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The Crisis of Cultures and the Vitality of Values: A Commentary on Emmanuel Macron's Declaration of the Need for Religion

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French president Emmanuel Macron's claim that society needs religion is explored in the light of rising populism and illiberalism, and failures allied to the forced gamble of globalization. Historical and experimental research indicates that the universal religions have no fixed meanings or essences that drive followers. Religions have adapted to many contexts and cultures because core elements are believed sacred and transcendental, that is, non-negotiable, logically inscrutable, empirically unverifiable or falsifiable and therefore always open to interpretation under changing sociopolitical influences. Recent studies in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe suggest that "devoted actors" committed to transcendental causes are those most willing to make sacrifices whatever the costs or consequences to ensure that their values endure.

When French president Emmanuel Macron declared during a visit to the Vatican June 26, 2018, "We have, anthropologically, ontologically, and metaphysically, need of religion" (*Nous avons, anthropologiquement, ontologiquement, métaphysiquement, besoin de la religion*) there was little critical analysis in the press, much less by philosophers and scientists of the moral, historical, or evidentiary basis of such a sweeping claim by the leader of one of the world's first and most revolutionary secular regimes. What follows is an attempt to make sense of President Macron's claim in the current European and global sociopolitical context, in part with the aid of recent research in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East from our team at Artis International and the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at Oxford University.

The values of liberal and open democracy appear to be losing ground worldwide to xenophobic ethno-nationalisms and radical religious ideologies. The "creative destruction" associated with global markets has transformed people from the planet's farthest reaches into competitive players seeking progress and fulfillment through material accumulation and its symbols but without a sense of community and common moral purpose. The forced gamble of globalization fails especially when societies lack enough time to adapt to unceasing innovation and change. As their members fall short of aspirations, anxiety, anger, and alienation can erupt into violence along prevailing political, ethnic, and confessional fault lines.

Today's alt-right movement involves the same narrow-minded global weave of tweets, blogs, and chatrooms linking physical groups across the world as the jihadi movement. They are

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in a tacit alliance that is clobbering societies in ways similar to the hatchet job on republican values by the fascists and communists in the 1920s and 1930s. A May 2017 poll of residents in the former communist countries of Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia revealed that substantial minorities in each country think the European Union is pushing them to abandon traditional nationalist values once associated with fascist movements, whereas Russia has taken the side of traditional values.¹ In Hungary, the ruling national conservatives (*Fidesz*) and the far-right Jobbik party (claiming rights to “protect” large communities of ethnic Hungarians in nearby countries) are advocating a revanchist expansive nationalism. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who was expelled from Liberal International, a global coalition of centrist liberal democrats, is now Europe’s leading apostle of what he calls “the illiberal state,” citing Russia and China as examples.² There we find that youth strongly support the government’s call for restoring the “national cohesion,”³ lost with the fall of Miklós Horthy’s pro-fascist regime (1920–1944), and for rooting out “cosmopolitan” and “globalist” values (grotesquely caricatured in government-sponsored posters of the Jewish financier George Soros). *Fidesz* avowedly seeks to end “the two-party system with ongoing division as to values” and create a “permanent government” devoted to genuinely “Hungarian” values—a praiseworthy “rethinking of values,” according to Vladimir Putin,⁴ but inconsistent with membership in the European Union. In Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński, head of the populist Law and Justice party, Poland’s largest parliamentary block, promised to follow suit and create “Budapest in Warsaw.” In November 2017, on Poland’s Independence Day, tens of thousands of far-right demonstrators in Poland took to the streets sporting anti-immigration signs for “Clean Blood” but also “Pray for an Islamic Holocaust” to wake up “White Europe” to the dangers of tolerance.⁵ Leaders of Austria and Italy, and the plurality of their publics who elected them, now support or tolerate (thus letting hate spread without hindrance) similar pronouncements against Islam, immigrants, and Roma.

According to the World Values Survey, the majority of Europeans do not believe that living in a democratic country is “absolutely important” for them.⁶ This majority includes most young Germans under age thirty, and especially their elders in the former communist East who in September 2017 voted into Parliament the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany.⁷ In April 2017, Marine Le Pen’s hard-right National Front and Jean-Luc Méleuchchon’s hard-left Unbowed France together captured just over half of the French vote of young people ages eighteen to thirty-four in first-round national elections.⁸ And in the United States, Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk find that nearly half of Americans lack faith in democracy, with more than one-third of young high-income earners favoring army rule—presumably to halt rising social unrest linked to staggering income inequality, job insecurity, and persistent failures in racial integration and cultural assimilation in an age of identity politics.⁹

The “clash of civilizations” is a concept birthed by Samuel Huntington at Harvard and *Foreign Policy*,¹⁰ then purposely nurtured by both al-Qaeda and ISIS and many who oppose them, including xenophobic ethnonationalist movements that play off them. It is a woefully misbegotten idea for our times. For transnational jihadi terrorism and right-wing violent extremism represent not the resurgence of traditional cultures but their collapse, as young people unmoored from millennial traditions in an era of globalization and “creative destruction” flail about in search of a social identity that makes their life significant for themselves and others. This is the dark side of globalization that I alluded to earlier. Individuals radicalize to find a firm identity in a flattened world. In this new reality, vertical lines of communication between the generations are replaced by horizontal peer-to-peer attachments that can span the globe, though in vanishing narrow bandwidths of information. The alt-right-and-light telescopes an enticing

worldview, a Paradise of the Lost Cause triumphant, just as the jihadi movement vows return of the Caliphate's mythified Golden Age to the yearning young.

Religion's Role in Society

Fearful of the chauvinism and xenophobia that fed two world wars, many liberal and "progressive" Western leaders and media simply denounce national identity or cultural preference as bigoted or racist and show an ostrich-like blindness to panhuman preferences for one's own. This stance leaves the field wide open for the offensive of white nationalist groups of the alt-right, or the far-right's less overtly racist alt-light defenders of "Western culture" against the onslaught of Islam, globalism, migration, feminism, and homosexuality. But patriotism is not necessarily about sentiments of superiority and pride; it's as much or more about belonging and social responsibility, as when people also feel ashamed about where their country is going or what it has done.

Then there is religion, which many secular thinkers, especially in Western academia, denounce for its seemingly primitive cosmology and reactionary morality that lead to stupidity and cruelty (think "God created the world in six days" or "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" [Colossians 3:18]). But in fact religious canon has very little cosmology ("There is only one God," "Jesus is his son," and "Mohammed is his Prophet" are some) and the majority of injunctions (think Ten Commandments or Pillars of Islam) are less about morality than about performance of social rituals (Keep the Sabbath; Give to charity). Even religion's cosmology and moral injunctions are very much open to interpretation,¹¹ which is why the universal religions, at least, are so adaptable across so many different peoples, places, and times. It is why we have priests, pastors, rabbis, and imams preaching weekly sermons that give contextual meaning to what are logically and empirically absurd cosmological notions ("God is three in one, bodiless but sentient, omnipotent and omnipresent") and nuance to moral imperatives ("You can't kill, or take from others, unless . . ."). It is also why it is nonsense to say, as many political leaders and social commentators do, that this or that religion is "fundamentally" or "in essence" for peace or war, oppression or liberation. Religion is whatever the people doing the interpretation, and however people acting according to interpretation, make of it as a way of living with others.

Religion, then, is less about fixed cosmology and rigid moral canon than about securing belonging through dutiful repetition of shared practices (rituals) that affirm social responsibility toward a group rooted in transcendent (sacred) values that are fixed in symbols but highly variable in thought—values that bind people together in words and rituals with a sense of timeless significance and purpose and that are heartfelt certain to endure whatever the crises, challenges, and uncertainties of the here and now. Neither can its social functions be simply co-opted by negotiated social contracts, even for the greatest good of the greatest number, for all contracts are ultimately matters of convenience with a better deal always possible down the line. And if there is ever the likelihood of a better deal down the line, then (reasoning by backward induction) it is always to a person's advantage to defect sooner rather than later, which makes societies built exclusively on contracts unstable in the long run. But religion's transcendent values and symbolic rituals blind people to exit strategies, no matter how immediately reasonable or rewarding, and whatever the stress or costs. In short, religion cannot be readily discarded or replaced without severe social side effects that usually lead to its eventual re-emergence in societies that seek to endure. As Edmund Burke notes, if people are to consider society no more than a voluntary association for the pursuit of self-interest and are allowed to

question traditional customs, values, and institutions merely in the light of that personal self-interest, then the only means to halt this centrifugal drift of society to “crumble away [and] be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality” would seem to be an absolute despot.¹²

This leads to consideration of the role of religion as a palliative against sociopolitical unrest, whether under an absolute monarchy or in a free market society, which has been analyzed in similar ways by some of the most original political theorists of the modern age. Perhaps the pithiest summary of this general view is one widely attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte (whom some consider the despot Burke anticipated following the chaos of the French Revolution): “Religion is excellent stuff for keeping common people quiet. Religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich.” Now, if that is what religion is mostly about, then there is cause for considering Macron’s call for religion in society as evidence for the charge of “elitism” in favor of the powerful and wealthy that many of his critics level against him. Consider: For Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, all men are naturally endowed with reason. Unencumbered by belief in Providence (God) or other extraneous a priori principles (natural law), the free and unfettered exercise of reason would lead any man to conclude from an examination of the “state of nature” that all men compete against all others to acquire without limit the means (property) to better their lives. Consequently, one must deduce that it is an “obligation” incumbent upon every man to cede part of his interests and freedom to an overarching sovereign power. For only by this cession is the sovereign enabled to physically protect individual life, peacefully enforce contracts, and generally prevent competition from turning violent.

But there is a rub. As Hobbes puts it: “Common-peoples minds . . . are like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by Public Authority shall be imprinted in them” and have neither the opportunity nor inclination to freely and fully exercise reason. Commoners, he asserts, sell their labor (workers) or otherwise cede it (slaves, alms-takers, women), and thus a part of their life and will, to those who control labor (and, in Locke’s rendition, to the property-owning “industrious” class that rightfully controls others’ labor and elects the sovereign for the betterment of all). Religion, which for Hobbes is both “above” and “against” reason, should then be taught with a few select principles that lead to behavior “consonant to reason”:

The Great Mysteries of Christian religion . . . are above Reason; and millions of men be made believe that the same Body may be in innumerable places, at one and the same time, which is against Reason; and shall not men be able, by their teaching and preaching, protected by the law, to make that received which is so consonant to Reason that any unprejudicated man needs no more to learn it than to hear it? I conclude therefore that in the instruction of the people in the Essentiall Rights (which are the Naturall and Fundamentall Lawes) of Sovereignty, there is no difficulty, (whilest a Sovereign has his Power entire)[;] . . . it is his Duty to cause them so to be instructed; and not only his Duty, but his Benefit also, and Security, against the danger that may arrive . . . from Rebellion.¹³

As Locke elaborates in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, faith must be simplified for commoners, “a religion suited to vulgar capacities” as with stark notions of heaven and hell, to ensure their “moral” obligation to the sovereign state and subservience to the propertied class that establishes and elects it:

The day-labourers and tradesmen, the spinsters and dairy maids . . . hearing plain commands, is the sure and only course to bring them to obedience and practice. The greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe. . . . The view of heaven and

hell will cast a slight upon the short pleasures and pains of this present state, and give attractions and encouragements to virtue, which reason and interest . . . cannot but allow and prefer. Upon this foundation, and upon this only, morality stands firm, and may defy all competitions . . . [for] the greatest part of mankind have not leisure for learning or logic.¹⁴

Marx would have little objection to how Hobbes and Locke describe the function of institutional religion in the society they advocate and defend, however it is called (bourgeois, market, capitalist). But he rejects the legitimacy of such a society, the putative role of religion in it, and the supposed state of nature on which it is based as neither reasonable nor natural. Rather, he sees it contrived by the powerful to keep the powerless effectively enslaved. Marx thus rejects religion's role as a pacifier that promotes the common good and considers it rather as an "opiate" that inhibits the masses from freely exercising their reason, will, and productive ambitions and abilities:

Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. . . . Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people [*Opium des Volkes*].¹⁵

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, like Marx, was a fervent critic of the Hobbesian idea that man is by nature endlessly seeking advantage over, and so ever at war with, his fellow men. Rather, the natural state of man is freedom from domination by, and desire to dominate, others. What Hobbes, Locke, and other "Christian authors," as Rousseau calls them, deem the "state of nature" is actually a philosophical excuse for the perversion imposed on the mass of men by a venal ruling class. (Actually, Hobbes's "state of nature" may be best understood as an abstract characterization of how English society, based on the emerging market economy of the seventeenth century, devolved into violence and chaos amid the breakdowns and turnovers of government that attended the English Civil War, thus requiring a perpetual sovereign power—or, in Locke's case, a recurrent delegation and election of authority by a rational and responsible propertied class—to reign in "the state of nature" to peacefully manage economic exchanges and maintain social order).¹⁶ Rousseau, however, differs from Marx in recognizing the role of religion in fostering a social conscience among the public. This role is not of "the other world" as preached by the "saintly, divine, true" religion of the early Christians. Rather religion should be a real-world affirmation of "the sanctity of the Social Contract and Laws" (*la sainteté du Contrat Social et de Lois*):

But there is a purely civil profession of faith . . . not as dogmas of Religion, but as social sentiments [*sentiments de sociabilité*] without which no man can be either a good Citizen or a faithful subject. Though it has no power to compel anyone to believe. . . . Now that there no longer is, nor can be, any exclusive national Religion, one should tolerate all those that show tolerance to the others, so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of the Citizen.¹⁷

Religion, in other words, should avow the sacred and inviolable contract that affirms man's natural and "authentic" goodness. It should help to liberate him from the social and moral inequalities that result from slavish and "artificial" pursuit of superfluous material goods and enslavement to the tyrants and despots who compel that pursuit.

Granted, there is undeniable historical truth that institutionalized religion has backed a ruling power and the social classes it has privileged (as with the Church of England under the Restoration following England's Civil War, or France's Catholic Church following the Franco-Prussian War in its attempt to "expiate the crimes of the Commune").¹⁸ Even Rousseau's "civil religion" became a tool of state oppression in the hands of Maximilien Robespierre and the Jacobins, who sought to institute Rousseau's vision of religion as a sponsor of revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity (but, like Rousseau, advocated death for heresy against the sanctity of the Social Contract and its laws as an "emergency measure for the preservation of democracy" requiring "terror . . . a severe and inflexible . . . emanation of virtue").¹⁹

Nevertheless, there is also a strong historical current, both in the Anglo-American Puritan tradition and among French free thinkers, whether Catholic or Protestant, that religion provides the individual with a moral conscience that is as natural to reason as it is compatible with it. As Elisha Williams, a colonial jurist and former rector of Yale College, said:

*This Right of judging every one for himself in Matters of Religion results from the Nature of Man[;] . . . a Man can no more part with it than he can his Power of Thinking. . . . A Man may alienate some Branches of his Property and give up his Right in them to others; but he cannot transfer the Rights of Conscience, unless he could destroy his rational and moral Powers.*²⁰

Moreover, this moral conscience that religion encourages provides a means to check the ruling power, and even a duty to rebel when that power imposes unethical, dishonorable, dishonest, or unfair burdens on citizens. Such, for example, is the sentiment expressed by the motto "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God," which Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson proposed for America's Great Seal,²¹ a sentiment also evident in the personal Catholicism of Charles de Gaulle.²²

According to the French socialist leader and leftist icon Jean Jaurès, religion inspires revolution:

The very essence of religious life consists in coming out of one's small and selfish ego, to go towards ideal and divine reality. (*L'essence même de la vie religieuse consiste à sortir de son moi égoïste et chétif, pour aller vers la réalité idéale et divine.*)²³

Similarly, for the Protestant socialist philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whom Macron considers a mentor, religion, on whose foundation Western reason developed, helps us imagine a social and political life more desirable than the one we have. Religion thus serves the critical function of allowing us to judge what is wrong now and what might be better in the future. Thus, far from hindering thought, religious faith "steps up reason" (*suscite un surcroît de raison*) by moving us "beyond any concrete morality" anchored to present and particular rules, behavior, and conditions, toward a general ethic of equality—a "justice where everyone's rights weigh equally"—and to an "ethic of love," including "that love of the innocent victim."²⁴

There is, in other words, a longstanding vision and mission for religion and its role in a democratic society of liberal tolerance that need not privilege any person or group and need not be obligatory or even institutionalized in ways bound to tradition or convention. This notion of religion pervades public space in calling individuals to a common moral aspiration and is surely closer to ideas of Jefferson and Jaurès than to those of Hobbes and Marx.

In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin casts devotion to spiritual and moral virtues that "come to be highly esteemed or even held sacred,"²⁵ along with devotion to one's own group, as the "the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy." Together, commitment

to cherished values and to one's comrades appears to be the best evolutionary formula for success in history's spiraling competition for survival and dominance. Across cultures, the strongest forms of primary group identity are bounded by sacred values that are immune to material trade-offs, such as unwillingness to sell out one's religion or country. Is not God the symbol and sinew of society, as the French sociologist Emile Durkheim famously conjectured?²⁶

Through imagined kinship and faith beyond reason, religions enable strangers to cooperate in a manner that gives them an advantage in competition with other groups. This has been especially true since the advent of the "Axial Age" (Karl Jaspers's *Achsenzeit*),²⁷ more than two millennia ago. That was when large-scale civilizations arose under the watchful gaze of powerful, all-perceiving divinities who mercilessly punished moral transgressors to ensure that even strangers would work and fight as one in the competitively emerging multiethnic empires warring and trading across the middle latitudes of Eurasia.²⁸ Call it "God" or (ever since the American and French Revolutions) whatever transcendental and a priori ideology (and so immune to logical contradiction or empirical counterevidence) one prefers, including any of the great modern salvational -isms, such as colonialism, socialism, anarchism, communism, fascism, and liberalism. Humans make their greatest exertions and sacrifices, for ill or good, for the sake of ideas that give a sense of significance. This is "the privilege of absurdity to which no creature is subject, but men only" of which Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan*. In a universe where humans may be nothing more than a trivial occurrence, and where humans alone among organic species recognize that death is unavoidable, there is an overwhelming psychological impetus to overcome this tragedy of cognition: to realize "why I am" and "who we are."

Often such values are attributed to Providence or Nature and embedded in notions whose meaning one can never quite pin down and that cannot ever be definitively verified or falsified by logic or empirical evidence (e.g., "God is great, bodiless but omnipotent" or "Free markets are always wise"). Thus, while "sacred values" intuitively denote religious belief, as when land or law becomes holy, they also include the "secularized sacred," as when ground or rights become hallowed (think of the military cemeteries of Gettysburg, Flanders, and Normandy, or the Declaration of Independence or the Rights of Man). Consider the quasi-religious notion of the nation itself, ritualized in song and ceremony, and sacrifice. Or take those "self-evident" aspects of "human nature" that humankind is supposedly endowed with, such as "unalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In the initial draft of America's Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson deemed these rights "sacred,"²⁹ which Benjamin Franklin, seeking "rationalist" foundational principles, even for the spiritual, subsequently insisted be made "self-evident." In fact, such rights are anything but self-evident and natural in the life of our species.³⁰ For example, cannibalism, infanticide, slavery, oppression of minorities, and male domination of women were more standard fare. It wasn't inevitable or initially even reasonable that conceptions of individual freedom and equality concocted by eighteenth-century European intellectuals should emerge, much less prevail.³¹ They did only through revolution, intensive social engineering, economic competition, and belief in "just war."

The Vitality of Values

Civilizations rise and fall on the vitality of cultural ideals, not material assets alone. After the Visigoths sacked Rome over fifteen hundred years ago, Augustine sought in *The City of God* to describe the abiding city or commonwealth that would outlast the fall of earthly cities; only "The Republic of God," he surmised, would endure under whatever material guise.³² With the defeat

of fascism and communism, have our lives defaulted to the material quest for comfort and safety on ever-shifting sand? Is an endless, despiritualized gambling for gain enough to ensure the security, much less triumph, of the open societies that we seem to take for granted, and believe our world should be based on?

Among young men resident in Mosul and surrounding areas who had just come out from under the rule of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), our research team found no support for democracy, which after the U.S. invasion of Iraq was suffered by the Sunni as a tyranny of the Shia majority. (And without the laborious development of institutions that underpin democratic governance of the kind that took Europe and the United States more than two centuries to foster, democracy just may not be very good at adjudicating across tribal, ethnic, and confessional boundaries and conflicts, any more than in family matters.) Almost all people we interviewed and psychologically tested initially embraced ISIS as “the Revolution” (*al-Thawra*). Although many came to reject ISIS’s brutality, the overwhelming majority continue to adhere to ISIS’s core value of strict *Sharia* law as the ultimate salvation of society. Moreover, those who believe in *Sharia* as the best form of government are more willing to make costly sacrifices, including fighting and dying.³³ We also find that few of the thousands of Western European youth that we have surveyed, in contrast to North African supporters of *Sharia* in the service of militant jihad, are willing to make corresponding costly sacrifices for their supposedly cherished values, such as democracy.³⁴ A majority of eligible eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old voters do not even participate in national elections in France or the United States. This seeming lack of devotion and commitment to our own core values, rather than threats from violent extremism or outside forces, likely represents the greatest existential challenge for open societies.

Reenchantment and perhaps communitarian rerooting of our own once-transcendent values in an engaged and educated citizenry for the cooperative pursuit of individual liberty and happiness may be the key existential issue for our futures. For some, rerooting of our own values of representative government, with equal opportunity and justice before the law and unfettered debate, may provide a way forward in life. Preserving what is left of the planet’s fauna and flora and avoiding environmental catastrophes may inspire others. Yet others might be called to antinuclear activities to parry what is probably humanity’s greatest threat.

A social ritual is a formulaic, ceremonial sequence of language and behavior that an audience shares, which coordinates and focuses individual bodies, minds, and emotions into obtaining a collective sense of significance about who they are and with whom they belong. The words and movements are accepted, even if not understood. Often, a collective sense of significance is achieved with the help of bodily coordination, through handholding, kissing, or embracing or through dance, sway, or song. Frequently there also are primate displays of submission to a greater power, such as bowing, genuflecting, baring the throat or chest, or covering and uncovering the heart or head, which even leaders of religions, popular movements, and nations must demonstrate to convince and ensure their people that the leader’s authority over them depends on the leader’s obeisance to an even higher authority, be it God, Nation, Humanity, or some other Ideal. The universally preferred idiom for ritual ceremonies involves expressions of kinship, real or imagined, of family, brotherhood, motherland, and so forth.

Our society makes use of many rituals to symbolize the beginning, transitioning, recurrence, or ending of important social events or tasks: baby showers, baptisms, bar mitzvahs, communions, inauguration ceremonies, grand openings, launchings, graduation ceremonies, engagement and marriage ceremonies, birthday parties and anniversary celebrations, national holiday celebrations, closing ceremonies, funeral services and memorial ceremonies, and so

forth. Yet many of our rituals have lost effectiveness because they have become mere habit or dogma. This is one reason so many people are now seeking significance in shamanism, New Age spiritualism, and radical (and highly ritualized) movements. Or, they otherwise are fleeing from what Søren Kierkegaard calls “the dizziness of freedom”³⁵—the constant anxiety that comes from unrelenting pressure to choose and change—in drugs and alcohol, sex and porn addiction, or in lives increasingly given over to social media and video games.

In the United States, the Boy Scouts, high school and college sports teams, local churches and Lions Clubs, and the military draft proved effective means for integrating immigrant families and youth into U.S. society under the ideal of “truth, justice, and the American way,” however far from practice or veracity that ideal. The unraveling of U.S. town and community life, as chronicled and quantified in Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, has greatly lessened the importance of such ritualized activities, along with a decline in cultural consensus about “who and what is an American.”³⁶ And community life in France has gone much the same way. Also in steep decline in the United States is the way children subtly learn community norms through free association in spontaneous forms of play, from stick ball to cops and robbers.³⁷ Absent the direct adult supervision, activity planning, rigid rules, and need for “personal space” governing children’s interactions today, children would negotiate how familial and community norms applied among themselves as they managed minor risks, insults, bullying, cheating, and so on in achieving a collective consensus about what constitutes good and bad behavior.

So what re-ritualizations are likely to re-enchance our young and re-spiritualize the values of open society to a point where they again become worthy of sacrifice, and that give a sense of what people should believe in and why they should act in certain ways or not in others? Macron’s idea of reinstituting at least a minimum of national service may be one promising solution, provided there is a convincing coordination of ideas, values, emotions, and bodies that lead to a shared sense of significance. Such a sense of significance often is created through shared military experience, especially in combat for a cause; a more pacific national service that still generates devotion might be had, however, in something like the U.S. Peace Corps, established by President John F. Kennedy “to promote world peace and friendship . . . under conditions of hardship if necessary,” by providing social, economic, and technical assistance to help people understand our culture and help us understand the cultures of other countries. Unfortunately, the all-volunteer aspect of Kennedy’s initiative, subsequent funding cuts and opposition to the Peace Corps by Richard Nixon, further cuts and a reorientation toward business-related programs under Ronald Reagan, and a general dwindling of support have resulted in a very diminished project and impact. Yet something like a Peace Corps as one option of national service could be more effective, if participants come to share a commitment to their mission, ceremoniously expressed and realized “under conditions of hardship if necessary.” In addition, programs might be organized to bring youth into politics through civic education in schools, which includes promotion of hands-on involvement in teams and election campaigns, and an open forum for criticism and suggestions.

At the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, I presented some of our research team’s findings on how and why “devoted actors ” (as opposed to “rational actors”), who are unconditionally committed to non-negotiable sacred values and their group, have been able to resist and even prevail against political and military opponents with much greater material resources: for example, the religious Islamic State and the secular Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),³⁸ the early Bolsheviks and Nazis, or, in a less warlike vein that still required bloody

sacrifice, Martin Luther King Jr.'s U.S. civil rights movement and Mahatma Gandhi's Indian independence movement ("If loss of life becomes necessary in a righteous battle," Gandhi proclaimed, "one should be prepared, like Jesus, to shed his own, not others' blood."³⁹). I had the impression that most people in attendance thought that the vicious spiral of jihadism and xenophobic ethnonational populism were just atavistic blips in the ineluctable progress of globalization that were destined to soon go away, as Chinese president Xi Jinping seemed to be telling us. That to me was the most worrisome feature of Davos, whose denizens basically run the world (or try to). Few there seemed willing to change their behavior. They seemed to view the left-behinds of the dark side of globalization as simply losers who might be given a handout when robotization denies them any chance for a decent living.

To end these worries, there was earnest talk among the powerful and spectacularly wealthy of a universal guaranteed income for the economically disadvantaged. Yet poor people rarely instigate violent overthrows of established order because they are preoccupied (physically and cognitively) with subsistence.⁴⁰ A guaranteed income for people without purpose or significance in life would more likely radicalize them than create quiet sheep. The doyens of Davos thereby could be subsidizing their own extinction. And providing jobs that deny people dignity or the dream of a worthy life likely would fare no better.

We need to alter the approach to youth, who form the bulk of today's extremist recruits and tomorrow's most vulnerable populations. Right now, young people, especially young men (although increasingly young women), are viewed mostly as part of a global "youth bulge," a problem to be pummeled, rather than as a "youth boom"—the world's most creative force, holding the promise for a better future, without violence in the mix. Let us help these young people realize their hopes and dreams, help them take agency over their own lives.⁴¹ The best strategy could be showing them how they might successfully navigate their ideas in the labyrinths of power and the prevailing institutions to change the world without violence. This is a goal of the United Network of Young Peacebuilders,⁴² which was instrumental in promoting UN Security Council Resolution 2250 that urges member states to give youth a greater voice in decision making to confront violent extremism. But for now, that goal is only a hope.

We need a strategy to redirect radicalized youth by engaging with their passions for a better cause, rather than by ignoring or fearing them, or satisfying ourselves by calling on others to moderate or simply denounce them. Yet no countervailing message will spread in a social vacuum, in the abstract space of ideology or counternarrative alone. The means of engagement are critical, requiring close knowledge of communities at risk. In our research on terror networks we find that, most often, people join radical groups through pre-existing social networks.⁴³ This clustering suggests that much recruitment does not take place primarily through direct appeals or following individual exposure to social media (which would entail a more dispersed recruitment pattern).⁴⁴ Rather, recruiting often involves enlisting nests of family, friends, and fellow travelers from specific locales (neighborhoods, universities, prisons, social media cliques).⁴⁵

Of course, there are limits to tolerance, and dangers of worse violence in appeasement of the intolerable. Neither reason alone nor modesty in aspiration will ever trump the passion for persuasion, which careful analysis and controlled psychological experimentation show is much more commonly the social goal of reason in argument than is discovery of truth.⁴⁶ And our partisan divisions include real differences in values that many of our politicians and pundits hype and ply into existential threats for their own fame and gain. Perhaps few of us will ever be altogether free from the anxiety of never-ending change and choice that favors escape into the absolute, and into the hopeless delusion of never-changing ways of life that can lead only to

greater dread of difference in others. But there are still vast common grounds of shared passions and ideas that exist and can be created in a nation and a world where all but the too-far-gone can live life with more than a minimum of liberty and happiness, if given half a chance. It is for this chance that some of our forebears fought revolutions, civil war, and world wars.

The times call out for transformative engagement of civil society and government to address problems of violent extremism and radical illiberalism. They call out as well for a spiritual revival of our civilizational values and rituals and their potential for eliciting commitment to defense of the common good represented by them. These need not be monotheistic or even institutionally “religious,” as Macron implied, but they may well need to be sacred and transcendental. For history suggests that societies best endure when their culture-binding values and sociopolitical rituals become, as Darwin notes, “highly esteemed and even held sacred,” transcending and thus engaging—anthropologically, ontologically and metaphysically—commitment beyond any social contract’s utilitarian considerations.

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Notes

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