

THE PARTY CRASHER

HOW JESUS DISRUPTS POLITICS AS USUAL
AND REDEEMS OUR PARTISAN DIVIDE



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JOSHUA RYAN BUTLER

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and Redeems Our Partisan Divide*

JOSHUA RYAN BUTLER



MULTNOMAH

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed
to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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To Jim Mullins, one of the wisest and humblest leaders I know. The best ideas in these pages I've learned from you; many of the stories are inspired by your genius. It's been an honor to co-pastor with you. You ask insightful questions, your creative imagination is unmatched, and you are a true friend.

To Redemption Tempe, for the honor of being your pastor for five years. Your allegiance to the King as citizens of his kingdom has inspired and embodied the stories in these pages. You've modeled unity in Christ, staying at the table in the midst of polarization, and the fruit of the Spirit, throwing a better party for the world.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this book while a pastor at Redemption Tempe in Arizona. The stories herein are, in many ways, a celebration of God's work in this amazing church community that our family was honored to call home for many years. When I speak of "our church" in the pages to come, I am referring to Redemption Tempe. After the book was completed, we found ourselves returning to our hometown in the Pacific Northwest, closer to our extended family. Yet this book remains inspired by, written from within, and dedicated to the amazing followers of Jesus and the kingdom party happening at Redemption Tempe.

INTRODUCTION

The Party Crasher

Kyle wasn't invited. Back in high school, I was the awkward book nerd; he was the jock football star. I didn't even think to extend an invitation. So there was no front door thrown open, no red carpet rolled out when he arrived. I was content with the party I had, boring as it might have been. Yet he showed up anyway. Literally. At my house.

Kyle crashed my party.

He disrupted the cliques of high school politics-as-usual. Kyle refused to hang out with the usual suspects, befriending the goths and the misfits, the pretty and the put together, the artists and military brats and nerds (like me)—and yes, the athletes too. He breached social circles and broke down walls, forming a shockingly new and eclectic community.

Kyle was the life of the party. The atmosphere changed when he walked in. The laughter got louder, the stories grander, the friendships deeper. He crashed a party not to tear it down but to build it up. It wasn't the beverages he brought; it was his presence. Things got better with him around. Yet there was something else he was known for . . .

Kyle threw an even *better* party. His backyard bashes were epic. My memories are vivid: awake at 2 A.M. in the hot tub, with

the firepit blazing, truly alive with close friends and never wanting to go home. Kyle drew me out of my bubble, into a wider horizon and more expansive community than I would have otherwise thought possible. Once I tasted this party, the others paled in comparison. My former bubble seemed boring and stale. I'm glad he crashed my party.

Kyle was like Jesus.

* * *

Jesus is crashing the party. Or, better yet, the parties. This is not a book about high school politics but American politics (though there are many similarities). Increasingly, many Christians feel they don't fit comfortably within either party. Each side demands ultimate allegiance to a "party package" that is incompatible—at points—with the Christian faith. As temperatures rise, the hostility and division are tearing friendships, families, and churches apart. I'll share loads of firsthand stories in the pages ahead.

The partisan boxes become like high school cliques, isolated bubbles filled with people who think alike. Sadly, the gossip, slander, and drama are worse than any locker room or hallway. The party conversation quickly becomes status seeking, scripted, and stale.

This issue is bigger than Democrat and Republican. In chapters 1–3, I'll offer fresh insight on the four distinct values driving the division today. (Surprise: There are not just two parties; there are four—and they're not that fun these days!) I have found these four values helpful to explain "What the heck just happened?" in American politics.

I call these "the four political religions." People are converting to them in droves, with zealous devotion to guarding the tenets of their newfound faith. We'll explore how politics is more religious than we often think and how the gospel is actu-

ally political—though not in the way you might expect!

Fortunately, Jesus is the Party Crasher. Like Kyle, the boundary-breaking prom king, the King of kings is calling together people who lean in different directions but refuse to bow to the partisan religions of our day. Whichever side you're on, Jesus is disrupting politics-as-usual and calling you into a bigger, bolder, grander vision that can redeem our partisan divide.

Jesus shows you how to bring his life to your party. In chapters 4–6, I'll focus on political discipleship. We'll get practical with ten political commandments for Christlike engagement. We'll learn how to be peacemakers rather than peacefakers or peacebreakers. We'll explore how to be bold and take a stand without compromising the fruit of his Spirit. Jesus shows you how to be actively engaged in politics without destroying your soul.

I'm not here to tell you to leave your party and stop caring about politics. Actually, it's the opposite. I want to encourage you to be a better disciple of Jesus in whichever party or place you're in—one who makes it better because of your presence there. I do want to show you how to resist the idols in your circles (every party has them), but I hope you'll finish this book caring *more* about the public life of God's world and feeling equipped to go about it in a way that's faithful to the King of heaven and earth.

I'm also not here to tell you how to vote. I'm a pastor, not a pundit. But if I'm a good pastor (which I try to be) and tell you there's a threat to your life with God, it's probably a good idea to listen. The reality is, people are spending billions of dollars to draw your allegiance away from Jesus and divide the body of Christ. And it's working. There are idols and ideologies offering false visions of salvation that ultimately will not satisfy. I want to inspire and equip you, in this volatile climate, to pledge your al-

legiance to the King of kings and live faithfully as a citizen of his kingdom.

Jesus is throwing a better party. In chapters 7–9, we’ll look at how to get in on his kingdom celebration. I’ll offer formational practices for a polarized world. We’ll learn from ancient wisdom in the church to reimagine a better future for our children. We’ll examine how the church itself *is* political and offer creative options for what our public presence as citizens of the King might look like today.

I want to make you a party crasher, like Jesus, who refuses to conform to the partisan boxes and scripts of our day, in order to offer a better political vision and a more life-giving kingdom presence to the world. I’m so glad Kyle crashed my party, but I’m even more exuberant that Jesus broke through my bubble and called me into the expansive embrace of his kingdom. The King of kings is throwing a feast, and you’re invited.

Join the party.

THE FOUR POLITICAL RELIGIONS

Half the congregation disappeared. Out of three thousand people, around fifteen hundred left—and left angry. What happened? A handful of influential members walked away and sought to take down the church on their way out. They scoured pastors' personal social media feeds, stalked the accounts of the pastors' spouses, and meticulously watched sermons, looking for any ammunition to take down the church. They started email chains with every person they knew, spreading misinformation, rumors, and slander. They made YouTube videos saying the lead pastor was under the influence of Satan. They raced to another local church and asked that church to start a sermon series attacking the place they'd left. And it worked.

The congregation split in half.

This was a church I loved that our church had partnered with, in the same city. So it hit home personally for our congregation, too. The cause for this mass exodus? Political ideology.

I'll share more of my own church's story in the pages ahead. Mistakes we've made. Things we've learned. Convictions that have grown. We took punches from both the Left and the Right, in similar measure. And I know we're not alone. Christians are facing partisan division in their families, friendships, and

churches at unprecedented levels. The body of Christ is fracturing along political fault lines. Partisan politics is crashing Jesus's kingdom party. The cause?

People are converting to the political religions.

THE POLITICAL RELIGIONS

Imagine you wake up tomorrow and a third of your church has converted to another religion. Some to Buddhism, others to Islam, others to Hinduism. One dude's now a Zoroastrian.

But they're still part of your church. They proselytize fellow church members over coffee, post their favorite devotional mantras on Instagram, share videos of their favorite spiritual guru's teaching on YouTube, and debate the tenets of their newfound faith on Facebook—not seeming to recognize there's a conflict with the faith they've long professed.

Eventually, when friends refuse to join them, they break fellowship. When family members don't share their zeal, they distance themselves. They seek new communities who will worship the way they now do. Your community is fracturing, and many people are wondering how to respond. Here's the thing: This isn't fiction.

This has actually happened.

Untold numbers of Christians have recently converted to new religions. These are friends and family members within our churches, and it's happening right under our noses. It might not be a third of the church, but it's a lot. However, we haven't recognized them as conversions because they're not turning to the typical old-school world religions. They're turning to the new-school political religions.

There are four political religions that masses of people are increasingly converting to—in both our culture and our

churches. I'm not calling them religions to be cute. The root of the word *religion* means something like “devotion,” and there’s arguably no greater zeal or devotion many people are showing today than to their political ideology and tribe.¹ I want to explore the sacred rituals of each political religion—its priests and prophets, its authoritative texts and repeated mantras, its symbolic temples, sacred cows, and purity boundaries. Each has its own inflexible set of rules and expectations and will kick you out if you break them.²

Each is competing for our ultimate allegiance.

These political ideologies are a primary feature of our cultural moment—in America at least, though there are similar trends throughout the West and around the world—and a central challenge for the church today. I want to explore how political rituals invest each ideology with transcendent weight and power; how they shape us with a particular story, meaning, and hope; and how they threaten to displace God as the true center of our lives.

All of them are a pale substitute for Jesus’s kingdom party.

My Story

Friends and I first recognized this phenomenon in 2016. What started as good discourse between people we knew and loved began to look a lot like conversion, undertaken with religious zeal. It happened on the Left *and* on the Right. Fellow Christians began to give more attention to the words of pundits than to the words of Scripture, to break fellowship with longtime friends in the faith, to cut out family members who saw the world differently.

As pastors, we saw couples we had counseled and married, friends we had walked and cried with through suffering or sat with at the deathbed of a loved one, angrily break ties because

they disagreed with a fellow church member.

This was more than classic political debate. These disagreements possessed, for those involved, transcendent purpose. We witnessed intense evangelism from Twitter to TikTok proclaiming the good news of their political saviors. We saw new forms of catechesis, with sacred texts on Fox and CNN, with rising gurus on YouTube educating adherents on the doctrines of the faithful. Each side cultivated sacred boundaries to divide the pure from the impure, the faithful and orthodox from the heretics.

It made us realize that the religions of our day are political and cultural ideologies. No one I know is converting to Buddhism or Islam. But loads of people are giving their deepest allegiance to political ideologies competing with their allegiance to Christ, the King of kings. Many people are converting without even knowing it—they don't recognize the religious nature of their newfound ideologies. They seem oblivious that it's crashing their allegiance to Jesus.

In this chapter, I want to describe these ideologies in religious terms to illuminate the nature of their appeal and the temptations they pose. A good place to start is the Four Americas.

The Four Americas

We tend to talk about politics as Left and Right, but this doesn't do justice to the current landscape, which is more fractured and complex. In *The Atlantic*, George Packer wrote a fascinating cover story on "The Four Americas," and it has since become an influential book.³ He observed four different cultural narratives—different "Americas"—that are significantly shaping our politics.

- **Smart America:** the worldview of Silicon Valley and the professional elite, who believe we can use science,

technology, and strong institutions to change the world.

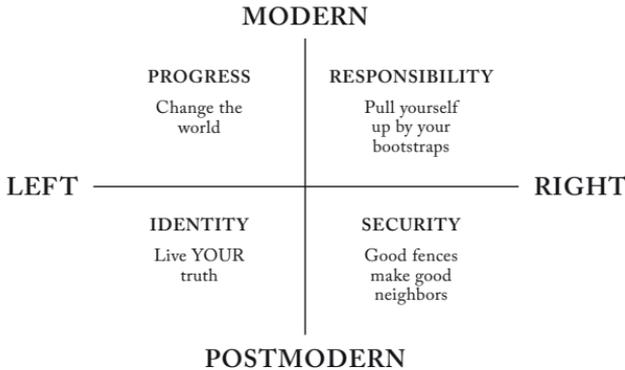
- **Free America:** the worldview of the suburbs, with an emphasis on free markets and hard work, dedicated to caring for whatever small patch of the world we're on and contributing to a thriving economy.
- **Just America:** the worldview of the urban core, with an emphasis on citizens as members of identity groups that inflict or suffer oppression with a call to dismantle unjust systems.
- **Real America:** the worldview of the Midwest and rural areas, with an emphasis on loyalty to deep roots and protection from outside threats.⁴

Keep in mind that Packer is not saying the fourth group is more “real” than the others; he’s simply identifying the quadrants with language popularly used for them. Also, there’s complexity and nuance in the details of these four Americas, broad brushstrokes and all, but I think we get the picture.

When I first read Packer’s article, my immediate response was, *He stole that from my friend Jim!* (I’m joking, of course. I doubt he has heard Jim’s sermons.) Jim and I were co-pastors, and he’s been talking about this idea for years. Jim and I used similar categories to help our church navigate the choppy waters of past election seasons.⁵

Jim uses different terms to describe the Four Americas, which I find more helpful. While Packer’s language helps to recognize these movements in popular culture (on a *sociological* level), Jim’s language helps to understand the values and ideological roots driving these movements and engage them biblically (on a *theological* level).

Jim's terms are illustrated in the following diagram, which we'll be using throughout this book. The key words in each quadrant speak to a core value at the heart of its ideology.



- **Progress** (versus “smart”): to speak to the upper left’s strong belief in the value of science, technology, and institutions to change the world for the better.
- **Responsibility** (versus “free”): to speak to the upper right’s strong belief in hard work, family values, and personal ownership to build flourishing communities.
- **Identity** (versus “just”): to speak to the lower left’s strong belief in self-expression, anti-discrimination, and a recognition of others’ unique stories to tackle oppressive legacies and build a more just society.
- **Security** (versus “real”): to speak to the lower right’s strong belief in loyalty, local identity, and protection from external threats to establish the conditions for a thriving community.

It’s worth observing that all four of these values are good in

their proper place, with something to bring to the table. (More on that in chapter 2.) What if we approached our political “opponents” with the assumption that they have something good to contribute? That there’s something to learn from their perspectives? How might that help our discussions be less heated and more productive? Yet each value can also become distorted when made ultimate and uprooted from God’s creational design.

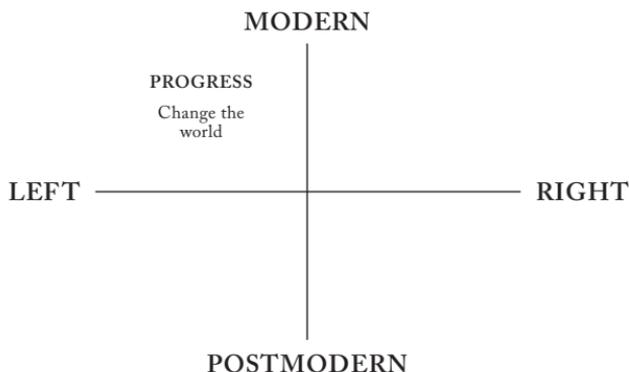
You’ll also notice there is a “top-down” axis on this diagram, not just the typical Left-Right axis. This represents *modernity* and *postmodernity*. I will make the case (following my friend Jim) that this is the underlying current that has “split” the Left and Right sides of the traditional political spectrum and helps explain why some of the deepest conflicts today are not simply between Left *versus* Right but between different camps *within* the Left and the Right. (More on that in a minute.) Postmodernity has crashed the traditional political parties.

For now, let’s explore each of these four quadrants as religions, identifying their creeds and core doctrines, their high priests and sacred texts, their temples, boundaries of purity, and formational practices. An important caveat: My goal in this chapter is simply to *describe* these quadrants, not place judgment on them. (So no need to get defensive if the quadrant you most identify with comes up!) In future chapters, we’ll seek to *prescribe* the kingdom; here we’re simply seeking to get the lay of the land.

THE RELIGION OF PROGRESS

The Religion of Progress, in the upper-left corner, lives by the creed “We can change the world.” This is an optimistic religion that believes salvation comes through scientific discovery,

human ingenuity, and technological advancement. It places faith in advanced education, strong institutions, thorough research, and robust public policy.



This religion thrives in what Packer calls “Smart America”: Think Silicon Valley, Google and Facebook, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, the smartphone and the tech boom, artificial intelligence and medical breakthroughs. Its location in the upper half of the diagram means it is *modern* (rather than *postmodern*), reflecting a strong belief in science, technology, and institutions. Believers here place a devout faith in these things to achieve *progress*, building a more just, beautiful, and thriving world.

This religion’s high priests have been people like Bill Gates, the Clintons, and Steve Jobs, rallying the faithful toward progress and forming foundations to mediate its transcendent truths. Its most renowned worship leader is Bono, singing hymns to unite and uplift humanity around ending global poverty, AIDS, and hunger. Steven Pinker and Sam Harris are leading apologists for the power of its gospel, defending the modern ascendance of our civilization through science and reason to unprecedented heights while calling us to leave behind the superstitions of the past.

This religion's sacred texts are found in places like CNN, *The New York Times*, NPR, and—for its more radical fundamentalists—Mother Jones. TED Talks are its sermons and academic research its scripture, where the devout turn for truth and holy instruction.

The university is its temple, particularly the STEM department, where you can ascend the ranks of the saints with a degree, which empowers you to work wonders that miraculously transform the world.

Zealous laity can be found waiting eight hours in line at the Apple store to enter its sanctuary, bestow an offering, and receive from an acolyte its latest blessing to the faithful: the iPhone.⁶ This iconic relic's updated version (to be kept on your person like an amulet at all times) will allow you to approach transcendence, moving closer to *omniscience* (knowing everything that's happening in the world), *omnipresence* (staying connected to friends, family, and even strangers thousands of miles away), and *omnipotence* (with the power of the universe in the palm of your hand).

THE RELIGION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The Religion of Responsibility, in the upper-right corner, lives by the creed "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." This is also an optimistic religion, but its faith is centered on the power of personal potential. It preaches the gospel that the world will be saved through hard work, good moral values, and people who are responsible for their family and their property. It places faith in the free market, business entrepreneurship, and individual liberty.



This religion thrives in what Packer calls “Free America”: Think the suburbs, Wall Street and Ronald Reagan, classic conservatism and the free market, family values and strong businesses, hard work and personal responsibility.

In the upper-right quadrant, this religion shares with the upper-left a modern belief in reason, an objective order to the world, and legitimate moral authority to enforce a more just society. Its believers also share a faith in strong institutions, though the emphasis here is on business and family, rather than government. Business is the economic engine to drive society forward, with owners at the wheel and responsible workers pushing the gas pedal rather than bureaucratic intervention siphoning off the fuel and slamming on the brakes. When it comes to government, the emphasis is on *limited* rather than *expansive*, to avoid interference with the power of the market.

Historically, Ronald Reagan was the iconic high priest of this quadrant (“Man is not free unless government is limited”),⁷ with Milton Friedman its strongest economic apologist and Newt Gingrich its public herald. Today, public figures have arisen to take the baton, like Jordan Peterson shepherding his online megachurch with the philosophy of Admiral William McRaven

(“If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed”⁸); Ben Shapiro exhorting his congregation while publicly defending the faith; Jocko Willink guiding novices into the monastic order of extreme ownership; and the *Dirty Jobs* guy, Mike Rowe, modeling the virtues of hard work as a path to sanctification.

The sacred texts for this religion are found in places like Fox News, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the Daily Wire. Its holy scripture is the stock market, updated for hourly observances of meditation. Those seeking to advance in its doctrines can find deeper instruction in think pieces at *National Review* and *The Federalist*. Scholastics wishing to develop new resources for catechesis are invited to apply to the Heritage Foundation or the American Conservative Union. Thought leaders can be found at the annual denominational CPAC assembly.

If the temple for *progress* was the university, the temple for *responsibility* is the home with a white picket fence and two-car garage, a reward bestowed upon the faithful as a sign of divine approval, where hard work receives its recompense, family values can be lived out, and the individual may recharge from their responsible contribution to the world.

Now, before we shift to the lower quadrants, we need to describe modernity and postmodernity to understand what’s driving the shift.

MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

Modernity and postmodernity are big concepts. If you’re a philosophy major, you’ll probably want to slap me for how simplistic I’m about to be. But I’ll take your slap over having all the other readers falling asleep.

Modernity, if I can offer a visual stereotype, is the scientist in

a lab coat with a microscope, dissecting and studying the world. It's a worldview that grows out of the Enlightenment, with a faith in reason, the scientific method, and building strong institutions that will solve the world's problems. It's a very optimistic outlook that says we need to use the rational aspects of our minds to study the world and invent solutions to improve it.

Postmodernity is a reactionary movement focused on deconstructing the ideas and institutions of modernity. It grows out of seeing some of modernity's failures: world wars, nuclear weapons, and evil things like eugenics done in the name of science and progress. In the words of Jean-François Lyotard (what a cool name!), postmodernity is "incredulity towards metanarratives."⁹ In other words, it says, *Don't believe in big stories, big universals*. Rather, your understanding of reality and truth should come from within, from the self, from your unique story as an individual. Anything larger is just trying to limit and oppress people.

Postmodernity, to offer another visual stereotype, is an artist painting a picture of (*drumroll . . .*) the artist. He's creatively expressing himself. If modernity is about discovering and defining the world, postmodernity is about constructing and creating one's own world.

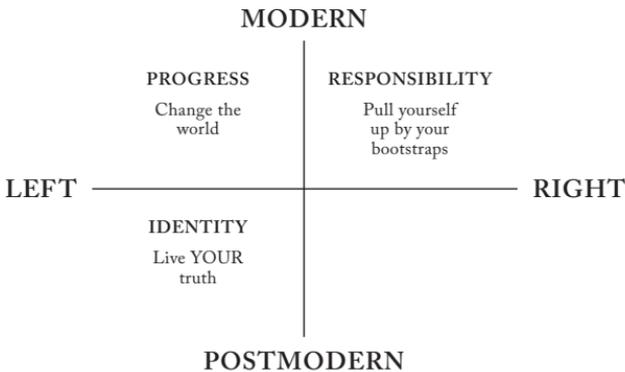
While the upper-left and upper-right quadrants have been shaped by modernity, the lower-left and lower-right quadrants have been shaped by postmodernity. As previously mentioned, all four quadrants offer good insights and contributions, yet each one has an idol that's trying to replace God. Each has a functional religion that emerges and competes with our allegiance to Jesus, seeking to crash our faith.

Let's now move to the lower quadrants.

THE RELIGION OF IDENTITY

The Religion of Identity, in the lower-left quadrant, has a creed of “Live your truth.” Don’t let anyone else tell you how to live *your* life. You are the one who crafts your identity. Rather than universal truths or morality, the focus is on discovering, cultivating, and constructing oneself.

This religion thrives in what Packer calls “Just America”: Think the urban core, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Elliot Page, San Francisco and Boston, race and gender placards, protests against a legacy of injustice, and Tik Tok and Instagram posts with an ethos of personal self-expression, dismantling oppression, and experiencing the world.



As a lower quadrant, this religion is pessimistic toward the ideas and institutions of modernity, observing how they have historically been used to oppress people and have manipulated language to justify their injustice. Although there is still a desire for progress, this distrust in the external pushes the vehicle for transformation within. The locus of faith is no longer “out there” in science, technology, and strong institutions but rather “in here,” discovering and expressing one’s most authentic desires—

being oneself—and freeing up others to do the same. The objective is traded for the subjective.

This religion is not completely relativistic, because it also has a big moral push that says that any ideas or institutions that get in the way of self-expression must be dismantled and deconstructed.

The preachers of this religion are pop-culture icons like Lady Gaga and Lil Nas X, modeling the way of salvation through performative self-expression and continual reinvention. Its prophets are political leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, proclaiming a gospel that the world will be saved through deconstructing and dismantling all institutional roadblocks that keep people from their authentic selves. This religion's most rampant conversion growth has been seen on the front lines of the race and gender revolutions, with big-tent evangelists like Ibram X. Kendi and Jazz Jennings.

If the symbolic temple for *progress* is the university, and for *responsibility* the white picket fence, the symbolic temple for this religion is the protest: where the faithful gather to sing the choir of the vox populi, registering their disillusionment with the establishment and expressing their demand for change.

The sacred texts for this religion are TikTok and Instagram, where influencers provide a menu of available options for constructing one's own personal identity and customized brand. Try them on and, if you like something, make an offering to the building campaign. (For example, "Share this post" to support the construction of this influencer's online cathedral.)

Catechism in this religion is provided through the Disney script, where youngsters learn that family, tradition, and authority are obstacles to be overcome in their project of self-realization. Elsa learns to "let it go," Luca leaps out of the water, and Moana sets out on her own until she is able to declare, "I am Moana!"

Each must look within to discover their truest self and guiding light, over and against the external sources that lay a claim upon their existence. Granted, I love watching these films with my children, and there's certainly something of the classic "hero's journey" here as well. Yet themes from the postmodern cult of identity are also clearly at play, especially when compared with classic films and children's tales.

Those in this religion are tempted to quickly swap out career choices, hobbies, and spouses when they no longer serve the higher purpose of a vehicle for the construction of identity.

Personality tests like the Enneagram are rites of passage to this sacred order, providing you with a language to discover and share the unique strengths and temptations that make you *you*. (It's funny, I've gotten more hate mail when I say anything less than enthusiastically positive about the Enneagram than when I do the same about most any other topic.) I'm not saying such personality tests are bad—they can be useful—but simply that their skyrocketing popularity today is iconic of the identity quadrant in our cultural moment. (Discover and cultivate the truest you!)

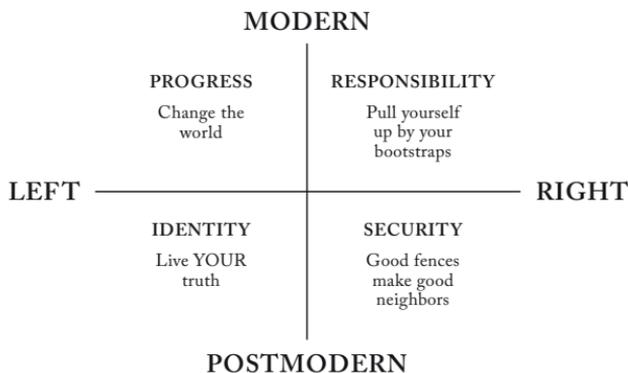
Adherents of this religion frequently claim to resist consumerism ("the sins of their fathers") and prefer minimalism. Yet this practice is deceptive—it is simply a new *type* of consumerism. We consume experiences. We want the awesome meals at the hot new restaurants, the killer vacations in amazing locations, the craft coffee, local microbrew, latest Broadway hits, and prestigious music festivals. And, of course, we want to document the whole thing on social media along the way.

Many have called this "the experience economy." We've gone from *buying* things to *doing* things. A sign of status used to be the logo on your jacket or handbag; today, it's the location of your latest Instagram post. Honest confession: My wife and I

used to brag, “We’re not into stuff; we’re into experiences” (thinking that made us less consumerist). But now we’re like, *Oh wow, that’s just a new form of consumerism!* It’s centered on the god of “me,” on the pilgrimage to cultivate the sacred identity of the self.

THE RELIGION OF SECURITY

Finally, the Religion of Security, in the lower-right quadrant, lives by the creed “Good fences make good neighbors.” We live in a dangerous world. Security allows us to prosper as individuals, families, and local communities. We need boundaries and borders to keep people safe. Insiders share codes of conduct, or rules of behavior, for how we live together. We should display thick bonds of loyalty to insiders and be wary of how outsiders can threaten our way of life.



This religion thrives in what Packer calls “Real America”: Think the heartland left behind by the coastal economic boom, Sarah Palin and Tucker Carlson, hometown identity and jobs shipped overseas, Detroit and the decline of manufacturing, Appalachia and the epidemic of meth addiction and unemployment.

As a lower quadrant, this religion is pessimistic toward the institutions of modernity. The deep-state government wants to take away your rights. Big Pharma medicine is pushing its pills and vaccines. The “fake news” mainstream media is deceiving you. The elites are out to get you, using language games to oppress you. The faithful need to fight against those things.

Unlike its postmodern counterpart in the left quadrant, the concern here is not that institutions are limiting your self-expression so much as they are infringing upon your security. They’re using you, deceiving you, and limiting your rights. While this religion still has a value of responsibility (like the upper-right), it is not a responsibility to some objective external moral good but rather a loyalty—or relational responsibility—toward one’s in-group.

Donald Trump has been the great high priest of this religion. Consider his most viral campaign slogans: “Build the Wall” invoked a widespread desire for security in the context of borders and immigration. “Drain the Swamp” reflected a deep suspicion of elites and institutions. “Make America Great Again” preached a patriotic nationalism in the face of globalization. Each slogan promised security, seeking to reassert a loyalty to “us first,” and resonated deeply with those experiencing or perceiving a loss of jobs, safety, cultural cohesion, or national identity.

Other preachers and prophets include Sean Hannity, nightly stoking the zeal of the faithful on his popular political talk show; celebrities like Roseanne Barr and James Woods, raising the alarm on those who want to take away your rights; and those like Dana White, the head of the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship), who claim to be apolitical but preach the message that everything you love is under threat but that if we band together, we can fight and defeat those trying to destroy our homes and way of life.

Sacred texts for this religion can be found on sites like Fox News, Newsmax, Truth Social, and Breitbart. There have been attempts to build new online fellowship halls for believers to mutually edify one another—such as Parler, Rumble, Gettr, and Gab—but despite strong financial backing, they have been largely unsuccessful in attracting the masses. On the more extreme fundamentalist end, revolutionary zealots are known to congregate underground at places like 8kun, where they can anonymously discuss things like QAnon conspiracy theories, white supremacy, neo-Nazism, racism, anti-Semitism, hate crimes, and other topics (rightly) taboo in respectable society.

The Religion of Security is not restricted to the heartland. A friend of mine who grew up immersed in nineties' hip-hop culture drew my attention to the prominence of such themes. Gangs, for example, prize loyalty to one's group as the highest good. The mentality is, *The streets are dangerous; the police are out to get you; society doesn't understand you. We need to stick together—our safety's at stake.* There is a sacred code of conduct, which is directed not toward a universal moral standard "out there" but rather toward establishing the security of us "in here"—the in-group—through loyalty. There are patriotic signs of identification, such as gang colors and tattoos, that mark one as an insider. The cardinal sin is being a narc, snitch, or traitor—betraying one's crew. It's fascinating how many rappers have expressed respect and admiration for Trump. One wonders whether this ethos is a significant reason why.

Security helps explain why nationalism thrives strongest in this quadrant. While people use the term *nationalism* in different ways, its function in this quadrant is often as an antithesis to (and antidote for) *globalization*. Our integration into the global economy is benefiting our country's wealthy elites, the argument goes, but hurting the working poor. We need to rise up and reas-

sert our voices as the people of this nation and stick up for the common citizen, whose leaders are out of touch and untrustworthy.

For this religion, the temple is the nation. There are heretics within (who need to be shamed or called back to the ancient paths), corrupt leaders above (who need to be overthrown for defiling the sanctuary in D.C.), and hostile invaders at the gate (who need to be repelled with stronger enforcement of our sacred borders).

This helps explain why immigration is such a focal issue for this quadrant. While there is broad consensus that immigration reform is desperately needed, it is a flash-point rally cry for the Religion of Security, for it touches on all the core values mentioned earlier.

Boundaries of purity are also rigidly enforced. Cancel culture is not unique to the lower-left; it's just as strong on the lower-right. Trump excommunicated a long string of comrades on the sheer basis of loyalty, and his protégés do the same. Even before he was elected, Republicans and conservative Christians were being "canceled" if they didn't support him.

This religion has also contributed to what some have called the death of expertise, where the public has lost trust in intellectual authorities. Everyone has a statistic, study, or story to challenge the wisdom of experts. We have more information at our fingertips than ever, so, in the words of Tom Nichols, "average citizens believe themselves to be on an equal intellectual footing with doctors and diplomats."¹⁰ When the postmodern suspicion of authority meets the internet, this revivalist religion sparks a grassroots movement of conspiracy theories, contesting the authority of the misguided priestly class.

So, where do we go?

THE KING'S TABLE

Progress. Responsibility. Identity. Security. There are more than two parties; there are four—and on their own, they're all pretty boring.

You're probably asking, *Where does Jesus belong in these four quadrants?* Well, he doesn't belong to these values. Rather, these values belong to him. As we'll see in the next chapter, with Jesus you get the best of progress, responsibility, identity, and security. He can crash these four parties because they're all rooted in values that ultimately belong to him. But on their own, these values are not enough; these gods will not deliver.

Where does the church belong? The church belongs to Jesus. We are not to be contained by these quadrants. (It's claustrophobic in there!) Rather, the King of kings is throwing a better party, forming a common table in a conflicted world. His table has people who lean in all different directions but refuse to bow to the idols that hold sway.

We need to prioritize Jesus or we're doomed. In the coming chapters, we'll see *how* to prioritize him, but first let's recognize the stakes. If we don't, our friendships and families will be fractured, our churches will be divided, and the unity for which Christ died will be trampled upon. While his church will survive intact, *your* church—and your faith—may not.

The solution is not to become *apolitical*. In some ways, I hope you'll come away from this book *more* political, though in a healthy way. I'm also not saying the church should be centrist, always trying to take the middle of the road or path of least resistance. As you'll see, there are definite places to be bold and take a stand.

Yet there is a powerful opportunity to bear witness to the prophetic unity of God's kingdom. Pledging our ultimate alle-

giance to Jesus will help us love our neighbors across partisan lines, learn from them, and live peacefully with them. It will bless us with stronger friendships, families, and churches. It will make us a better prophetic witness to Jesus's kingdom party for the world.

Wait a sec. Are you saying I shouldn't listen to NPR? you might be asking. *Or that I can't read Jordan Peterson?* No, I'm not saying to isolate or escape from politics or culture. As a matter of fact, we *need* people who lean in all different directions. We need it because it allows us to help one another see the good and the temptations in our respective areas as we pursue Jesus together.

Jesus shows us how to be actively engaged in politics without destroying our souls. Whichever quadrant we're in, he disrupts politics-as-usual and calls us into a bigger, bolder, grander vision that can redeem our partisan divide.

He crashes the party to bring life to the world.

We've seen how politics is more religious than we think. In the next chapter, we'll explore how the *gospel* is more *political* than many people think—though again not in the way you might expect! Let's move from *describing* the political religions to *prescribing* the kingdom. We want to see what faithfulness to Jesus looks like in the political arena, and how his party is better, as we pledge our ultimate allegiance to the King of kings.

Reflection Questions

- How can you tell when your political views are becoming something closer to a religion?
 - Which of the four quadrants do you lean toward and why? If you have a difficult time identifying which one you most relate to, look for the quadrant you think I'm being too hard on. That might be an indicator of which way you lean.
 - Which quadrant do you have the hardest time with? What bothers you most about the ideas or people in this quadrant and why?
 - Make a list of friends and family members who lean into your least favorite quadrant. What specific steps could you take to better understand them and love them?
 - How have your political leanings shifted over time? What were the factors that contributed to your change in perspective?
-

THE PARTY CRASHER

HOW JESUS DISRUPTS POLITICS AS USUAL
AND REDEEMS OUR PARTISAN DIVIDE



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