

## A Pastoral Response to the US Presidential Election

By

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For those who voted against him, Donald Trump's reelection to the White House this week is just as disturbing as was his election eight years ago, although, for me, it doesn't feel nearly as shocking. Back then we were all in a state of disbelief, including, perhaps, Donald Trump himself. How could such an obviously unsavory, inexperienced, and flawed character become President of United States? I personally know of people who had heart attacks, strokes, and mental breakdowns within days of his first election. But equally as shocking was that so many of our fellow Americans voted for such a despicable character. What did and does his election say about our country? What does it say about our neighbors? What does it say about our democracy?

The Sunday following his first election we had a standing-room-only crowd of attendees in our church seeking solace, direction, and some means of making sense of a political outcome that seemed impossible. But today, after a decade of learning to cope with the reality and constant presence of a figure who has continued to command most of our nation's attention, it is hard to find ourselves shocked by anything about him, including his re-election. We may now feel just as confused, saddened, and anxious as his first election, but we are not nearly as shocked, not nearly as naïve.

And this is a good thing, this feeling that "nothing can surprise us anymore," that, "now we've seen it all," because, despite our hopes and expectations, most of us went into the recent election knowing Donald Trump had a good chance of winning, and win he did, with an impressive lead and without question. Whatever else we conclude, we have to admit that our democracy, such as it is, worked, even if we are now left wondering if Democracy itself works? 2,500 years ago, when the Greeks were first establishing Democracies, Plato argued that it was the worst possible kind of government because it would inevitably lead to unfit populist leaders empowered by a tyranny of the masses. "How little she cares for the training of her statesmen ..." he said. "Such is democracy; a pleasing, lawless, various sort of government, distributing equality to equals and un-equals alike."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, all that we have endured these past ten years has brought us to this place of introspection, ready for a reality check, wondering *if our form of democracy* really is "better than all the rest," as Winston Churchill once claimed. Questioning our moral absolutes is always a good idea, whether or not it leads us to change or improve them. But more importantly is the grit and stamina we have gained this past decade having had to cope with Trump's chronic presence. We now know that lamenting the loss of what could have been and should have been only makes matters worse. And we know that we have the strength to

endure whatever we must because we already have, and we can still be at our best under any circumstances.

Today, as we begin our new but sadly familiar circumstance, there are two important questions before us, *How could this have really happened, again?* and *What do we do now?* But before I address these, let me first go back to what many of us are feeling so intensely right now, those feelings of confusion, sadness, anger, and fear, whether we are shocked or not. I wish I could calm these feelings, like a mother who holds her child tight and reassuringly says, “It’s okay. It’s all going to be okay.” But we are not children, and I know history well enough to understand that things aren’t always “going to be okay,” just ask the people of Ukraine and Gaza whose neighborhoods and homes are being obliterated, even as scores of their innocent loved ones are being killed simply for being in somebody’s way. There are events in our world that, at best, will be remembered by historians for the unabated evils that they are, while nothing is done to alleviate them in the present. So, I cannot tell you it will all be okay, but I can tell you that the intensity of what we’re feeling now will decrease over time and, no matter what happens next, we will come through it together. We may not survive unscathed or without suffering and loss, but “we shall overcome” whatever we must, precisely because we must.

Before going further, I should also admit that the tone of my words so far presume that the election of Donald Trump is a terrible result, that he is a bad person who is unfit for any office, let alone the highest in the land, and that there is something deeply flawed in the thinking and morality of the millions of Americans who voted for him. I’ve had some suggest I ought to temper what I have to say about his supporters, but I will say only what I believe is true and leave the “fair and balanced” shtick to Fox News. This does not mean that I am angry at his voters, nor consider them my enemies. On the contrary, many of them are my neighbors, friends, and even family members, and as much as I might disagree with them, I defend their right to vote for whom they want. But acknowledging this does not prevent me from understanding there is something fundamentally wrong with their thinking and ethics.

Even so, I have wondered and continue to wonder if there’s something wrong with my own thinking and ethics and, by extension, with that of all Democrats who voted against Trump. Is it possible that our own biases, fears, and hopes have gotten the best of us? Are we only able to see the worst in Trump and not the good that so many others seem to recognize? Are we being as hyperbolic and unfair as we think his supporters are in their adoration of him and their extreme disgust for his opponents like Hilary Clinton, Joe Biden, and Kamala Harris? To some extent this must be so. We are no different than anyone else, which, by my estimation, means our thinking and beliefs are driven by our emotions far more often than not. So, let’s not deceive ourselves into believing we don’t deceive ourselves.

But to be able to ask ourselves this very question proves we have a degree of introspection that helps keep our emotional thinking in check as best we can. And I suspect just about

everyone here has wondered, “Am I the one who’s crazy?” To be able to ask the question is enough to suggest we are not. We also have empirical facts to reassure us that we aren’t. Maybe some, but not all, of the prosecutorial actions against Trump these past few years have been politically motivated attempts to keep him from running again, but, given his unsubstantiated claims of election fraud, higher crime rates, that democrats are aborting children after they are born, that Kamala Harris got the answers before the debate, and that Haitian immigrants are eating our pets, we have real evidence on our side, and we don’t need to give Trump or his supporters the benefit of the doubt in the name of false fairness and alternative facts.

The most recent issue of *The Economist*, for example, contains a cover story about America’s economy entitled, “The Envy of the World,” a phrase Joe Biden was criticized for using. It says that “Since the start of 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, America’s real growth has been 10%, three times the average for the rest of the G7 countries. Among the G20 group, which includes large emerging markets, America is the only one whose output and employment are above pre-pandemic expectations according to the International Monetary Fund.”<sup>2</sup> The data also shows that crime is significantly down, as are the crossings at the Southern Border, despite Trump’s politically motivated thwarting of a bi-partisan bill to address the problems there. And, according to its Republican Mayor, Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio are not overrunning the city, are welcome and important contributors, and are most certainly not eating pets, not a single one!

On the other hand, Trump has been routinely unable to show any understanding of important political matters, let alone offer details about his plans to improve matters. Instead of answering the questions he’s asked, he attacks the character of his interviewers. His speech is often incoherent and inconsistent, not to mention extreme, obscene, and untruthful. He says things that are profoundly racist, sexist, and misogynistic, and, as we saw on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, sometimes incendiary, not to mention his personal history of bankruptcies, lawsuits for bad business dealings, and alleged criminal activities. So, there is plenty of good reason to rest assured that Donald Trump is unfit for office and should not be in the White House no matter how many people voted for him. Being fair and introspective does not mean we should allow ourselves to be gaslighted by others and certainly not by ourselves. We are not crazy!

In addition to all that we are now worried about, less than two months ago Trump began saying our biggest problem is “the enemy from within ... We have some very bad people. We have some sick people, radical left lunatics ... and it should be very easily handled by, if necessary, by National Guard, or if really necessary, by the military, because they can’t let that happen.” He later added that he was referring to Democrats like Nancy Pelosi and Adam Schiff and referred several times to Kamala Harris as a “radical left lunatic.” His supporters often dismiss such comments by saying, “That’s just Trump being Trump.” They’re right, and that’s precisely what we’re worried about, Trump being Trump. Trump being Trump is not

an excuse, it's the whole problem. As members of a liberal religion that has a long history of liberal activism, we have sound reason to be worried—worried about mass deportations, worried about healthcare, worried about Ukrainians and Palestinians, worried about skyrocketing inflation, and worried about the continuation of our Constitutional democracy.

This leads back to the question of how so many Americans could have voted for him, hearing the same things we have heard and knowing the same things we know about him? In only just a few days, I've heard several potential explanations. One is that the U.S. is racist and misogynistic and isn't ready for a female President, let alone one who is a woman of color. Perhaps this is true for some, but I don't believe it is true of most American voters today, on the Left or the Right. It's true that a majority of Harris voters were female, and a majority of Trump voters were male. Still, 44 percent of Trump voters were women, including 7 percent of black women and 37 percent of Hispanic women. Meanwhile, 44 percent of Harris voters were male.<sup>3</sup> That's close to half. There may be some misogynists and racists among Trump's voters, but these statistics do not support claiming them as the reasons for his victory.

Another possibility is that economically disenfranchised white males are now poorer than they've ever been. This possibility is substantiated by a recent New York Times article explaining that during the past 40 years white working-class males, defined as "men without a college degree,"<sup>4</sup> have seen their incomes drop faster and more steeply than any other demographic, even as government programs and resources are going to uplift everyone else. This downturn is mostly because blue-collar production and manufacturing jobs, that once earned a respectable income, have declined in number and significance compared to other lines of work. Can there be any wonder such workers, who are simultaneously being blamed for all the evils that have ever happened by some on the Left, might respond to a message like, "Make America great again" coming from the Right? It's not because they are racists or misogynists but because they are financially desperate enough to grasp any straw, any glimmer of hope, within reach.

Some democrats have also taken to blaming other democrats for the loss, including blaming Joe Biden for not having gotten out of the race earlier, and Kamala Harris for not focusing on the right issues and demographics. There may be some truth here. In retrospect, we always see the things we could have done differently, but I don't think it's reasonable to blame our democratic leaders who are just as astonished by Trump's resounding win as anyone else. He is a force and phenomenon that so far defies explanation. No matter what missed opportunities may have given Harris more of a lead, the blame for Trump's success, along with the responsibility for his failures and whatever else comes next, is on those who voted for him despite knowing all the same things about him as those of us who did not.

As a student of history and social psychology, I think, rather than focusing on the particulars of this election, we should take a bird's eye view of the circumstances that always give rise to authoritarian leaders who play upon our fears, especially by creating an evil other to

blame for all our woes. Going all the way back to 64 CE, for example, to deflect blame from himself, Emperor Nero blamed the Great Fires of Rome on the Christians, saying they wanted to destroy the world, which led to their persecution and to the practice of execution by burning people at the stake, as our Unitarian founder, Michael Servetus was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Hitler, we know, scapegoated the Jews for all of Germany's problems. And now Trump is blaming immigrants who are "rapists," "criminals," "taking black jobs," along with us "radical left lunatics." As a student of social psychologist Erich Fromm, who left Germany prior to the Holocaust in opposition to Nazism, I would, as briefly as possible, say that the rise of authoritarian societies stems from individuals' feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and fear in the face of rapid change or instability. To escape this existential anxiety, people often seek security in submission to authority and conformity, sacrificing their freedom and reason for a sense of belonging and order.

This, to me, explains the rise of Donald Trump today and is how we should understand the time we are living in, as a historical moment that must be understood from a historical perspective so that we can navigate through it without repeating the worst mistakes of the past. Rather than paying attention to this particular election and this particular authoritarian, we need to look at the bigger picture. As catastrophic as this sounds, however, I do want to catastrophize the situation and do not believe, dire as it is, that it is as dire as it seems. If the pattern remains the same, in two years Trump will have proven disappointing enough that voters will turn out to elect a Democratic run Congress and, perhaps, Senate, which will keep Trump at bay for the remaining two years of his Presidency. A Democrat will be elected two years later. Then, in two more years, one or both Houses will regain a Republican majority, and so the pattern continues. So, let's hope our Democracy holds for two years, just long enough for us to reestablish the ineffective gridlock government we're all used to.

And this leads us to the most pressing question of the day, *What do we do now?* Especially as religious liberals and social progressives?

Firstly, I advise that we don't catastrophize the situation unless or until there is an obvious catastrophe visible on the horizon. Let's not panic, even when taking serious matters seriously.

Secondly, make good use of the stamina and grit we've had to build up over the past decade, especially since the shock of 2016. You know you have the strength and fortitude to get through this because you have done so once already.

Thirdly, don't become callous. Don't give up. Keep caring. This requires emotional intelligence. Be aware of your negative feelings, like sadness, anger, fear, depression, and so forth, so that they assist you but do not control you. Channel the energy of your feelings in positive directions. We do this through love, which is not itself an emotion but a way of acting

in the world that always considers the welfare and dignity of others, no matter what we feel. When channeled through such love, our rage is transformed in courage—(core + rage) the rage of the heart—and passion is transformed into compassion, the care and concern for others, including our perceived enemies.

Depression, which is particularly difficult, is anger that we turn inward because we feel powerless to control our situation, circumstances, or others. It makes us want to give up and do nothing. Listen to that feeling and transform it into love and compassion for yourself so that it becomes an invitation to take a Sabbath of the heart. Give yourself permission to rest, let go, enjoy what is good in your life, and reenergize.

Fourthly, be stoic. Stoicism is the philosophy that reminds us, as Epictetus said, “Some things are in our power and some things are not in our power.” Wisdom is understanding the difference, then concentrating our energy on the concerns we can influence and improve, not, as is usually the case, worrying about what we cannot.

Stoicism is also based on virtue ethics. In 300 BCE, its founder, Zeno of Citium, Cypress, taught that virtue is the greatest good because it is the only thing that is useful in all circumstances. All else is indifferent. By virtue, Zeno meant upholding the moral principles we hold most important, which, for him, were *wisdom, courage, justice, and moderation*. Those are pretty good, but the virtues that define us as liberals today are *human dignity, individual freedom, reason, and tolerance*. The reason they are considered useful in all circumstances is because they should guide our behavior no matter what our circumstances or their consequences to our lives. If by upholding them we benefit, wonderful! If by upholding them we suffer, so be it. For the point is always to uphold our principles, whether doing so is pleasant or not.

Fifthly, I believe we must practice and demonstrate *tolerance* above all. It is the principle our world needs to value most right now, so that we stop making enemies of everyone we disagree with and become more open to entertaining new ideas and ways. Tolerance is already a universal human value as proven by some version of the Golden Rule—*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*—in almost all cultures throughout history. We need only appeal to the better angels of human nature by reminding others of what they already know. But tolerance does not mean, as some now think, that we should not disagree with others or say things that others might disagree with. On the contrary, tolerance means we can say things others disagree with, without fear of retribution, just as they ought to be free to peacefully disagree with us.

Sixthly, remember that we need not be pawns of history but can seize upon this moment to be its movers. If these are the times that try our souls, then, like the great figures of the past, let us not shrink from our service to our country, to our world, and to humanity. Let us not be victims of our circumstances, but those who rise to the occasion. We are not beaten. We

are not whipped. We are more determined than ever to preserve the freedoms and ideals this country and our liberal religion are both founded upon. Let us counter authority with our autonomy. Let us meet fascism with our independence. Let us confront ignorance with reason and denial with truth. Let us face conformity with authenticity, submission with defiance, fear with courage, and let us lift our heaviest burdens together with the strength we give each other. There is a saying that *it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness*. And I say the smallest of candles shines brightest only in its darkest hour. Dark as it may now seem, this is not our time to shrink but to shine.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato. *The Republic* (p. 1). Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> *The Economist*, “The Envy of the world,” Special Report, October 19, 2024, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.statista.com/chart/33408/female-male-us-voters-exit-polls/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/10/26/upshot/census-relative-income.html>