

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Wokeness and the New Religious Establishment

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On June 2, 2020, a crowd of mostly white people arrived at a library parking lot in Bethesda, Maryland, to show solidarity with a Black Lives Matter rally. During the rally, one of the organizers had the crowd raise their hands and take a pledge to oppose racism. The attendees obeyed and repeated the pledge, many kneeling as though in prayer. A video of the event made its way around the internet, providing yet more evidence that America is experiencing a religious revival on the political left — and that the heart of this revival is the deification of group identity.

Until the last few years, identity politics — now commonly referred to as "wokeness" — has avoided serious scrutiny as a religious movement. Yet even before the Bethesda episode, political observers had an inkling of its religious character. Professor Elizabeth

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Corey's recollection of her experience at a 2017 conference addressing identity and the law offers one illuminating example. One of the presentations she described featured a call-and-response session that ended with an exhortation for political revolution. "I began to feel that I was not at an academic lecture at all," she wrote, "but at an Evangelical church with a charismatic pastor."

Efforts to account for the religious aspects of this emerging phenomenon are already underway. George Washington University's Samuel Goldman theorizes that the moral relativism conservatives feared a generation ago has morphed into its own version of Puritanism. Essayist Joseph Bottum, too, contends that wokeness has its roots in liberal Protestantism, while Alan Jacobs of Baylor University compares wokeness to the theology of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. In a pun on the historical Great Awakenings of American Christianity, Matthew Yglesias, formerly of *Vox*, referred to the phenomenon as the "Great Awakening."

Regardless of its origins, wokeness is quickly becoming the established faith in the legal and regulatory framework of the American political system, as well as in elite corporate culture and academia. This development is already beginning to provoke controversy. As wokeness continues to increase its influence in the public arena, it risks colliding with the anti-establishment principles its adherents pushed to enshrine in the law.

A RELIGION OF IDENTITY

Scholars of religion tell us that the human person encounters the divine in two distinct ways: subjectively, as with matters of faith, and objectively, by performing rites in accordance with their faith.

The objective components of religious experience are those that onlookers can easily observe. They consist of what Wilfred Cantwell Smith calls "cumulative tradition" — the liturgies, processions, pilgrimages, public acts of penance, and other rites that faith communities celebrate. The behavior of the attendees during the Bethesda rally offers a useful illustration of such phenomena, as does the call-and-response session Corey described.

Within these cumulative traditions, people have personal encounters with religion. These encounters are subjective, in the sense that each person experiences the divine in a way that no outside observer can measure. Social scientists can record such encounters through interviews, but they can never experience them or reproduce them in their scholarship. Subjective religious experiences are very real, however, meaning that they cannot be dismissed simply because social-science methods cannot comprehend them.

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Gaining a full understanding of wokeness, therefore, requires an account of both its public rites and the subjective religious experiences of woke adherents.

We can begin our analysis of the emerging woke faith by probing its concept of the divine. Wokeness has an unconventional understanding of divinity that tends to disguise its religiosity from those accustomed to monotheism; in fact, the notion may not be fully recognized among its practitioners themselves. For the woke, identity is the source of divinity. Yet individuals are not divine on their own; they only participate in the divinity found in shared group identities.

Certain segments of wokeness also exhibit pantheistic traits in that they view the natural world as divine. For these adherents — particularly those who identify as vegan, green, and in some cases, indigenous — nature unmolested offers harmony within the individual and among the growing multiplicity of identities that make up humanity. For other segments of the woke community, human beings must adjust nature to render internal identities external. Gender re-assignment surgeries and hormone replacement or suppression regimens for transgender persons are among the most conspicuous examples.

Transgender identity — in which one's inward gender identity is said to differ from one's bodily sex — offers a useful snapshot of woke metaphysics. Wokeness is grounded in a Gnostic understanding of the world, which distinguishes between appearances accessible to everyone and the reality perceptible only to a certain few. To join the community of those who recognize this ultimate reality, one must undergo a kind of "awakening" — or, in identity-politics parlance, "become woke." A 2016 account from poet Cleo Wade in *W* magazine typifies the experience:

I had no appetite for politics, and also didn't think I mattered much. So many voices always seemed louder, richer, or more powerful than mine. It was only as I got older and started working on myself spiritually that I began to really understand not only that my voice mattered but that I needed to make sure I was using it as an act of love and service....When you become more sensitive to the people around you in this way, you can't help but become more sensitive to the conditions in which the people around you, near and far, are living. I began to not just understand but really feel that I didn't want to merely live on the planet, I wanted to be in the world and, as a woman of color in this day and age, there was just no way I could really be in our world and ignore politics.

What Wade describes is a central rite of passage into the woke framework. The transition typically begins with a person living an ordinary existence of production and consumption. Over time, the individual notices how this way of life is lonely and unfulfilling. Traditional authorities are hypocritical or incompetent. Nothing is as it

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appears. There is a sense of living in a "Cartesian nightmare" in which the world exists not because God created it, but because the devil — or what in traditional Gnostic texts is called the "demiurge" — did. It is only when the individual discovers a small collection of like-minded believers who have pierced the veil to see past the illusions of the world that he "awakens." Together, woke believers become a people apart from and above those who still labor in the corrupted world of appearances.

These like-minded groups of believers replace the un-woke families, neighborhoods, and religious communities in which the woke individual was raised. Scholars and activists call these voluntary communities "families of choice" — safe harbors for woke individuals who feel unsafe in a traditional family or community, often because of bullying or violence they experienced. Woke families of choice are grounded in the identities that woke individuals adopt. To share an identity with others after becoming woke is to subject one's personal identity to the rules governing that group, and in turn, to police those rules.

According to the woke creed of intersectionality, human beings are composed of not just one, but a multiplicity of identities, among which are race, ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, and sexual preference. In his book *American Awakening*, Joshua Mitchell classifies these various identities using the terms "innocent" and "guilty" in an effort to compare wokeness to a kind of decomposed version of Protestant Christianity. According to Mitchell's account, the guilty identity, or scapegoat — namely the white, heterosexual male — must be purged in order to restore and confirm the cleanliness of all other identity groups. He is the "transgressor," Mitchell explains. "All others — women, blacks, Hispanics, LGBTQ persons — have their sins of omission and commission covered over by scapegoating" this transgressor, just as the scapegoated Christ covered over the sins of all the descendants of Adam.

Yet wokeness involves a complicated system of ranks that do not break down easily into two, mutually exclusive categories. It's more useful to think of woke identities in caste terms, wherein the highest-caste identities are "clean" and lower-caste identities are increasingly "unclean." Unclean identities are those born into "privilege," while clean identities are those that suffer under oppressive cultural forces like whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, cisgenderism, Christianity, capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and even humanity (as in the presumption of human beings' superiority to the rest of the natural world). A person bearing all of these identities is maximally unclean, since he is thought to have experienced no suffering and only privilege. Those individuals bearing oppressed identities — including racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians, transgender persons, religious minorities, and indigenous people — are considered clean.

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Identity caste rankings are not always fixed. East Asians, for instance, have experienced a decrease in perceived cleanliness thanks to efforts to distinguish "people of color" generally from black and indigenous people, who are thought to have endured greater suffering than other racial minorities. Similarly, Jewish people once harbored a separate, relatively clean identity given their historical status as an oppressed people, and yet they have increasingly been folded into the generally unclean identity of whiteness, or even rendered especially unclean thanks to Zionism.

The key animating principle of wokeness is the collective struggle against the evil *geist* that inhabits the privileged, with the ultimate goal being the reversal of the advantages inherited by the privileged in favor of those who have suffered. The cleaner identities, by virtue of their cleanliness, have the standing to determine how the struggle is to proceed. The privileged, meanwhile, must atone for their unclean status by struggling alongside the clean. All must struggle, but the privileged must struggle most of all.

The primary means by which the privileged may join the struggle is through "allyship" — the subordination of their privileged identities to those who have historically endured the greatest suffering. For this reason, Mitchell is not quite right when he says there is no possibility of forgiveness in wokeness; it's just not the kind of Christian forgiveness that he and others recognize. Forgiveness for the woke comes from becoming a good ally. There is no absolution, however, as privilege is permanent. The privileged, therefore, are required to engage in constant, public acts of atonement.

The willfully privileged — those who refuse to struggle alongside the clean — remain unclean. The firmer their attachment to their privilege, the less clean they are. Whites who refuse to reckon with their privilege make up the majority of this lower caste, with the least clean among them being white supremacists — among which include neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, Proud Boys, and even devotees to right-wing conspiracies like QAnon — who revel in their privilege. These are the untouchables of the woke hierarchy. Due to their willful privilege, they are thought to deserve any hardships they suffer.

Since caste status is linked with identity, there is always incentive for people to assume cleaner identities, either to experience greater cleanliness or greater power. At the center of this controversy is the extent to which identity is chosen or inherent. Currently under dispute is the concept of "trans-racialism" — whether one can identify as a race different from the one assigned, as with the fracas over Rachel Dolezal, Jessica Krug, CV Vitolo-Haddad, and Satchuel Cole. These are white women who presented as black because of their desire to enter the struggle with a quasi-adopted clean identity.

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One solution to this dilemma is to treat intersectional identities as divine but not transcendent. Steven Smith calls this the "*immanent* sacred" — the location of "the sacred *within* this world" that "consecrate[s] the world from within." The immanent sacred contrasts with traditional monotheistic "transcendence" of the sacred — the notion that the sacred exists outside of, and acts upon, creation. Since sacredness for the woke is of this world, they lack any rationale for self-sacrifice; there is no eternal reward for those who ally themselves with the clean in their struggle against the unclean. Yet the present world affords a limited horizon for harmony, since the continuing struggle, even among the woke, prevents its present fullness.

The afterlife for the woke is not one where the soul awaits the judgment of creation. Rather, like the pagan Romans, the woke find life after death through *fama*, or the renown due to a person who lived a glorious life. Similarly, fate for the woke seems to lie in the continued caste struggle. Yet whatever successes the woke might achieve, they are never complete, and are always subject to reaction. This makes the outlook of the woke a rather bleak one.

A CIVIL RELIGION FOR GLOBAL CAPITAL

As theologian William Cavanaugh observes, the claim that there exist boundaries between religion and non-religion, and that these boundaries are "natural, eternal, fixed, and immutable," is a relatively new phenomenon that came about "with the rise of the modern state." "The new state's claim to a monopoly on violence, lawmaking, and public allegiance within a given territory," he continues, "depends upon either the absorption of the church into the state or the relegation of the church to an essentially private realm."

In the latter scenario, state actors profess indifference on matters of faith, provided the faithful make no effort to interfere with the use of state power. This is the stance the woke ostensibly push for in the public sphere, especially with regard to traditional religious faiths (more on that later). Yet as philosophy professor Francis Beckwith has argued, such an arrangement is arguably incoherent, as matters of faith place the faithful under obligations to act on their faith in the public realm. To demand privatization of faith, therefore, is to ban it outside of the human heart.

The second possibility Cavanaugh raises is equally dangerous. In this scenario, the state absorbs the church and uses its monopoly on violence to impose at least outward compliance with the religious tenets of that church. In America today, these tenets are increasingly the tenets of wokeness.

If wokeness is a religion, it is a civil religion, in the sense that it merges one's duty to the divine to that of the state. For proof, one need only examine how in recent years, in cities

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across the nation, woke protesters have torn down statues of the old American civil religion of the founders, Catholic saints, and soldiers, and demanded new ones be built in their place to honor the gods of the woke pantheon.

For the woke, the state is the central entity through which clean identities struggle not only for justice, but to secure patronage. Eric Voegelin's [Political Religions](#) offers a useful example of how a religious patronage system works. Here again, we depart from Western — and indeed, modern — monotheistic faiths to draw comparisons between wokeness and a much older, polytheistic tradition.

In ancient Egypt, according to Voegelin, temples of the lower gods were linked in a patronage network that held the different regions together. The pharaoh patronized the gods of these temples by offering local priests and aristocrats prestige, money, and power. In exchange, the priests and aristocrats pledged their loyalty to the pharaoh. While rival cults disliked having to compete for state patronage, they all agreed that the worst outcome would be for the pharaoh to reserve the patronage for his own god and put the local cults out of business. And so they agreed to the arrangement.

The woke patronage network functions in much the same way. Patronage in wokeness takes several forms, the cheapest of which is recognition, or the state's acknowledgment that certain identities are deserving of respect and deference. Bearers of clean identities look to the state for such recognition, typically in the form of a holiday, a public display, or a committee or hearing on matters of importance to woke identities. From there, they seek out more significant forms of patronage, including financial and political investments. Examples may include academic chairs or departments at colleges and universities, along with monetary compensation covering expenses like medical procedures and the restoration of property.

The most significant patronage events occur when the state becomes an instrument of the struggle. Across the country, state entities — especially those in regions historically linked to the oppression of clean identities — have bowed to social pressure by incorporating wokeness into their official policies. A telling example comes in the form of human-rights commissions that some municipalities have launched to provide oversight on issues of identity and equity. The one in Charlottesville, Virginia — a locality that is no stranger to conflicts over identity — requires at least nine of its members be "broadly representative of the City's population, with consideration of racial, gender...religious, ethnic, disabled, socio-economic, geographic neighborhood and age groups within the City." The stated purpose of the commission is "[t]o act as a strong advocate for justice and equal opportunity by providing citywide leadership and guidance in the area of civil and human rights."

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This arrangement is merely an updated version of the Egyptian patronage system Voegelin described: The different identities that populate the city receive state patronage as they supervise the diversity, equity, and inclusion of clean identities in the public sphere. Thus when Ibram Kendi — a historian and founding director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research — suggests establishing a department of anti-racism at the federal level, he is merely applying the logic of municipal governments on a larger scale.

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To gain further leverage over the state, the woke frequently court influence in the corporate world. Such efforts date at least back to 2017, when Pepsi hoped to capitalize on Black Lives Matter protests by launching an advertisement featuring a short narrative of a self-satisfied consumer, played by supermodel Kendall Jenner, emerging from her private world to join a broader movement of individuals living out their own authentic identities. The participants depicted in the ad are unified in this endeavor through their attachment to global corporate brands — in this case, Pepsi — that support them in their efforts to win over the state's coercive power to work the will of the diverse identities united under wokeness.

Though Pepsi was forced to pull the ad — activists criticized its focus on Jenner, a white woman of privilege, rather than the struggle of those bearing cleaner identities — its message has become a political reality, as wokeness has demonstrated increasing control over state power with the help of global corporations. One of the earliest examples involved Brendan Eich, a co-founder of Mozilla who was driven from his executive role in the company after journalists uncovered his contributions to efforts supporting a 2008 California ballot measure that limited marriage to the unity of one man and one woman. A more consequential instance occurred when the National Basketball Association withdrew the 2017 All-Star game from North Carolina after the state passed legislation restricting transgender persons to bathrooms of their biological sex, prompting state legislators to repeal the law.

For this new faith to flourish, it requires global capital, and global capital has adopted wokeness as its religion. There are exceptions, of course — the most prominent being Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A. But for most corporations, the decision to embrace wokeness is a no-brainer, as there is no downside: Outside of Russia and the Middle East, where woke branding and messaging might prove to be a liability, coordinated opposition to the movement is virtually non-existent.

There are also deeper reasons behind the move. Global capital benefits from the free exchange of the goods and services that supply individuals with the material to express and satisfy their identities. Laws prohibiting labor exploitation, pornography, work on holy days, contraceptives, abortion, prostitution, gender re-assignment, and the like,

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inhibit this free exchange. One of the defining struggles of wokeness is the fight against such laws, which the woke see as arbitrarily imposed on the expression of certain identities. In this way, the policy interests of corporations and the woke are aligned.

Like states, global corporations provide patronage to the woke. Forms include funding human-rights organizations, offering grants to prestigious academic institutions, and patronizing identities in the arts. They also adopt internal diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives — human-resources rules that ensure the protection of clean identities within the company, often through guidelines provided by profitable consultancy agencies. The leading consultant in this effort, Robin DiAngelo, is a white woman and author of the bestselling book [White Fragility](#). She reportedly charges \$320 an hour for phone consultations and between \$10,000 and \$15,000 for appearances.

Consultants like DiAngelo provide prestige for elite organizations seeking to adorn themselves with examples of their continued commitment to the moral issues of the day — in exchange for a fee, of course. Yet questions remain as to the efficacy of these arrangements. As Bonny Brooks argues in *Arc Digital*, "activism is now firmly near the top of many big-brand marketing agendas" because it "is a lot simpler to appropriate images of protest to sell soda than to ensure there are no exploitative practices in your supply chain." Helen Lewis of the *Atlantic* concurs, defining the "iron law of woke capitalism" to be that "[b]rands will gravitate toward low-cost, high-noise signals as a substitute for genuine reform, to ensure their survival."

Where woke patronage has become most vibrant is in higher education. Twenty years ago, Eldon Eisenach argued that the next religious establishment would come from universities that were, in his paraphrase of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the seminaries for democracy. Universities have indeed served this purpose. Today, most higher-education institutions offer majors, minors, events, speakers, and student groups organized around one or more identities, with strong administrative support and faculty dedicated to studying them. Diversity, equity, and inclusion administrators at these institutions are increasing in number even as budgets and student tuition have reached a breaking point — and even as their effectiveness, like that of diversity consultants in the corporate world, remains up for debate.

Some universities are looking to ground higher education entirely in the tenets of wokeness. The University of Tulsa, for example, has recently sought to re-orient the university around the twin pillars of business and social justice while cutting the traditional core curriculum to the bone. Among those angry at the decision are many of the students. Meanwhile, Ivy League institutions have owned up to their history of systemic racism by making the appropriate hiring and funding decisions — all while

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vigorously defending themselves from lawsuits made on behalf of Asian Americans claiming systemic exclusion in their present-day admissions processes.

Wokeness is the opiate of the elites. None of the patronage directly benefits struggling communities; it simply moves funds from state institutions, global corporations, and universities to diversity, equity, and inclusion consultants. These consultants, in turn, serve as moral and spiritual alibis, helping to rehabilitate institutions' public image whenever issues of prejudice emerge. Paradigmatic cases can be found, as Matthew Continetti of the American Enterprise Institute has argued, at global corporations like Alphabet, which generously donates to social-justice organizations while opening an artificial-intelligence research center in China — despite the latter's horrifying record of human-rights abuses (often in service to these very corporations). Like the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, state entities, corporations, and academic institutions offer patronage to the woke gods in exchange for their loyalty. And like the priests in those old Egyptian temples, the consultants grant prestige and temporary absolution while keeping the money.

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A STATE-SPONSORED RELIGION

If states and public entities are increasingly patronizing woke identities and causes, are they also establishing wokeness as a government-sanctioned religion? In some respects, they surely are.

The Supreme Court case *Lemon v. Kurtzman* has set the standard for what qualifies as an unconstitutional establishment of religion in America since 1971. The *Lemon* test consists of three dictates: Laws must have a secular purpose, they must not have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion, and they must not promote excessive government entanglement in religious matters.

If wokeness is indeed a religion, then efforts to establish its tenets through legal and regulatory frameworks clearly violate the *Lemon* test. State-sanctioned endorsements of woke identities advance the woke faith, as do municipal commissions tasked with promoting identity-based equity initiatives. Distribution of state money to woke identity groups and causes fosters government entanglement in religion. The hiring of diversity, equity, and inclusion administrators at public universities to oversee the representation of clean identities is akin to those universities hiring priests or rabbis to oversee their adherence to Catholicism or Judaism. In short, if the Supreme Court were to recognize wokeness as a religion, these state-sponsored patronage efforts would have to end.

This conclusion, of course, hinges on whether wokeness constitutes a religion for First Amendment purposes. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court has never quite articulated a

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concrete definition of the term as used in the Constitution. Its earliest attempts included an 1890 description of religion as "one's views of his relations to his Creator, and to the obligations they impose of reverence for his being and character, and of obedience to his will" — a standard that confined religion to traditional monotheistic beliefs. The Court eventually abandoned the use of a belief in a creator as the hallmark of religion, declaring in the 1961 case of *Torcaso v. Watkins* that the government may not "aid those religions based on a belief in the existence of God as against those religions founded on different beliefs." While this clarifies that a religion need not involve a creator, it offers little in the way of a distinction between religion and non-religious belief systems.

Another line of cases — the conscientious-objector cases of the 1960s — might help shed some light on the matter. Though these decisions interpret the term "religion" as used in a statute, courts and scholars alike have looked to the definitions they provide as signals of what the Supreme Court might classify as a religion in the First Amendment context.

The conscientious-objector rulings characterize religion as consisting of "deeply held" and "sincere" beliefs that rest on "moral, ethical, or religious principle[s]." This is an exceedingly expansive definition, since it arguably encompasses not only faith-based belief systems, but secular philosophies. In 1972, the Court attempted to walk back the characterization, noting that "the very concept of ordered liberty precludes allowing every person to make his own standards on matters of conduct in which society as a whole has important interests." But the limiting principle it offered was that the First Amendment applies only to "a 'religious' belief or practice." While this statement clarifies that not all deeply and sincerely held beliefs are grounded in religion, it doesn't offer much help for those attempting to distinguish between religion and non-religion.

Such vague descriptions may not offer much to guide us, but given what the Court has deemed a religion in past cases, the legal classification of wokeness as a religion likely rests on firm ground. In the *Torcaso* case, for instance, the Court explicitly recognized both ethical culture and secular humanism — philosophies premised on non-spiritual moral traditions and the rejection of religious dogma — as being "[a]mong religions in this country." Even atheism qualifies for constitutional protection — at least under the amendment's Free Exercise Clause, which draws from the same mention of the term "religion" as the Establishment Clause. The bar for what legally qualifies as a religion is thus quite low. Given the deeply held and undoubtedly sincere nature of woke adherents' beliefs, along with the tenets of wokeness described above (the belief in the divinity of identity, the concept of the woke faith community, the Gnostic understanding of the world, notions of fate and the afterlife, and the moral code grounded in the struggle against oppression), one would be hard pressed to explain how wokeness is less deserving of the status than belief systems explicitly grounded in secularism.

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One caveat to the *Lemon* analysis above is the sense among some constitutional lawyers that the 2019 case *American Legion v. American Humanist Association* implicitly overturned *Lemon*. If that's true, then wokeness may be in even worse shape, at least from a legal standpoint. The majority opinion in *American Legion* stresses "respect and tolerance for differing views," "an honest endeavor to achieve inclusivity and nondiscrimination," and "a recognition of the important role that religion plays in the lives of many Americans" as key to identifying whether a given state policy or practice constitutes an illegal establishment of that religion. Though wokeness appears to elevate tolerance, inclusivity, and non-discrimination above all else, its efforts are often implemented in ways that chill the expression of dissenting views, especially by those who adhere to faith traditions associated with unclean identities. What's more, woke allies in government, corporations, and academia often seek to privatize, or in some cases prohibit, the practice of non-woke faiths — all while they continue to encourage or coerce engagement in public rites of wokeness.

FILLING THE VOID

If wokeness becomes a legally recognized religion in the United States, efforts by adherents to secure state patronage and enlist public entities in their struggle would violate constitutionally protected natural rights. Historically, such measures have provoked an organized political and legal response among disadvantaged faiths. And that is precisely where we may be headed.

Adherents to wokeness might object by noting that they oppose laws viewed as the product of church-state collusion — including laws that coerce prayer and scripture reading in schools, those that ban the teaching of evolution in schools, and those that mandate days of rest on the Sabbath — as well as displays of religious symbols on state property. This objection is not so much wrong as it is decades out of date.

It is true that, in seeking to clear the public square of Christianity and other monotheistic traditions, woke advocates of church-state separation have tried to liberate individuals and communities from state-sponsored religions. Yet nature abhors a vacuum, as does the human soul. As Ross Douthat documents in his book *Bad Religion*, attempts to scrub religion from American public life have failed; alternative belief systems have rushed in to fill the void. The newest and perhaps most potent of these alternatives is wokeness, which is fast becoming the dominant faith of the elite in the political, corporate, and academic worlds — and, in turn, of American public life.

With the decline of the old Judeo-Christian consensus, the woke have sought to establish themselves in the spaces left open by the success of secularization. But as their faith

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coalesces and their successes build, they are beginning to grow out of those spaces. It seems that at the very moment of its overcoming, the struggle is struggling with itself.

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