979); Nigeria, 600,000; and Indonesia, an astounding 6,500,000 (due to [unique circumstances](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Indonesian_Revival/VB3SSAAACAAJ?hl=en)). According to [Andrew van der Bijl and Al Janssen](http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/books/secret-believers/235124), there are "even Christians in Medina and Mecca."

In Egypt, a Coptic source informs me, "great numbers of Muslims converted to Christianity after the 2011 uprising and the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power. The Coptic Church called Islamist President Mohamed Morsi the 'great evangelist' and stopped counting the converts. Go to any church and you'll almost certainly find former Muslims, especially women, attending."

Most dramatically, in a much-cited December 2000 interview on Al Jazeera television, the director of Libya's Companions' Lighthouse for the Science of Islamic Law (‏منارة الصحابة للعلوم الشرعية, *Manarat as-Sahaba li'l-'Ulum ash-Shar'iya*), [Ahmad al-Qat'ani](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36GyUvgmXhk&feature=youtu.be), stated without evidence that 6 million Muslims convert to Christianity each year. He reported that the Muslim population of Africa had gone from over half to just one third and raised the prospect of Islam disappearing from sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps he exaggerated for fundraising purposes, but his numbers have had wide circulation.

MBBs also live in the West, with the United States hosting by far the most (450,000) and Bulgaria the most in Europe (45,000). Since 2014, Liverpool Cathedral has hosted a weekly [service in the Persian language](http://www.liverpoolcathedral.org.uk/home/worship-here/iPersian-congregation.aspx) (called "Sepas") led by a deacon of Muslim origins; the Anglican [bishop of Chelmsford](https://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/news/article/next-bishop-of-chelmsford-announced), England, is an Iranian-born daughter of a convert. Muslim conversions increased the size of Berlin's [Evangelisch-Lutherischen Dreieinigkeits-Gemeinde](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/05/european-churches-growing-flock-muslim-refugees-converting-christianity) congregation from 150 to almost 700 in just two years. New institutions have been founded, such as the [Pars Theological Centre](https://www.parstheology.com/) in London, which since 2010 exists "to equip and mobilize the Iranian church by training a new generation of servant leaders to lead the church and transform the Persian-speaking world for the glory of God."

Vague and divergent numbers suggest that while no one has a good idea of the number of Muslims converting to Christianity, the magnitude is large. Christians celebrate this phenomenon; Joel Rosenberg exalts that "the Church is being truly resurrected in the lands of its birth."

### Why Muslims Become Christians

[Duane Miller](https://www.academia.edu/11059646/An_Exploration_of_Christs_Converts_from_Islam_Reasons_Given_for_their_Conversions) notes that "Christ's converts from Islam are often driven away from Islam as much as they are drawn to Christ or Christianity." Focusing here only on the factors that propel Muslims specifically toward Christianity finds the list to be long.

**Dreams and visions**, especially of Jesus, probably draw about a [quarter of MBBs](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/october/42.80.html). [Mike Ansari](https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2018/january/exclusive-jesus-is-building-his-church-inside-iran-millions-watching-christian-satellite-tv), an Iranian convert, reports that many people "are actually having dreams and visions about a shining man dressed in white far before we are out there telling them about Jesus." [Dabrina Bet Tamraz](https://www.jihadwatch.org/2020/02/iranians-are-losing-their-islamic-religion) notes that Iranian converts often ask each other, "Have you seen the white[-robed] man, have you seen Jesus?" The [leader of a Presbyterian church in Pakistan](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2016/01/muslims-dreaming-about-jesus/) found that Afghan imams were traveling hundreds of kilometers to study the Bible with him. When asked what prompted them to do so, the minister replied: "Dreams! Christ had appeared to them in their sleep and instructed them to come here to hear the truth." And in Colorado, Pastor George Naeem who conducts classes in Arabic via the radio and the Internet reports that "Virtually all [his students] came following dreams."

[Michael Stollwerk](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/where-muslim-dreams-may-lead-uwe-siemon-netto/) tells of the time after a service at the cathedral of Wetzlar north of Frankfurt: "I stood at the exit, still vested, bidding the worshipers goodbye, when a veiled woman approached me. I fumbled through a slit in my robe for my wallet, thinking she was a beggar. 'No, no,' she said. 'I only have a question: Are you the imam here?' I answered: 'Well, in a way I am – I am the pastor.' She went on: 'In that case you are the right man. God commanded me in a dream to go to the big church on the market square and ask the imam for the truth'." She was baptized several months later. [Siemon-Netto](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/where-muslim-dreams-may-lead-uwe-siemon-netto/), who recounts these stories, goes on:

Next I heard of similar episodes from a Lutheran theologian whom imams visited through his back door in the middle of the night in Egypt for the same purposes; I heard it from a Catholic missionary who had worked in Algeria, from a Baptist whose surprise visitors told him that Christ had appeared to them in their tents in Saudi Arabia. An Anglican priest spoke of hundreds of Persian women attending secret Bible studies in Tehran following dreams. Pastor Gottfried Martens in Berlin estimated that at least two-thirds of his Persian and Afghan converts had followed the instructions of a "figure of light" identifying himself as the Jesus of the Christian Bible and not the "Isa" of the Koran.

[Nabeel Qureshi](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/where-muslim-dreams-may-lead-uwe-siemon-netto/) a Pakistani MBB, explained this common pattern with reference to Islam: "Dreams are the only means by which the average Muslim expects to hear directly from God."

Muslims open minded enough to read **the Bible** tend to be impressed by its contrast with the Koran, especially its emphasis on love. [Wasef](https://world.wng.org/2006/07/quiet_currents) explains: "When they read the Bible, [it] changes them right away. It's better than any talk or any debates. When I sit down and talk with [Muslims], all that I say is from the Bible."

There's a widespread sense among Muslims, supported even by Muslim-sponsored research studies, that **Christians behave better** than Muslims, that they behave, ironically, [more Islamically](http://www.danielpipes.org/14663/islamic-muslims). In a 2014 interview watched over 400,000 times on YouTube, a completely covered woman who gives her name as [Shadya Sabir Hussein](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3Tcsw6Gtj8) publicly declares on Egyptian television that she "hates Islam" and plans to become Christian because of all the killing that Muslims engage in. An Iraqi scholar noted that problems in [Iraq](http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iraq/2007/05/iraq-070521-irin01.htm) have caused "many of our youths [to] convert to Christianity, after defaming Islam as a terrorist religion." The [Algerian crisis](https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2001/01/04/retour-en-grace-du-christianisme) of the 1990s had a similar impact: all those deaths in the name of Islam led many to declare that **"**Christianity is life, Islam is death."

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), by dint of its brutality, has enhanced this trend. [Omar, a Protestant church administrator](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/life-under-isis-led-these-muslims-christ-n963281), testifies that "Most of the brothers here converted or come to church as a result of what ISIS did to them and to their families." Jasim, a mechanic, was jailed by ISIS for six months in 2016 for not knowing the basics of Islam, during which time ISIS forced him to read the Quran and tortured him: "After I witnessed their brutality with my own eyes, I started to be skeptical about my belief." He visited a church and "It didn't take me long to discover that Christianity was the religion I was searching for."

Issues of **peace and violence** loom large in the conversion stories. Mark Durie informs me, "In my experience many Muslims from Muslim-majority countries are quite traumatized, and inner peace is a constant theme." Iran's Intelligence Minister [Mahmoud Alavi](https://fa.shafaqna.com/news/743778/) confirmed this when quoting the motives of converts: "We are looking for a religion that could give us peace of mind." [Sadegh](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/05/european-churches-growing-flock-muslim-refugees-converting-christianity), now Johannes, started to doubt his faith while studying at the university in Iran: "I found that the history of Islam was completely different from what we were taught at school. Maybe, I thought, it was a religion that began with violence? A religion that began with violence cannot lead people to freedom and love. Jesus Christ said 'those who use the sword will die by the sword.' This really changed my mind."

**Personal contact** with Christians who live righteously has a frequent role in conversion stories. [Mohammad Eghtedarian](https://liverpool.anglican.org/admin/Mohammad-Eghtedarian) stayed with a priest for six days, opening the opportunity for the priest to ask him the question that changed his life: "Do you have peace and freedom in Islam?"

Then there are the practical reasons for conversion. That Islam and Muslims are **lagging behind** the rest of the world prompts some Muslims to wish to get ahead by joining Christianity, sensing that doing so means joining [the modern team](http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2006/11/muslims-lagging-behind).

Finally, conversion can be undertaken with the expectation of **material gain**. London's *Daily Telegraph* reports that some ["Rice Christians" in Lebanon](https://web.archive.org/web/20170130123851/https%3A/www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/30/muslim-refugees-converting-christianity-find-safety/) "say they converted to benefit from the generous aid distributed by Christian charities" and recounts the story of Ibrahim Ali, an impoverished Syrian whom the Anglican Church of God in a Beirut suburb offered "a bed, two hot meals a day and a small monthly stipend, on the condition he agreed to attend their weekly Bible study sessions." Ali explains that he converted for practical reasons, as did others.

### Observations

Three thoughts on the process of conversion. First, although some Christian spokesmen ([Zakariya Botros](https://www.nationalreview.com/2008/03/islams-public-enemy-1-raymond-ibrahim/), [Jay Smith & David Wood](https://trinities.org/blog/jay-smith-and-david-wood-on-religious-confrontation-vs-dialogue/)) criticize Islam, this has limited utility in attracting Muslims. [Jill Nelson](https://world.wng.org/2006/07/quiet_currents) paraphrases Wasef: "Public debates between Muslims and Christians are not effective ministry tools, and Christian literature is usually ineffective as well. ... Statements such as those made by prominent evangelical leaders calling Islam 'wicked' and criticizing Muhammad also tend to drive Muslims away from Christianity." [Victor Atallah](https://world.wng.org/2006/03/medium_and_message) of the Middle East Reformed Fellowship concurs: "We have to be careful not to condemn Muhammad but also not to condone him."

Second, traditional missionary efforts by Westerners, such as providing education and treating the ill, plays a surprisingly minor role in winning converts. Radio and television broadcasts, some founded and led by MBBs, have largely replaced them, including Radio Monte Carlo, SAT-7 International, METV, High Adventure Ministries, Voice of Christ Media, and Middle East Reformed Fellowship. An Algerian newspaper explained the role of these stations in [Kabylie](https://www.meforum.org/104/christianity-is-life), the most intensely Berber (or Amazigh) region of Algeria:

The faithful whom we met have confirmed that information had, in their view, an important role in the legitimization of Christian doctrines. Like Saïd – who confessed that he listens a lot to Radio Monte Carlo and particularly its popular broadcasts in Amazigh. As for Slimane, he declares that "80 percent of the reasons which impelled me towards Christianity came from Radio Monte Carlo." There are also other radio stations such as "Miracle Channel" (SAT-7), and most of the faithful confirmed that they listen to these stations which broadcast the Christian message across the world.

Country-specific stations, such as Aghapy TV for Egypt or Elam Ministries, Iran Alive Ministries, Mohabat TV, and Nejat TV for Iran, also have a substantial impact. [Ansari](https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2018/january/exclusive-jesus-is-building-his-church-inside-iran-millions-watching-christian-satellite-tv) explains about Mohabat TV: "It appears that roughly about 16 million Iranians within the last 12 months have viewed one or more of our programs on satellite TV and also on their mobile devices. That roughly translates to about 20 percent of Iran's population."

Third, if foreign missionaries provided the initial spark, MBBs drive much of the current Evangelization of Muslims. Christianity has become dynamic again among believers in its home region.

### Pious Frauds

Some Muslims convert tactically for practical reasons, especially to facilitate emigration to the West. A Church of God pastor, Said Deeb, quotes desperate Muslims telling him, "Just baptize me, I will believe in whoever just to leave here." [National Public Radio](https://www.npr.org/2018/12/14/669662264/iranians-are-converting-to-evangelical-christianity-in-turkey) paraphrases Şebnem Köşer Akçapar of Koç University in Istanbul to the effect that "only some of the refugees are genuine converts. Others are using religious persecution as a way to get to the West." [Aiman Mazyek](https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A/%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%88-%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%A1-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85/581149), head of the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland, reacts with acute skepticism about growing numbers of Muslim converts to Christianity.

Once in the West, conversion has two advantages. It can facilitate permission to remain, as governments (whatever their theoretical neutrality) sometimes favor Christian migrants; and it renders repatriation more difficult by putting the migrants in danger of persecution back home for abandoning Islam. As [Volker Kauder](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/july-august/germany-refugee-muslim-christian-convert-asylum-claims.html), a leader of the Christian Democratic Union, points out: "Once someone has renounced Islam, regardless of whether or not he authentically converted to Christianity, he can be prosecuted for apostasy. When it comes to political persecution, those who persecute do not care about the authenticity of a conversion."

Accordingly, more than a few converts have dubious spiritual credentials. [Rick Robinson](https://www.npr.org/2018/12/14/669662264/iranians-are-converting-to-evangelical-christianity-in-turkey) of the United Pentecostal Church in Turkey accepts that many of his congregants may not come to him as completely sincere believers: "There might even be some who start with the help just for the refugee status." Gottfried Martens, the Persian-speaking pastor of the [Evangelisch-Lutherische Dreieinigkeitskirche](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/05/european-churches-growing-flock-muslim-refugees-converting-christianity) in Berlin, acknowledges not knowing which converts are genuine and which are tactical: "I know there are — again and again — people coming here because they have some kind of hope regarding their asylum." Vesam Heydari, a member of that church confesses that "The majority of Iranians here are not converting out of belief. They only want to stay in Germany." The congregation of Reverend [Hugo Gevers](https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/may/12/iran-converted-christians-sanctuary-germany-muslim) in Leipzig is one-third former Iranian Muslim; he admits that "There were occasions where we were very deeply disappointed. We were supporting them for years, they had the court case and a positive answer – and the same day they separated from us." But he notes that entirely false conversions are low, especially since pastors have adopted protocols to identify fakers.

More broadly, one should not over-estimate the number of fraudsters. Berlin's [Martens](https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/may/12/iran-converted-christians-sanctuary-germany-muslim) observes that "there is really a kind of Christian awakening in Iran at the moment with pretty large dimensions. People who come to us have already had these contacts with house churches and have had to flee because of that."

### Muslim Accusations

Worried about "a Christian surge," Joel Rosenberg observes, "Muslim leaders are becoming nervous and angry."They focus on pious frauds and accuse all converts of switching religions for personal gain, such as funding, a job, or a visa. This has the convenient advantage of both discrediting MBBs while absolving themselves of responsibility. Such accusations are particularly common in locales like northern Iraq and Algeria, where conversions of Kurds and Berbers are unusually high.

Soon after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, [Muslim World League](https://www.spacedaily.com/2003/030415140312.qw7i10sy.html) Secretary-General Abdullah al-Turki warned that "non-Muslim organizations" (meaning Christian missionaries) had entered Iraq "to start their activity under the cover of providing humanitarian aid" and warned of "the dangers this poses to Muslims." Ahmed al-Shafie of the Association of Muslim Scholars in [Sulaymaniyah](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/fr/node/236842), Iraq, denounced a supposed secret influx of Christian missionaries: "We strongly condemn this disgraceful act against Islam and Muslims which demonstrates that there are hidden hands with foreign agendas [working] to destroy the society of this country." Another Muslim figure in [Sulaymaniyah](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/fr/node/236842) repeated this accusation in 2007: "Missionaries are exploiting the harsh economic situation that these youths experience in these areas as they are unemployed and almost depressed. In some cases, the youths want to go abroad and [conversion to Christianity] is an easy way to achieve their dream as they can say that they are threatened and need a safe haven."

In 2006, an official at [Algeria](https://www.resiliencetv.fr/2006/05/22/761/)'s Ministry of Religious Affairs, Mohamed Aissa, claimed that Christian missionaries entice local Muslims with such offers and "profit from the confusion of youths to convert them." (He also noted that "Numerous youths have repented, returning to Islam.") That same year, [Algeria](https://eclj.org/algeria-bans-muslims-from-learning-about-christianity)'s government passed a law prohibiting "anyone urging or forcing or tempting, to convert a Muslim to another religion" on pain of 2-to-5 years in prison and a fine of €5,000-€10,000. [Two Muslim converts](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2008/07/03/condamnation-de-deux-algeriens-convertis-au-christianisme_1065896_3212.html) to Christianity were sentenced to two years in prison and €5,000 fines under this law in 2008 for "proselytizing and the illegal practice of a non-Islamic religion."

### Living as a Christian

Winning MBBs is half the battle; getting them to stay Christian is the other half. A study of returnees to Islam in Indonesia by [Julia Sianturi](https://search.proquest.com/openview/8e28754e6cbb7465e16e3d6b24f07c64/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y) found several factors driving their actions:

Strong attachment to their family and deep Islamic roots seem to be the major leading causes to their decision to return to Islam. Discrimination from surrounding community and the divinity of Jesus might have some influence in their decision making. And their disappointment toward pastoral ethics raises a concern due to its effects on MBBs' perception of the church and Christianity.

So great are these difficulties, [Andrew van der Bijl and Al Janssen](http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/books/secret-believers/235124) acknowledge that "at least half of all Muslim converts [to Christianity] return to Islam." To address this issue, [Duane Miller](https://www.regnumbooks.net/products/i-will-give-them-an-everlasting-name) wrote a book with ideas on providing unprecedented numbers of MBBs with "a new and welcoming home."

Converts who do remain Christian face various challenging alternatives:

1. Keep their conversion quiet by maintaining complete secrecy and continuing with the appearance and habits of a Muslim. Many, [Nelson](https://world.wng.org/2006/07/quiet_currents) notes, still don "traditional Muslim dress to avoid the consequences of their conversions." In some cases, they even maintain the myriad of Islamic customs and rituals. But this means suffering from deep solitude and moral failure. The pressure can become unbearable.

2. Announce the change of faith (or confiding in a close relative or friend who, outraged by the news, betrays the convert's trust) leads to MBBs having their world turned upside-down. They face unremitting and sometime violent pressure from family, society, and government, a sense of isolation, and a loss of income. They [cannot leave](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-religion-ruling/malaysias-lina-joy-loses-islam-conversion-case-idUSSP20856820070530) their Muslim identity. They may be forcibly treated for mental illness. When only one spouse converts, marriages can be broken up and contact with children lost. In Muslim-majority countries, authorities typically refuse to acknowledge conversions out of Islam, trapping MBBs legally as Muslims; female converts who may only marry fellow Muslims as their identity cards list them as Muslims, are limited to marrying male MBBs. Ironically, born-Christians avoid MBBs, and established churches reject them, leery of being accused of having been party to their conversions and punished accordingly. As one priest cruelly put it, converts "need to keep quiet about their belief in our Lord, or we all will suffer."

3. Relocate to another city to make a fresh start as born-Christians means leaving family behind, starting new social relationships and earning a quiet living, while ever fearful of recognition or exposure.

4. Emigrate to [non-Muslim-majority countries](https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/may/12/iran-converted-christians-sanctuary-germany-muslim) may seem like the perfect solution, but it is not. Beyond the strains of re-establishing one's life anew, usually with a new language, Islamic pressure can continue unrelentingly even there. Some MBBs remain scared of their home governments and so live in "an atmosphere laden with overwhelming suspicion." One convert observes that "Maybe someone inside the church is one of them." Accordingly, "refugees are careful to keep their distance from each other, never revealing information about their cases or details of their lives back home." Women face special problems. As the [European Centre for Law and Justice](https://eclj.org/religious-freedom/french-institutions/la-persecution-des-chretiens-ex-musulmans-en-france) notes about France, "a significant proportion of the converted women are threatened with being forcibly married, sent to their parents' country of origin or sequestered as long as they do not return to Islam. In infrequent [and] increasingly rare cases, converts are lynched or even killed by Islamists." Thus do the fear and loneliness continue.

### Conclusion

Substantial voluntary conversions from Muslim to Christian amount to a historic novelty, one that alters a venerable imbalance, whereby Islam almost invariably poached believers at Christianity's expense. This turnaround has potentially great implications for how Muslims see themselves and their religion; the traditional confidence deriving from one-way conversions no longer holds; will something else replace it; or will this vulnerability undermine Muslim confidence? The implications run deep.

Conversions to Christianity, in turn, make up part of a larger move away from Islam, one that also includes conversion to other religions (especially [Zoroastrianism](https://www.jihadwatch.org/2020/04/kurds-attempt-return-to-a-zoroastrian-future) among Kurds and [Hinduism](https://web.archive.org/web/20141225172232/https%3A/www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-india-conversions-20141225-story.html) among Indians; Judaism and Buddhism also attract converts) as well as the adoption of deism and atheism. Together, these related trends pose a seldom-noticed but significant development that go far to negate the widely-noted Islamist surge of the past half-century. Indeed, they can potentially undo that surge.

*From The National Interest, July 12, 2021*

**William Gardner Smith: A Black Writer Found Tolerance in France, and a Different Racism**

By: James Hannaham

When William Gardner Smith submitted what would be his final novel, **THE STONE FACE (New York Review Books, paper, $16.95),** to a French publisher, his friend and biographer LeRoy Hodges recalled, the editor told Smith it was “very courageous to have written the book, but we can’t publish it in France.” How could a courageous novel by an established writer have met with such immediate dismissal? In America, “The Stone Face” (1963) had been accepted by Farrar, Straus, like Smith’s three previous novels. Why not France?

The answer is more complicated than the rejection. In 1951, [Smith](https://www.nytimes.com/1974/11/08/archives/william-gardner-smith-author-and-newspaperman-dies-at-47.html), a Black journalist and novelist from Philadelphia, joined the celebrated cadre of [African American expatriates](https://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/19/books/lights-of-the-city.html) who made France their home in the mid-20th century. He was a close friend of Richard Wright, and often shared the illustrious company of James Baldwin, Chester Himes and others. Smith, for his part, was a wunderkind. Before leaving Temple University, he’d established himself as a journalist for the Black-owned Pittsburgh Courier. Farrar, Straus published his first novel, “The Last of the Conquerors,” in 1948, when he was only 21 years old. Like his peers, he felt France would provide a safe haven from the bigotry and violence he had experienced at home; he may also have hoped that the move would save his marriage. While abroad, he made his living as an editor and a correspondent for Agence France-Presse in Paris, and helped start a TV station in Ghana.

Smith’s fiction belies a lifelong skepticism. His books, now mostly out of print, are sometimes referred to as protest novels, and while they tackle social issues, they’re far from prescriptive; none ever provides an easy answer. “The Last of the Conquerors” details the experiences of a Black soldier in Germany after World War II who realizes that he has found more acceptance in what was enemy territory than he ever did in his own country. “The Stone Face” represents the maturing of a voice determined to confound preconceived notions about patriotism, Blackness and sanctuary, and accordingly the story takes no prisoners, so to speak.

The Algerian War began in 1954, three years after Smith arrived in France. As a reporter, Smith knew the details of the conflict and couldn’t ignore the parallels he saw between his treatment by whites at home and the anti-Arab sentiments he witnessed in his adopted country. With semi-autobiographical overtones, “The Stone Face” traces the journey of Simeon Brown, a journalist and aspiring painter who, like Smith, hails from Philadelphia. Brown has lost an eye in a racially motivated attack and comes very close to avenging his mutilation, but his gun jams. Shaken, he moves to France, claiming, “I left to prevent myself from killing a man.”

Brown quickly jumps into the buoyant Black expatriate lifestyle, and takes up with a Jewish woman, a Polish refugee haunted by memories of the Nazi camps. He can’t help noticing that while he enjoys exceptional good will from his host nation, the French treat Algerians with a casual bigotry he immediately recognizes. What’s more, the Arabs notice him noticing. “How does it feel to be a white man?” asks an Algerian he has accidentally gotten into trouble with the law.

Like Smith’s expatriate pals, Brown’s brethren warn him against getting involved in French politics lest he seem ungrateful, get deported, or worse. This very issue makes one Black expat in the story do bizarre mental gymnastics to avoid making the connection Brown makes so easily. “Algerians are white people,” Brown’s closest Black émigré pal warns. “A black man’s got enough trouble in the world without going about defending white people.” Still, the empathetic Brown’s intensifying friendships with two Algerians — Ahmed, a student, and Hossein, the man he originally wronged, who turns out to be an Algerian militant — draw Brown deeper into the struggle. And then it blows up.

In real life, on Oct. 17, 1961, the French police killed an estimated 100 to 300 Algerian protesters. (Official reports, which surfaced only in 1998, put the number closer to 40.) According to some accounts, the authorities tied a number of people’s hands behind their backs and threw them into the River Seine to drown. The international press downplayed the incident, and the French government suppressed and censored it in the media for decades. It isn’t clear whether Smith witnessed any of the events of Oct. 17 firsthand. In the novel, he shifts the date of the violence to Oct. 1, perhaps to avoid suggesting too exact a parallel. However, Brown’s harrowing account of this event proves to be the climax of “The Stone Face,” which takes its title from Smith’s description of a portrait of the face of indifference and hatred that Brown struggles to complete.

“Simeon,” Smith writes, “saw old men clubbed after they had fallen to the ground, sometimes by five or six policemen at a time, their bodies beaten after the men were dead. In scenes of terrible sadism, Simeon saw pregnant women clubbed in the abdomen, infants snatched from their mothers and hurled to the ground. Along the Seine, police lifted unconscious Algerians from the ground and tossed them into the river.”

This passage would be the only depiction of the massacre in literature until Didier Daeninckx’s novel “Meurtes Pour Mémoire” (“Murder in Memoriam”) was published more than 20 years later, in 1984. Now, “The Stone Face” has been reissued by New York Review Books, and will finally appear in France this year, when Éditions Christian Bourgois will publish a translation in October, on the 60th anniversary of the massacre.

“It’s peculiar,” Smith reportedly said when the French publisher rejected “The Stone Face.” “You can do things in the States, you can say things in the States, that you can’t say in most other countries. And yet you feel so free in France, on an everyday level.” Yet Smith’s novel could’ve ignited controversy in the United States on multiple counts, depicting as it does the overwhelming violence of American racial dynamics; France’s brutality, including murder and sexual assault; and explicit romantic relationships between racial groups. He rips the romanticism off Black émigrés, making them look frightened and decadent, like “a new Lost Generation,” as Simeon’s friend Babe Carter puts it. Smith doesn’t even spare the ostensible victims of the story. In one scene, Hossein gets taken to task for spouting anti-Semitic rhetoric — admitting that he hates Jews more than he hates the French — in front of Brown’s Holocaust-survivor girlfriend. Smith would not have recognized a sacred cow if he’d had to milk it.

Yet no one batted an eyelash when the novel got published in America. The editors suggested a change to the hero’s trajectory at the end, but gave no hint that Smith had chosen any improper subject matter at all. (Literature was way ahead of television in 1963.) On the level of sheer verbiage, it turns out, America gets closer to being the democracy it claims it is. Perhaps this is what enabled Black American novelists to make a living criticizing America from the safety of France in the first place. Our appetite for scandal, outrage and gore almost always trumps our desire and ability to silence others.

Were a description of a massacre like the one at the heart of “The Stone Face” to appear in an American novel, its level of truth would merely become the subject of debate even if a viral video surfaced. Fiction for us is not the lie that tells the truth, as Camus put it, but the lie that could still be just a goddamn lie. For better or for worse, the cacophony permitted by the First Amendment both protects and damages the dangerous truths fiction can tell by drowning them out with meaningless noise. Posed with a hypothetical situation similar to Smith’s, in which a novel by an established author were to excavate new unpleasant truths about shameful American atrocities, my own publisher, Michael Pietsch, chief executive of Hachette Book Group, told me, “I can imagine a publisher thinking it would create a lot of attention, and that would help us sell it.”

*From The New York Times, July 13, 2021*

**The World of Egyptian Jewish Literature**

By: Jean Nag­gar

*Literary Map of Egypt*

[*https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/sites/default/files/images/Jewish%20Literary%20Map%20of%20Egypt.jpg*](https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/sites/default/files/images/Jewish%20Literary%20Map%20of%20Egypt.jpg)

“This is the bread of afflic­tion which our ances­tors ate in the land of Egypt,” we read in the Hag­gadah, which tells the sto­ry of the Jews’ bib­li­cal exo­dus from a coun­try where they had risen to be Pharaon­ic coun­selors and end­ed as slaves. The exis­tence of Jews in Egypt — and lit­er­a­ture con­cern­ing it — stretch­es far into the past. It is also inex­tri­ca­ble from loss and exile.

As Adi­na Hoff­man and Peter Cole relate in Sacred Trash, the Cairo Geniza — a trove of doc­u­ments and reli­gious texts dis­card­ed by Cairo’s Jew­ish com­mu­ni­ty — was dis­cov­ered in an attic above the Ibn Ezra Syn­a­gogue in 1896. These doc­u­ments, which attest to a thou­sand-year span of Jew­ish life in North Africa and the East­ern Mediter­ranean, have inspired mod­ern-day writ­ers to exam­ine over­looked eras of the region. Schol­ar Eve Krakows­ki, for exam­ple, has used them to recon­struct the life of ado­les­cent Jew­ish girls in Egypt in medieval times.

The 1700s saw an influx of Jew­ish immi­grants — some from Europe, oth­ers from Syr­ia, Turkey, Iraq, and else­where in the Mid­dle East — who set­tled in Cairo and Alexan­dria. Many of them embraced Egypt­ian nation­al­i­ty, and enjoyed com­fort and oppor­tu­ni­ty for gen­er­a­tions. Jacque­line Shohet Kahanoff, born in 1917 in Cairo, grew up at a time when the coun­try was still home to a plu­ral­is­tic, cos­mopoli­tan soci­ety. Although she emi­grat­ed when she was in her twen­ties, she remained deeply attached to her Egypt­ian ori­gins. For the young pro­tag­o­nist of her unfin­ished nov­el Tam­ra, the ​“three tri­an­gles of the pyra­mids, out­lined against the sky, or dim­ly per­ceived through a veil of haze” have become a source of nos­tal­gia, link­ing her to a more dis­tant past: ​“because at the dawn of his­to­ry her own Hebrew ances­tors had been so dra­mat­i­cal­ly involved in Egypt, she felt this world clos­er to her than any in which she had lived in so tran­sient a manner.”

Nos­tal­gia is also a pre­dom­i­nant emo­tion in lit­er­a­ture writ­ten by Jews who were forced to leave the coun­try decades lat­er. My own pater­nal ances­tors were among those who set­tled in Egypt in the 1700s. Seat­ed at our seder table in Cairo in the mid-twen­ti­eth cen­tu­ry, my fam­i­ly nev­er con­sid­ered the Hag­gadah prophet­ic. But in 1956, the reli­gious free­dom and diver­si­ty encour­aged dur­ing the Ottoman occu­pa­tion of Egypt van­ished. With­in a few years after the Suez Cri­sis, approx­i­mate­ly 25,000 Jews were expelled from or fled the coun­try, many los­ing their Egypt­ian pass­ports as well as the land they con­sid­ered home.

Intent on gain­ing a new foothold in the world, Jew­ish refugees from Egypt focused on rebuild­ing their lives — main­tain­ing scat­tered fam­i­ly con­nec­tions and cling­ing to famil­iar rit­u­als while find­ing homes and careers. At first, many were unable emo­tion­al­ly to look back. But as the years went by, we felt a grow­ing need to pre­serve the mem­o­ries that made each of us who we are — and made Egypt what it once was.

Until I read André Aci­man’s mem­oir, Out of Egypt, I’d nev­er encoun­tered a book that reflect­ed the world of my child­hood to me. I mar­veled at the beau­ty and evoca­tive ener­gy of Aciman’s writ­ing. Lat­er I dis­cov­ered oth­er books that gave me a new sense of the com­plex social, eco­nom­ic, and cul­tur­al diver­si­ty that informed the Jew­ish Egypt­ian expe­ri­ence, such as Joyce Zonana’s Dream Homes, Luci­enne Carasso’s Grow­ing Up Jew­ish in Alexan­dria, and Yitzhak Gormezano Goren’s Alexan­dri­an Sum­mer.

For Amer­i­can read­ers, one of the most impact­ful books on the sub­ject has been Lucette Lagnado’s best­selling mem­oir The Man in the White Shark­skin Suit.Born in Cairo the year of the Suez Cri­sis, Lagna­do immi­grat­ed to New York when she was a young child, and even­tu­al­ly became a reporter for The Wall Street Jour­nal. Her mem­oir about her father high­lights the pain of exile for those who had been thrown into a con­text for which they had no lan­guage. It also intro­duced read­ers to a Sephardic his­to­ry of which many peo­ple were unaware.

Poets of the Jew­ish Egypt­ian dias­po­ra have also described the anguish of expul­sion. Edmond Jabès, for exam­ple — whose family’s roots in Egypt stretched back to the fif­teenth cen­tu­ry — was among those who left Cairo for France in 1956. His lat­er work reflect­ed a deep sense of melan­choly, and the real­iza­tion that exile is a per­ma­nent state of mind for Jews no mat­ter their ori­gins or cur­rent home.

Jew­ish Egypt­ian lit­er­a­ture rev­els in the taste and scent of food. Lagna­do recounts that her Syr­i­an grand­moth­er believed apri­cots were ​“the fruit of God” and fla­vored near­ly every dish she cooked with their tangy sweet­ness; both Lagna­do and Aci­man remem­ber eat­ing pas­tries in Cairo’s cafes. The most icon­ic Jew­ish food writer to have emerged from Egypt is undoubt­ed­ly Clau­dia Roden. Although many of her cook­books are wide in geo­graph­ic reach, Roden acknowl­edges the impor­tance that her for­ma­tive years in Egypt had on her career. In The New Book of Mid­dle East­ern Food, she explains that the Egypt­ian megadar­ra (rice, lentils, and caramelized onions) was known as ​“Esau’s favorite.” It was a favorite in our house­hold as well as in hers; my grand­moth­er from Dam­as­cus pro­nounced it ​“muju­dra,” and ate it with yogurt.

One of the most deeply evoca­tive nov­els about Egypt from the past few years is Michael David Lukas’s The Last Watch­man of Old Cairo. Inter­twin­ing plot­lines from three dif­fer­ent eras, it fol­lows Jew­ish, Mus­lim, and Chris­t­ian char­ac­ters con­nect­ed to the Ibn Ezra Syn­a­gogue and its extra­or­di­nary geniza. In addi­tion to the country’s unique mix of reli­gions and cul­tures, Lukas con­veys the mag­ic that draws those who left to dream of Egypt still — the Egypt each of us knew and loved, the Egypt that is often entan­gled with the warmth of home, the mys­ter­ies of child­hood, and the desire for what is past and will nev­er return.

*From the Jewish Book Council journal, April 4, 2020, re-posted to JBC Paper Brigade, July 11, 2021*

**Book Review: Charles Murray is Telling the Hardest Truths about Race**

By: R. Shep Melnick

*Charles Murray, Facing Reality: Two Truths about Race in America, Encounter Books, 2021*

For many years now, Charles Murray has been a lightning rod, a hero to the right and a leading villain to the left. As I noted in my [review](https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/a-tale-of-two-cities/) of his 2013 book, Coming Apart, Murray’s writing often combines trenchant empirical analysis with substantial overstatements that reflect his strongly held libertarian views.

This book, though, is different. It is shorter, less polemical, and less edgy than Losing Ground, The Bell Curve, or Coming Apart, and as a result, it is more convincing. Rather than preaching to the choir, he gives “special priority” to reaching “people on the center-left who are liberals in the tradition that extended from FDR through Bill Clinton and included Senator Joe Biden.” Those seriously interested in taking practical steps to improve educational and economic opportunities for racial minorities cannot afford to ignore the “two truths” that he presents with overwhelming evidence.

Murray’s first “truth” is that when whites, blacks, and Hispanics “take tests that are related to cognitive ability, their group results have different means,” and that these tests are pretty good predictors of job performance, especially at the upper end of the pay scale. Since Murray is famous for making controversial arguments about IQ, genetics, and race, it is important to emphasize that most of his analysis is based on aptitude tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Armed Services Qualification Test, and graduate admissions exams rather than IQ tests. The racial gap measured by these tests has narrowed significantly since 1970 and the size of the gap changes as children get older, indicating that such “cognitive ability” is hardly determined by genetics alone.

That the median and mean math and reading comprehension scores of black and Hispanic students are significantly lower than those of white and Asian students will surprise no one familiar with education policy. Addressing this problem has been a central concern of the policymakers at every level of government for over half a century.

Why is it particularly important to “face this reality” today? Because so many influential voices are dismissing it as unimportant. Current measures of cognitive ability, we are repeatedly assured, are culturally biased—symptoms of “white supremacy.” They don’t measure anything significant, but are merely a way to deny racial and ethnic minorities a proportional share of slots in prestigious schools and high paying jobs.

Murray presents extensive evidence showing that this is simply not true. The SAT and ACT are pretty good predictors of performance in college. Far from being biased against African Americans, these tests tend to overpredict how well those students will do in college. Cognitive ability as measured by standardized test is far from the only trait important for doing well in school or at work—grit, reliability, and empathy certainly matter—but it remains significant in all but the most menial jobs.

Group averages tell us nothing about the millions of individuals within these poorly defined categories. The mean NAEP score of African-American students is 0.85 standard deviations below the mean for white students. The mean for Hispanic students is 0.62 standard deviations below whites; the mean for Asian students is 0.30 standard deviations above whites. Murray reminds us that while these aggregate differences are significant, it is also true that millions of black and Hispanic students score higher than millions of white and Asian students.

How should we react to the inconvenient fact of significant differences between group averages? We can ignore it, and dismiss any deviation from racial proportionality as evidence of racism. Or we can acknowledge the problem and take steps to improve the performance of minority children. The latter is the strategy most civil rights leaders and education reformers have adopted for generations. It is important to remember that the “testing and accountability” regime that reached its apogee in No Child Left Behind received strong support from many civil rights groups: they wanted to highlight the fact that the racial achievement and opportunity gap remains large. To be sure, as Murray emphasizes, improving public education is much easier said than done. But the fact is that the racial achievement gap has shrunk significantly since 1970 should give us some hope that the problem is not intractable. Sweeping the problem under the rug is the best way to ensure that we make no further progress.

Murray’s second “truth” is that African-American and Hispanic males commit violent crimes far more often than do white and Asian males. (I say “males” because they are responsible for the overwhelming majority of such crimes.) This is hardly a startling fact. But in the current debate over mass incarceration and “the new Jim Crow,” it often gets buried in the rhetoric. Murray focuses on the most serious offences, especially murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. He looks at a wide variety of measures, including arrest rates in major cities, reports by African-American and Hispanic victims of crime, and New York’s database of non-fatal shootings. The racial differences are consistent and huge.

Murray does not investigate the multiple, deep-seated causes of this difference. But he does review some of the consequences. Most obviously, the vast majority of law-abiding African-American and Hispanic residents of high crime neighborhoods are the principal victims of such violent crime. Even a casual reader of Chicago newspapers will appreciate the tragic consequences of this. Moreover, “disproportionate minority crime rates discourage developers from building office space in minority neighborhoods,” and “raise the cost of doing business for retailers of all kinds.” Middle class families of all races and ethnicities will avoid these areas. The result is that the residents of these high-crime neighborhoods will remain isolated, cut off from job and educational opportunities, and forced to pay more for almost everything they buy.

Reducing crime rates is hard, but not as hard as shrinking the racial achievement gap. Until last year, crime rates in major American cities had been declining for over two decades. It is one thing to say that some of the measures we adopted to combat crime—especially harsh prison sentences—were excessive and possibly counterproductive. It is quite another to ignore the many ways in which crime reduction is a tremendous boon to those residing in poor black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

Today we are bombarded with arguments about “systemic racism.” Those on the left insist that most the American institutions are inherently racist. Those on the right claim we have purged racism from our public institutions. Seldom does one hear a cogent explanation of what “systemic racism” means. In his final chapter Murray offers this useful distinction: “Many of the problems are systemic, but they will not be solved by going after racism. They will be solved, or ameliorated, by going after systemic educational problems, systemic law enforcement problems, systemic employment problems.” Murray makes a convincing case that we cannot begin to address these educational, economic, and law-enforcement problems without facing the two “truths” that he describes.

Another way of saying this is that half a century after the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, we continue to grapple with the long-term consequences of centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial discrimination. As Lyndon Johnson put it in his 1965 [address at Howard University](https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/commencement-address-at-howard-university-to-fulfill-these-rights/):

**You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, “you are free to compete with all the others,” and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.**

As a result of this long history, African Americans have far less financial capital than whites. Just as important (but harder to quantify), they have less social capital. They have less educational capital. They have fewer family resources of almost all sorts.

One could trace all these problems back to slavery, segregation, and discrimination. But that will not make them disappear. Eliminating exam schools, covertly reserving slots at selective colleges for racial minorities, and instituting de facto hiring quotas for high skill jobs will only paper over the core problems rather than address them. Denying that crime is a problem in many poor neighborhoods leaves many decent people at the mercy of a violent few. The hard reality is that ignoring the “two truths” that Murray highlights will leave the most vulnerable people in our society worse off. Even those who dislike and distrust this particular messenger should heed his message.

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*From Law and Liberty, July 12, 2021*

**Facts Don’t Care About Ayn Rand’s Feelings**

By: Andrew Cheng

In an interview with PBS, Donald Trump’s former Justice Department spokesperson Ian Prior said the following about [critical race theory](https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-race-theory):

**“We’re not about not teaching history. We’re about teaching history in an objective way that is not represented as America is systematically racist.” —** [**PBS NewsHour. (2021, June 24).**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JbdKWsHeLI&ab_channel=PBSNewsHour)

I can’t help but notice Mr. Prior included the word “objective” in his declaration that America is not a systematically racist country. Most people of color would contend such a statement is patently subjective, the biased opinion of yet another white man who doesn’t appreciate how good he has it in the world.

Mr. Prior’s quote harks back to the teachings of [Ayn Rand](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ayn-Rand), who’d unironically coined her philosophy, [Objectivism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/objectivism-philosophy).

Translation: Hers is the only true philosophy. Ms. Rand once stated she would only recommend the teachings of “the Three A’s” — Aristotle, Aquinas, and Ayn Rand. (Sciabarra, Chris Matthew (1995). [Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical](https://www.amazon.com/Ayn-Rand-Chris-Matthew-Sciabarra/dp/0271014415).) Every other philosophy is complete hogwash.

Ms. Rand had a particular gripe against Immanuel Kant, whom she called “[the most evil philosopher of all times](https://philosophynow.org/issues/101/Kant_and_Rand_on_Rationality_and_Reality).” And it had nothing to do with Kant being a [racist](https://theapeiron.co.uk/should-we-cancel-philosophy-b0ffe5083e51).

Today, Ayn Rand’s personal philosophy has become a sacred text for many in the GOP and the Alt-Right. While rebuking critical race theory and LGBT+ rights, conservatives would assert that they are merely acting objectively.

Or, as [Ben Shapiro](https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/03/28/inside-the-mind-of-ben-shapiro-a-radical-conservative) famously coined it, “[facts don’t care about your feelings](https://twitter.com/benshapiro/status/695638866993115136?lang=en).”

## What Kant Got Right and Rand Got Wrong

Ayn Rand’s gripe with Immanuel Kant comes from their opposing views on morality. Rand’s ethics is derived from humans acting out of self-interest, while Kant’s comes from us acting out of our sense of [goodwill and duty](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/).

But this disagreement goes even deeper than that. It goes right to the root of their respective metaphysics.

At the heart of Randian philosophy is the idea that human reason enables us to determine an objective view of the world. Rand posits that this objective view allows us to determine the nature of good. In contrast, the intrinsic and subjective views of reality championed by many philosophers and religious institutions inevitably lead to absolute states and totalitarianism. (For more on this, please watch [Ayn Rand’s lecture on Capitalism](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmcmauM78FE&ab_channel=AynRandInstitute).)

On the other hand, Immanuel Kant argues we always see the world through (metaphorically) [blue-tinted glasses](https://philosophynow.org/issues/101/Kant_and_Rand_on_Rationality_and_Reality). Everything we observe is filtered through our perceptions; we could never see the world for what it actually is. Moreover, our minds act to create our understanding of reality by applying what Kant called [Transcendental Analytics](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/critique-of-pure-reason/division-one-transcendental-analytic/7F2DBDE9B148530084D056ED915B3D70) — a priori concepts like causality, negation, and reciprocity.

While there are many arguments against Kant’s moral teachings (the debate around Kant’s [Categorical Imperative](https://www.britannica.com/topic/categorical-imperative) is a staple of any philosophy class), the objective fact is that Kant’s metaphysics better represents reality than Ayn Rand’s.

There is ample scientific evidence that [animals see the world differently from humans](https://petsdoc.org/through-the-eyes-of-your-dog/). We’re quite sure humans perceive the [same colors differently from one another](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20120209-do-we-all-see-the-same-colours). (Remember the 2015 [Dress](https://slate.com/technology/2017/04/heres-why-people-saw-the-dress-differently.html)?) So when Ayn Rand says human reason can determine the objective view of reality, she is categorically wrong.

Not for nothing, but both Kant and Rand have neglected [Jean-Paul Sartre](https://iep.utm.edu/sartre-ex/)’s idea that it is impossible to grasp our individual consciousness without relating it to something else. Consciousness is a function of our past experiences and other people’s perceptions. (Of course, Kant has the excuse of having died centuries before Sartre was born.) Ayn Rand may have liberated herself from the “[hell [that] is other people](https://www.vox.com/2014/11/17/7229547/philosophy-quotes-misunderstood-wittgenstein-sartre-descartes),” but psychology has added yet another wrinkle to her Objectivist philosophy.

## “Weapons of Math Destruction”

One could argue that Ayn Rand’s misunderstanding of reality doesn’t necessarily negate her philosophy. Humans share enough of a collective reality that we can navigate the world with relative consistency.

The problem with this view is the very same problem that’s plaguing data scientists today. What inputs do we feed into our analysis? What outcomes are we hoping to achieve in the end?

Data scientist and mathematics Ph.D. Cathy O’Neil is the author of the book, [Weapons of Math Destruction](https://www.amazon.ca/Weapons-Math-Destruction-Increases-Inequality/dp/0553418831/ref%3Dsr_1_1?dchild=1&gclid=CjwKCAjww-CGBhALEiwAQzWxOp9oDSioWGALATGDX642l2lP6Vv-7KGaL-sB5HSOay7TgSXjsCo_-hoCmiQQAvD_BwE&hvadid=208339425506&hvdev=c&hvlocphy=9000898&hvnetw=g&hvqmt=e&hvrand=14210913103000822776&hvtargid=kwd-329809828004&hydadcr=23307_9563075&keywords=weapons+of+math+destruction&qid=1624807363&sr=8-1). In it, Ms. O’Neil details several cases where human perceptions have negatively influenced data models, [perpetuating systematic racism and benefiting the rich over the poor](https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/roots-of-unity/review-weapons-of-math-destruction/).

For example: when trying to create a predictive model for recidivism — a person’s propensity to commit a crime after being released from prison, the analysts would input data points like the subject’s first run-in with law enforcement. Unfortunately, the algorithm doesn’t account for systematically racist policies like stop and frisk. This creates a vicious cycle where those initially categorized as “high risk” would be given longer sentences and thus would spend more time living with inmates. When such prisoners are released into the public with criminal records, they inevitably find it harder to find employment and thus are more tempted to commit crimes.

Unfortunately, the police force (and pretty much most of society) is conditioned to regard such mathematical models as completely objective. Numbers don’t care about your feelings. Numbers represent cold hard facts.

Such is the problem with Ian Prior, Ben Shapiro, and Ayn Rand.

When Ian Prior describes his version of history as objective, he blatantly omits the historical data provided by adherents of critical race theory. When [Ben Shapiro calls transgender people mentally ill](https://www.glaad.org/gap/ben-shapiro), he ignores the years of research conducted by the [American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf).

During her 1979 interview with [Phil Donahue](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3u8Jjth81_Q&ab_channel=MensBusinessAsocEduc), Ayn Rand dismisses an audience member’s objection without even hearing the latter’s argument. She had allegedly treated her own followers the same way, acting coldly or angrily to anyone who dared disagree with her. (Heller, Anne C. (2009). [Ayn Rand and the World She Made](https://www.amazon.ca/Ayn-Rand-World-She-Made/dp/1400078938). New York: Doubleday. ISBN 978–0–385–51399–9.)

In other words, when the data aligns to their particular worldview, it’s a cold hard fact. When it doesn’t, that’s your “feelings” talking.

## Why the Alt-Right’s “Facts” Are Appealing

When I was in my twenties (I don’t remember which year), I picked up Ayn Rand’s [The Fountainhead](https://www.amazon.ca/Fountainhead-Ayn-Rand/dp/0452273331) from the local public library.

I remember falling in love with part one of the book. The conflict between the uncompromising Howard Roark and the weak-willed Peter Keating piqued my angry-young-man sentimentalities. Like Peter Keating, I’d secretly longed to shed my corporate-line-towing act to become a brazen individualist like Howard Roark.

(Then I got to the [rape scene](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/fountainhead/section5/page/2/) and found the rest of the book pretty much unreadable.)

Looking back now, it doesn’t surprise me why my younger self would find Howard Roark so appealing. The character was living out an adolescent fantasy — to be certain you’re right while all the established experts are wrong.

Ayn Rand’s philosophy is many things, but it’s definitely not objective. She has never outgrown her rebellious teenage phase, and neither has Ben Shapiro and those of his ilk.

For my last word on Ayn Rand, I turn to another childhood hero of mine, the late Christopher Hitchens:

**“I don’t think there’s any need to have essays advocating selfishness among human beings. I don’t know what your impression has been but some things require no further reinforcement.” — Christopher Hitchens**

(DefenceSpeech. (2009, Sept 29). [Hitchens Destroys the Cult of Ayn Rand [Video]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wYR6e9Z6es&t=103s&ab_channel=DefenceSpeech). YouTube.

*From The Apeiron Blog, July 6, 2021*

**Catholic Ideas and Catholic Realities**

By: Ross Douthat

For the last fifty years, from the Second Vatican Council onward, it made sense to speak of an American Catholicism fully reconciled to liberal democracy. On the fringes there were still some noteworthy anti-liberal and radical Catholic periodicals and writers, but the mainstream was defined by the opposition between a “liberal Catholicism” and a “conservative Catholicism” that were broadly aligned with the Democratic party and the Republican party, respectively—even if the bishops and popes sometimes argued for a different synthesis: a political Catholicism beyond the existing American categories of left and right.

In partisan politics, the more liberal Catholicism found its most famous embodiments in figures such as Mario Cuomo and Joseph Biden, who attempted to sustain the easy, New Deal–era relationship between Catholics and the Democratic party while downplaying or effectively privatizing those elements of Catholic teaching—on abortion, above all—where the Democrats and the Church increasingly diverged.

For the more conservative or neoconservative Catholicism, figures such as Paul Ryan, John Boehner, and ­Antonin Scalia were reasonably representative. The conservative, Republican-voting Catholic usually joined a firm view on abortion and marriage to a more unstable view of the welfare state, one that sometimes tried to correct right-wing libertarianism, sometimes looked for a religious way to justify it, and sometimes ­promoted a corporatism that owed more to the Chamber of Commerce than to the social ­doctrine of the Church.

Intellectually, the equivalent polarization was between “Commonweal Catholicism” and “First Things Catholicism”—between a more theologically liberal Catholic perspective, which emphasized a “seamless garment” theory of the Church’s social teaching as a reason to support the Democratic party despite its position on abortion, and a more ­theologically conservative perspective, which found its home in the GOP as that party became more consistently pro-life and found its moment of maximal political ­influence in the evangelical presidency of George W. Bush.

These intellectual camps had significant differences but also a substantial commonality: They took for granted the harmony between their interpretation of post–Vatican II Catholicism and their interpretation of the liberal order. They differed most substantially on whether, after the sexual revolution and the rise of neoliberal economics, the leftward or the rightward sort of liberalism had gone more dramatically astray.

This basic intra-Catholic polarization has not disappeared, and the most prominent Catholic politicians in America today—from Biden to Nancy Pelosi to former Attorney General Bill Barr—still embody it. But among younger Catholics, in the intelligentsia especially, both syntheses have come under severe strain.

The further secularization of liberal America has made the position of Catholic Democrats more difficult, as elite progressivism increasingly seeks not only to preserve abortion or same-sex marriage rights but to harry religious institutions that dissent from progressive views. Meanwhile, the political failures of mainstream Republicans and the general post-­Christian drift of American society even (especially?) under conservative governance has raised questions on the right about the effectiveness of a Catholic alliance with a libertarian conservatism—and doubts about the ultimate destination of liberalism itself.

The papacy of Francis has added to these strains. In breaking, to some debatable extent, with both the neoconservatism of John Paul II and the soft traditionalism of Benedict XVI, the current pontificate has created an atmosphere of crisis among theological conservatives, even as its mix of populism and anti-modernism on economic and ecological matters has rejuvenated the Catholic left.

The presidency of Donald Trump was disruptive as well, by suggesting (in its populist economic forays and successful appeals to some minority voters) the promise of an American conservatism more in tune with Catholic social teaching than with libertarian orthodoxy, but also (in the president’s unique mixture of nativism, conspiracism, and personal religious indifference) the possibility of an American conservatism that is functionally post-Christian.

All these strains on the post-1960s paradigm have not, as yet, radically altered the political behavior of American Catholics. Among white Catholics, the liberal-conservative split still defines national voting. The ethnic division between white and Hispanic Catholics remains, even if it narrowed (perhaps surprisingly) under Trump.

But among Catholic writers there has been substantial fracture, experimentation, realignment, and division. The older categories certainly persist. There remain conservative Catholics who believe in the fusionist project of American conservatism, the Catholic reading of the American founding advanced by John Courtney Murray, and the virtues of the pre-Trump Republican party. Meanwhile, the Biden presidency has given a boost to liberal Catholics who believe that the Democratic party is their natural home and meliorist, welfare-state liberalism the obvious way Catholic social teaching cashes out.

But there are also new categories, revived and re­invented movements and tendencies, which matter more to intellectual debate than they did in years past and may eventually matter to Catholic politics as well.

Let me suggest a tentative taxonomy of these new categories. First, there are the populists, who regard many Trump-era shifts in conservative policy as congruent with Church teaching, and a welcome corrective to the libertarian errors they associate with figures such as Paul Ryan. The populists tend to champion a corporatist turn in economics, seeking strategies to recreate a family wage through industrial policy or family subsidies or some mixture thereof. They generally favor immigration restrictions to protect domestic workers and rebuild social solidarity; they are amenable to antitrust actions against Silicon ­Valley behemoths; they seek a more aggressive culture-war strategy, a counterattack after a long retreat, on issues such as transgenderism and internet pornography. And though they are divided on Trump’s capacities and morals, they mostly regard his rise as salutary and his presidency as at least the lesser evil, and probably a good.

Philosophically, the populists are often described as post-liberals or anti-liberals, and sometimes they describe themselves that way. But it’s not clear that the label fits. The Catholic editor of this ecumenical journal, R. R. Reno, speaks for many populists when he argues for populism as a solidaristic and religious corrective within the liberal order, rather than some kind of alternative to American constitutionalism. One can assume that the politicians who have championed policy ideas associated with this populism—including the Catholic Marco Rubio, the Protestant Josh Hawley, and the Mormon Mitt ­Romney—would wholeheartedly agree.

The populists are clearly different from the Christian libertarians and classical liberals with whom they often feud. But they may not be so different from a figure like Richard John Neuhaus in their primary commitments. Like him, they believe that liberal democracy requires a strong religious politics and an alliance between evangelicals and Catholics. They just no longer accept the vision of political economy and foreign policy that Neuhaus came to be associated with late in his career.

This idea of populism as a corrective within liberalism separates populists from the next group, the Catholic integralists, for whom liberalism is beyond correction because it was rotten from the start. The integralists are the heirs of Triumph, L. Brent Bozell’s disputatious magazine, and further back of the ­nineteenth-century popes and their ringing anti-liberal anathemas. Like King Josiah (who lends his name to the leading integralist website) recovering the lost book of the law, they believe that they are calling Catholics back to the true and only Catholic politics, obscured for a time by fond delusions and Americanism, but now, amid the crisis of liberalism, visible as an alternative once again.

The integralists align with the populists on pro-family economics and industrial policy (Gladden Pappin, an integralist editor at the journal American Affairs, publishes regularly on those themes), but they are more divided on other aspects of the new right-wing politics: immigration restriction, ­climate-change skepticism, and the idea of the nation as something worthy of loyalty. The integralists ultimately believe in Catholic empire, not Catholic nationalism, and they regard some of the leftward elements of Pope Francis’s magisterium as implicitly integralist­—­particularly the ecological encyclical Laudato Si’, whose admonitions and prescriptions do not feature prominently in populist politics at the moment.

Despite this critique, the integralists tend to look favorably on nationalist politicians, from Trump to Viktor Orban. They prefer illiberal nationalism to liberal internationalism, and they believe that ­nationalist-populist uprisings provide an opening for a Catholic insurgency within the West’s elite.

Because this insurgency is not exactly visible as yet, the practical impact of their ideas remains uncertain. But the integralists are engaged in at least two real-world projects: pushing Church officials toward a more vigorous assertion of the Church’s legal rights and juridical power over the faithful, and pushing both populist and neoconservative Catholics toward a more fully Catholic politics and a more aggressive use of state power. They believe, above all, that the conditions for a reinvigorated Church and a Christian revival in America can come about only if there is a revolution from above.

In this, they make a stark contrast with the third group, the benedictines, meaning not the religious order but those Catholics who accept Rod Dreher’s diagnosis, in [*The Benedict Option*](https://bookshop.org/a/20607/9780735213302) (2017), of the near inevitability of continued secularization and continued Christian retreat—who agree with Patrick Deneen’s conclusion, in [*Why Liberalism Failed*](https://bookshop.org/a/20607/9780300240023) (2018), that local experiments are the key to revitalizing our once-Christian culture—and who are particularly interested, with writers like Brandon McGinley and Leah Libresco Sargeant, in internal renewal as a precondition for any new form of Christian politics.

Of course, Deneen has shown strong sympathy for both populist and integralist arguments, and ­McGinley recently co-authored an integralist-tending book with Scott Hahn—proof that these categories are unstable and overlapping, not settled or fixed. But though some benedictines may vote for populist politicians or endorse integralism at some level, and others may have more left-leaning sympathies, they are generally skeptical about national political solutions and doubtful of the prospects for any kind of top-down Christian restoration, preferring to pour their energy into institution-building from below. Their watchword is Joseph Ratzinger’s famous admonition:

**[The Church] will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. . . . As a small society, it will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members . . . [it] will be a more spiritual Church, not presuming upon a political mandate, flirting as little with the Left as with the Right.**

This means that benedictines are often more ecumenically inclined than integralists, with sympathies for anti-political Protestant figures such as Stanley Hauerwas and Wendell Berry and communities like the Bruderhof. It means they prefer Alexis de Tocqueville to Carl Schmitt, and strategies of ­community-building and evangelization to ­strategies of power. And it means their cultural influence waxes and wanes depending on the apparent prospects for Catholic politics at the national level: The marginalization of religious conservatives in the late Obama years made the benedictine option more attractive, whereas the seeming widening of political possibilities in the Trump era pushed their ideas into ­abeyance. They may return, should a Biden presidency usher in a long liberal age.

That possibility brings us to the fourth group, which I will call the tradinistas, borrowing from a 2016 manifesto whose signatories, in the way of left-wingers in every era, soon fell out with one another. Their disputes notwithstanding, the term fits an identifiable tendency, a belief that late capitalism more than late liberalism is fundamentally ­incompatible with Christian faith, and that the recent revival of socialism can be adapted and deployed by Catholic social thought. (“LeftCath,” this group’s ­Twitter designation, conveys the two things they hope to bring together.)

The tradinista tendency has found a home in journals and spaces associated with the Commonweal-and-Cuomo side of the older liberal-conservative divide, but it distinguishes itself from much of post-1960s liberal Catholicism by embracing a more radical stance on economics, just as secular millennial socialists are often distinguished from Baby Boomer liberals. The tradinistas also show relatively little interest in the Boomer-liberal project of accommodating Catholic teaching to the sexual revolution, even if they do not oppose this project with the clarity and consistency that conservatives might like. Their prescriptions sometimes overlap with those of the populists, but they regard any kind of right-wing nationalism as compromised by racism and easily bought off by capital.

Herbert McCabe and Alasdair MacIntyre, two rather different Marxist Thomists, are inspirations for the tradinistas. The Atlantic’s Elizabeth Bruenig may be their most prominent champion. “Weird Catholic Twitter,” so-called, has often been their online home. If all of this makes the tradinistas sound marginal relative to the other tendencies I’m ­describing—well, in certain ways they are, but their economic vision often has the current Holy Father in its corner, and that has to count for something.

Even if it lacks the direct political influence of the populists or the ambitions of the integralists, tradinismo nonetheless has a clear political theory: The conditions for Christian renewal depend on breaking capitalism’s chains, and thus to ally with secular socialists may be to seek the good of the Church in the long run, notwithstanding the gulf between a figure like Bernie Sanders and Church teaching on just about every non-economic issue. And to the extent that they participate in some small way in the larger revival of socialist thought, which in turn participates in some way in the Biden presidency’s ambitious economic agenda, these “LeftCaths” can claim at least a modicum of remote influence over our second Catholic president.

All of these categories, again, are unstable and shifting. One could easily subdivide them further, and it’s possible to move from one camp to another, or simply straddle them. One can be an integralist-tradinista for whom socialism is the political economy of the integralist state, or a benedictine drawn to populism because it promises political protection for the local and experimental, or an integralist who turns tradinista out of distaste for Donald Trump. (I can identify writers who have made versions of these moves in just the last few years.)

Meanwhile, allowing for a few sympathetic Republican politicians in the orbit of the populists, these tendencies belong, for now, to the intelligentsia and the intelligentsia alone. They are all especially distant—as is much Catholic punditry—from the American Church’s burgeoning Hispanic population and disaffected white working class. Yes, the populists aspire to speak for the downscale voters who supported Trump, and the tradinista sympathy for Bernie Sanders was shared by many Latino Democrats. But most of the people having these debates are somewhat overeducated, and there are no self-consciously post-liberal cadres among the working class as yet, no mass movement equivalent to the role the pro-life movement played in defining conservative Catholicism after the 1970s.

Similarly within the Church, there are integralist or tradinista or benedictine priests on Twitter, but those labels would leave most bishops baffled. The leaders of American Catholicism still belong clearly to the older liberal and conservative factions established in the 1970s and 1980s, and most Catholic institutions, likewise.

This does not make the new ideas unimportant; it just means that absent a revolutionary moment of some sort, their influence is likely to filter more gradually through American Catholicism, shaping the Church or being reshaped by its realities in unexpected ways. So, it’s worth considering them in combination with the nonintellectual trend that’s most likely to reshape institutional American Catholicism in our lifetime. That trend, that reality, is widespread structural collapse.

Decline is nothing new for American Catholicism. The steep fall in Mass attendance and vocations in the 1960s and 1970s gave way to stabilization in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Church was saved from dramatic numerical decline in part by Hispanic immigration. But around the time of the worst sex abuse revelations, the early-to-mid 2000s, the decline resumed, with Catholic identification falling and Mass attendance among Catholics dropping below Protestant church attendance for the first time.

It has been natural to hope that this new trend is temporary, born out of disillusionment with the Church’s hierarchy, and that Catholic numbers will stabilize again if the bishops are perceived to have put the sex abuse crisis behind them. But it’s more likely that the decline will accelerate, with multiple forces eroding the Church’s institutional position over the next twenty years:

* first, generational turnover in the pews—or, for the younger generation, out of them—as devout Silent Generation and more-loosely affiliated Baby Boomer Catholics pass away, and their increasingly nonpracticing or nonaffiliated grandchildren and children come of age;
* second, the continued fallout from the sex abuse crisis, with state investigations like the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report continuing to highlight alleged abuses and cover-ups throughout at least the next five years;
* third, the institutional stress of the Church’s vocation shortage, which will be intensified by generational turnover as the last large cohort of priests retires or passes away;
* fourth, a financial crunch, hastened by the preceding factors and also by ethnic and socioeconomic change, as the upper-middle-class white Church of the post–Vatican II era becomes a lower-middle-class Hispanic church—which, however rich in faith, will have less money for schools and colleges and churches and charities than did the Catholicism of 1980 or 2010;
* fifth, the combined effect of slowing immigration from Latin America, driven by lower birthrates in most Latin countries, and the rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America and across the Global South, which will make new immigrants more likely to be devoutly Protestant than committedly Catholic;
* sixth, increasing hostility toward Catholicism, especially in more liberal states, which is likely to hasten the secularization of Catholic educational and healthcare institutions;
* and finally, the impact of the pandemic’s temporary suspension of Mass-going, which is still somewhat unknowable, but unlikely to be positive for Mass attendance and donations over the next ten years.

Of course, the Holy Spirit may have other plans for the Church. But renewal would require dramatic religious change—meaning mass conversions, not just the reversion of the lapsed. Since the 1960s, American Catholicism’s main dilemma has been how to reach a large population of baptized-and-confirmed Catholics who have drifted from the Church, and it has been able to rely on the ethnic and cultural loyalty of many prosperous cradle Catholics who no longer practice the faith consistently but still support Catholic institutions. Now the Church is entering a very different era, in which the heirs of those lapsed or culturally attached Catholics haven’t been baptized, haven’t been confirmed, haven’t been married in the Church, and don’t have any real loyalties at all. Many are no longer “lapsed,” but simply non-believers.

Here are some statistics to fill in this picture, ­collected in a 2019 report by the Catholic Leadership Institute. In the early 2000s, there were almost a million Catholic baptisms in the United States ­every year. By 2015, that number was down to around 700,000. If that trend continued, there could be as few as 350,000 by the 2030s.

The share of Catholics marrying in the Church has dropped by 55 percent since the early 1990s, when there were about 325,000 marriages ­annually. ­Projected forward, that trend could yield fewer than 100,000 Catholic marriages annually by the late 2030s.

First Communions and confirmations follow a similar pattern, with a falling-off from baptism in each case: One in five baptized Catholics do not receive First Communion, two in five are not confirmed, and 85 percent of confirmed Catholics aren’t practicing their faith by age twenty-one.

These trends—all of which predate the ­pandemic—have inevitable financial implications. The Catholic Leadership Institute estimates that there is a five-billion-dollar gap between how much money the Church takes in right now to fund its operations and how much money it will take in once Generation X has replaced the Baby Boomers as the generation with the power of the purse.

Of course, a Church with fewer baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and—ultimately—parishioners will need less money to sustain itself. But under such transformed circumstances, as the report puts it, “the current models of diocesan and parish life cannot be sustained.”

Such a transformation will leave no aspect of Catholic life untouched. Indeed, its shadow has already shaped the intellectual trends I’ve just described: You can see the quest for a new approach to Catholic politics and Catholic cultural engagement as, in part, an attempt to reckon with the choices that led the American Church into this new age of decline.

But if the decline itself accelerates, what happens to the bold ideas? One possibility, which a skeptic of intellectuals might readily invoke, is that over the next few decades Catholic ideas will become increasingly ­irrelevant to Catholic realities, building Christendoms in the air while the actual Church decays.

This unhappy scenario is possible but not entirely likely, for one reason: All of the Catholic ideas sketched above represent attempts to intensify commitment, to forge a more fully Catholic approach to politics and culture than has prevailed since the 1960s. And in a shrinking Church, the influence of its more committed members will wax, not wane. The diocesan ­fundraisers of the future will be hitting up populists and integralists, and perhaps even tradinistas, because the lukewarm cradle-Catholic donors of the present era won’t be available anymore. The parishes of the future will depend on benedictines for either renewal or survival. In a smaller, weaker Church, the influence of ideas that seem weird to the average Catholic today are likely to be magnified, as the Church becomes more an institution by, for, and of the weirdos.

So in some form, these Catholic ideas are likely to become increasingly important to Catholic realities as the Church passes through a period of rearrangement. But their influence will be manifest in an American Catholicism that’s institutionally and demographically weaker than the Church has been in decades, or even since the nineteenth century.

That reality will create both obligations and temptations. The first obligation is for intellectuals to take the Church’s internal crisis seriously on its own terms, and not just to use practical Catholic problems as a cudgel in theoretical debates.

With the partial exception of the benedictines, most of the ink spilled by the schools I’ve just described has been about questions of public policy, political order, partisan loyalty, and ideological ­realignment. Far be it from a newspaper columnist to say that these are unimportant questions. But much more ink needs to be spilled on, and much more thought and effort given to, the internal questions facing American Catholicism—questions of how parishes, schools, and dioceses can transition to the likely realities of 2040, how renewal can be achieved within weakening structures, how contemplative and active forms of Catholic life can be revived, how the five thousand can be fed when the supply of loaves and fishes seems to be in steep decline.

Each of the schools I’ve just described has something to contribute. Benedictines have the most natural interest in questions of institutional preservation and renewal, but integralists may have a particular role in helping the Church govern itself more effectively, in an era when its relationship to state and society will become more fraught than in the recent past. Tradinistas may be able to instantiate their radicalism on the local level, in new movements and Catholic Worker–style communities, even if Catholic Socialism as a national ideology remains notional. Catholic populists, who are likely to be the most politically influential faction in most imaginable futures, have an obligation to think about how the public policies of the secular state are likely to shape the landscape in which the Church tries to stabilize, recover, and grow.

Meanwhile, all the old-but-unsettled ­post–­Vatican II debates will still be there: debates over the role of women in Church ministry and governance, over the general role of the laity in the same, over how the Church should minister to Catholics in irregular and sinful personal situations, over what the liturgy should look like amid competing visions of reform.

There is a way in which arguments about political Catholicism, the Church’s proper relationship to secularism and liberalism, can offer a welcome respite from some of these seemingly never-ending controversies. But they are never-ending because they matter, not just in Rome and Washington, D.C., but to the day-to-day of parish life, and movements intent on pressing for a deeper and more comprehensive political Catholicism will be pulled back into nonpolitical controversies as well. (What do integralists make of female authority in the Church? How do benedictines approach gay Catholics? Just how liturgically “trad” are tradinistas?)

Any secular political influence these ideas gain will come with its own obligations and temptations. And these ideas may indeed gain influence, even amid ecclesiastical decline. To the extent that a certain kind of elite-oriented Catholic institution displays more resilience than mass Catholicism, and that Catholic thought speaks to serious minds seeking to escape the disorders of the times, it’s easy to imagine the patterns of the present being accentuated in the future. Catholics would continue to be overrepresented at the highest levels of politics, conservative politics especially, even as their Church loses mass membership and institutional capacity.

With that overrepresentation will come opportunities for what the Harvard integralist Adrian Vermeule has called “integration from within.” But there will also be a temptation to count the strength of Catholicism primarily in its elite representatives, to assess Catholic success in terms of policy influence exerted rather than souls saved, or else to assume that elite power itself is a sufficient tool for religious revival—powerful enough to achieve goals that could have been achieved earlier, had the prior generation of political Catholics not been too timid, too at peace with liberalism, to shape reality from above.

Some realities can be shaped from above. But in a democracy, power flows between the elites and the masses—not just in one direction—and there are battles that an elite Catholicism simply cannot win unless mass Catholicism recovers. So, if the former is ­flourishing while the latter decays or languishes, it will be a sign that the Church needs restoration-from-­below as much as or more than integration-from-within.

Meanwhile, Catholics in elite circles may feel another temptation: to make their Church’s growing weakness an excuse to allow themselves to be co-opted by un-Catholic styles of politics. There is nothing wrong with making prudential political judgments. But with the Church in a weakened state and partisan politics at a boil, Catholic intellectuals may wish to identify more closely with their co-partisans than with their coreligionists. They may be inclined to place their hopes in the work of the state or the movement rather than in Christ and his Church.

The appeal of the new Catholic schools of thought is their argument that right-liberal and left-liberal Catholics have fallen into precisely this trap, and that there are more fully Catholic alternatives outside the Paul Ryan–Joe Biden binary. But in the relationship of the new tendencies to right-wing nationalism and left-wing socialism—in the way integralists and populists sometimes rally to corrupt or chauvinistic conservative politicians while tradinistas carry water for an anticlerical left—it’s possible to see the problem they critique getting recapitulated.

The benedictines face a different temptation: Their focus on the local and internal can become an excuse for ignoring broader social problems, and a justified distaste for partisan bickering can become an excuse for failing to take up the duties of citizenship. Unless Christians are careful, religious communities may recreate secular forms of class-based secession, in which intentional parishes and schools populated by well-educated believers effectively wall themselves off from social disorder.

Ideally, conditions of Catholic decline would forge greater solidarity among the Catholics who remain. But quite often the opposite happens: The fact of decline makes the stakes of debate seem desperately high. Diminishing institutional spoils are fought over more fiercely. A sense of crisis magnifies differences that in a time of optimism and plenty might be debated in an irenic and fraternal spirit. And this, of course, only makes the decline more likely to accelerate, because people outside the Church, and the marginally attached, look to whether the most fervent Catholics act like Christians, and instead see ­fratricide—or its Twitter equivalent.

The debate over political Catholicism (my own contributions included) has thus far manifested many of these vices. Ideally it would be otherwise, since the grounding of Catholic faith should provide a perspective on contemporary politics that is less timebound and more aware of the contingency and provisional nature of all political arrangements.

Sub specie aeternitatis no political system is perfect, and no political system final. American Catholicism has flourished under the undoubtedly imperfect system of American liberalism. Even in its present decline, it has strengths relative to the Church in other wealthy countries, and we cannot know for certain that the current decline is irreversible, and that flourishing cannot happen once again.

Perhaps it’s the destiny of these various schools to help renew liberalism through challenge and ­critique, to make American society more hospitable to Catholic faith by importing skepticism of liberalism or capitalism as a kind of invigorating ballast. ­Perhaps some twenty-second-century John ­Courtney ­Murray will write gratefully of the influence of the ­twenty-first-century integralists or tradinistas—who, like Jonah in Nineveh, helped save the liberal order by bemoaning its evils and prophesying its destruction.

Or perhaps the system known as liberalism really is fated, judged, and found wanting, and what’s happening in the schools I’ve described is the stirrings of a post-liberal era, the tapping and feeling around a doorway that leads into a very different world. In which case we should hope that some future political philosopher of the Empire of Guadalupe will write gratefully of how the different twenty-first-century Catholic schools refined one another through their spirited debate, and how their liberal critics challenged them constructively, so that the post-liberal age did not simply return to the sins and errors and cruelties of the ancien régime.

Or maybe the difficult Catholic realities are the only important aspect of our situation, the ideas are mostly music at twilight, and the Church is headed, at speed, into a post-Christian age in which there will be no “options,” only necessity.

By this all people will know that you are my ­disciples, if you have love for one another. Whichever fate awaits us, Catholics and Christians of every political persuasion should remember that admonition and prove their fidelity by entering an uncertain future not just as disputants, but as friends.

*Ross Douthat is a columnist for the New York Times. A version of this essay was given as a lecture for the “America, Liberalism, and Catholicism” conference at the University of Dallas in April 2021.*

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**The Revenge of John Roberts**

By: Andy Kroll

WASHINGTON — In the fall of 1981, a young conservative lawyer named [John Roberts](https://www.rollingstone.com/t/john-roberts/), fresh off a [Supreme Court](https://www.rollingstone.com/t/supreme-court/) clerkship, arrived at the Justice Department at the start of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Hired as a special assistant to the attorney general, Roberts [focused on voting rights](https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/john-roberts-voting-rights-act-121222/), and in particular the battle underway in Congress over the reauthorization of parts of the landmark [Voting Rights](https://www.rollingstone.com/t/voting-rights/) Act of 1965. That included Section 2 of the law, which gave voters a tool to fight discriminatory voting laws and rules in the states.

As Roberts settled in at DOJ, a coalition of Democrats and Republicans in Congress wanted to reform [Section 2](https://www.justice.gov/crt/section-2-voting-rights-act). Under their plan, voters could strike down discriminatory voting laws by proving those laws caused discrimination, not that the people who made the laws had set out to discriminate. In other words, intent didn’t matter; outcomes did.

John Roberts helped lead the fight to stop this change. He [drafted](https://www.archives.gov/files/news/john-roberts/accession-60-88-0498/030-black-binder1/folder030.pdf) op-eds, talking points, and memos arguing that the proposed reforms gave the federal government too much power to influence state voting laws and would lead to a quota system for who held elected office.

Roberts and the Reagan DOJ failed. The Voting Rights Act reauthorization passed with bipartisan support in 1982, and the number of lawsuits about discriminatory voting laws brought under Section 2 [went](https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/john-roberts-voting-rights-act-121222/) from three in 1981 to 175 in 1988, according to the book Give Us the Ballot by the journalist Ari Berman. But Roberts would get his revenge. He [claimed](https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/judicialnominees/roberts.html) the Supreme Court chief justice’s seat once held by his mentor, William Rehnquist, in 2005. In the ensuing years, Roberts has chiseled away, piece by piece, at the nation’s laws for voting rights, campaign spending, and other democracy issues. Today, voting-rights activists and election-law scholars say the Roberts court, having dismantled chunks of the post-Watergate ethics reforms and the Voting Rights Act, is one of the biggest impediments to democratic reform at a time when the country needs those reforms more than ever.

The final two opinions of the most recent Supreme Court term put this phenomenon on full display. In Americans for Prosperity Foundation v. Bonta, the court’s six conservative justices ruled that California’s requirement that charities disclose their biggest donors to state regulators was unconstitutional. Critics of anonymous political spending say the decision will fuel future challenges to transparency laws and empower anonymous donors at a time when American politics is [awash in dark money](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-23/-dark-money-helped-pave-joe-biden-s-path-to-the-white-house) from Democratic and Republican groups alike. “We are now on a clear path to enshrining a constitutional right to anonymous spending in our democracy, and securing an upper hand for dark-money influence in perpetuity,” Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) said in a statement reacting to the decision.

In the second decision, Brnovich v. DNC, the Roberts court knee-capped Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. The Brnovich decision, legal experts say, will give greater leeway to state governments when they craft voting rules, and makes it much harder to prove that a voting law is discriminatory. “This is the rewrite of Section 2 that John Roberts couldn’t get in 1981,” Rick Hasen, an election-law expert at the University of California, Irvine, tells Rolling Stone. “I think it’s going to be extremely difficult now (to bring Section 2 challenges) except for the most egregious forms of voter discrimination.”

Combined, the AFPF and Brnovich decisions continue the Roberts court’s decade-plus track record of undermining the hard-fought voting laws enacted during the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-corruption reforms passed in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal. And with a six-vote conservative majority on the Supreme Court in place for years — if not decades — to come, that trend shows no sign of ending soon. “As long as there’s a strong conservative majority on the court, any hope that the courts will do anything to rein campaign spending or states’ efforts to restrict the vote or tilt the playing field is indeed a hollow hope,” says Lee Drutman, a senior fellow in the Political Reform program at New America.

In the face of the Roberts court’s agenda, reformers in Congress and in state legislatures as well as election-law scholars say the need for new policies tailored to survive the high court’s scrutiny. Coming at a time when Republican state governments are seeking to restrict access to the ballot box, the Supreme Court’s latest decisions are “yet another affront to Americans’ right to pick their elected officials and know who is working to influence the democratic process,” Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) tells Rolling Stone. “This further underscores the need for Congress to pass legislation to protect the freedom to vote and ensure that our democracy works for the people, not for special interests and billionaires.”

Before surveying the options under consideration by reformers, it’s worth better understanding how far-reaching and potentially damaging the Supreme Court’s last two decisions were.

In the AFPF case, the court struck down California’s requirement that large donors to charities must be disclosed to the state government so that the state can root out possible fraud related to those donors. The Americans for Prosperity Foundation, a Koch-backed group, and the Thomas More Law Center challenged that requirement, saying it violated the group’s freedom to associate in private. They also cited the risk of harassment if the private donor information became public (as had happened in the past when some donor information was leaked).

The case harkened back to the influential NAACP v. Alabama decision in 1958, when the Supreme Court ruled that the NAACP didn’t have to disclose members who feared facing retribution in the Jim Crow South. In AFPF, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, ACLU, and other civil-rights groups invoked that earlier case in [a friend-of-the-court brief](https://www.aclu.org/afpf-v-becerra-amicus-brief-aclu-naacp-ldf-knight-institute-hrc-and-pen-america) that argued for the right to associate in private and urged the court to reach a narrow decision that would have struck down California’s rule without broader implications for transparency in civic and political life.

Instead, the majority’s opinion, written by Roberts, has broad implications for politics and activism. Before, the Supreme Court had made clear that disclosure was important enough to preserve even if it led to some nastiness or vitriol as a result. In his AFPF opinion, Roberts tossed that out the window. The mere possibility of a chilling effect on association was enough, he wrote in his opinion, to justify getting rid of certain disclosure requirements.

Roberts’ decision does more than wipe out California’s law, experts say. Under this reasoning, it opens the door to future challenges to longstanding laws on the disclosure of campaign donations put in place after Watergate, when untraceable money flooded into American elections and led to corruption. “Today’s analysis marks reporting and disclosure requirements with a bull’s-eye,” Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote in her dissent in the AFPF case.

In Brnovich, the voting-rights case, the Roberts court took the opposite stance toward a state’s authority to set the rules. This time, in an opinion written by Justice Samuel Alito, the court deferred to the states to set their own voting rules and raised the bar almost impossibly high to challenge those laws for alleged discrimination, voting-rights advocates say. The majority’s opinion makes it so that a state can justify voting changes (cutting early voting, restricting absentee voting, reducing polling places) if it did so in the interest of preventing possible fraud, even if such fraud is vanishingly rare. The majority’s Brnovich ruling also takes as its benchmark the year 1982 — the year when Congress last passed major updates to the Voting Rights Act — for gauging the discriminatory nature (or not) of voting changes.

Rick Hasen, the election-law expert, describes the practical effect of the decision like this. Imagine that a state offered a week of early voting, he says, and there was evidence that a large number of African American voters used the Sunday before the election to do Souls to the Polls drives to get people to vote right after church. Then imagine that, post-Brnovich, the same state got rid of Sunday early voting and the evidence suggested the state did so to blunt African American turnout.

Under the Roberts court majority’s approach, Hasen says, this would likely not run afoul of Section 2. In his opinion, Alito says the benchmark for measuring whether a voting change is discriminatory is how it compares to the voting rules when the VRA was last reauthorized — in 1982. His test also implies that as long as a state can point to other voting opportunities, it can fairly justify cutting something like Sunday early voting. “For one reason, in 1982 there were very few early voting opportunities, so eliminating early voting can’t be a Section 2 violation because that wasn’t the norm in 1982,” Rick Hasen says. “For another thing, you have to look at the election system as a whole, so long as there are other ways to vote, then it’s not discriminatory under this court’s ruling.”

So what can — and what should — Congress do?

Lee Drutman, the New America political-reform expert, says the For the People Act, aka H.R. 1 and S. 1, contains a number of provisions that could repair some of the damage done by the Supreme Court’s two most recent decisions. That bill — which was recently filibustered in the Senate but Democrats have vowed to revive — would increase disclosure of dark-money donations, mandate paper ballots, and give the federal government more latitude to expand access to the ballot box.

But Drutman acknowledges that many of the most popular pieces of the For the People Act — which has a slim change of passing in the first place — will face challenges by conservative and libertarian legal groups. “Republicans are going to litigate the hell out of it,” he says.

As pressure builds inside the American democratic system because of hyper-partisanship, the nationalization of politics, and many other factors, what’s needed are release valves, Drutman says. He supports reforms that might break the [“two-party doom loop,”](https://www.amazon.com/Breaking-Two-Party-Doom-Loop-Multiparty/dp/0190913851) as he puts it. Those include Alaska’s model of a top-four primary election and [ranked-choice voting](https://www.rollingstone.com/t/ranked-choice-voting/) like in New York City but applied to, say, the U.S. Senate. “I think you’d see opportunities for more political parties and new coalitions forming,” he says. “You’d get the release valves.”

Rick Hasen says lawmakers should focus for now on the most immediate threat to American democracy: election subversion. He says the country narrowly avoided such a disaster in the 2020 election despite Trump’s attempts to pressure state and local election officials, like when he asked Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to “find” 11,870 votes to give him the victory in Georgia. But with the Trumpist wing of the GOP in full control, and Republican state legislatures moving to pass laws that empower partisans to dictate how elections are run and counted, subversion remains a threat, whether it’s the prospect of a state legislature selecting a rival slate of electors, a president pressuring election workers to change the count, or members of Congress disrupting the certification process in Washington, D.C.

Hasen says the universal use of paper ballots, tougher penalties for anyone who interferes with the election-counting process, and reform of the antiquated Electoral Count Act could all help prevent a future attempt to overturn or change an election outcome. It’s also a more narrowly tailored solution that, he says, could win over 10 Senate Republicans.

“We may not know until January 2025, when Congress has counted the Electoral College votes of the states, whether those who support election integrity and the rule of law succeeded in preventing election subversion,” Hasen [wrote](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/23/opinion/republicans-voting-us-elections.html) this spring. “That may seem far away, but the time to act to prevent a democratic crisis is now.”

*From Rolling Stone, July 9, 2021*

**Samuel Alito’s Boundless Contempt for Democracy**

By: Matt Ford

I spent my Fourth of July holiday this year like most others did: spending time with friends and family, eating hot dogs and hamburgers, and setting off fireworks. It’s one of my favorite holidays—partly because of my affection for this country and brightly colored explosions, and partly because of its timing. July 4 also usually follows the end of the Supreme Court’s annual term, capping off what are my busiest months at work each year. This year, however, relaxation didn’t come as easily. I found myself instead thinking about [the court’s final ruling](https://newrepublic.com/article/162698/alito-brnovich-vra-voter-suppression) before its summer recess.

In theory, *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee* was about whether two Arizona voting rulings—a policy that bans counting provisional ballots cast by out-of-precinct voters and a state law that bans most third-party collection of absentee ballots—violate Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In theory, *Brnovich* was also about how courts should decide when a state measure violates Section 2’s ban on racially discriminatory voting practices, and whether the test used to strike down the Arizona rules in question was the right one.

In practice, however, that’s not really what *Brnovich* was about. It instead continued the Supreme Court’s ongoing campaign to crush the life out of the Voting Rights Act. In a nihilistic ruling by Justice Samuel Alito, the six-justice conservative majority did not so much interpret Section 2 as they rewrote it and gave future litigants a roadmap to circumvent what was left. The court’s approach has dire implications not just for voting rights cases under the current law but also for possible congressional efforts to strengthen America’s democratic system.

As I [noted last week](https://newrepublic.com/article/162698/alito-brnovich-vra-voter-suppression), the court did not really bother to tell lower courts how to apply Section 2’s broad language to the mercurial threat of racist voter suppression. Instead, it set up a series of trip wires for future Section 2 claims to stumble over in court. Much of the litigation in *Brnovich* revolved around the test used by a Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals super-panel, which struck down the two provisions in question last year. So what sort of test would the court adopt?

None, apparently. “We think it prudent to make clear at the beginning that we decline in these cases to announce a test to govern all VRA Section 2 claims involving rules, like those at issue here, that specify the time, place, or manner for casting ballots,” Alito wrote. Those who have little faith in the court’s good faith on voting rights might conclude the justices didn’t want to establish a clear hurdle that future plaintiffs could then overcome. But whatever the court’s motive, it will be much harder for plaintiffs to hit a moving target instead of a stationary one.

Perhaps it’s incorrect to say the justices didn’t create a test in *Brnovich.* Alito then offered a series of “guideposts” to help lower courts resolve future cases along these lines. They are largely unmoored from the text and purpose of Section 2 itself. In practical terms, what they represent are trap doors that lower courts can use to send voting rights lawsuits to jurisprudential dungeons. If these guideposts came from Section 2 itself, then Congress would be responsible for them. As Justice Elena Kagan noted in her dissent, however, they appear to be cut from whole cloth by Alito to suit his own purposes.

“The majority’s opinion mostly inhabits a law-free zone,” she wrote. “It congratulates itself in advance for giving Section 2’s text ‘careful consideration.’ And then it leaves that language almost wholly behind. (Every once in a while, when its lawmaking threatens to leap off the page, it thinks to sprinkle in a few random statutory words.) So too the majority barely mentions this Court’s precedents construing Section 2’s text. On both those counts, you can see why. As just described, Section 2’s language is broad. To read it fairly, then, is to read it broadly. And to read it broadly is to do much that the majority is determined to avoid.”

Take, for instance, Alito’s “guidepost” on 1982, the year that Congress most recently amended Section 2. He set it as a baseline of sorts for evaluating future claims. “Because every voting rule imposes a burden of some sort, it is useful to have benchmarks with which the burdens imposed by a challenged rule can be compared,” Alito explained. “The burdens associated with the rules in widespread use when Section 2 was adopted are therefore useful in gauging whether the burdens imposed by a challenged rule are sufficient to prevent voting from being equally ‘open’ or furnishing an equal ‘opportunity’ to vote in the sense meant by Section 2.”

But, as Kagan noted, this is the exact wrong way to read Section 2 and understand the circumstances behind the 1982 amendments. “An election rule prevalent at that time may make voting harder for minority than for white citizens; Section 2 then covers such a rule, as it covers any other. And contrary to the majority’s unsupported speculation, Congress ‘intended’ exactly that,” she wrote, quoting from language in the bill itself. “Section 2 was meant to disrupt the status quo, not to preserve it—to eradicate then-current discriminatory practices, not to set them in amber.” This is fairly basic stuff: If Congress had wanted to preserve the 1982 status quo, after all, it wouldn’t have passed a law to change things.

So why set a baseline at all? It’s worth noting here that Alito’s 1982 rule has some troubling practical implications. As election law expert Rick Hasen [noted](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/01/opinion/supreme-court-rulings-arizona-california.html) in an op-ed in *The New York Times* last week, 1982 was “a period when early and absentee voting were scarce and registration was much more onerous in many states.” Alito is fully aware of this. He readily notes in this section of his opinion that only three states allowed no-excuse absentee voting in 1982 and that most states “typically required nearly all voters to cast their ballots in person on election day and allowed only narrow and tightly defined categories of voters to cast absentee ballots.”

If you believe that the right to vote is sacred, then the court’s unwillingness to protect it is jarring. But the justices do not appear to approach the matter from the same starting point. For Alito and his colleagues, the state’s interests are what must be defended against a “radical interpretation” of the Voting Rights Act. “The dissent is correct that the Voting Rights Act exemplifies our country’s commitment to democracy,” Alito wrote for the court, “but there is nothing democratic about the dissent’s attempt to bring about a wholesale transfer of the authority to set voting rules from the states to the federal courts.”

It’s worth pausing to acknowledge the sheer chutzpah of Alito’s suggestion that the dissenters are the undemocratic ones here, for disfavoring state legislatures. The Voting Rights Act was also passed by a legislature: the United States Congress, which meets in the big white dome across the street from Alito’s own workplace. He may have caught a glimpse of it once or twice during his commute. Is it more undemocratic for a state legislature to pass unequal voting laws or for Congress to pass a law that restricts state legislatures from passing unequal voting laws? The answer is not obvious to at least six Americans, and they all happen to serve on the Supreme Court.

“Section 2 was indeed meant to do something important—crucial to the operation of our democracy,” Kagan wrote in dissent. “The provision tells courts—however ‘radical’ the majority might find the idea—to eliminate facially neutral (as well as targeted) electoral rules that unnecessarily create inequalities of access to the political process. That is the very project of the statute, as conceived and as written—and now as damaged by this Court.”

It’s worth noting that the court’s conservatives could have ruled in Arizona’s favor on more narrow grounds. They could have simply held that the evidence presented by the plaintiffs in this case just wasn’t persuasive enough to show discrimination and sent it back to the lower courts. Indeed, that was the conclusion reached by the district court in 2018 before the Ninth Circuit overruled it. And the Roberts court is more than capable of handing down narrow rulings in blockbuster cases when it wishes: Look no further than this term’s ruling in *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* to see how the court can avoid resolving thorny legal questions.

But in *Brnovich,* the court’s conservative bloc wanted to go big or go home. Look no further than Alito’s final guidepost, which suggests that unequal voting rules are “less likely” to violate Section 2 if they further an important state interest. “One strong and entirely legitimate state interest is the prevention of fraud,” Alito wrote. “Fraud can affect the outcome of a close election, and fraudulent votes dilute the right of citizens to cast ballots that carry appropriate weight. Fraud can also undermine public confidence in the fairness of elections and the perceived legitimacy of the announced outcome.”

Voter fraud is an exceedingly rare phenomenon in American elections, with only a handful of cases found among the millions of ballots cast in recent decades. But it looms large in the rhetoric of Republican lawmakers, who invoke its false specter to justify almost every restrictive voting measure they try to impose. Alito’s voter-fraud fears, cloaked in the magisterium of the Supreme Court, will make it that much harder to fight back against unequal laws and policies that invoke them.

“The state need not even show that the discriminatory rule it enacted is necessary to prevent the fraud it purports to fear,” Kagan wrote in reference to Alito’s invocation of voter fraud. “So the state has no duty to substitute a non-discriminatory rule that would adequately serve its professed goal. Like the rest of today’s opinion, the majority’s treatment of the collection ban thus flouts what Section 2 commands: the eradication of election rules resulting in unequal opportunities for minority voters.”

The problems with the *Brnovich* ruling go far beyond two provisions in Arizona. When the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act’s preclearance system in 2013, the remedy was theoretically simple: Congress could pass a new, updated formula for determining which states must receive federal approval for changes to their election laws. (In practical terms, the filibuster and Republican control of the Senate make it much harder.) But what remedy is there for *Brnovich*? Even if Congress could tweak or strengthen Section 2 itself, as it did in 1982, it wouldn’t matter. As Kagan noted, the actual text of Section 2—to say nothing of Congress’s rationale in passing it—played little role in the reasoning behind Alito’s opinion for the court.

The court’s willingness to squelch existing voting rights laws also bodes ill for the measures currently under consideration by Congress. Would the For the People Act’s mandates to expand absentee ballot access and early voting survive if brought before the court’s six conservatives? Would the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which hopes to impose the preclearance system on every state in the Union, pass muster from a court that could not stomach the system when it affected only nine states? The Fourth of July is a celebration of Americans’ right to self-government. But after the Supreme Court made it that much harder for Americans to protect each other from ourselves when we vote, the hot dogs didn’t taste quite as good and the fireworks didn’t shine quite as bright.

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