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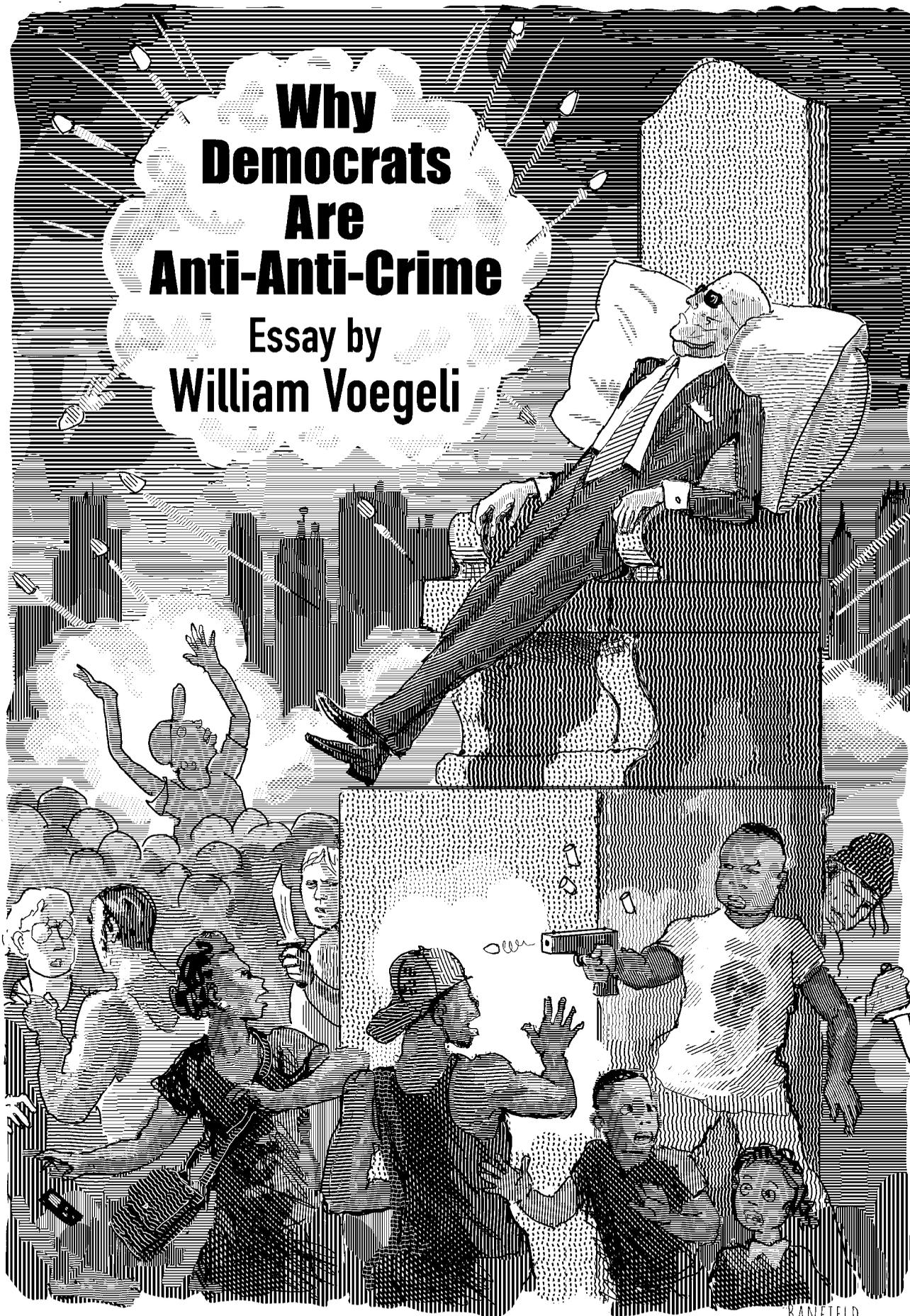
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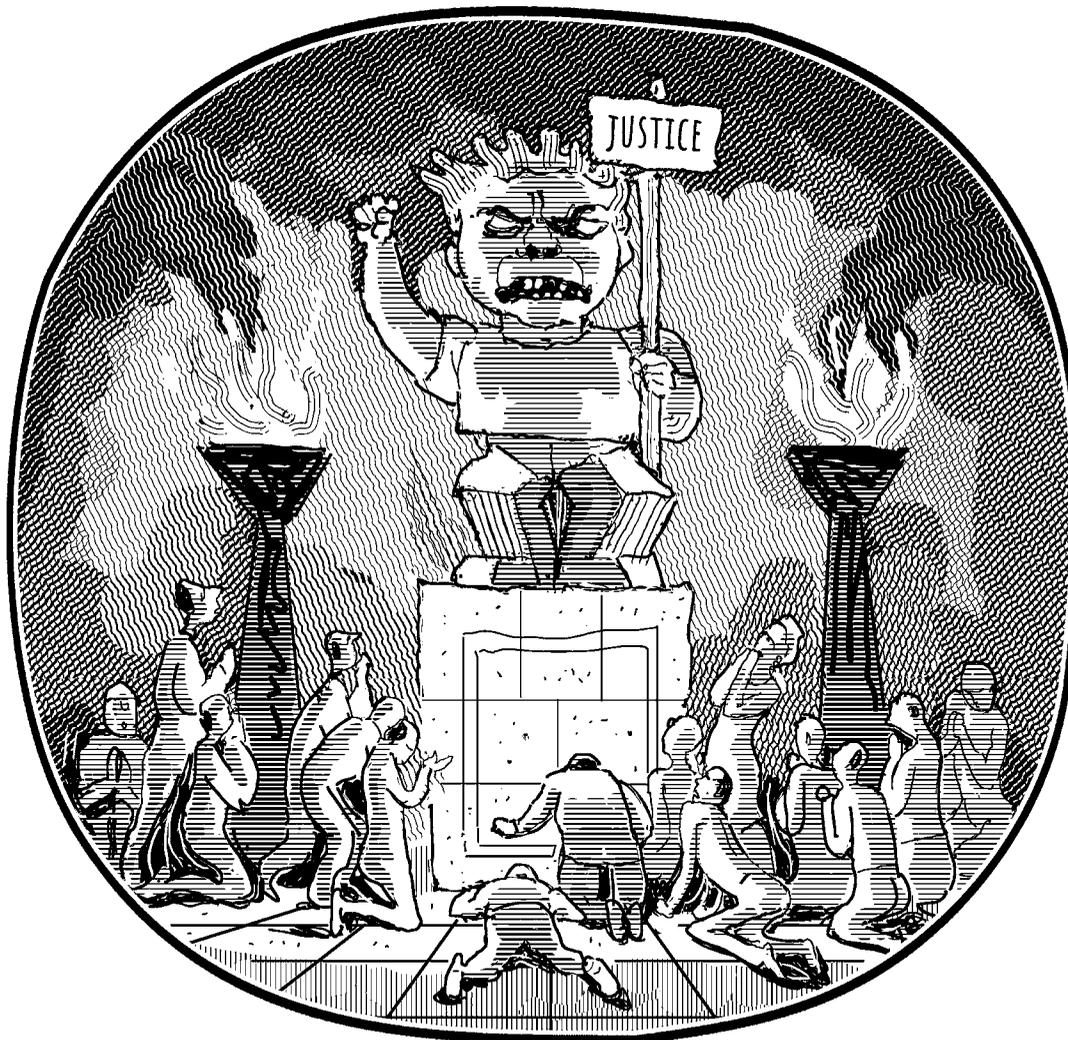


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Book Review by Peter C. Myers

STRANGE GODS

American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time, by Joshua Mitchell.
Encounter Books, 296 pages, \$28.99



AMERICA, G.K. CHESTERTON REMARKED, is “a nation with the soul of a church.” So it remains, in a way, even as more Americans than ever before are renouncing organized religion. For when a nation with such a soul grows corrupt, its spiritual hunger does not vanish but instead seeks satisfaction in the service of other, likely angrier gods. In our latest great awakening, argues Georgetown professor of political theory Joshua Mitchell, we are becoming a nation with the soul of a witch trial.

Mitchell’s *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* is an ambitious book, offering an elaborate and penetrating diagnosis of the present condition of the American soul. As Mitchell sees it, the

country is beset by several interrelated afflictions: identity politics, bipolarity, and addiction. All of these collaborate in posing a mortal threat to our liberal republican order, but identity politics is the most acute and virulent of the three.

MITCHELL, LIKE MANY OTHERS, SEES identitarian zeal as a new form of religious faith. This is not intended as a backhanded slap at religion itself. Identity politics is best understood, Mitchell contends, as a heretical residue of a decayed Christianity—not as authentic Christianity’s terminal phase. As heresy, it may indeed imperil its adherents’ souls, but Mitchell’s focus is on its worldly effects. Identity politics is de-

structive of liberal republican government in both theory and practice.

Identitarians politicize biblical categories by sorting people into two primary classes: transgressors and innocents. Transgressors—in their purest incarnation, white heterosexual males—are by intention or effect perpetrators of injustice against innocents, who comprise the various aggrieved groups defined by racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender identities. As such, transgressors’ only legitimate social role is to redistribute their ill-gotten privileges to the aggrieved innocents. This relation of moral hierarchy is permanent. Humans are not created equal, because transgressors and innocents are irrefutably and ineluctably identified based on group demographics.



Identity politics is likewise hostile to natural liberty, as is amply indicated by its daily lengthening litany of affronts to freedom of speech, free exercise of religion, and due process of law. Mitchell, however, is less interested in chronicling these familiar outrages than in exploring their deeper sources and significance. As his analysis reveals, identity politics fundamentally denies not only our possession of equal rights, but our basic competence to exercise those rights. In the Manichean world of identity politics, Mitchell remarks, “oppressive social forces loom large and human freedom looms small.”

AMONG THE MANY AMERICANS THUS consigned to impotence, none are more scandalously betrayed than black citizens, whom identity politics “needs to render...as perennially innocent victims” (emphasis added). Yet blacks are not the only class reduced to victimhood by the emerging order. Nor is identity politics the exclusive cause of their and others’ degradation. At first glance, more chronic afflictions, which Mitchell conceptualizes as “bipolarity” and “addiction,” may seem unrelated to identity politics. But he shows all three to be rooted in the same psychological malady.

What Mitchell calls “bipolarity” denominates a range of symptoms indicative of our republic’s devolution into an oligarchy—a regime in which a cosmopolitan, ruling elite, “management society,” lords it over a disdained, futureless, and inexorably demoralized class of commoners, “selfie man.” The bipolarity operates also within selfie man, who takes solace in the godlike technological powers at his fingertips, even as his imaginings of transcendent freedom are constantly dispelled by his actual subjection to management society’s humiliating and oppressive paternalism.

Thus, too, does our bipolar society become also a society of addicts, a fact of which the opioid crisis is only the latest evidence. As Mitchell conceives of it, our swelling addiction problem consists in a habit of transforming “supplements” into “substitutes.” A painkiller such as OxyContin, for example, can supplement or assist a process of healing, but it cannot itself induce a state of health. The diversions and palliations of selfie man, taken as substitutes for a well-lived life, are deadly to both spirit and body.

Mitchell identifies this pattern of “substitutism” nearly everywhere in present-day America. What it reveals, in broad view, is the country’s moral constitution being heedlessly dismantled, as more and more of us substitute consumption for production, fleeting sex

for loving marriage, subjection for citizenship, rootless globalism for rooted localism, and aggrieved identity for self-improvement. Mitchell’s analysis thus shows identitarians to be noisier and more aggressive counterparts of selfie man. No less lost, lonely, and needy, they substitute aggrandized victimhood for real social improvement and personal virtue.

“[W]e are draining citizens of everyday competence,” Mitchell observes, “and—often wittingly—removing the opportunities to develop and retain it.” One hallmark of bipolarity, addiction, and identity politics alike is “personal fragility”—a psychic weakness memorably exemplified by the Yale undergraduate, the voice of a quadrangle mob of next-generation elites, shown on a 2015 viral video shrieking in tearful outrage at Professor Nicholas Christakis after he defended Professor Erika Christakis’s suggestion that students be left free to choose their own Halloween costumes.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO US? Mitchell’s answer is multidimensional. One dimension is sociological, highlighting Alexis de Tocqueville’s prophetic warning that democratic conditions tend to dissolve ties of community, rendering atomized individuals vulnerable to spiritual debasement—and thus prone to regard themselves in bipolar terms, at once “greater than kings and less than men.” Another dimension is theological. Mitchell calls identity politics “the latest outworking of Protestant Christianity,” and he singles out America as “the land of the Puritan fixation on stain.” As the sea of faith recedes, that fixation remains and becomes a mania. A still further dimension is ideological, rooted in atheist variants of the Enlightenment that renounced Christianity’s God while attempting to retain Christianity’s egalitarian spirit. Identity politics, Mitchell remarks, is the “predictable consequence of a civilization that has neither the courage nor the honesty to fully renounce its foundation and start over—or to fully return to that foundation for sustenance.”

In Mitchell’s Biblical anthropology, however, the deepest source of our afflictions lies further down. Identity politics at bottom is not a distinctively American evil, nor a democratic, modernist, or Judeo-Christian evil. Deep down, it is a human evil. The three afflictions we suffer, Mitchell remarks, “are each a manifestation of man’s pride, which must be humbled if we are to see clearly.” Here is the fundamental human choice: we can either accept the governance of God or rebel against it. Being fallen, we repeatedly make the wrong

choice, rebelling against the humbling acknowledgment of our brokenness. Identity politics reflects our all-too-human inclination to avoid repentance by shaming and purging the perceived evildoers whom we blame for our own failings.

MITCHELL CRITICIZES THE REPUBLICAN Party, “transfixed...on the twin threats of progressivism and Marxism,” for missing the emerging danger of identity politics. Fair enough, but he seems to share the reluctance of many Republicans to consider closely how the civil rights movement contributed to the advent of the identitarian regime—this despite, and also because of, the fact that that movement, personified by the martyred Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., played the crucial part in hallowing and glorifying the anti-racism cause for succeeding generations. He rightly praises King for understanding that “racism can be put to rest only by putting an end to group scapegoating.” But like many on the Right, Mitchell is silent about the “radical King,” as activist professor Cornel West admirably describes him, the King who supplied fuel for identity politics by attacking Western civilization as morally bankrupt, calling for a “radical revolution of values” in America, and comparing conservative Republicans to Nazis.

Beneath King’s career trajectory lies a more fundamental question. It comforts many on the Right to believe there was a disjunction between a healthy, first-phase civil rights movement that aimed at public color-blindness, and an unhealthy later phase that intensified and perpetuated race consciousness. But in *The Age of Entitlement* (2020), CRB contributing editor Christopher Caldwell argues that there was no such disjunction. From the beginning, he contends, “civil rights meant affirmative action. Civil rights meant political correctness” (emphasis added). Mitchell’s larger argument contains the seeds of a rejoinder to Caldwell. “Man,” remarks Mitchell, “is a creature who always looks for shortcuts to [the] distant someday” of justice and peace. Affirmative action, disparate-impact redistributions, and identity politics fit into Mitchell’s scheme as illicit shortcuts to the desired outcomes, substitutes for the hard work of finding fruitful and judicious ways to exercise newly-won rights. The premise of the rejoinder, then, would be that the anti-discrimination regime, epitomized by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, is theoretically compatible with the principles of liberal constitutionalism. But there is no attempt in *American Awakening* to establish this premise.



THIS RESERVATION ASIDE, *AMERICAN Awakening* is a virtuoso exercise in diagnostics. It abounds in trenchant insights drawn from Scripture and from the Western tradition of political philosophy. But the seriousness of the diagnosis underscores the difficulty of the most pressing question it raises: what is to be done?

In the practical realm, Mitchell proposes three main “pillars of renewal.” First, he writes, we must “renew our commitment to the middle-class commercial republic our country was established to be.” Second, we must make “an earnest effort to heal the legacy of the wound of slavery”—a “singular wound” healable by no governmental program but only by the steadfast, developmental labor of citizens in collaboration across the color line. Third, the U.S. must adopt a more modest foreign policy and a sober commitment to the primacy of the nation as a political unit. Mitchell mostly leaves others to explain the particulars of how these pillars are to be erected. Nonetheless, his proposed remedies amount to an instructive blueprint for a renovated political order. The foundation for them all is an appealingly recharacterized liberalism, a mixture of agency and humility that Mitchell calls “the politics of liberal competence.”

Tacitly correcting generations of anti-liberal critics, Mitchell views true liberalism neither as a morally miniaturizing quest for self-preservation and comfort, nor as a cloaking device for economic or racial oligarchs, nor as a license for purportedly autonomous, natureless self-creators. Instead, his liberalism is a doctrine for *builders* in a broad and deep sense of the word—builders of commercial enterprises and of material wealth, yes, but also builders of friendships and families, of homes and churches and schools, of civic organizations, of well-formed people and citizens. Liberal citizens proper are cultivators of the competencies, i.e., the virtues, required for living and acting well. Mitchell’s syncretic reading incorporates the wisdom not only of John Locke and Tocqueville but also of Athens and Jerusalem. He argues that unless we see ourselves as fundamentally equal in our humanity before a God who surpasses us all, we will continue to regard ourselves as more than kings or less than men—as gods or beasts.

WHAT WE NEED MOST OF ALL, THEREFORE, is a profound moral and spiritual reorientation. The spirits of liberty and religion, which marched together in the America Tocqueville visited, must somehow be rejoined. Near his conclusion,

Mitchell concedes he can only “dimly imagine” an America thus reoriented. His doubtful prognosis recalls the haunting words of John Adams in a 1775 letter to his wife Abigail: “Liberty once lost is lost forever.”

And yet in the book’s Preface, Mitchell also declares himself “hopeful—indeed expectant” that we are on the verge of recovery. As Frederick Douglass liked to say, “The arm of the Lord is not shortened.” Douglass and other great reformers discerned, in moments no less daunting than our own, a peculiar providence in the mad extremism of their adversaries. Identity politics is an ideology of negation and destruction, not of governance. Evidence of its disastrous failure is even now accumulating in Blue states and cities. Violent crime rates, homelessness, failed public schools, and other social ills are all combining to produce rising tides of outmigration. Those failings, rendered intelligible by works like *American Awakening*, may yet reopen American minds to the grand effort in civic education on which the fate of the republic depends.

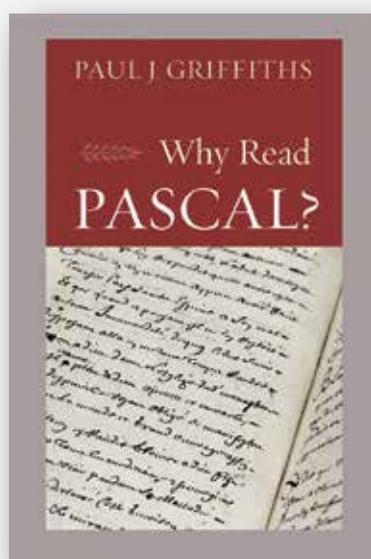
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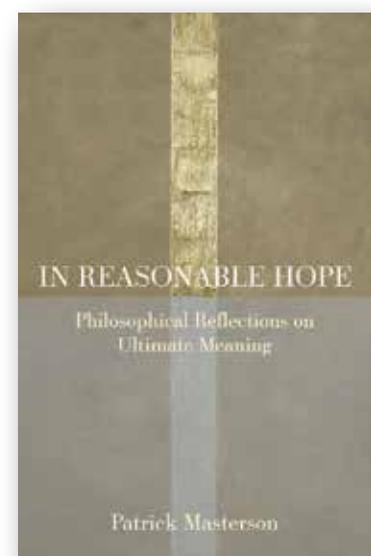
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