
LOSING OUR RELIGION

MOLLY WORTHEN ON THE MODERN SEARCH FOR MEANING

STACI KLEINMAIER

Since the 1960s American religious affiliation has been in decline. For more than two centuries religious institutions have given our lives meaning beyond day-to-day experience, offered a connection between the mundane and the spiritual, and served as a powerful source of social and political authority. But more and more, Americans are looking elsewhere to make sense of the chaos and uncertainty of life.

Historian Molly Worthen says that secularization points to a broader U.S. trend: the decline of institutional authority and the expansion of a do-it-yourself ethos. She says Americans are turning to wellness trends, podcasts, and life coaches to piece together a spiritual tool kit tailored specifically to them. The aim isn't salvation so much as optimization: better sleep, inner peace, and profitable entrepreneurship.

Worthen grew up in a secular Midwestern home and became interested in religion at Yale University, where she was surrounded for the first time by people of different backgrounds and beliefs. Religion, she realized, is an important framework that people use to guide them through life: "If I wanted to understand other humans, I ought to understand religion more."

In 2001, the summer after her sophomore year, Worthen traveled to Alberta, Canada, to study a community of Russian Orthodox Old Believers. She spent weeks immersed in their faith and getting to know the women. She milked cows, participated in sewing parties, and attended grueling, multihour church services. It was a worldview totally different from her own. The experience cemented her interest in religion and reporting.

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of conversations we discussed religion, politics, wellness trends, conspiracy theories, and even witchcraft.

Kleinmaier: A lot of people today say they are "spiritual but not religious." What does this mean, and why do you think this shift is happening?

Worthen: For a very long time, scholars of religion have relied on conventional metrics when drawing conclusions about the religious landscape in the West. They've tracked things like church membership, church attendance, baptism rates, and the official pronouncements of elite leaders in religious institutions. These measurements appeared to speak for a large enough swath of the population that they were meaningful. Now, though, it seems every year a new survey comes out in which the category of "no religious affiliation" grows larger and larger. A small portion of those people embrace the label *atheist* or *agnostic*, but the vast majority don't, and some would say the phrase "spiritual but not religious" applies to them.

I have sometimes struggled with the impulse to be dismissive of that idea, to associate it with a kind of smorgasbord approach, dabbling in pop psychology, self-help, New Age bestsellers, and astrology websites. But many people in that "spiritual but not religious" category really are investigating the relationship between our material existence and something transcendent. I'm trying to answer the question: If more and more humans are not worshipping in a traditional religious context, then where and how and why are they worshipping?

You asked why this decline in religious affiliation and church attendance is happening now. Scholars use the cumbersome term *secularization*, which is often associated with the declining authority of traditional religious institutions over spheres of law and public policy. That's important, but it's more meaningful to think of the rise of secularization not just in terms of religion, but in terms of the declining authority of institutions in general. Compared to previous

generations, Americans today simply commit less of our time, money, and energy to institutions such as rotary clubs and fraternal organizations. You could make the argument that the federal government and multinational corporations are two institutions that have grown exponentially in power, but they generally don't facilitate the kind of meaning-making you find with transcendent authority, including a sense of connection with people who came before you.

In exchange we've gotten the glowing rectangles that we all carry around in our pockets, and they provide an illusion of connection and community. I don't want to dismiss the ways in which the Internet and social media have provided a sense of

community for people who really struggle to connect with others. But I don't believe that even the most vibrant social-media chat or Facebook group is a substitute for in-person affiliation. The sense of obligation and duty, which is an important part of institutional bonds, has become anemic in the context of the atomization caused by the Internet.

Kleinmaier: What else has caused this decline in community institutions?

Worthen: The story of progress in the West is tangled up with the story of the individual becoming the only unit that counts in any social setting: the entity to which rights accrue. That is, in some ways, a glorious thing, but it hasn't come without a cost. Our epidemic of isolation — the feeling that life is a restless, stumbling circle rather than a path with a clear goal — is the legacy of that same noble intellectual tradition to which we owe so much. American culture fetishizes the individual through a very narrow idea of freedom as the absence of restraint. You are most free if you can just allow your authentic self to flourish with no impingements from the outside. So our students come to college having been told that they're supposed to find themselves and their passion. I think this is a severely crippled and sometimes wrongheaded notion of what true freedom entails. It's based on the false assumption that there is some autonomous diamond inside you that just needs uncovering. Our sense of identity, however, is always formed in conversation with culture and community and the process of taking on serious duties.

We're social creatures, whether you believe we evolved or were created to be this way. We want to be in relationship with one another. We're also meaning-seeking creatures. So humans flourish in a web of relationships that signify something in a larger, transcendent context; that serve a purpose larger than our own ego-gratification.



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Operating as if our primary task were to achieve happiness — and defining happiness as freedom from duties and obligations, seeing them as burdens rather than as opportunities — lands us in a place that's out of touch with human nature, a place of anxiety and loneliness and the constant pressure to find fulfillment. This leads to the dopamine hits of social media and the incredibly fragile egos that depend on them to develop a sense of self. I think so much good would come of something like mandated national service after high school. I look at cultures like Israel, where there are structures for creating a sense of duty to something larger than yourself and framing service as part of your identity. That's largely missing from

American culture.

There's an economic story here, too: the rise of neoliberalism and globalization and the deterioration of social-welfare safety nets in America since the 1970s. Growing socioeconomic inequality puts people in survival mode, which certainly doesn't help.

Kleinmaier: You've been talking about the U.S. and the West. How is secularization manifesting in other places?

Worthen: In the 1960s a wave of social scientists preached what came to be known as modernization theory, which claimed that religion was largely a feature of the premodern human experience, and that declining church attendance in the West was simply the awakening of modern humans who had finally embraced enough science and education and technology to do without mythology as a crutch. In this view the story of modern progress naturally would go hand in hand with the decline of organized religion. And as this form of progress reached broader and broader swaths of the world, surely the same pattern would unfold across all cultures. This was the theory. And it still does have purchase among the secular intelligentsia in the West, even though they've become careful to avoid seeming condescending toward non-Westerners. You might think that, after 9/11, anyone who thought religion was no longer a serious factor in world affairs would have to revise their view. But, even then, some saw the terrorist attack as just the last gasp of fundamentalist desperation and not actually a sign that humans are in any lasting sense religious. It was a fleeting protest movement, they said.

Demographic data have since demolished that hypothesis. The rate at which Christianity is exploding in Latin America and Africa — and in countries you would not expect, like China — is astonishing. The demographic center of gravity of Christianity has shifted to the global South. That

trend is only going to accelerate. It is foolish to think we are talking only about rural, uneducated people in Nigeria or the far-flung farming provinces of China, who are just now finding their way to this set of fairy tales. We're talking about modern, relatively urban, educated people in these countries. Of course, it's hard to get good data on the growth of Christianity in China, for obvious reasons. But scholars who know more about this than I do have concluded that a lot of the growth of Christianity there is not happening among rural Chinese; it's happening among the urban intelligentsia, who are apparently disillusioned with Maoism — and with the attenuated form of Confucian thought that is still a powerful ideology in China. These are not people who are out of touch with modernity.

What does this mean for the West? It's difficult to predict over the long run. In the short term it suggests we will see a growing divide. Conservative Christians in the United States feel they have lost the culture war on issues like sexual identity and gay marriage. So they have been building alliances for decades with Christians around the world, particularly in Africa, and they take great encouragement from the fact that globally they are in the majority. The liberal expression of Christianity that has gained cultural authority in the West does not reflect the worldview of most Christians in the twenty-first century. And the collapsing rates of childbirth in industrialized nations are really bringing us to the precipice of a grave social crisis in which it will be difficult to fund social safety nets, make our economy work, and have a young, healthy workforce that can support an aging population. At some point that pressure is going to force a liberalization of immigration policies, and I think we're going to see greater numbers of immigrants coming from the global South, the vast majority of whom will be deeply devout in one tradition or another. Immigrants change the culture they immigrate to as they are changed by it. It's possible that Christianity in America is not on a one-way decline. The story may become more complicated.

Kleinmaier: How is patriarchy supported by religion?

Worthen: The vast majority of human religious communities have been patriarchal, in the sense that they grant men leadership roles not granted to women. There have been some exceptions, of course, but these have been in the minority. I have spent a lot of time in my teaching and research looking at the ways in which women in religious traditions have done an end run around structures of authority that deny them power. But I've also been struck by how the vast majority of women in religious communities support patriarchy. We see this playing out now in the Southern Baptist Convention and American evangelicalism in general. The Southern Baptists are having a belated #MeToo moment of reckoning as victims of sexual assault within the church come forward, and those who do come forward are getting a fairer hearing than they used to from

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church authorities. Still, some very prominent leaders in the Southern Baptist community have left that denomination in protest against the way they believe Southern Baptist authorities have mishandled the situation: Beth Moore, who's arguably the most influential female Bible teacher in the country, has left; so has Russell Moore (they're not related), who's one of the few prominent never-Trumper evangelicals. But I think it would be a mistake to interpret this upwelling of anger over sexual assault as an indictment of patriarchy or of the theology known as "complementarianism": the idea that God created men and women for distinct and complementary roles, and that they are not completely malleable and interchangeable. I think the vast majority of women in these communities absolutely believe in that theology and would strenuously object to critiques of it as prejudiced and disempowering or dehumanizing. I'm speaking particularly of American evangelicalism. I'm not commenting on the Taliban or any of the much more extreme expressions of religious patriarchy around the world.

There's a tendency among outside observers to be condescending toward women in evangelical communities and to think that all outsiders have to do is awaken them, and they will see that they need to reject the patriarchy. I just don't think that's true. And I don't think there's much evidence to support the idea that all complementarian families are oppressive regimes in which the husband makes all the decisions and bosses the wife and children around. In our twenty-first-century economy most households require two

incomes, so evangelicals have to be practical about both partners working outside the home. Any marriage that's going to last needs constant negotiation and an awareness of both partners' strengths. There isn't a ton of hard data, but some years ago sociologists Christian Smith and Sally Gallagher did a survey that concluded that in 90 percent of evangelical marriages, husbands and wives make decisions jointly — and this has been the general pattern I've found in my own reporting.

When I talk to evangelical men and women, their descriptions of their marriages don't sound all that different from the accounts of marriage I hear from couples who call themselves committed feminists. I see men and women in the evangelical community highlighting the prominent role of women in the Gospels and the early Church, encouraging young women to pursue a wider range of careers, and opening more roles in ministry to women without departing from their core beliefs. I hear complementarian men talking about the prophet Isaiah's idea of the suffering servant as a model of what Christian-male family leadership means: a commitment to getting out in front of any challenges your family faces and leading through serving.

This isn't to say that there aren't contexts in which these theological ideas are abused, but I see that as a symptom of the broader human tendency to seek and abuse power, which is evident in any cultural or theological context. So I always err on the side of nuance and good faith whenever I'm trying to understand a family whose theological principles I don't necessarily share.

Kleinmaier: You've written about women who are, so to speak, cherry-picking spiritual or religious beliefs. What are the advantages and hazards of this approach?

Worthen: I see this as part of a long tradition of women who have found sources of spiritual authority outside of established institutions. In centuries past, that took the form of claiming direct revelation from God, or an anointing from the Holy Spirit that permitted a woman to preach and evangelize and maybe even form a religious community within a tradition that would never ordain women or grant them formal religious leadership. Consider Anne Hutchinson, the midwife who challenged the Puritan establishment in 1630s Massachusetts, or Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers. If you look at them or any of the female evangelists in the great revivals of the eighteenth century, these were not protofeminists; they were not saying the rights to public expression and religious leadership should be open to all women. They were instead making the argument that they had been uniquely called, and they didn't even want this calling, but they were simply trying to bring more people to Christ.

The women who call themselves spiritual coaches today are not bound by religious traditions in the way that their forebears were. These women express a broader trend in American spirituality: an inclination to treat metaphysical

options like items on a spiritual buffet and not convert or commit wholesale to any one tradition, whether it's Buddhism or Wiccan practices or some variety of Christianity, but rather to pick and choose and treat them as a spiritual toolbox.

When I've spoken to women who have made a career as a spiritual coach, they see their primary job as helping clients discern what their needs are and what their taste for metaphysical experimenting is — whether they think crystal healing is completely wacky, or whether they're intrigued by it. The spiritual coach then has these different practices on offer. If we were to try to describe this mish-mash of practices as one worldview, it would fall broadly under the heading of what historians call New Thought. The basic idea of New Thought is that, with the right training, knowledge, and practices, you can manipulate the invisible supernatural energies of the universe to serve your purposes. When you hear people talking about “manifesting” the thing that you want — that great new job or the partner or the new car — it's an ambitious, metaphysical form of positive thinking. It sometimes has Christian forms. One of the key figures in the New Thought tradition in America was the New York pastor Norman Vincent Peale, who wrote *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which came out in the 1950s and is still in print. He was, by the way, the family pastor of Donald Trump when Trump was growing up. Peale was also one of the godfathers of the “prosperity gospel” tradition, which informs the ministries of preachers like Joel Osteen and Creflo Dollar and is immensely popular around the world.

The danger here connects to what I was talking about earlier: this very attenuated idea of freedom. Many Americans are tempted to learn a little bit about a lot of religious and spiritual practices and then pick and choose based on their first impressions and what seems to suit their mood and needs on a particular day. Too often this results in incomplete and amateur engagement with serious religious traditions, and it short-circuits opportunities for learning and enlightenment by not submitting to a tradition from a position of humility. That self-help book that translates Zen Buddhism into a fifteen-minute mindfulness practice is giving you the commercialized, simplified caricature of a rich, ancient tradition. Spiritual dabbling can be enriching if it leads to deeper engagement that decenters the self; that pulls us away from the impulse to see all spiritual resources in terms of our own ego; and that encourages us to wrestle with what these different traditions offer.

A second hazard is that the implicit message in a lot of this literature is “All your problems are just due to your negative thinking and your failure to fully connect with the positive energies in the universe. But if you just read these books and start chanting the right affirmations in the morning and think positive thoughts, you will solve all your problems.” This can turn into self-blame that denies

the complicated web of economic, social, and political factors that affect all of us. Although there's a lot to be said for the sense of empowerment and ambition that comes with spiritual self-help, it needs to be balanced by a clear-eyed assessment of one's environment. I raised this question in my conversations with every spiritual coach I interviewed, and, to their credit, they were all aware of it. The usual response was "My calling is not politics or social activism — it is to empower the individual client. I don't deny injustice or systemic problems. I'm saying that whatever your situation is, however awful your environment is, you are not powerless." I don't want to caricature the work that the spiritual coaches are doing or oversimplify their worldview.

Kleinmaier: Can these types of spiritual and wellness practices led by women be seen as a response to the patriarchal systems in the West today?

Worthen: Women often begin exploring these alternative spiritual practices because they've been let down by more traditional, mainstream religious institutions, which have historically excluded women from leadership roles, or simply don't speak directly or consistently to women's experience. I interviewed a woman who grew up Catholic. That church's view on gender was part of what led her to explore on her own. But she talked less about the patriarchy and more about her objection to the Catholic ideas of guilt and original sin and her desire for a more supportive set of spiritual practices that help a person work through past mistakes and suffering. I think this was a reasonable response to what can sometimes be a punishing set of theological messages and judgments. At the same time, there's something to be said for the doctrine of original sin — the idea that we need to confront the fundamental selfishness that does show up in every human being.

Kleinmaier: You've written that four hundred years ago, women engaging in self-help practices like this would have been called witches. How did the concept of witchcraft develop, and how has it changed over time?

Worthen: If we define a witch as an individual who has cultivated or inherited the power to connect with supernatural forces and deploy those forces on others, we can find figures who meet these criteria across a range of cultures. In some Indigenous cultures there are figures who can deploy such powers for good or evil and have a fair amount of authority in the community. One pattern we see fairly often, certainly in the Christian West, is the association of such powers with people who are on the margins of society. That often meant women who, sometimes for reasons out of their control, were not in traditional family or economic arrangements: women living on their own, for example, without a male breadwinner in the household.

Fear of witches also seems to track with broader social instability and anxiety. It is tempting to think of witchcraft as a premodern superstition and to assume that the further back in history we go, the more belief in witches

we will find. In fact, these beliefs have ebbed and flowed. In the eighth century Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor, declared that the death penalty was suitable punishment for anyone who burned a so-called witch at the stake. He said burning witches was something only pagans did. The real surge in witchcraft hysteria came during the Thirty Years War, in the early seventeenth century. That's not a coincidence. In periods of instability and violence, people seek a scapegoat. Historians have sometimes viewed the infamous Salem witch trials of the 1690s through this lens: It was a period of Massachusetts history when there was enormous economic pressure on a shrinking pool of available land and resources. These factors predisposed the community to blame marginalized, weak individuals for the presence of suffering.

Kleinmaier: Were colonial witch trials as ubiquitous as pop culture makes them seem?

Worthen: The Salem witch trials happened at a time when executions on that scale were not happening in Britain. So they were interesting for that reason. We're not talking about a huge number of individuals being killed. It was fourteen women and six men; most were hanged, and one man was pressed to death. But more than two hundred were accused in an area with about two thousand residents. The Salem witch trials are also a reminder of the complexity of Puritan Christianity in this period. There's always a gap between the theological treatises and the religion as it's actually practiced by laypeople. We think of the Puritans as orthodox Christians par excellence, but they also carried around rabbits' feet, and their clergy were constantly haranguing them to "put away your pagan amulets" and pray instead. On the other hand, you have someone like the Puritan minister Cotton Mather, who infamously allowed for spectral evidence in the trials in Salem, letting people talk about visions of ghosts in their testimony against the accused.

Kleinmaier: What is our cultural fascination with witches? Why do we keep coming back to that story?

Worthen: I was thinking about this around last Halloween, because it seems there's been this explosion of grotesque decorations. It might be in part due to COVID and people's pent-up desire to make a bigger deal out of holidays, but I think it's also connected to the cultural fascination with witches that you're describing. We like to pretend our fascination with witches is lighthearted, but often it's a macabre way of joking about two features of human experience that we don't have a lot of tools to deal with: the presence of evil and our fear of death.

I think horror films and giant skeleton Halloween decorations are our culture's cheap, commercialized way of expressing our anxiety about mortality. We're a culture that runs away from the prospect of death. For much of human history, people died at home, often in the care of female relatives. Death was very much women's work. Rates

of mortality for women in childbirth and young children were so high that the prospect of death was a regular feature of life. Most people in industrialized societies have no concept of that. As a result of our insulation from that constant specter of mortality, we have struggled to maintain a language for talking frankly about it and addressing our fears in the way that traditional religious practice encouraged.

Secularized intellectual culture and materialist world-views tend to explain human suffering through evolutionary psychology or brain chemistry or socioeconomics. When it comes to doing justice to the scale of human suffering, they fall terribly short. Consider the way in which even people who don't believe in any kind of supernatural power will still use words like *evil* to explain a mass shooting or a terrorist attack. They need words like this because the perpetrators' brain chemistry or an unfortunate upbringing or bad laws don't seem sufficient. Humans have this pressing need to honor the scale of the horrors we all see and endure with a vocabulary that captures their magnitude. Our cultural fascination with supernatural evil could be a hangover from an earlier age of Christendom, or it could be a window into a certain bankruptcy in the modern secular imagination that will eventually need to be filled by something more substantial than Halloween decorations.

Kleinmaier: The Wiccan faith bills itself as a modern pagan religion. Does it have any ties to colonial witchcraft?

Worthen: Wicca doesn't have direct cultural links to older practices. It would be more accurate to think of it as a kind of nature religion that is so decentralized we can't identify its orthodoxy. The very term *orthodoxy* seems like a poor fit for such a loosely defined, nonhierarchical faith. You could probably locate some people who call themselves Wiccans who have a concept of demonology and the devil and others who don't.

This lack of hierarchy reminds me of another female-dominated religious subculture: the Spiritualists of the nineteenth century. Historians run into similar challenges when trying to define Spiritualist beliefs or doctrines. This was a movement that started in the 1840s in Upstate New York, when the Fox sisters — then fourteen and eleven — began to claim they could hear knocks in a house that their family had moved into, and that the knocks were efforts to communicate by the ghost of a dead peddler who'd been murdered and buried in the basement. In the ensuing decades this grew into a network of spiritual mediums — almost all women — who claimed the ability to communicate with the spirits of the dead in one way or another. There were a couple of hundred traveling female trance speakers. When they performed, they would enter an auditorium often already in a trance, then get a random topic assigned to them by a committee of audience members. The topics were usually considered "masculine" — obscure questions about science or theology, which, audiences assumed, a

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relatively uneducated young woman would not have any ability to answer. If she could do it, then it must be a spirit that was speaking through her. And these women would then deliver hour-long lectures, impromptu. This was an era when it was frowned upon for a woman to travel alone or have a career like this, but these trance speakers were exempt from those social restrictions.

Many of the women who challenged male authority in this religious sphere also did so in politics. There was a lot of overlap between this network of Spiritualists and the women's movement. A significant number of the people who showed up at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 — the first major women's-rights convention — were practicing Spiritualists. There was a great deal of overlap with abolitionism as well: Harriet Beecher Stowe was interested in talking to spirits. William Lloyd Garrison visited the Fox sisters. It was natural for people who were inclined to question hierarchy and see injustice in the political sphere to raise these same questions metaphysically. And Spiritualist ideology espoused a fierce egalitarianism, possibly in reaction to the harsh Calvinism that shaped religious culture in Upstate New York.

From our perspective much of what the Spiritualists did seems sort of crazy, but with death a constant reality in the Victorian era, families would go to a medium for some indication that their two-year-old who'd died of typhoid was not moldering in the ground but was frolicking



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happily in some spirit land. It's incredibly moving when you think about it.

By the late nineteenth century a lot of prominent Spiritualist mediums, including the Fox sisters, had been exposed as frauds, and their cultural presence had shrunk. But it's not hard to find a practicing medium in your own hometown today. Hollywood celebrities pay a thousand bucks an hour to sit at the feet of some of the famous mediums who operate there. This is a living tradition. We continue to be fascinated with the possibility of connection to some world beyond. We want a glimmer of hope that death is not final.

Kleinmaier: How was the women's-suffrage movement affected when the Spiritualists were discredited?

Worthen: I don't think the end of the Spiritualist movement had concrete consequences for women's suffrage. Spiritualism was never organized enough to be a movement. So when the Fox sisters accepted payment from a reporter to reveal how they cracked their knuckles and made it sound like the rappings of a dead peddler, it's not as if that exposé caused people to throw out all Spiritualism. You can't behead something that amorphous and decentralized.

Kleinmaier: I don't hear Christians blaming witches now. Who is the current scapegoat?

Worthen: In the U.S. our tribal inclinations are on full display. No matter where you're located on the political spectrum, you probably feel as if your place and agency and

authority are under threat in some way. That has elicited a tendency to demonize anyone we think is on the "other side." For many this doesn't have anything to do with religious convictions.

That said, I do think that there's a portion of politically conservative Christians — whether they are actual churchgoers or whether Christianity for them is primarily a cultural affiliation — who are panicked about the collapsing cultural and economic authority of white Christian men. That sense of panic, of being left behind in the global economy, of being rejected by the elites who run the political parties and the mainstream media, has prompted a scary tendency to scapegoat immigrants and nonwhite minorities — people they perceive to have jumped the queue, who seem to be receiving unfair advantages. I see there an exaggerated expression of a universal human tendency. I don't see that as unique to Christianity. Whether our beliefs and practices come from God or from a human authority, we all have a tendency to use those ideas and practices to gain, protect, and expand our power. The history of Christianity in the U.S. is tied up with the history of white supremacy and the exploitation of the poor. We're still wrestling with that entanglement. But it's an expression of this broader pattern in all humanity.

Kleinmaier: Would you say that this idea of a witch hunt is now more political than spiritual? We hear Donald Trump claim that he's the victim of a witch hunt, and

his rallies often included chants to “lock her up,” meaning Hillary Clinton. That feels like scapegoating to me.

Worthen: A number of political scientists have made the observation that politics has become religious. Anxiety about ideological purity and the desire to identify and expurgate evil do show up more often in political contexts today. The culture of American political rallies has always been tied up with the American revival tradition. The first mass political rallies borrowed quite explicitly from evangelical revivals. Read the speeches of someone like Eugene Debs, a Socialist candidate for president and avowed agnostic; they sound like good evangelical preaching. The songbooks of labor movements in the South explicitly drew on American hymnals. To separate religion and politics is always a false dichotomy at some level.

Kleinmaier: Did the separation of church and state ever exist in the U.S.?

Worthen: The secular Left and the Christian Right both misunderstand that history. Popular writers on the Christian Right have tended to put forth a conflicted narrative that conscripts the founders into the conservative-evangelical political platform. That is certainly not true to the history. But it’s also a mistake to suggest that the founders or the early Supreme Court justices envisioned an American public square cordoned off from explicit religious practice and rhetoric. They did not. The relationship between religion and public life in America has always contrasted with, say, the French idea of *laïcité* [*a form of secularism that allows for belief in multiple faiths as long as they are kept out of public affairs* — Ed.], which is a legacy of the French Revolution and posits a freedom from religion for citizens. The founders — and I would include even the very heterodox Jefferson and Madison in this, as well as the more orthodox ones like Patrick Henry or John Witherspoon — thought Protestantism would always be totally dominant in this country. They did envision a tolerant society in which non-Christians could live and worship freely, but it was always to be a Protestant country. They supported freedom of religion and opposed a federal established church because they thought these steps would actually promote the flourishing of Protestantism. You might say, “Well, that’s neither here nor there; why should we be bound, in our much more religiously and ideologically pluralist twenty-first century, to the ideas and visions of these men in the late eighteenth century?” That’s a perfectly fair question. But it’s worth getting clear on the history, because both the Left and the Right try to conscript the founders, and they’re both mistaken.

Kleinmaier: What forms of demonization do female public figures face on either side of the political spectrum in the U.S.?

Worthen: *Demonization* is a strong word. But there is a general tendency to prefer masculine traits in politics. Americans across the political spectrum associate traditionally male patterns of speech and physical bearing with good

leadership and legitimate power. I don’t think this is limited to politics. In my own sphere of academia, women who can speak in a lower register and command a room like a traditional male orator have a serious advantage, regardless of the political context. Take someone like Elizabeth Holmes, who was, at least in the short term, immensely successful. [*Holmes founded the health-care technology company Theranos before being convicted of fraud in 2022.* — Ed.] She is an example of a charismatic woman who took on traditionally masculine forms of self-presentation, deliberately lowering her voice and dressing like Steve Jobs to evoke a kind of masculine authority. In the business world many successful women deploy ways of speaking and gesturing that American audiences associate with men. But there is a double standard, a danger that an audience will view a confident woman as bossy or bullying.

I’ve been thinking about this as I study the rise of the guru in this country over the past fifty years. I define *guru* as a charismatic leader who operates largely untethered from traditional institutions and gains followers by presenting a worldview so totalizing it can become an alternative reality. This type of charismatic leadership role is dominated by men. I’m still working on my theory about why this is the case. It has something to do with sexism, but it’s also because, by this point in U.S. history, women are having more success gaining authority through institutional pathways, so they have less need to do an end run around institutional power the way they did in the past.

But there still are ideological expectations, on both the Left and the Right, of what a woman’s job is. Much of the Right’s vilification of Hillary Clinton was a response to her challenge to certain perceived rules about the role a woman should play. I suppose there is a version of this on the Left: feminists who have expressed discomfort with some of the claims of the transgender-rights movement have experienced serious vilification and silencing in academia and in the media.

It’s important to note that the Christian Right has had many publicly prominent women who had full political careers and were accepted by the Right because they fought on that side. Take someone like Phyllis Schlafly, without whom we would probably have an Equal Rights Amendment. A Roman Catholic with six children, she ran unsuccessfully for Congress, then went on to have an amazing career in political activism. To my knowledge she was never criticized by the Right for being too independent or somehow betraying the values of the traditional Christian family. In a way she’s an echo of those female evangelists in the eighteenth century, who carved out an exception for themselves — not to explicitly challenge patriarchal authority but to promote their idea of the kingdom of God.

Kleinmaier: Can you give me some examples of the gurus you’re studying?

Worthen: I’ve been very interested in the 1970s, which

is caricatured as the age of the religious cults. There were many, from relatively benign Pentecostal groups or East Asian imports to violent cults like Jim Jones's Peoples Temple. A character from this period I find really fascinating is Guru Maharaj Ji [Prem Pal Singh Rawat], who was the son of an Indian guru who died in 1966. The son showed up in the U.S. in the early 1970s as a thirteen-year-old and rapidly gained a following of tens of thousands of young Americans. Many were former student activists disillusioned with the possibility for reform and revolution through political means. They proclaimed this Indian teenager, who was really into fast cars and water guns and candy, as their Perfect Master, on par with Jesus and the Buddha. He would usher in a new age, they said. For his part, he was incredibly savvy at responding to and encouraging this. It's an extreme example of a familiar pattern in these charismatic movements. From the outside it's just completely baffling: What were his followers getting out of this relationship? Why did they see this individual as a divine being?

The age of the guru followed what I call the age of the experts: a period from the 1950s to the early seventies that is the apogee of mainstream scientific expertise, institutions of higher education, and government by technocracy. It came on the heels of World War II and the rise of atomic physics, but it crashed amid the domestic and international turmoil of the late 1960s and early seventies, when many Americans lost faith in experts like Robert McNamara, architect of the disastrous Vietnam War. The social liberation movements of that period exposed the hypocrisy of the narrative of American progress and reason. And it was sort of the last hurrah of the 1960s, which we think of as socially liberal and politically moderate, or even progressive. Liberal Protestant churches that had once enjoyed a high degree of cultural authority and representation in the centers of power began to see their membership rates drop.

This type of disillusionment, especially for younger people who are coming of age, creates a power vacuum, a real opportunity for a new kind of leader. I'm trying to trace a line to these gurus of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century from prophets and mystics from three or four hundred years earlier. There's a shared vocabulary, there are commonalities, but there's also a way in which the atomization of late-twentieth-century culture produced a new message: that you should be able to determine what your life is about; that spiritual meaning is a natural thing waiting to be tapped within you. You just need the right spiritual environment.

This impulse finds its way into politics. Successful mainstream politicians figured out ways to borrow from these models of charismatic authority. Maybe such methods wouldn't work if they were adopted wholesale, but they offer certain sets of tools. Donald Trump is a good example: the way he gave the middle finger to the Republican

establishment. It would be incorrect to cast him as a completely free agent, a guru figure who was a total outsider, un beholden to any force other than his own. A huge proportion of people who voted for him were always going to vote Republican in 2016. But he took advantage of the media landscape. We can see in Trump's 2016 success some features of this guru type that I'm describing. He presented a total worldview: an alternative reality offering answers — or pseudo answers — to a lot of voters' big questions. He gave certain people a sense of being seen. So much of Trump's resonance with voters was his ability to channel their feelings of victimization. It was a telling commentary on how far the authority of experts had fallen.

Kleinmaier: Do you think this decline in expert authority accounts for the rise in alternative-wellness trends and conspiracy theories during the COVID pandemic?

Worthen: Absolutely. The Internet has turned everybody into an expert. You can persist in the illusion that you have no need for the advice of credentialed professionals because you can just google your way to enlightenment. The rapid democratization of access to information and the ability to connect with marginal communities and wellness practitioners has accelerated the declining authority of mainstream experts. There may also be a special appeal in practices that white Americans perceive as coming from someplace else. This has been true of some Americans for hundreds of years. Look at Henry David Thoreau and his fascination with Hindu texts and Buddhism. He made an effort to read about these faiths, using the partial translations that were available then, because of his frustrations with what was on offer in his own community.

Kleinmaier: Why are Americans so drawn to these wellness trends and to self-improvement in general?

Worthen: These trends tap into the venerable tradition of American individualism. Americans have a high degree of confidence that, through some combination of hard work, luck, and creativity, they can find their way out of any problem. It's a strain of American culture that is exacerbated by the lack of a social safety net. Since World War II Canada and the countries of Western Europe have been providing greater levels of assistance and a more robust safety net, whether it's universal health insurance or strong public school systems. The American system has gone in the opposite direction. We are more on our own than ever.

Wellness trends also speak to the American desire to DIY our way to meaning. There's something appealing about being able to futz around online and assemble your own tool kit of spiritual practices. The great American philosophical tradition is pragmatism, which we owe to philosophers like William James. Pragmatism defines *truth* as any idea that works for you. An idea is like a fork. How do you know if something's a fork? Well, can it spear the piece of steak and get it to your lips? Then it's a fork. Nothing else matters. ■