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Toward a Theology of Joy

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Christians regularly confess that humanity's "chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever," as the Westminster catechism puts it. But what exactly it is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever, is a matter of some dispute. In fact, none of us can safely say that we fully understand what those words mean. We are called to a destiny that we can name, but one whose inner energies remain veiled to our eyes, in this dispensation at least.

Nonetheless, though the ultimate meaning of the word "joy" remains beyond us, it may offer one useful way to talk about eschatological destiny of humanity, the vocation and meaning of the churches, and Christian theology as a practice of, in, and for those churches. After all, it is the mission of the churches to enable humanity, in unity with God and community with one another, to fulfill their destiny. And if we understand theology as an attempt to help the churches in their mission, it may be a wise strategic choice to imagine a theological program centered around an ecclesially-disciplined cultivation of joy. That, at least, is the thought I will pursue here.

Hence here I want to explore something of what that strategy might entail. Part One sketches what I mean by "joy," what it means to say that the churches are called to cultivate such joy, and what a "theology of joy" might entail. Part Two suggests how such a focus on joy might refigure what we can call the "horizon of problematics" that any theology entails—that is, that spectrum of concerns in relation to which a theology is always partly determined, and towards which it attempts in part and more or less self-consciously to speak—in ways that are superior to the rival options for such a "horizon of problematics" on offer today. Finally, Part Three explores the prospects of a broad "alliance for joy," looking for friends in the culture with whom Christians, individually and in their communities, can make various sorts of common cause in the struggle to cultivate joy. This part tries to identify some potential allies, of other professed faiths and of none, and it also suggests some limits to those alliances due to what I judge to be the differences between what Christians mean (or should mean) by "joy" and what non-Christians take joy, or its likenesses, to be.

I. Setting the Stage

I begin by attempting first to sketch, provisionally, what I take "joy," to designate, and then, second, to sketch one way to understand the churches' mission, and theological task, as one of cultivating joy in the people of God.

A. The Nature of Joy

Thanks for help with this piece are due most prominently to Charley Coury, Jennifer Geddes, Willis Jenkins, Paul Jones, Alonzo MacDonald, Christina McRorie, Mary Moschella, Mark Storslee, Miroslav Volf, and Joshua Yates. Miroslav Volf in particular asked a question of me once that helped tremendously, as well. As ever, for this paper's many failures, I have only myself to thank. This is a work in progress; please do not quote without express written permission.

On my account, ecstatic, joyful praise is humanity's end and current glory.¹ The joyful act of praising God—a thankfulness flowing almost automatically from recognition of God's gifts—is the central action of the human, the self-transcending act in which we begin to participate in our fullest flourishing. A larger Augustinian anthropology is implied here, and not an apophatic one: We were never designed simply for human sociability, and attempts to reduce us to that mutilate our natural being, both eschatologically—as creatures called to become fit to bear the joy that is our eschatological destiny—and currently—as we are called to receive rightly the proleptic gifts of that eschatological joy in the here and now. We are always doxological creatures, called to recognize and exult in the vast gratuitous contingency of Creation itself, most immediately and locally in how that gratuitous contingency is manifest in our own lives, but ineluctably spilling over into a more proper, and properly cosmic, gratitude to being in general; and that gratitude is itself the ultimate telos of joy. We are called to become participants in the endless joyful round of love that is the Trinity, and though in this dispensation that round has been splintered into a fugal structure, it has not been severed from that end: and so our lives here are a matter of learning to receive rightly the proleptic gifts of eschatological joy today.

What can we say, here and now, about joy? Most fundamentally we can say that joy is excess, beyond conception or imagining; as St. Paul says, quoting Isaiah, “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has the human heart conceived, the things that God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9, see Is. 64:4). Furthermore, this excess is self-referentially recognized *as* excess, and so in awareness of joy we are aware of ourselves *as* joyful, but unable fully to comprehend the joy. Unlike happiness—where very little self-consciousness can work to undo the state—joy seems more durable to human reflexivity; indeed, perhaps partially constituted by it. It seems part of the logic of joy that one knows one is joyful (even if that knowledge is hardly a primary fact about one's joy) and that that reflexivity if anything amplifies our joy.

Yet joy is not solipsistic. Certainly the potential self-consciousness of joy is part of why joy can seem at times disorienting, dizzying, revealing an infinite height, or a bottomlessness, intrinsic to joy. But this dizzying is not a wallowing in the infinite sublimity of our own subjectivity. Joy is *provoked* by something contingent, something that comes to one, something outside oneself—the hug of your child, a Thelonious Monk performance of “Crepuscle with Nellie,” or the recognition that the cosmos is utterly unique and so warrants an infinite awe and gratitude to the one who brought it into being. Joy seems less a general mood and more a responsive state prompted by some discrete object or action. Joy is a responsive act of exaltation and thankfulness, implicating one in an extra-subjective relationship. In contrast to the (necessarily unselfconscious) immanence of happiness, joy speaks immediately of transcendence, of what is outside.²

¹ I have been much informed by a number of works, perhaps especially David F. Ford and Daniel W. Hardy, *Living in Praise: Worshiping and Knowing God*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), and Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play*.

² I am grateful especially to Marianne Meye Thompson for her paper “Reflections on Joy in the Bible” on these points, though she should of course not be held responsible for what I do with those points here.

So joy is excess, and an excess beyond the self. This leads to the second thing to say about joy, which is that, because it is so supremely intimate to oneself yet also intimately related to an other, joy is a reality best understood in the “middle voice”—that is, a reality that is not purely passive, happening to us, nor simply active, something we do; but partaking of both receptivity and dynamism. Other, equally significant phenomena in Christian life are also framed in the middle voice; the Koine word for feeling compassion is *σπλαγχνίζομαι* (*splagchnizomai*), which is another crucial “action” that is in the middle voice; and a similar thing can be said of *ελθών* (*elthon*) “to arrive” or “to come”, which is used for the Prodigal Son’s recognition, amidst the swine, of the reality to which his life has come (of longing for the quality of life of pigs).³ Hence human agency may be implicated in the achievement of joy in a slightly less indirect way than it can be in the attainment of happiness, which may be why St. Paul repeatedly exhorts people to be joyful (not happy)—e.g. *Philippians 4:4* “Rejoice in the Lord always; and I say again, rejoice.”⁴⁵

Thus understood as an excess rapture, catching us up into a reality in the “middle voice,” joy is a sort of sacramental state: *in* Creation yet prompted ultimately by something beyond and before Creation, a reality simultaneously speaking of immediacy and transcendence, something done *to* you yet something you manifest, express, realize and participate in. Here and there, now and not yet, you and another, creation and Creator—joy can serve as a synecdoche of the Christian life as a whole. And that is how I propose to understand it here.

B. The Role of the Churches and Theology in Cultivating Joy

Joy so understood is one conceptual lens through which we can understand the struggle to lead a Christian life. As such, this struggle is, or ought to be, an ecclesial struggle, before and as it is an individual one. That is, for theological, ethical, and sociological reasons, a theology of joy must be a church theology.

This implies a fairly specific understanding of what a church is, and it is this: The churches are those institutions that aim to give us a communal and personal, intellectual and affective, structure to help cultivate joy, our cultivation of which is their ultimate purpose. They shape a liturgically-structured discipline whereby we are “trained by our longings” to become fit citizens of the kingdom of heaven.⁶ Indeed, the churches just are the way that sinful humanity is made into the body of Christ and comes to participate in the divine self-giving that is the Trinity. They are those communities where the grace of Christ, and the joy that flows from it, is most intentionally and intensively *solicited*, its reception *cultivated*, and through that cultivation most palpably and vividly *endured*. It is

³ *σπλαγχνίζομαι*—to “feel compassion” (Lk 15:20 & elsewhere) – 8 of 12 uses in NT refer to Jesus feeling compassion for others (Mt 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 18:27 (*not Jesus*), 20:34, Mk 1:41, 6:34, 8:2, 9:22 (*not Jesus, but compassion asked of him by another*); Lk 7:13, 10:33 (*not Jesus, the Samaritan*), 15:20 (*not Jesus, but father of the Prodigal*). *ελθών* —“came to himself” (Lk 15:17); **also, notice joy and hinni and “follow me”?** I thank Rebekah Latour for help with this matter.

⁴ “Χαίρετε ἐν κυρίῳ πάντοτε: πάλιν ἐρῶ, χαίρετε.”

⁵ Jean-Luc Marion’s *The Erotic Phenomenon* trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) is useful in thinking about agency here.

⁶ Augustine, “Homilies,” iv.6, p. 290. See Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p. 97. The idea of “beginning” as a goal to be sought was a central trope in early monastic spirituality; see Burton-Christie 247-9 (though the book as a whole has been of enormous value for me).

solicited, cultivated, and endured, in two ways: first, through the primary practice (most commonly begun in worship services in church, but hopefully over time extending throughout our lives) of showing us how the story of our lives are only properly intelligible within God's providential governance and God's saving action upon the world; and second, by the derivative communal response to those stories, the actions that those stories can narrate and for which they provide determinate structure, showing us thereby how that story carries on, with us in it, to its joyful consummation. This response is directed to God both immediately—in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving—and in and through the mediation of sacramental acts of justice, charity and peace-making in the world, through the world, to God. In all this activity, humans are trained for the eschatological reception of creation *as* creation, to undertake the light burden of the yoke of Christ and undergo the training that is necessary for humans to become fit to bear the weight of glory that is mankind's eschatological destiny—to begin the arduous but joyful journey to becoming those who understand and inhabit what it means to be part of a created order loved into existence by God—whose love is not simply *admiration*, akin to a warm beam of admiration from a distant sun, but *constitution*, like the hot blood that surges through our flesh, and the very flesh itself. "The church" is the activity of the people of God as the body of Christ being trained to bear the Holy Spirit in its practice of being the love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Son for the Father. This is not a training that humans inaugurate, of course; we discover ourselves always already on the way in this training, and on some level the most we do is beseech the Spirit to come. The churches are simply the location where that training has its central locus in human history.

It is only as such—as first and foremost a *church* theology—that this proposal is a political theology. Hence, I suspect, only by coming clear on the central pedagogical and ascetical tasks of the Christian churches, and the central ecclesio-centric focus of theology, can theology say something of real, if immediately indirect, import to this-worldly political order. The maladies of the soul that the churches diagnose are not unrelated to the maladies of the polity that much political discourse currently laments, and will, as I have argued, increasingly in the future bewail; and the pedagogy that the churches undertake is effective, primarily indirectly, for those more immediately political concerns as well. The churches can make good citizens, then, and a theology can be political, most basically by teaching believers what it really means when they pray, *veni creator spiritus*.

This could sound like I am recommending that we understand the churches as a spiritual gymnasium. I do not mean that, however, and this is where theology as a distinctive discourse and intellectual practice plays a role. For theology, on this account, provides an intellectual framework within which to understand the practices and preaching of the churches as a form of theopolitical soul-crafting and community creation whose ultimate purpose is to enable for its members an embodied deliberative life that cultivates a hopeful joy. And as joy is in the middle voice, so this intellectual framework highlights for us how such soul-crafting is not something we primarily do, but which is done *to* us—how our stories are always already caught up in the

sacramental dialectic of the already and not yet, helping us see how the proleptic already is palpable in amidst the all-too-obvious, in our quotidian, sin-riddled world, not yet.

Theology then has as its topic of study how humans are taken up, in and through praise, into vivifying communion with God even now—the ultimate goal of all theology is of course evangelical: to help Christian communities pursue the deepening (in its members' souls, through various broadly "ascetical" practices) and widening (in others, and society as a whole) of the body of Christ on earth, the Church. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*: "The law of prayer is the law of belief." This is one of the oldest of Christian theological rules; it means that proper theological formulations, of what it is right to believe, always attend seriously to how people want to pray. The voice of the people as they pray to God in thanks and praise—however that "voice" is to be determined (and that is a hard task indeed)—is an ineliminable criterion of theological propriety. And behind the people, guiding them, is the Holy Spirit. Theology is an attempt to understand the Holy Spirit—to catch its rhythm, so to speak; it is a way of dancing, where another takes the lead. It is a way of making sense of our active gratitude, expressed in "prayer" which, when most broadly construed, includes our works as well as our words. Because of this, such theology holds itself accountable in a certain way to the Christian community's (often but not always previously) considered theological views. In short, theology consists finally of recommendations to the faithful, finally about how they can increase their ability to praise—that is, how best to increase their ability to participate in the life of praise that always already constitutes the flourishing of the body of Christ, the churches' liturgy of citizenship that fits us for the celestial republic.

This does not mean that a theology centered around the cultivation of joy is ruthlessly pragmatically tied to immediate demands for church relevance. It is not simply a rather low to the ground therapeutic ethics, helping us to see what it is to live and be happy only in the *distentio* that is hope. It is also properly a metaphysics, a way of seeing creation as creation, and indeed as yet incomplete, waiting to be fully realized in the escahton.

Indeed, much of the history of theology can be understood as an attempt to grapple with the fraught relationship between joy and the created order, at once absolutely necessary and utterly opaque. I have already said that it is so in Augustine, but consider Aquinas: In the *responsio* to the first article of the first *quaestio* of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas quotes Isaiah 64:4 as evidence as to why a *sacra doctrina* that stands beyond (natural?) human reason is required. Joy, it seems for Aquinas, is simultaneously the mysterious "other-worldly" prompting force behind *sacra doctrina* and the ultimate destiny of created human existence, a destiny whose tug is palpable even now. Aquinas is complemented in this by an insistence, more tacit in Thomas than overt, that this joy, though it be obscurely present in our world, is yet still incarnate here, and informing the world; so we can borrow from Augustine and say that the restlessness of our hearts absent their resting in God (in *Confessions* 1.1), which is part of our creation, is itself also a function of joy. So the apparently supra-rational reality of joy, of grace, has descended, as it were, into creation, and become incarnate in it, perpetually ensuring

the created order does not become too stagnant in dulled indifference to its Creator. Hence, just as joy exists at the junction between transcendence and immanence, now and not yet, so does the practice of theology as well.

Of course the puzzle of how this can be so is simply one part of the logic of Christian faith altogether, a faith that in this life is caught always in the ascetical struggle to keep the polarities described above in an eschatological tension. In this undertaking, believers always struggle to avoid the “fleshly imagination,” mis-conceptions of joy grounded in the criteria and ideals of this fallen dispensation, images that domesticate or (mis-)secularize such joy. And this may be especially a struggle in ages such as ours, where so much of culture, politics, and social life are about our immediate gratification. But in fact, this is also a challenge for all times, and so in this way, the struggle properly to understand, and rightly to cultivate, joy is a perennial struggle for us.

The priority of this talk about joy may seem odd as a description of what theology is, what Christian churches are supposed to cultivate. Christianity has often been seen by modern critics as a force oppressing human joy—a device for making people feel guilty, a way to express some fundamental animus at the world, not a vehicle for delight in it. And H.L. Mencken was not entirely off-base when he once defined Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”⁷ It is also the case, however, that it has given voice to some of the greatest expressions of joy that humans have so far imagined. And whatever the history of the Puritans would suggest, the history of Christian revival movements—including, in recent decades, the emergence of a vibrantly expressive and joyful form of Christian worship, in the exploding Pentecostal movement across the world—gives evidence of powerful dynamics toward exuberance and delight deeply rooted in the tradition. I want to recognize such non-Christians suspicions of Christian accounts of joy, and I hope to be heard as partly and indirectly responding to them; but I do not want my proposal to be governed by them, or to be read defensively, as centrally and directly aimed at disputing such accusations. I note them here only to recognize their presence as a factor that any theology of joy must recognize.

Conclusion to I: Joy and *Metanoia*?

One last thought. There is the question of whether Christians themselves are fully able to stand behind a program centered upon a pedagogy of joy. After all, some reasonably question whether “joy” as a category can ever really capture the full range of *metanoia* which involves *justice* and *judgment* as well. Perhaps focusing on joy alone would risk undervaluing the ways we should cooperate with God to work for the world’s good (*justice*), and perhaps it avoids the difficult work of discerning God’s will more directly (*judgment*). That is, we cannot forget that joy is only one dimension of the eschatological aim, and a too-exclusive focus on this word could easily return us to a kind of consumerist mindset.

⁷ p. 233 in Alistair Cooke, ed., *The Vintage Mencken*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955). Mencken was a shallow Nietzschean; but a deeper, and more probing Nietzschean response, from the likes of someone like Foucault, would not disagree with that—it would simply recognize that every social order shapes subjects in powerful ways, including in their emotional and affective lives, and Christianity is no different.

This is wise and true. “Joy” is at best a noble lie, a human term applied to divine realities, and any such application will be flawed; recall Aquinas’s *incept* for theology: this-worldly human knowing will always only be achieved by a few, *et per longum tempus, et cum admixtione multorum errorum homini proveniret*.⁸ Yet, if we proceed with due caution and circumspection, I suspect that a theology of joy might well produce new and surprisingly fruitful lines of enquiry.

Some of those lines of enquiry focus on the various, more immediately practical, challenges any such theology organized around joy must face. I turn to them next.

II. Our Challenge: Joylessness

Thinking about the Christian theological task, and the purpose of the churches, as a matter of preparing humans for the joy that is our eschatological destiny is not only interesting for what it says about the vocation and meaning of the churches and the inner logic of the theological task. It also has the substantial value of helping us better specify and comprehend the true challenges that Christian life faces, perhaps in any age but especially in our conditions today, in late modernity. For there are, as ever, snakes in this particular garden. Our current situation makes it hard, harder than it should be, to cultivate joy; indeed some think that the human capacity for joy is under quite severe and historically unique attack. This section assesses those claims, in order to come to an understanding of the challenges we truly face.

In doing this we are both showing how this theological vision understands the challenges we face today, and we are arguing that this way of understanding those challenges is the best one available. This last point is especially important, because here I think we find rival and in their own ways compelling demonologies of our moment. Most especially we are tempted by two rival languages of theopolitical concern. One sees our fundamental problems through the prism of a classic liberal concern (now extended into some forms of postmodern concern) with totalitarianism and the oppression of the human spirit; thinkers as diverse as Kant, liberation theologians of various stripes, and various postmodern deconstruction theologies all share this concern. The other, which we can call the aristocratic critique of our democratic-egalitarian age, sees our fundamental problems through the lens of long-standing anxieties about the decay of absolute standards of perfection and true nobility, a decay ending in what thinkers in this vein call “nihilism”; in this group we see a line of critics going from Tocqueville through Nietzsche and Weber to contemporary worriers like Francis Fukuyama and John Milbank.

Now both of these are worthwhile concerns. And I do not mean to discard the positive insights each offers. But I think that neither of them really gets at the full depth and breadth of the challenges we face. Total oppression has a real and powerful danger for some in the past; but most of us in the West are not most immediately or most fundamentally confronted with totalitarian terror. And it is certainly the case that we

⁸ *Summa Theologiae* Prima pars, q.1 a.1.

have entered a Brave New World were almost any desire can be met, letting us enjoy the quotidian *divertissements* of the last men, at least until death overtakes us. But neither of these horizons of problematics really capture the theo-psychological depth of our problem—at least not as well as an Augustinian political theology of joy and idolatry do.

Lest my imminent grouchiness be mistaken for apocalypticism, I should begin with a frank statement: We have never had it so good. The market world we live in brings us benefits and blessings unimagined by our ancestors. Our material lives are richer by far than any age before us; your typical working-class person in the First World lives amid more material comforts than did nineteenth century royalty. (It is an astonishing fact that increasingly across the developed world, the central emerging medical problem is obesity.) Across the globe, the last several decades have seen the largest expansion of human wealth in recorded history.⁹ There is an interesting, and at least partially plausible, case to be made that the bourgeois virtues cultivated in this world are genuine moral virtues, fitting more and more of us for flourishing and rich lives. And the worries I express in the coming pages should not be taken as an expression fundamentally of regret that the scope for human agency has expanded and continues to expand at breathtaking pace. Far from it: there remain too many people in the world for whom too much agency is hardly a looming danger. None of this can be denied, nor should anyone take seriously complaints about this situation that suggest that it would be better for humanity, on the whole or individually, if we were to go back to the way we lived two or three centuries ago. Certainly individuals are free to "simplify" their lives if they so wish; but it must be noted that even such decisions are just that—free choices, enabled as such by life in our world. (The genuine crisis of the environment that we face is not, I think, an essential part of this world, but epiphenomenal upon it—it can be solved while the fundamental dynamics continue.) And few who talk about going "back to the land" are really able to do so without relying on modern medicine, government, technology, and education. Like it or not, this is our world—and there is a very great deal of *good* in it.

But these facts should not induce in us any Pollyannaish placidity, nor seduce us towards a smug dismissal of those who feel something is missing. Despite the hyperbolic hysteria of (typically well-paid) demonologists of the market, this world poses real dangers for its inhabitants, as its blessings bring with them enormous and complicated challenges. Most fundamentally we face the prospect that the conditions of our existence militate against our inhabiting integral, coherent, and deep lives, lives of the sort that humanity has talked about trying to live for most of its time on this earth, and lives of the sort that Christians cultivating joy ought to seek to lead.

A. Contemporary Challenges: Consumerism, Agency, and the Limits of Choice

Let me try to sketch what I mean by these worries. At least since Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Conditions of Capitalism*, thinkers have worried that the basic structures of

⁹ The World Bank's Development Research Group estimates that from 2005 to 2008, the number of people living at \$1.25./day or \$ 2/day declined—both as an absolute number *and* as a percentage of the population, across all regions of the world.

liberal capitalist consumerist society strongly encourage the development of a culture of luxury that vitiates the energies its members need to develop into a virtuous citizenry. (If Albert Hirschman is right, these worries go back to basic debates about the passions versus the interests in the 18th Century.) The details of this worry are complex and contested, but the basic concern is that our cultures embody a soul-craft profoundly inimical to proper moral agency. Most basically this happens because the “creative destruction” that is the society’s basic energy creates in us a radical existential turbulence that constantly undermines, directly and indirectly, the stability and commitment to long-term aims that has been the fundament of moral formation in traditional societies.

To see what this "radical existential turbulence" amounts to, consider how pervasive dissatisfaction is in consumer societies. In order to prosper, these societies require constant cultivation of dissatisfaction in consumers—the "warranted obsolescence" not only of the products we buy, but of our satisfaction with those products themselves. Such dissatisfaction would be intolerable without some overarching acceptance of such dissatisfaction as, curiously, satisfactory; you need some way to survive a life lived fundamentally in the experience of lack. So this lifestyle entails a therapeutic project of ensuring a minimally positive outlook on life, irrespective of whether such an outlook is warranted by reality. The goal is to feel good, to exist in the subjective feeling of self-worth and accomplishment. But feeling good has no very vital connection to the condition of actually being morally good; hence we aim to be "nice," not good—socially acceptable and civically inoffensive. Such psychological cosmetology need be little more than skin-deep to succeed, and so it is. In the rituals of late-modern selfhood, the problem is not that self-knowledge and moral rectitude are sacrificed on the altar of happiness; it is simply that, in these rituals, such concepts play no functional role at all.¹⁰

All this radically changes our picture of ourselves and our world. As Iris Murdoch put it, "man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture."¹¹ When we imagine ourselves as fundamentally mobile agents

¹⁰ See Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), esp. pp. 138-160, and "I Shop Therefore I Know That I Am: The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Consumerism", in Karin Ekstrom and Helen Brembeck, eds., *Elusive Consumption* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

To reference the literature on therapy would be vast. Much real Freudian therapy seeks unhappiness... see Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a very interesting study contrasting "eudaimonic" pictures of human flourishing—that is, pictures of human flourishing which identify flourishing with the exercise of agency along lines conducive to an objectively structured human nature—with "hedonic" pictures—that is, subjective pleasure-based pictures of human flourishing—and arguing that eudaimonic pictures are superior to hedonic ones in tracking the reported evidence of human life-satisfaction (even among those who profess a more "hedonic" picture of human happiness), see Ethan A. McMahan and David Estes, "Hedonic Versus Eudaimonic Conceptions of Well-being: Evidence of Differential Associations With Self-reported Well-being." *Social Indicators Research* 103 (2011), pp. 93–108. For more, see John P. Robinson, "Sex, Arts, and Verbal Abilities: Three Further Indicators of How American Life is Not Improving," *Social Indicators Research* (2010) 99: pp. 1-12. See also Robert Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Iris Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," in *The Nature of Metaphysics*, ed. D.F. Pears (London: MacMillan, 1960), at p. 121. On the link between studying rational choice economics and selfishness, see Robert H. Frank, Thomas Gilovich, and Dennis T. Regan, "Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 159–171; and Robert H. Frank, Thomas Gilovich, and Dennis T. Regan, "Do Economists Make Bad Citizens?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 1996), pp. 187–192. On the link to depressed voting, see André Blais and Robert Young, "Why Do People Vote? An Experiment in Rationality," *Public Choice*, Vol. 99 (1999), pp. 39–55. For evidence against the selfishness hypothesis, see Bruno S. Frey and Stephan Meier, "Are Political Economists Selfish and Indoctrinated? Evidence from a Natural Experiment," *Economic Inquiry*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (July 2003), pp. 448–462. Accepting this fact needn't move you towards any sort of flat-footed idealism, of course; it only helps you avoid flat-footed materialism.

adrift on a bottomless sea of consumable objects, it is not only our conception of action that is distorted; it becomes very difficult to see much point in the idea of a central underlying purpose to life as a whole. Pascal's *divertissement*—a word we might translate (with a Parisian *audace*) from Pascal's French as "the channel-surfing of the soul"¹²—is no longer the temptation of the leisured elite; it becomes the habituated lifestyle of us all.

It is at this moment that liberal worries about the oppression of human agency seem beside the point, and worries about nihilism have their strongest bite. For indeed, in a certain light, we do look like Nietzsche's "Last Men," Weber's "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart." More recent thinkers have bemoaned this as well—Fukuyama's *End of History* thesis effectively argues this point, and David Brooks's concept of "flexidoxy" and Jonathan Rauch's idea of "apatheism" do something of the same on a more popular level. Within theological circles, the fixation on nihilism is quite common among a certain species of theological voices.

But I think that this is importantly mistaken. For consider: if choice is all there is, and which choice you make makes no difference, yet still the necessity of choice is real. There remains an absolute in this schema, a *summum bonum* higher than which cannot be conceived: namely the good of choice itself. Now this is patently absurd, of course, but it has a sufficient patina of plausibility to make for a superficially coherent life plan. Choice becomes God; it serves, that is, as an idol (an ideologically imagined idol, of course, but in the end what idol isn't that?). The problem that so many have described as nihilism, that is to say, is really a problem of idolatry, and more specifically the pathetic idolatry of bare choice itself. But approaches that focus on concerns about nihilism fail to take this insight organically on, and thereby deprive themselves not only of a powerful diagnostic tool, but also of a more charitable attitude towards our condition.

This critique is important in part for the positive lesson it teaches us about the sorts of creatures that we are revealed, by it, to be. The self-conscious exercise of agency cannot be the ultimate good: would it be good for you to *choose* each breath you take? To *choose* each step? A worldview of absolute choice, however superior it may seem to us when we compare it with what we imagine of previous worldviews, is subtly tyrannical. It mis-shapes us, so that we come to care less *what* we choose and more *that* we choose. But surely some of the things we "choose" are not really "choices" on our part at all. Most superficially, our hobbies are not simply chosen; there is something about model trains, or baseball, or antique cars, or Celtic folk music, or weaving, or whatever that resonates with you in a more fundamental way than the language of "choice" can capture. Similarly, for those of us who feel our professions as vocations—literally, "callings"—it is not true to our lives to think that we "chose" them. Most profoundly, I cannot speak of "choosing" to love my daughter or my son or my wife without mis-describing the experience I have of being drawn to them, transfixed by them, *just because* of who they are.

¹² On *divertissement*, see Pascal's *Pensées*, esp. Lafuma § 136. And see Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 24 ff. for a discussion of the "aesthete" as a modern type.

The failure of choice to reach deeply into our beings is more damaging still. It is not just a failure of moral rectitude that we witness here. We seem to be witnessing a significant withering of our capacities for joy. Precisely because joy is so profoundly unchosen, but is a responsive commitment to what is there before us, demanding of us, it is very difficult indeed to articulate in a worldview so overmastered by the ideology of choice. And that is my complaint.

B. After Eden: Idolatry and Escapism

I have a further complaint against both the totalitarian and the nihilist accounts of our challenges: both of them are shallowly historicist. For them, the conditions of modernity create or embody a radical caesura or rupture in human history, wherein the discontinuities vastly outweigh the continuities; hence, to grapple with the modern condition requires in us a parallel break in our political thought.¹³

But Christians should resist these sorts of historicist narratives as superficial diagnoses of our situation. For Christian faith teaches that the vexation of our efforts is not simply a matter of historical contingency, potentially fixable by us. We live in history, to be sure. But we also live East of Eden and after Christ—in the Epilogue, "after the Word," when everything has already occurred. The fall did not happen in 1277 with Archbishop Tempier's condemnations, nor when Scotus began to teach, nor in the Industrial Revolution; similarly, sin is not reducible to a pervasive philosophical commitment to onto-theology or consumerism. In fact we have lived after "the end of history" for a very long time: ever since AD 33. Some of the challenges we face are perennial, in this dispensation at least, and some of our difficulties are chronic. "Modernity" is not, that is, a properly theological category.

If we move in this direction, however, our problem becomes in one sense more profound: for it moves from the context of our time to humanity's perennial problems, at least as we have come stably to know humanity from its evolutionary emergence to today. Of course, the fact that this reframing makes the problem harder to resolve is itself an argument in its favor; for in this dispensation our problem is in fact intractable. The aim of this section is to see what, if this is true, we ought to do in light of it.

In fact, theological anthropology identifies the fundamental human problem, the crux of the post-lapsarian human condition, precisely as a crisis of desire. Against the devotees of nihilism, human longing cannot be destroyed: we always want an infinite end, and as fallen creatures, our longing for an infinite end translates into a bad consumption of the world in which we will always want more, and when we do not get it, we seek satisfaction in bad ends, faulty goods, false gods. We end in idolatry. This is not to say that worldly goods are bad: As with any idolatry, there are genuine goods being pursued, goods needed for a flourishing life; but those goods become idols when we try to use them to satiate (which means, here, to suffocate) longings that they cannot properly fulfill—that is, our immaterial longings. Those who cry "nihilism" neither

¹³ For a very good and stimulating discussion, see Jeffery Isaac, "Critics of Totalitarianism," pp. 181-201, in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Political Thought*, ed. by Terrence Ball and Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

acknowledge the real and inescapable profundity of the problem, nor realize that that profundity itself is what should make us not despair.

There is no human solution to this—no socio-political arrangement, no technology, is deep enough. Nor—and here is the hope—will we ever leave this tortured longing behind. Humanity cannot apocalyptically de-humanize itself; God does not allow it.¹⁴ We are stuck, graciously, in this damnably perilous state, and must learn how most fruitfully to inhabit it. In this situation most moral theology will be ascetical and therapeutic, dedicated to disenthraling us from the various determinate forms that idolatry and escapism take in our local cultural situation. Here, I propose, is the crux of one viable theological language for today.

Such an approach is, to my mind, especially vivid in Augustine's work, which has at its heart the idea that the human has (or better, is possessed by) infinite desire—that our longing is endless, that we are restless until we rest in God. Furthermore, Augustine's is a church theology, pedagogically focused, interested in cultivating believers' doxological capacities, their capacities for living a life of joyful praise to God.¹⁵

This approach is more functionally diagnostic and therapeutic than an approach concerned with nihilism. Here's how: Much of what seems to be a new problem in modern life can be seen, following Pascal, as forms of *divertissement*. But such diversions are merely forms of boredom driven to desperation, attempting to escape its fundamental nature. The problem with this sort of solution to the quandaries of moral life is that it is endless. Such a strategy does not end in happiness, because it does not end. That is, it is not properly intelligible. It is bottomless: it has no aim, no goal beyond the negative one of evasion and deferral, and so, consumed as we are with not confronting our situation, we miss the intrinsic reality of whatever phenomenon or activity we are using for our *divertissement*.

But such avoidance will never make us happy. In fact, such an approach ends up making all of our pleasures hollow, for they serve us only as momentary pauses in the endless drama of manipulation we play with the world. Experience becomes wholly a matter of evasion, of avoiding the facts of our life, of escape, a way of staving off contemplating the emptiness of our lives in such situations; as Augustine once put it, "such is the weakness of the flesh, such is the irksome nature of this life, that everything, however wonderful, ends in boredom."¹⁶ Elsewhere, and more broadly, Augustine once quite insightfully described his own pursuit of such a goal in the Confessions as a process whereby he ended up making of himself a *regio egestasis*, a "desolate region," a desert.

This is all accurate as far as it goes, but it misses the social dimensions of the phenomenon, how such strategies of evasion can take different determinate shapes depending on the social context in which they exist, and how those several social situations habituate us in particular ways, into particular deformations of character. Better to understand this, we can turn to Tocqueville, who described the fundamental

¹⁴ See Peter Burnell, *The Augustinian Person* (Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

¹⁵ See Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Jason Byasse, *Praise Seeking Understanding* (Eerdmans, 2007), and various works by Lewis Ayres, John Cavadini, William Harmless, Michel René Barnes, and Michael Fiedrowicz.

¹⁶ Augustine *Sermon 243.8*; see also *De civitate Dei*, iv.3, iv.15.

worry as a rising "individualism" which encourages an isolation and anomie among citizens, and a lessening of the human capacities for true greatness and excellence. He saw that the mutually implicated rise of material wealth and equality in a democratic age do not make us significantly better, but may well instead encourage a certain kind of indifferent "individualism" in which each pursues a life of purely "private" pleasures in fundamental indifference to one another or to the commonweal. But Tocqueville's account, in turn, is not fully satisfactory either; its fixation on the diagnosis of individualism is, on its surface, at least, too narrowly and shallowly political. It does not attend to the psychic challenges we face. What is especially problematic about this individualism, is how it gives us many new opportunities for avoidance—avoiding one another, avoiding ourselves, avoiding reality itself—and ultimately, on Christian terms, avoiding God.

In light of this analysis of individualism, the language of escapism and *divertissement* becomes useful: We are likely to use luxury, prosperity, and abundance not to inhabit life, but rather to avoid it. We use our abundance in the service of escapism, an escapism with fundamentally theological roots. This is finally idolatrous, for it reveals both that our attachment to certain goods in the world is always threatening to become a worshipful attachment, and that behind this counterfeit worship lies an even-deeper idolatry, the commitment to the mastery of the world by the self, the desire to make the self its own god—or rather, to have no other gods before the self.

For all Tocqueville's indebtedness to past thinkers, he was convinced that new questions had to be asked. He went so far as to call for a "new political science" to understand the new age, with its new promise and new perils. But that new political science has not yet appeared. For it to do so, such a new political science would need to be a *theological-political* science, and in some important ways, an old one, at that. It must begin with the acknowledgement that human desire seems to have a functional "elective affinity," as it were, with infinite longing, longing of the sort traditionally associated with longing for God. This new theo-political science must begin from, if not a confession, at least an acknowledgment of the *bottomlessness* of human desire, the endlessness of our longings.¹⁷ It must begin, that is, with our capacity for something like joy.

The details of how that might be undertaken are beyond the scope of this paper. But this paper cannot end without noting the ways that such a project also might find allies beyond Christian churches. I turn to the prospects for an "alliance for joy," across our pluralistic world, next.

III. An Alliance for Joy?

Let us take stock of what has been argued so far. If we think about the Christian life as a matter of cultivating joy, the task of the churches and derivatively of theology is to become spaces where we are graciously disenthralled from our various idolatries and taught to wait and live into the *distentio* of a sacramental life during the world. This also

¹⁷ Even if we resist the reduction of the forms of those longings to a monochromatic language of desire.

helps us to reframe our vision of the challenges confronting Christian life. In light of this reframing, our very many material blessings are for us a double-edged sword: While no one would seriously reject the great goods our ever-increasing wealth and power allow us, but we must become more cognizant of the characteristic vices attendant upon these blessings, the better to confront and resist them. Most obviously, our technological proficiency and material abundance enable in us a powerful tendency towards an attitude of avoidance. These vices mean that we do face a challenge with its own specific form—the challenge of a crisis of moral energy itself brought on by structural changes in the socio-cultural order, changes that aggravate certain malformations of the psyche to which we are already, as fallen beings, prone. Such an understanding of our situation is superior to the two rival sorts of analyses of the challenges to Christian life in our world, those framing the worries in liberal terms as concerns with totalitarianism and oppression, and those framing the worries in aristocratic terms as concerns with nihilism, both because it is able to bring the whole spectrum and depth of the challenges we face more fully and vividly into view, and because it is more richly and organically in communion with traditional Christian orthodoxy.

As the above should make clear, so far this proposal has been wholly intra-Christian in character, concerned with the project of cultivating believers within the Christian churches. But it is not enough that churches do this; for themselves and for others, they must care about the social arrangements within which they exist. Churches cannot imagine that they are or will ever become the fundamental frameworks within which their parishioners live, or even understand their lives; the character of contemporary society makes such a conceit deeply implausible, and those who cling to it are simply unrealistic, or Amish.¹⁸ The churches must work with others to ensure that, even in their own precincts, the work of healthy cultivation can go forward.

Fortunately, the idea of joy has appeal far beyond strictly Christian discourse. Many people outside of those churches also care about joy, or about things so analogous to joy as to be potential fellow-travelers in this program. After all, many thoughtful people in advanced industrial societies today are better than this; indeed they share these worries, and are haunted by the too-easy picture that these analogies entail. They are worried about these temptations, even as they feel them *as* temptations—in fact, precisely *because* they are worried about them as temptations. I recognize this, and my aim here is not to suggest that there is no hope for us, or that we are entirely lost. The bare fact that we can ask this question, and can feel the question as a worry about what we might become—and feel the temptation of despair as a temptation—speaks to the way that we are not without hope. (And why would one write if one did not have some hope?) And anyway, these are not concerns simply of grumpy anti-moderns or anti-liberals; thoughtful liberals like Jeffrey Stout or John Tomasi can and do recognize these dangers, and worry about them.¹⁹ (Indeed, even a thinker as antithetical to Christianity

¹⁸ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁹ See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), and John Tomasi, *Liberalism Beyond Justice: Citizens, Society and the Boundaries of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

as Nietzsche can share in these concerns.²⁰) Charles Taylor has identified the general problem here to be one of trying to figure out how to have "fullness" in one's life; it is a problem endemic to our condition in late advanced industrial modernity. This essay is not an apocalyptic *cri de coeur* about the end of our moral world; it wants to be a more diagnostic, pedagogical, and ascetical inquiry about how we should best inhabit our condition. These worries, that is, are amenable to expression from quite diverse moral and religious standpoints. In sum: the category of "joy" is so general a term as to perhaps encompass, in an under-determined manner, a great number of the more specific visions motivating many of the individuals and communities involved in our world today; and yet it still has enough content to perhaps be useful as a critical and constructive tool for immanent criticism, of traditions and movements and institutions.

Here I want to expand the program a bit and suggest that a focus on joy will, in part, aid us with those who are not Christian: in interreligious dialogue, and even in conversation with those of no particular religion. It does so because it helps keep a common goal at the center of general concern, and this goal can mobilize disparate actors to work together. A cross-traditional alliance for joy—properly (that is, expansively) understood—is possible, could be powerful, and if it comes it will come due to the ongoing conversation between movements like the Abrahamic traditions and the various versions of postmodernity. To accomplish such an alliance, and speaking pragmatically, we may well need multiple alternatives, as it is unlikely that one solution will suit all people. And of course there will be definite limits to unanimity of understanding and action, limits better conceived of as needing management than resolution; I will talk about those as well. But the crucial point is that such a pragmatic alliance may be of some use for us in coming decades, not just for Christian theological reflection and ecclesial practice, but for many others, in diverse ways, as well.

A. An *Oikonomia* of Joy?

As I said, I am not alone in offering the diagnosis of Part Two. Many non-religious critics identify a crisis in our capacity to experience joy, and the deforming effects of this crisis on our psychological, economic, and societal well-being. For them as for me, the idea of joy and delight seems increasingly fugitive in the thought-patterns shaping and explaining our societies. And the experience of joy seems harder to understand in its proper terms, and so we "happen" upon it, which we may do less and less, ever more accidentally, ever more momentarily, before returning again to the flow of time onrushing. We consume what titillating amusements we will, and are sated; but we seem increasingly less able to delight, to pursue ecstatic, extra-subjective commitments. Tibor Scitovsky has aptly called this the "joyless economy"—one in which the distinct idea of joy has no place structurally, intellectually, and increasingly

²⁰ See Robert Pippin's essay "Nietzsche on Naïve and Clumsy Lovers," in *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and also, in a different vein, William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War," pp. 1281-1293 in *Writings: 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987).

phenomenologically.²¹ Such figures are promising candidates for allies in this campaign for joy.

Scitovsky was, in his time, a kind of *vox clamans in deserta*, who in turn echoed John Maynard Keynes, who in his essay “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren” differentiated between the (contingent) problem of scarcity and the (permanent) problem of living a well-formed life.²² More recently, the tradition of “behavioral economics,” from Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky forward, and George Ainslie, moving to people like Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, have identified the ways in which neoclassical economics’ psychology and axiology is not just philosophically flawed but empirically mistaken. Such thinkers suggest we can move beyond a focus on satiation, towards a concern with genuine eudaimonism, and that any such move would actually be in the direction of greater empirical realism.

The strengths of this work are manifold. Such scholars recognize the inadequacy of a purely consumptive moral anthropology (or at least we have some arguments in common on this matter, and ones that we may be able collectively to direct at those who disagree with us on this, to their vexation if not conversion). Furthermore, due to their non-reductionist picture of moral personhood, they are open to a more productive understanding of how religious visions can be functional participants in society. For political thinkers of even so decidedly secularist a bent as Jürgen Habermas, religion is a power (not the only one, but an important one) that should resist incorporation in the capitalist worldview. Some of these thinkers are even willing to say that religion also formulates positive claims that are, as it were, morally focusing—highlighting realities in the world that would otherwise go unnoticed—and morally energizing and inspiring—engaging those who apprehend such realities. Furthermore, it does *both* these things in ways that other sources of moral deliberation, particularly much secular thinking, does not and perhaps cannot do.

Obviously, there are inevitable tensions between a frankly theological view such as the one offered in this paper, and fundamentally secular views that are at least as common today. For example, the idea of happiness proposed in secular accounts may be too subjectivistic, individualist, or anthropocentric for Christians interested more centrally in joy. Real tensions may exist here, and need to be worked out over time. But this does not entail assertions of the sort that you occasionally hear from theological perspectives, namely, that “secularists don’t really have a concept of joy”. That is simply

²¹ The literature on the problem of joy in the social sciences is rich; see Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy: The Psychology of Human Satisfaction*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and his “How to Bring Joy into Economics,” pp. 183-203 in *Human Desire and Economic Satisfaction: Essays on the Frontiers of Economics* (New York: New York University Press, 1986). For another useful summary of the arguments, and a more recent overview of the literature—in economics, sociology, political science, and psychology—on happiness, see Carol Graham, *The Pursuit of Happiness: An Economy of Well-Being* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), esp. p. 55: “Utility defined simply by consumption choices equates the purchase of a Big Mac by an obese individual with that of a guitar string purchased by a professional musician.” The point is *not* that such quantifiable attempts are pointless, but they can be misleading. See also Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*. On leisure time, see especially Douglas Kleiber, Gordon Walker, and Roger Mannell, *A Social Psychology of Leisure* (State College, PA: Venture Books, 2011). For a very good collection of essays on happiness by some leading figures, see Luigi Bruni and Pier Luigi Porta, eds., *Economics and Happiness: Framing the Analysis* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

²² See also James, “The Moral Equivalent of War.” Also, we need to appreciate good of creativity—meaningful productive work—Robert Lane, *The Market Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Lorenzo Pecchi, *Revisiting Keynes: Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

not true; most proximately, the post-Emersonian Romantic tradition, exemplified in this dimension especially by Whitman, may well have much to teach Christians about joy. The real and abiding and concrete differences between views will have to be confronted and managed, neither papered-over nor rendered so insuperable as to warrant mutual indifference. There is no need for sheer unanimity of conviction as a precondition for collective action. Each partner in a genuine collaboration has their own interests to protect and advance as well as the interests of the collective; we can trust that there has never been any human organization so coherent as to obviate all recognition of the diversity of views within it. No one should expect, short of the eschaton, that all these divisions, and the differences in tactics and strategies that they entail, will go away. The coherence of this alliance is based primarily and essentially on a parallel recognition of the problem, on similar expressions of alarm and concern about the regnant picture of agency, even as those expressions of alarm and collection of concerns are themselves formulated in different vernaculars. The responses to these concerns will equally be diverse, though one hopes for significant collaboration on at least some fronts.

In any event, such an alliance seems possible, though not without its difficulties; and that is all I need to suggest now.

B. An Abrahamic Alliance?

Other, more proximate, possibilities for an alliance exist as well. Most notably I would propose that it is as regards these issues, and around this project of developing a non-apocalyptic cultural critique, that the Christian churches should pursue a long-term dialogue with a wide range of representatives of Islam, as the churches have so far failed utterly to do. This may well aid in the "liberalizing" of Islam that policy-wonks talk so much about, by helping both sides work on improving their understanding of how to "be particular" in pluralistic public settings. But more than that rather condescending benefit, such a dialogue has much to teach Christians. It can teach us important things both indirectly, about the practice of the faith, in its similarities and dissimilarities with Judaism and Islam, and directly about the nature of joy itself, as that category (or its analogues in the traditions) is explored and articulated in other—very different but not absolutely dissimilar—traditions. (I suspect that practices such as Ramadan and keeping Shabbat could have a substantial deal teach Christians about the cultivation of joy.) Such a dialogue has historical precedent; think of the Jewish-Christian dialogue after the Shoah, and all the good that has yet produced, not just in "understanding" between the two groups (though we ought not discount that), but also, for Christians at least, the deepening understanding of the profound "Jewishness" of proper Christian faith, and its self-understanding as a sub-story in the Election of the people Israel. Perhaps we can turn to good use the current situation if this conversation gets under way. At the very least we ought seriously to try.

Of course, in the end this group of views would not culminate in simple harmony either, any moreso than would the engagement with non-religious collaborators. Most prominently, different understandings among the Abrahamic traditions about the character of proper divine-human relation (Christiologically formed in Christianity,

decidedly not in Judaism and Islam) and the nature of the human situation in this dispensation (and derivatively the shape of the human predicament herein) mean inevitably that serious and perduring differences will have to be accommodated in any such alliance.

Again, however, the fact that any Hegelian *Aufhebung* of all our differences is a very long way off, is no reason to refuse to forge an alliance (of Christian thesis and secular semi-antithesis, as it were) in the interim. Such differences as exist can be acknowledged frankly while yet pursuing a common aim of imagining a more morally sane and spiritually fruitful way of life than is currently widely available. Dialogically speaking, even the differences separating the communities could be made productive. And of course it will be a perennial temptation for any such Abrahamic alliance to alienate or estrange or demonize non-Abrahamic faiths and those of no faiths whatsoever. I do not think they need to do so—quite the opposite, in fact; and by working in good faith with others of differing beliefs, they may well be able to generate not just moral and intellectual understanding, and perhaps even greater tolerance as well.

Conclusion

Here I have tried to sketch how one (broadly Augustinian) tradition of Christian thought might go about imagining a theology built around joy, and I invite others to do the same. I think the structures and patterns and intellectual issues that joy brings to the surface, both in our economic and cultural moment and in Christian theology across history, do merit direct reflection from a variety of perspectives. I would urge others to see what they can do with it as well.

During the world, a way of life built around cultivating joy may well be our best route into recognizing and inhabiting our *distentio*, our experience of tantalizing incompleteness that we confess we exist in at present, while at the same time proclaiming that all will be healed in the Eschaton. We must recognize both our own incompleteness, and the way that it tantalizes us. All of this is what the Christian churches' liturgies are meant to teach us—to give us the most exquisite training in longing we could imagine, in order to sculpt our souls into the right shape, to turn our minds toward contemplation of God's incomprehensible goodness, to stretch our hearts back to the size they were meant to be in the first place. It teaches us how to live faithfully, to be sure, and lovingly, but for our purposes most pointedly it teaches us how to live hope for joy.

A proper hope seeks a middle ground between the too-complacent apocalyptic immanentism of the resigned or self-righteous, and the too-complacent apocalyptic escapism of the embittered or smug. The liturgy anchors this view on its theology of history and creation, on its claim that history is not, during the world, finally literally legible, but only sacramentally so. Neither immanentists nor escapists can capture the true longings of humans, which inevitably transcend the mere satisfactions or anesthetics they impatiently advertise, and tell against them in our stubborn refusal to be satisfied with this dispensation, or satisfied in our dissatisfaction with it. True human flourishing

will best blossom, I would argue, in a joy that is here and not here, now and not yet, ours and God's. God has made us for God's self, and our heart is restless until it rests in God, so no worldly dispensation is adequate. Yet this dispensation matters; the violations and injustices here are not simply accidental or immaterial, and its joys and sorrows will finally be taken up into God and transformed into their full reality. It is out of this vision of the world, I believe, and the dispositions that it funds, that a theology of real joy, not debased consumerist satiation or fallen solipsistic happiness, might fruitfully begin.