After Christendom

How Theological Anomalies Took the USA into Chaos, and What Can be Done

By William R. Myers and Barbara Kimes Myers

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"…every headwind has its own upward draft."

Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind,* p.72.

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Introduction

Following the Sunday morning church service, thirteen-year-old Katie sat in the family car, waiting for her mother, and talking with her father. She was remembering a point in the service when everyone stood and repeated *The Apostles' Creed.* She asked her father: "Dad, do you believe that?" He replied: "What do you mean?" She said: "…the pastor had us say we believed that Jesus descended into hell and that on the third day he arose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Do you believe that?" After a moment's silence, he responded: "No; not really," to which she said: "…why in church did you say that you believe?" He said: "I guess because it's what we usually say in church." To which answer Katie drew quiet, and then replied: "I think that I don't understand church."[1]

The Apostles' Creed emerged as a kind of baptismal litany within the pre-modern, tri-level, theological language from the earliest Christian gatherings. It was established as a fealty oath for converts sometime during the late fourth or early fifth centuries. In early Christendom it held the same role as it does today; that is, when Katie and her family stand to repeat *The Apostles' Creed*, they are making a believers' statement about how they will live within the contemporary world. But when Katie's family joined other contemporary believers in repeating *The Apostles' Creed,* Katie mentally stepped back, experientially sensing what adults call an *anomaly.* Katie had studied in public school about the solar system and evolution. She knew the stories of Galileo and Darwin and could identify the names of several Roman and Greek gods and goddesses. When she heard her parent's church repeating words from *The Apostles' Creed* affirming that Jesus had descended into hell and after three days had ascended into heaven, she wondered how such "up" and "down" language fit within the modern scientific understanding of the solar system. And when the words "God the father, maker of heaven and earth" were recited, she wondered if God was an arbitrary person like the Greek and Roman gods she had studied. Katie

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[1] "Katie" is not her real name. Her father related this story to me. Age thirteen at the time, Katie was confirmed at age fifteen. Bill was one of the associate ministers at her church in Flossmoor, Illinois

was hearing the wording of *The Apostles' Creed* as something disconnected from her lived reality. She was not happy with what she had heard that morning. The creed not only positioned the church against what she was learning inside her school, it also puzzled her as to why her parents went to church. She was experiencing an anomaly, and it discomfited her.

What Might We Hope Katie Will Discover About Christianity?

Katie is asking basic questions which caring and faithful adults should be able to answer. *Chapter One of Part One* describes the authoritarian concepts defining the pre-modern context with its tri-level cultural understanding of how that world was expected to operate. Those concepts were used in constructing *The Apostles' Creed*. It fits the way the pre-modern era literally understood the world – heaven was above, hell below, and the earth in-between. Katie, a modern, thoughtful child living within the USA, knew nothing about this pre-modern culture or how Jesus fit within its context. She did not know that Jesus was a threat to the divinity concepts underlying Rome's Imperial Cult. She had not yet discovered how the Roman empire celebrated polytheistic cults and sought positive augurs favoring Roman leaders readying for war or in the process of making state decisions.

We know, however, that the Romans divinized their leaders. For example, after winning the battle of Actium (31BC), Caesar Augustus (63BC-14AD), was declared a hero and the first Emperor of Rome. His reign saw coins cast and cultic celebrations. After he died, the Roman Senate declared that he was a god. God-talk was also common gossip following the death of the Galilean named Jesus. While Jesus denied he was a god, the confessed tenets of the emerging Christian faith considered him to be divine. These claims might not have seemed seditious, except those still holding fast to Jesus' teachings and a monotheistic faith were unwilling to subscribe to Rome's polytheistic cults. There was but one God, and the early followers of Jesus held to that belief. This puzzled and irritated Romans. Christians seemed out of step with how citizens within the polytheistic Roman Empire were expected to act.

While the early church debated such issues, it was smallish and hardly seemed worthy of being called a church. A few devoted Jewish and gentile followers were meeting in homes and had become something other than an offshoot of Judaism. By 60AD, numerous writings were disseminated describing the life, teachings, and the presumed divinity of Jesus. An early writing called *Mark* was followed by others, with *Luke's* initial salutation addressed to "…most excellent Theophilus." The author of *Luke* compiled information for Theophilus so that he "…might know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed" (*Luke*, RSV. 1:3-4). This salutation suggests that the followers of the way, now in churches, had grown in both size and influence.

Determined to not side with the Jews in their 66AD revolt against Rome, what was fast becoming an institutionalized church appointed Linus to be its first Bishop (67AD). By the end of its first hundred years, a rapidly growing church had become a multi-regional entity no longer connected with Judaism or the synagogues. Primarily drawn from the lower Roman classes, the easily identifiable Christians were scapegoats for those who governed the Roman Empire. Nero persecuted the Christians, as did Emperor Decius. The public martyrdom of Christians such as Cyprian, Ignatius and Polycarp were the result of their opposition to Rome's polytheistic cults and the divinization of its Caesars. The Emperor Diocletian's concern for a unified Rome led him to organize a broadly-based persecution. In the early days of those following Jesus, it was a dangerous decision for someone to become a follower of the way.

The Constantinian Era

The winner of major battles, Flavius Constantine in 306AD was declared emperor by the Roman army. A Christian convert, Constantine openly stated that he owed his battle-won success to his faith. Called the *Constantinian Era*, men in councils chaired by Emperor Constantine would argue theological decisions. Council members accepted as normative the divine right of rulers and the regal properties assigned Emperor Constantine. He had been divinely chosen to lead by God. Also normative was the belief that everyone lived within a three-level universe. These pre-modern ideas about kings and the up and down scientific universe were

carried across the Atlantic into common theological understandings of newly forming Protestant churches.

Unfortunately, several centuries later, Katie's discomfort about repeating *The Apostles' Creed* suggests that her church unknowingly (or intentionally) remained trapped within a theological understanding initially accepted by the pre-modern theological conclusions of the early Constantinian Era. Certain theocratic components from that time in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were still held by many Christians as religious truth. *Chapter Two* explores how the mainline, protestant church and the evangelical movement theologically disagreed about such Christendom based constructions. The chapter also describes how the American form of Christendom emerged and how that process was later experienced during the nineteen-forties and fifties.

Why Theological Anomalies Matter

What Katie experienced is not a new thing. Theological constructions are human efforts to understand God. Given time's passing and how culture changes, theological anomalies often happen. To name something an anomaly is to suggest that something we once understood does not fit our current contextual situation. In the late nineteen eighties, theologian Sallie McFague was considering the theological discomfort of Augustine and Luther. She wrote: "In the case of each of these writers, something about the writer's own experience did not fit with current understandings of Christianity."[2] McFague suggests that such theological concerns "...presented an analogy that could not be contained in the contemporary paradigm."[3] She stated: "A changed interpretation was imperative if the writer was to identify himself as a Christian – and if the Christian faith was to speak to the critical issues of the day."[4] Her conclusion was that persons who want to be faithful must address the theological anomalies which are no longer helpful regarding what is taking place within the world.

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[2] McFague, S. *Models of God; Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,1987) 46-47.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

A Note for the Reader

If a theological anomaly does not fit a current contextual concern, perhaps it needs to be adjusted or its originating concept replaced by a differing theological construction. But not every Christian sees it this way. Many conservative and evangelical Christians profess belief in what they understand as the church's original and true theological statements emerging – with God's blessing – from early deliberations and councils of the Constantinian Era. They also hold the *Bible* as an inerrant, original, unchangeable document inspired by God. Their reliance on the inviolable correctness of the *Bible* and certain pre-modern theological constructs mirrors the philosophy of *originalism* followed by most of the current Supreme Court Justices. David Cole suggests that originalism, as practiced by most of today's Supreme Court justices "…contends that the Constitution should be interpreted and enforced based on its 'original meaning,' namely what it meant when it was adopted."[5]

Decisions in that court are now said to be grounded by presumedly inviolable contextual considerations drawn from earlier centuries. Certain cultural certainties are said by the justices to have originally framed the content of the Constitution and therefore are to be followed. How the culture of the United States has changed since that era is not considered to be relevant. As *originalists,* most of the current Supreme Court justices hold that the Constitution cannot be added to or changed unless amended; that is, the Constitution is not a living document.[6] Cole counters by suggesting that "…if you want to bind people to your specific intentions, you write with specificity." He concludes: "The framers chose not a stringent straitjacket but a set of enduring core principles whose meaning and applicability would unfold over time to meet the evolving needs of a growing nation."[7] This is not what current justices believe. They hold that any court decisions realized over the past fifty years are based on this

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[5] Cole, D. "Originalism's Charade" Pp 18-20 *The New York Review of Books.* Volume LXIX (18) November 21, 2022. 18.

[6] Cole, D. "Egregiously Wrong." Pp 35-38 *The New York Review of Books.* LXIX (13) Summer 2022. 35.

[7] Cole, D. "Charade." Op. Cit. 19.

erroneous premise, are dubious law and should therefore be skeptically considered or possibly expunged.

Originalist theologians accept the rigid concepts held by most of the Supreme Court Justices when using theological equivalents, applying them to the *Bible* and theological constructions like *The Apostles' Creed.* They would say that since these statements were true to the societal, cultural, and theological understandings of that era, they are true today and should be followed. We disagree with these originalist theologians. We believe that the *Bible* is a living document. We best understand it by stepping inside it and becoming partners of the Gospel story. How the *Bible* has been interpreted across time sustains us within our current situations. Theological constructs from the Constantinian era are testimonies to how God was experienced but cannot become literal directions addressing contemporary issues. Originalism applied to *The Apostles' Creed* misguides contemporary believers. A fealty oath constructed inside the late fourth or early fifth century is not representative of the indwelling God's continual presence within our contemporary universe. Such an originalist reading becomes a theological anomaly and a religious straitjacket to be avoided.

Why Challenge Theological Anomalies?

Theological originalism demands adherence to religious anomalies based on pre-modern theological constructions, Theological originalists tightly grasp and follow what they know to be God's theological truth. Those holding differing theological perspective think that originalist thought produces willful ignorance. Others hold that since pre-modern theological constructions cannot meet today's existential concerns, originalist theologians are either ignorant or misguided. Seeking meaning elsewhere, Christian progressives often leave the Christian faith. The progressive educator and philosopher, John Dewey (*Chapter Three)*, was such a man. He left the Christian faith and embraced a life of science. Of interest is his understanding of *religion* and the *religious.* This is described in his book, *A Common Faith.*[8] What is claimed as his personal religious experience is what

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[8] Dewey, J. *A Common Faith.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, originally 1934; reprinted: 2013).

a theologian might call an *epiphany*, and as such this experience propelled him out of the church's dogmatic originalism and its accompanying theological anomalies into the newly discovered scientific world.

Despite differing responses, what is often missed is the depth, power, and destructiveness of theological anomalies. They are often used in support of things like antisemitism, racism, misogamy, patriarchy, autocracy, white nationalism, and global warming. Not easily recognizing the role theology played within such issues, contemporary Christians are often unaware of such connections. Others understand, and *Chapter Seven* describes how cotton growers and slave owners intentionally connected cherry-picked, biblical proof-texts with phony science so that the sale and purchase of black human bodies might be legally and culturally approved. Given the legal and economic prerogatives given slavery, abolitionists opposed to slavery raised a differing biblical interpretation, and an un-united United States drifted into civil war. Vestiges of that war still anchor patterns of systemic racism embraced within both the North and the South.

Some theologians, compelled by the problem of theological anomalies, reject theological originalism and construct new theological constructions. Political activist, Dorothee Soelle (*Chapter Four*), and professor Jurgen Moltmann (*Chapter Five*), are such theologians. A WWII German POW, Moltmann was handed a *Bible*. That began his life-long theological constructive work. Soelle, a child under Nazi occupation, reacted to what she saw as the negating obedience of Christians during Nazi occupation and control of Germany.[9] Their lives and work permeate the chapters of this book. Still others adopt figurative understandings of originalist pre-modern constructions, mentally translating the church's tri-leveled, confessional language into more realistic theological terminology. Psychologist and professor, Margaret B. McFarland (*Chapter Six*), was such a person. She understood God as *Love* and was the director of a well-known center for studying children and the family. A respected teacher, she also served as the primary consultant for Fred Rogers' work in *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood.*

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[9] Soelle, D. Translators, B., and Rumscheidt, M. *Against the Wind; Memoir of a Radical Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 1999) 16 and 97.

Mainline and Evangelical Theological Anomalies

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the mainline church seemed unable to address its theological anomalies. It did not wonder what might happen if a once supportive Christianizing culture might collapse. Accommodated and supportive of the American culture, the mainline church promised little or no theological definition other than what the culture offered. Sunday School and confirmation programs became exit points for children and youth. While not surprising news, the indifference of the mainline church to their children's dropping out of church suggests that its adults may have been colonized into the American culture's way of seeing and being in the world (*Chapter Nine*).

While the mainline church seemingly remains unaware of its own theological anomalies, the evangelical movement is now experiencing its own theological denial and political trauma. [10] Entering the twenty-first century, it is said to compose "…the overwhelming Protestant majority."[11] Seemingly ignoring their fundamentalist, conservative, and originalist theological history, their support of Donald Trump and the Republican Party repositioned the evangelical movement as a contemporary power base in the USA. A theological anomaly, the evangelical movement's stepping away from their once important faith stance is explored in *Chapter Eight*. After Trump's 2020 defeat and an attempted January 6, 2021, coup, some evangelical reformers are attempting to move away from Trumpism.[12] They understand that until the evangelical movement deals with this theological anomaly, evangelicals will continue to be identified as a repressive, religious, political party.[13]

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[10] Brooks, D. "The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself" (www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04opinion/evangelicalism-division-renewl.html) 2.

[11] Richardson, K. Anders. "Political Complexities and Rivalries of Pneuma and Imperia" Pp. 130-140 in Benson, B. Ellis and Hetzel, P. Goodwin, editors. *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008) 138.

[12] Brooks, D. Op Cit.

[13] Bruinias, H. "Is the Label 'Evangelical' More about Politics than Religious Belief?" *The Christian Science Monitor* as quoted in *The Christian Century*. January 31, 2018. 13-14.

Human Theoreticians Offer Helpful Resources

Both the evangelical movement and the mainline church have work to do regarding such theological anomalies. A part of this book's task is to suggest how human theoreticians might help address such constructive, theological work. In *Chapter Eleven*, psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson stresses how the ethical, developmental, cogwheeling contact of caring elders across generations determines the positive and negative formation of individual and communal identities.[14] While Erikson's work has long attracted professional theologians and academics, the processes he describes are largely unknown by practitioners in both the mainline church and the evangelical movement. While we believe that a practical consideration of Erikson is a hard sell, we recognize that his descriptive work could be useful for both the evangelical movement and the mainline church's current dilemmas.

Paulo Freire was a different sort of cultural educator. *Chapter Twelve* describes his approach for considering manipulative cultural messaging. We look at how the American culture can impact a family, a community of faith, and seminary students. Freire offers a way people might come to understand the hidden and often seductive messages of a culture. He believed that to name one's cultural world was to become fully human. Such naming can be dangerous. Freire was ejected from Brazil and remains a controversial figure for many North Americans. Nevertheless, communities of faith often find his work important for understanding how theological anomalies become intertwined within a culture's socio-economic assumptions. We might profit by asking why most of the African Americans in my (Bill's) seminary classes saw Paulo Freire as both a friend and instructive compatriot.

Given the academic work of seminaries and divinity schools, evangelical institutions seem better prepared to turn out practical, pastoral entrepreneurs. Mainline ones, following certain Enlightenment principles, are more interested in producing curious, thoughtful, and academically

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[14] Erikson, E. H. *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985).152-192.

inclined ministers. These differences are explored in *Chapter Ten*, which also challenges the traditional, lecture based, top down, disciplinary siloed format of education prevalent in both schools. The chapter describes what it might take to develop a teamed, contextual, collegial, and integrated approach to theological pedagogy. *Chapter Thirteen* suggests that if a church welcomes those *others* often societally condemned, set aside, or ignored – like the victims of repressive regimes, immigrants, African Americans, gender differentiated, special needs children or those handicapped or disabled – the church will radically change, becoming more like what the early church experienced as a community of faith. We believe that David Tracy's theological understanding of the "other" will play a significant role toward such development.[15]

A Healthy Community of Faith

How we answer such concerns as presented within these chapters will define what encourages a church to face its own theological anomalies supportive of homophobic projections, neo-liberal economics, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, inadequate gun policies, a rejection of global warming, and systemic racism. *Chapter Fourteen* explores how a community of faith's intentional embodiment of biblical narratives can offer body/mind connections and life-altering perspectives. A pragmatic approach to *Bible* Study might utilize an expanded biblical hermeneutic, one borrowing the mechanics of improvisational theater within ritual practice.

For example, given the systemic reality of racism, a community of faith concerned about exploring God's indwelling presence might embody Jonah's racist disgust with the inhabitants of the hated city of Nineveh (*Chapter Fifteen*). Jonah was a slow learner who seemed to always run away from whatever God asked him to do. Jonah was not satisfied when the Ninevites repented. He sat on a hill wishing the city had been destroyed by God's wrath. Without much effort, a post-performance discussion of *Jonah*

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[15] Tracy, D. "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity." *Theology Today.* Volume 51. 1994. 108.

might help a community of faith understand how loyalty to erroneous theological anomalies and conspiracy theories about "the other" underpins and supports systemic racism (*Chapter Seven*).

Chapter Sixteen shares another embodied biblical design, Noah's flood time; Jurgen Moltmann's theological comments on global warming[16] are compared with Kim Stanley Robinson's technically based science fiction novel, *The Ministry for the Future.*[17] Robinson's book graphically describes what will happen when the world's temperature rises to unsustainable levels. Again, in considering this novel and deliberating over God's post-flood rainbow with its covenantal promise, a community of faith can better understand God's covenant and how humans might respond to the existential issue of global warming.

What Lies Ahead

Chapter Seventeen recounts the mechanics anchoring six theological anomalies. Given our current tribal camps, steps as might be taken to recognize, reject, and step inside contemporary theological constructions can only be good news for our troubled nation. *Chapter Eighteen* offers a personal descriptive testimony about how we came to such positions and the role played by the indwelling God following the demise of Christendom. Perhaps such considerations as are contained in these eighteen chapters will help individuals and communities in their sorting out within this twenty-first century what theologically matters.

Our hope is that post-Christendom's communities of faith will become more intentional about stepping inside biblical narratives and emerge better understanding how they might resist and yet still honor their faith wherever God accompanies them. Perhaps ministers will step down from the pulpit, working together with a community of faith's members, co-constructing a church's working theology in forms other than those uncritiqued from the past and designed within the expectations of pre-

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[16] Moltmann J. *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

[17] Robinson, K. Stanley. *The Ministry for the Future* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2020).

modernity's tri-level Christendom. Perhaps individuals unsure of where they stand will resist injustices by connecting with lively, un-silent, resistant, and demonstrative communities of faith. Perhaps Christians concerned with raising children today will join with other diverse communities in the building of appropriate, healthy, co-constructed projects of theological truthfulness and consequence for our world.

We live in hope.

Part I: Christendom in Europe and America

Chapter One describes Christendom in Europe. *Chapter Two* considers how American colonies approved theocratic church/state connections but dismissed such efforts following the adoption of the Constitution. It also describes how the mainline church adopted and utilized American cultural structures and institutions within a cultural religious formation of children while evangelicals favored conversion for bringing children and adults into the Christian faith. *Chapter Two* also offers a personal description of what the American version of Christendom looked like in the nineteen-forties and fifties.

Chapter One
The Rise and Fall of European Christendom

Western oriented and broadly based, *pre-modernity*, *modernity*, and *post-modernity* present basic assumptions about given eras and how people in them believed and acted. The term *pre-modernity* describes the early Western culture's social patterns, philosophic ideas, norms, political understandings, and religious beliefs. Those who governed were arbitrary rulers and warlords. Pre-modern people generally believed that theirs was a tri-level universe. Maps made for intrepid early ocean-going explorers held images of demons and monsters spilling off the map's edge. Only demons lived beyond what was known land. Pre-modernity lasted until the rise of industrialization and the Enlightenment period (late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries).

Modernity is also a generalized societal assessment. It was anchored by rational thought, Enlightenment principles, scientific exploration, the Protestant Reformation, and the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire (1806 CE). It could be argued that Martin Luther (1483-1546CE) lived during *Modernity's* beginnings, a time when the authority of scientific knowledge was competing with the authority of the church. Luther saw that certain theological constructions had to be altered to fit the concerns of the lived issues the church faced within the emerging modern era. As pre-modern and modern cultural understandings failed to provide a single, agreed-upon authority, *post-modernity* emerged. During post-modernity, not one stance has premier cultural authority, and a multitude of voices – including mainline denominational churches and the evangelical, non-denominational movement – struggle to be heard. A cacophony of often untruthful narratives often fills this cultural arena.

Why is it important to consider such cultural descriptions? This chapter looks at how European Christendom evolved during what we now call *pre-modernity*. Most of Christendom's interactions describe an erratic yet predictable authoritative role ascribed to God's divine hand and assigned leaders and governmental policies during that period. Even a cursory

description suggests that amidst the many violent pre-modern interactions, most humans looked to God as the supreme authority of the world. Saint Augustine lived within a similar *pre-modern* society (354-450AD). Given that pre-modern location within Christendom's pronouncements, it was unusual for him to have the temerity to challenge theological anomalies. Despite what had to have been his misgivings, he altered certain theological constructs that they might better fit the needs of his time. For example, his concern about the physical transfer of sin, generation to generation, was quickly accepted. Understanding what pre-modern science such as this meant for those who were engaged in constructing the pre-modern creeds and testimony of theocratically based councils is important for those questioning the reality of such theological anomalies.

We recognize that generalized summaries of pre-modernity, modernity, and post-modernity cannot offer watertight categories. An uncertain overlap always exists, and some people caught within such overlapping (intentionally or unintentionally) decide to live in opposition to what others affirm as the best or only way to understand how the world and humankind work. For example, evangelicals relying on a *pre-modern,* tri-level understanding of God sometimes accept *originalist* convictions while distancing themselves from rational, scientific, *modern* data. Not all evangelicals do this, but because many conservative Christians believe that God will *always* protect them, some conservative evangelicals oppose the scientific use of inoculations against the virus, Covid-19, and its variants. In 2019, this became a political wedge used against those who trusted scientific warnings. A theological anomaly based on God's ultimate individualized protection, the anti-science posture anchored untruthful narratives about scientists and Covid-19. It was also used to support the authoritative leadership of then president, Donald J. Trump.

Constantine Becomes the Emperor of Christendom

Such theological anomalies find support in the USA by continually twisting certain theological, *originalist* constructions emanating from fifteen centuries of Western European Christian dominance. Christendom started when a successful warrior, Flavius Constantine, converted to the Christian faith. As the powerful Western ruler, Constantine (the Great), established

freedom of religious choice *(Edict of Milan, 313 CE).* This was a governmental and church statement signaling that religious choice was now assured but also a recognition that the authority and power of the state was intentionally aligned with the theological constructs of the Christian church. This loose confederacy pledged allegiance to him as emperor, and the word "Christendom" thereafter commonly was used to summarize the interlocked, theocratic merger of the Christian church with the Roman State, or empire.

In the early pre-modern days of Constantine's rule, lengthy distances existed between the churches of Christendom. This presented communication problems. How could the empire unify its theological understanding of the nature of God, the Trinity, Christology, the Biblical canon, and numerous ecclesiological practices found in such multiple settings? Differing theological positions had arisen within such wide-spread diversity. While remotely located bishops might be reasonable about agreeing to local interpretations, seated councils were how Constantine decided Christendom could best reach "correct" or *orthodox* theological interpretations. Paying for the attending bishops' travel, food, and lodging, Constantine convened and chaired the *Council of Nicaea* (325 CE). In that gathering, Constantine was determined to find unity between his governing prerogatives and the bishops' theological positions. While accepting the reality of a tri-level universe, questions emerged as to how God fit within that reality. There was also confusion about the divinity and humanity of Jesus and how Jesus and God were intertwined with the Holy Spirit. These questions were debated. Conclusions about divinity were reached. Men seated under Constantine's watchful eye decided that Jesus was fully divine, and all subsidiary disagreements were swept aside. Arius, an Alexandria priest who taught that Jesus was only human, accordingly saw his followers excommunicated by the church and banished by the Empire.

Rome and Constantinople: The Eastern and Western Centers of Christendom

In 330CE, Constantine set Rome as the seat of the Roman rule of the West. He then chose the eastern city of Byzantium as the empire's New Rome of the East. Quickly renamed Constantinople (after Constantine), it became the assigned seat for the rulers of the eastern empire. Emperor Constantine died in 337 CE. Under new leadership, the *Council of Constantinople* (380 CE), solidified Christendom by affirming the divinity of Christ and theologically establishing Christ's full humanity. It also clarified how the Holy Spirit fit within the now strongly accepted Trinitarian formula. In 380 CE, the *Edict of Thessalonica* made Nicene Christianity the established religion of the Empire. The *Council of Chalcedon* (451 CE) re-affirmed that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Approved (orthodox) theological constructions from additional councils continued to emerge when needed. These were accepted as theological and state truths within the pre-modern era that was Christendom.

A common belief structure, agreed upon theological definitions, and religious practices were now established. Within the formal and informal governmental and ecclesiological structures of Christendom, statesmen and bishops decided how the Christian world was to function. There might be internal disagreements, but the state publicly recognized God as the one literally ordaining earthly kings. The bishops and functionaries of the empire ceremonially invoked God's presence while publicly conveying blessings from both the church and the state. Such regal language as well as the religious creeds, hymnody, worship services, and ritual practices of this theocratic merger of both church and state were widely celebrated. Signifying flags were flown, and its rulers (again, recognized as being chosen by God) were considered unassailable. These were the pragmatic, theological, governing facts of life. Those who disputed them were understood as standing seditiously against both the state and the church. Many of today's theological anomalies stem from literal, originalist belief in one or more of these tri-level, pre-modern, regal and theological constructions.

A Western, Socio-Economic, Theological, and Cultural Triumph

Often repeated in catechetical instruction and new member rituals, the theological creeds emerging from such councils became fealty oaths. Heretical disputes were settled, the building of pagan temples was stopped, and the empire found sufficient resources to construct both Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the initial St. Paul's Basilica in Rome. Civic uniformity in Christendom was effectively symbolized in such architectural buildings and regularized ritual celebrations. Theologians began to fill perceived gaps, in effect systematically defining how Christendom's pre-modern theological constructs might usefully educate people about how the world should work. Such systematizing helped define a society within which God (interpreted by church and state) was authoritatively in charge. With such a working, pragmatic, theocratically intertwined church and state, by 800CE the *"Holy" Roman Empire* had become a Western socio-economic and theological triumph of human ingenuity, one carefully excluding from the inside of such triumph all those holding heretical and seditious theological and anti-governmental beliefs. In all these ways, the steel of the state easily merged with the religious rhetoric of the church.

Given the public nature of this emerging relationship, one might speculate that if someone needed a job, aware citizens would realize that it was best not to be understood as being religiously outside the empire's theocratic world. After the conversion and rise to power of Constantine, citizens pragmatically converted and rushed to fill Christian worship services. While newly formed parish churches welcomed and baptized pagan converts, bishops were forced to travel lengthy church circuits, examining, approving, and welcoming new adult converts and families. A screening process was needed, and membership interrogations began to rely on the new *Apostles' Creed* (mid-300's or early 400's CE). Joining the church was a serious business and adults seeking entry had to confirm their obedience to the commands of Christ. Hoping to gain approval from the traveling bishop, catechumens were questioned as to their intent regarding the

theological formulations found in the creed.[18] Their oral recitations were public pledges of such commitment to both church and state. While one might question the authenticity of every conversion or robotic, adult recitation of *The Apostles' Creed*, the practicality of how this fealty process connected the church with the state was not questioned. The burgeoning activity provided by the onslaught of newly converted members made the Christian faith the most common and most powerful religion in the Western world.

Christendom's Administrative Structures: The Parish System and Confirmation

In the early years of Constantine's political control, one helpful step toward the establishment of unity was the *parish* system. After Constantine's conversion, parish boundaries automatically followed the government's footprint, making those who lived within such set boundaries the members of both the parish church and the empire. With such acts, provincial Dioceses occupied the same geographical regions as the imperial Roman empire's territorial divisions. Bishops, elders, and priests became tacit overseers. Thus, religious persons often administered Christendom's diverse business concerns. It was not unusual when Ambrose, a fourth century governor, became a bishop. Through such close, church-state relationships, *clergy* became quasi-civil servants intertwined within the complexities of the empire's administration. That many of these bureaucratic expectations eventually moved across the Atlantic to impact the formation of both Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy was predictable, yet contemporary Christians remain unaware of this history. On this side of the Atlantic Ocean, the Roman Catholic Church staked out diocesan geographic footprints and built parish churches meant to cover every inch of America. This was not how protestants functioned. Relying on American individualism, they built non-geographical, denominational

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[18] *Catechumens* were adults involved in a formative, inductive process before being baptized and becoming members of the Christian Roman Catholic faith and church. A contemporary Catholic approach is the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA).

"parishes." From their start, Protestant systems and structures mirrored the socio-economic, individualistic ideas of America.

Confirmation: A Religious and Secular Entry Point

During the height of European Christendom, the empire and the church legally kept track of every person who lived within parish boundaries. That kind of meticulous overview continued after the Protestant Reformation. The formal church/state governing entity of a region decided if an area was to be completely Roman Catholic or completely Protestant. If Protestant, it mattered which form of Protestantism was in charge. Bloody wars were often the result of such religious positioning, and the practice of confirmation remained a legal gateway into adulthood and church-oriented loyalties.

Confirmation records within European Protestant parish structures not only determined adulthood but also where couples could be married, babies baptized, who had the right to vote, who served as soldiers, and who had property and was on taxation listings. Most citizens were not able to escape such oversight. Despite differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics, adult confirmation remained the cultural doorway for both (an authentic rite of passage) into the privileges and responsibilities of church and state adulthood. In 1830's England, Richard Baxter's comments on England's church-state connection and the continuing entangling and positive importance of confirmation emphasized that it could never be described as a 'mere' catechizing into the historic faith of the church. He stated: "...we take it [confirmation] to be the approbation of the personal profession of *them that claim a title to the church-state,* and *privilege of the adult,* and an investing them solemnly therein, upon the solemn renewal [and personal adult entrance] into covenant with God."[19] Baxter's comment suggests how the modern era had continued to see confirmation as an action solidifying the political (state) and holy (church) connection. England's history is filled with political intrigue and bloody encounters

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[19] R. Baxter. *Practical Works, Vol 14* (London, 1830), quoted in Edgecumbe Hughes, P. *Confirmation in the Church Today.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1973) [italics mine]16.

between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Baxter was applauding confirmation as an important on-going guarantee and entryway into the church-state connection that he favored.

The Protestant Reformation Upends the Holy Roman Empire

From pre-modern times throughout the Middle Ages, Christendom's geopolitical alliance of Empire with the Roman Catholic Church dominated the West. But things conspired to tear apart this theocratic arrangement. In 1453CE, Constantinople was captured by the Ottomans and renamed Istanbul, the city of Islam. In the West, ideas anticipating modernity emerged during the Renaissance (1300-1700 CE). As these ideas seeped into the Holy Roman Empire, it's existence was challenged by the Reformation (16th Century), the rise of the nation state (17th Century), and the full-blown Enlightenment (18th Century). Such movements introduced momentous cultural changes affirming religious freedom, the role of science, resistance against superstition, intolerance, relentless wars, and the tyranny of state-controlled religion.

Cultural modernity is often suggested as being initiated by what the Protestant Reformation religiously unleased. Martin Luther's *95 Thesis* (1517 CE), nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Church, threw a pragmatic and highly political wrench into the Holy Roman Empire's maintenance of Roman Catholicism. As the Roman Catholic base struggled to hold itself together, religious wars between Lutherans and Catholics broke out in Germany. Not about piety, such wars were more likely occasioned by the corporate business and political decisions of modern officials, princes, and important regional, religious establishments. In a curious move, then Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, ended the German wars by announcing the so-called *Peace of Augsburg* (1555 CE). This "peace" allowed German princes and rulers to choose between Lutheranism and Catholicism. Such religious freedom of choice was a notable sign of modernity, but the "peace" of Augsburg also suggested that the authority of the *Holy Roman Empire* was rapidly disappearing. Between 1618 and 1648, Lutherans and Catholics killed each other in the Thirty Years' War. Caught in that conflagration, millions of civilians died from famine and poverty. In 1648, the *Peace of Westphalia* affirmed the right of princes to choose what their region's

religion would be while stating that the nation-state had control of all such regions with their differing confessional identities.

 In 1793, the French revolutionaries saw fit to behead their king. This anti-imperial act served to unite other similarly God-inspired monarchs against the new French Republic. Austria, Britain, Spain, the Kingdom of Naples, and the Holy Roman Empire aligned themselves against France. Thirteen years later, when pressed by Napoleon, Emperor Franz II abdicated his title, releasing all formal obligations made by signatories to the Holy Roman Empire (August 6, 1806). Franz II's abdication is often used in dating the close of European Christendom.

A Note for the Reader: Despite the formal collapse of Christendom, a variety of national versions continued, some remaining in effect until WWI ended with the defeat of Russia, Germany, and Austria. Artifacts of such quasi-theocratic governmental practices continue to exist. Many nations call secular, governmental agencies *ministries.* The term *parish* still defines geographical divisions in the American city of New Orleans. Of more relevance to this book is how some of the pre-modern theological constructions of Christendom continue as theological anomalies, often hiding contemporary political positions. What most protestants fail to realize is that from the earliest days of colonial America, both the so-called mainline protestant church and the evangelical movement picked up these continental disputes, continuing arguments about centuries-old theological concerns. The theological anomalies underpinning such disputes often clarify what is taking place politically and theologically. To those disagreements we now turn.

Chapter Two
The Mainline Church and the Evangelical Movement

Escaping the religious grip of European Christendom, Puritans took with them the radical idea that communities could raise up independent congregations unbeholden to divinely chosen kings. This was commonly accepted. Colonialists hoped that in the new world they would avoid the overreach of the state they had left behind in Europe. This idea did not last. Most colonies quickly established state churches. Colonial America was not a place of religious tolerance. The dissenters became persecutors: "Virginia imprisoned Quakers. Massachusetts whipped Baptists. Government-established churches were common, and non-believers were denied basic civil and political rights. "[20] Only the colonies of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Delaware failed to follow this theocratic trend. Then came multi-state deliberations resulting in the writing of a national Constitution affirming a uniting of the disparate states. What emerged was a modern product (written in 1787 and ratified in 1788), stating that the nation would "…accept a plurality of religious affiliations (including 'non-affiliation') and of ethnicities and cultures."[21] As a consequence, American democracy was meant to be "…eminently 'secular' – at least in the sense that the state will not sponsor one sect over all the others, as had been the religious experience in the Old World."[22] Earlier state endorsement of particular churches might have been a popular idea, but the American Revolution's liberal, egalitarian conception of religious freedom sought to eliminate "…autocratic rule, divine right of royalty, the inherited aristocracy, and a national church."[23] A ratified, national Constitution pushed individual states to abandon all earlier formal church-state

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[20] Chua, A., and Rubenfeld, J. "The Threat of Tribalism" Pp 78-81 in *The Atlantic* Volume 322 (3) October 2018. 79.

[21] Tobias, J. "The Orthodox Preference for Democracy: An American Response to 'the Church and the Public Square.'" *Theology Today* Volume 78 (4) January 2022. 420.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.