

## *Church of Woke: The Next American Religion?*

Michael Vlahos

What does it mean to be woke? First and foremost, “woke” is a religious signal that you have heard the Good News and Seen the Light. Awakening means both witnessing revealed truth and experiencing spiritual transformation. Today this has taken the form of a collective enunciation: of a new national church, reformed and transformed, to replace the original American sect, which is wicked and corrupted.

In simple, practical terms, the Church of Woke is pledged to the destruction of Racism, Patriarchy, and Heteronormativity.

The original national religion—often called American Exceptionalism—and the Church of Woke are locked in a victory-or-death struggle.

To understand this, two points are essential.

First: America is a religion. American life and politics function in a religious milieu.<sup>1</sup> That should not surprise. In 1967, American sociologist Robert Bellah declared a national “civil religion”—yet “civil religion” is a pleonasm.<sup>2</sup> The Greek word “politics” and the Roman “civil” both refer to the city, the national community of Antiquity. Hence today, in our national city, all citizens are part of an American religious congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Vlahos, “America is a Religion: Our High Church Politics and Sacred War,” *Library of Social Science*, 2014. <https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/essays/vlahos-america/>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Dædalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967), 1-21.

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Second, the full faith conversion of an empire is a transformation. Our distant past records just such a shift. 1700 years ago an entire civilization—the sacred world of the Greco-Roman *Mundus*—was overthrown and replaced by something new.<sup>3</sup>

This transformation was the work of three generations, from 313-380. The first generation converted a Roman emperor who declared tolerance toward Christians. The second marched steadily toward the persecution of “pagans.” In the third generation there was a counter-coup by the apostate emperor Julian. He failed. What followed was the total proscription of all pagans (or *Hellénikos*).

Likewise, the Church of Woke began its Long March to transform American life in the mid-1960s. Like Christianity, it has burrowed deeply into elite society and the institutions of state power. Now we are locked in a culminating phase. The third generation of Woke—true to Late Roman antecedents—must cast down the pantheon of American Exceptionalism, of Founders and Heroes, establishing a new divine order that will wash away America’s sins of Racism, Patriarchy, and Heteronormativity.<sup>4</sup>

What follows puts late antiquity and today’s world side-by-side. The reason to do this is compelling. Simply, we are facing a potential civilizational discontinuity.

What does that mean?

Modernity’s revolutions have cut deep into our civilization but have failed to overthrow it. The West at least has upheld its power and continuity. The Greco-Roman world of late antiquity, in contrast, was transformed. Christianity literally dismantled a millennium of Greco-Roman civilization, suppressing its literature and thought for 500 years. Classical Antiquity would not be rediscovered until “The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century.”<sup>5</sup>

We may be facing civilizational discontinuity as deep as the end of Classical Antiquity. It may feel uncomfortable to stack the Church of Woke against fourth-century Christianity—yet this may be the only real

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 10th Anniversary Revised Edition (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928). The 1930s rediscovery of the Medieval West’s rediscovery “of the Latin classics and of Latin poetry and Roman law; the recovery of Greek science, with its Arabic additions, and of much of Greek philosophy; and the origin of the first European universities,” reminded us also just how absent, for six centuries, had been the spirit of Classical Antiquity from Western life. The wages of civilizational discontinuity.

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historical analogy we have.

To be clear: There is no way to stack the Church of Woke against early Christendom *morally and spiritually*. This analysis insinuates nothing of the kind. In fact, today's woke religion is a mocking, empty caricature of Christianity, like earlier, Marxist heresies of the last century.

A potential discontinuity in our world is the only issue here—and it must be run to ground if we are ever to grasp how civilizational rupture *can* happen.

The goal is to compare—not mere revolutions, but transformations—side-by-side, to test whether or not the Church of Woke has the power to work another discontinuity in this civilization. *We need to understand how discontinuity works*. This is an analysis of civilizational change.

### ***The old American religion aligns strongly with fourth-century Rome***

The old American religion echoes the civic faith of Republican Rome, where ancestor worship was at the core of the civil religion. Romans appropriated the Greek Pantheon like a rooftop church pediment, linking their city to the larger world (*Hellénikos*). The American religion, too, is rooted in “founding fathers”—a genealogy of heroes, many wreathed in legend and myth. Like Rome, sacred ancestors are venerated in the Capital: a temple city as much as the center of national politics. Like Rome, too, the American passage is celebrated as an Odyssey or Aeneid. As Rome affixed the prows of Carthaginian galleys to triumphal columns, so Americans still sacralize memorials to “the honored dead” on the holy ground of the National Mall.

Yet as an empire, Rome became a universalist faith. Anyone could become a citizen through civil religious conversion: Speak Latin, fight alongside brother citizens, and embrace the “Roman Way.” America has been no different in its universalism. For Rome, from local Latium, to all Italy, and then, the world. For the United States, from British “stock,” to all Europe, and then, all humanity.

Outside Rome's civil religion, the personal-spiritual was tolerant and indiscriminating. The Dionysian and Eleusinian Mysteries, the mystery cults of Cybele, Mithras, and Isis, the pantheon parvenu, *Deus Sol Invictus*, and Neoplatonism highlight the diversity of faith in imperial Rome. So in America, Buddhists jaw with Baptists, Mainline Protestants with Jews. Ours is a big tent religion.

Yet like Rome, too, the Leader has become central to the exercise of the civil religion. Political legitimacy—the right of Rome to rule the world—required that the person of the emperor become divine, so as to

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create a systemic core of unquestioned authority. While every president is not yet divine (Obama and Trump emperor cults notwithstanding), he instantiates in his person, like a Roman emperor, representation of the nation's divine authority.

*The Church of Woke aligns strongly with fourth-century Christianity*

The Church of Woke, like Christianity, began as a *religio illicita*, a threat to "the peace of Rome," meaning, the universal authority of the imperial divine. Indeed, Christians sought to overthrow all ancestral deities in the Roman sacred world. They sought, through conversion within the leadership class, to subvert the empire. Hence, Christians were persecuted, often mercilessly, for two centuries. Then, by converting the emperor himself, they triggered a metamorphosis. Through the imperial person of Constantine, Christians took over the Roman state.

The deep story of Christianity's rise was in creating a new chosen people through the power of conversion. Imperial Roman conversion was civil-religious: New citizens did not give up old identities and beliefs. Christianity, in contrast, demanded full rebirth of the person into a new reality. The convert was remade into a soldier of Christ through transformation, purification, evangelism, and martyrdom. Likewise, Woke conversion also brings converts to their knees, refocusing their life energy on the great mission, through the same process.

At the heart of conversion is revelation—awakening. The awakening itself is an ecstatic event, as is its follow-up anointing ritual, the baptism, and describes a passage of personal transformation. Like Late Antiquity, awakening today is also the big reveal: eyes truly open for the first time! Those awakened feel urgently compelled to proclaim themselves converts—of the body and of the blood. Moreover, the arms of Christ's young church were outstretched to all.

Conversion doctrine in the Church of Woke, in contrast, is still unsettled between interior sects of the faith. Marxian purity of faith can be affirmed by acclaiming holy doctrine, like any early Christian acolyte, in pious conventicle with the holy man.<sup>6</sup>

Identitarian sects, however, define membership through correct state of being. The Chosen are already saved: The African-American, Queer, *Femmes Militant*, and Rainbow-Reborn.<sup>7</sup> The legacy of Calvinist predesti-

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<sup>6</sup> Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 57.

<sup>7</sup> E. J. Dionne Jr., "African American Christianity demands we overturn the structures of injustice," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2020; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, (June 2014); Janice Fiamengo, "Feminism is a religion, with its myths of

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nation is clear. Yet room must be made for the legions of white acolytes.

Purification is a powerful test of faith. In Christianity, working toward grace through penance made purification possible. In Late Antiquity, the penitent holy man might even receive sacred power, “because he was thought to have won his way to intimacy with God.”<sup>8</sup> The fourth-century church always left open the path to purification.

Yet later, for example, in late Medieval Spain, Christian Moriscos and Conversos were always suspected of thoughtcrime, and routinely tortured by the Inquisition. Fourth-century Christians were not so punitive. Light ritual violence, like our Woke, cows unbelievers into submission, dangling the prize of partial conversion for some.<sup>9</sup>

For others, branded by original sin, the bended knee and washing of feet, even *penitente*-like self-flagellation, is no path to redemption.<sup>10</sup> Those men whose ancestors built the historical systems of oppression—racism and slavery, female abuse and indenture, and queer Inquisition—must long atone for their sin, *and the lardered hoard of their patrilineal ancestors*—before expiating the “ponderous chain!” of original sin.<sup>11</sup> For “Cis-white” men, Woke orthodox archons are obdurately postmillennialist. Before Judgment Day, the penitent man will not pass.<sup>12</sup>

Evangelism works as an enduringly effective test of faith. In Late Antiquity, the “First Church of Woke” was ruthlessly evangelical. Yet to embrace Christ means personal metamorphosis. The promise of communion with Christ drew its power from being a promise to all—never

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creation, sin and salvation,” *Rebel Priest*, August 7, 2018; Rev. Kim Sorrels, “How My Gender Journey Became My Resurrection,” *Believe Out Loud* (undated). *Believe Out Loud* is a powerful primary source chronicling the rapid deconstruction of traditional Christianity in America.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Brown, “The Rise and the Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), 80-101.

<sup>9</sup> Amélie Lamont, “The Guide to Allyship,” *amélie.studio*. The severity and permanence of sin is evoked in this now-removed post from *Medium.com*, “Dear White Women: Do Not Commit Suicide because You’re Racists.”

<sup>10</sup> “Police officers wash the feet of Black faith leaders and beg for forgiveness in NC,” YouTube, uploaded by Tom Lin, June 12, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Dexter Thomas, “Cops Are Taking a Knee. Not Everyone Is Convinced,” *Vice* (June 3, 2020); Nicole French, “Today, a black film editor posted in a Facebook group for Hollywood editors looking to connect w/other black editors, as there is severe underrepresentation in post-production & they can be hard to find. What ensued is a slew of white editors who immediately objected,” (THREAD) 1, Twitter, June 16, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Paramount Pictures, 1989, “only the penitent man,” YouTube, uploaded March 28, 2014. The first and third films in the franchise remind us how just thirty years ago, Judeo-Christian icons were still positioned at the center of our national canon.

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retracted, never conditional. Yet however insistently the Church of Woke proclaims its universalism, only the chosen may enter the halls of woke. Lesser membership—allyship—is, for several sects, but the first step toward salvation, and may not lead to baptism. It may be withdrawn at any time. Hence, the new church has a hieratic inner circle of predestined *vir illustris*, and an outer ring of aspiring allies.<sup>13</sup> For a few, however, transformation can be realized through a sacred mortification of the flesh called gender “conversion”—baptismal rebirth where human may surgically ascend to angel.<sup>14</sup>

Christian martyrs’ chosen excruciation is sacred reenactment of Christ on the Cross. In the Dark Ages, “the charged power of the body of a long buried martyr was thought enough to strike a workman dead in the catacomb chamber.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, for several centuries, hagiography displaced all other literature in Western civilization. Historical memory orbited exclusively around *Lives of the Saints*.

Likewise, Black martyrdom’s *via crucis*, slavery, has all the story power of early Christian martyrs. Their tribulation’s gospels—and those of related groups—are redrawing the boundaries of America’s historical passage. The passage to Jordan—sacralized in the testament, 1619—is our new national scripture. Pointedly, its own hagiography mirrors earlier Christian sacrifice, and the power in the bones of modern martyrs is as venerated today as those a thousand years ago.<sup>16</sup>

This is the true source of power in the Church of Woke’s dominant sect: Black Lives Matter. Sects below in the firmament—other People of Color, *Femmes Militant*, and the Rainbow-Reborn—each has its own Communion of Saints and Allied Hosts. Together these represent a Church of Woke. Like fourth-century Christianity, it is still lacking a

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<sup>13</sup> Student Center for Reconciliation, APU Allyship & Anti-Racism Resources, Azusa University; Jessica Kent, “a story about privilege,” YouTube, June 5, 2020; Edward M. Schoolman, “Vir Clarissimus and Roman Titles in the Early Middle Ages: Survival and Continuity in Ravenna and the Latin West,” *Medieval Prosopography*, 32 (2017), 1-39.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor Hosking, “‘Pose’ Incites a Queer Revolution in Its Second Season,” *Vice*, June 12, 2019. The series is literally interwoven with plays on the word “angel”—and its trans star, Indya Moore, achieves both television and real life apotheosis; Constance Grady, “Angels in America on Broadway has been reshaped,” *Vox*, June 10, 2018. The interleaving of gay and Christian tropes—of martyrdom and beatification—is sealed and inescapable. Here Gay is anointed the successor sacred.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” 100.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Negro Spirituals,” *The Atlantic Magazine* (June 1867); Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “The River Jordan in Early African American Spirituals,” *Bible Odyssey* (undated); Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project,” *New York Times Magazine* (August 18, 2019); E. J. Dionne Jr., “African American Christianity demands we overturn the structures of injustice,” *The Washington Post*, June 20, 2020.

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unified Orthodox doctrine. Much as Nicene vs. Arian Christianity was decided between two ecumenical councils (325 and 381), so the next American religion has yet to harmonize doctrine, for example, regarding Trans vs. TERF. As with Christianity, resolution may mark an official end of the civilizational transition.<sup>17</sup>

Though pledged to transform our way of life, the Church of Woke highlights a spiritual continuity. American Exceptionalism was a compact between the nation and the almighty: God charged America to redeem humanity.<sup>18</sup> As the successor religion, the Church of Woke also proclaims a divine charge to her new Chosen People, likewise, to punish the wicked and raise up the righteous.<sup>19</sup> In practice, the two American religions share a postmillennialist view, to “immanentize the eschaton,” an inheritance perhaps from the Second Great Awakening, and the implicit rapture of “a more perfect union” to come.<sup>20</sup>

Yet continuity is also discontinuity. Church of Woke practice hearkens to Christian themes, yet its scripture, doctrine, and practice are more parody than mimesis.<sup>21</sup> Late Antiquity was driven by slavery, tyranny, and life like a “brief candle.” So, Christianity was steeped in love, in the spirit, and in transcendence. Modernity’s engines are narcissism, consumerism, and celebrity. Hence, Wokeism is steeped in the drama of one’s life, where all value is material, and fame is the only fulfillment.

### *Must (our) pagan civilization and its history be erased?*

Hence the Church of Woke—in its own words, by its own demands—is not just another righteous uprising in American reform. That saga, above all, sought to renovate the civil religion. The Woke mission, like fourth-century Christianity, is existential change, full awakening: “I once was blind but now can see.” Thus, New Church newspeak takes old holy words like “diversity” and “inclusion” and makes them mean, in religious practice, “one voice,” “one thought.” Thus, fourth-century Christianity and twenty-first century Wokeism enforce all-inclusive orthodoxy.

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<sup>17</sup> Leo Donald Davis SJ, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

<sup>19</sup> Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Barron Young-Smith, “The ‘Liberal Fascism’ Fallacy (a.k.a, Conservatives Immanentize The Eschaton),” *The New Republic*, April 21, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Nadine Schibille, *Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Aesthetic Experience* (Farham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 205-209.



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The fourth-century Church analogy is strongest, however, in the process of change. From the moment it was established as state religion, the Church began the work of totalizing enforcement. Moreover, the bishops knew, as do Wokeists, that true enforcement cannot be achieved through sanction and punishment alone. True orthodoxy can be secured only through absolute erasure of the entire historical memory of civilization itself—so that resistance has no anchor. From the fourth to the sixth centuries, the literature, traditions, celebrations, and ceremonial of the Greco-Roman Mundus was wiped from the face of the earth (or locked up in monasteries where, blessedly, something survived).

First, normal or legitimate social status is slowly chipped away. An *illustris* (celebrity) who keeps the old faith is stripped of status (“cancelled”). The uncorrected are called “pagan” (*paganus*—peasant), the Western empire’s stand-in for *fascist, incel, deplorable*.<sup>22</sup>

In the East the label was *Hellénikos*. For Christianity to flourish in it’s then-pervasive Greek voice, it had to be separated from the civilization—and all that came with it. Gregory of Nazianzus’s denunciation of the apostate emperor Julian was revealing: “Julian has wickedly transformed the meaning of ‘Greek’ so as to represent a religion and not a language!”<sup>23</sup> This is why the Church of Woke must expunge Western civilization from the English language.

Yet erasing *Hellénikos* took decades. “Paganism” was everywhere, in sacred practice (ceremony), places (temples), and icons (statues). So Maximus, bishop of Turin, preached, “Idolatry is a great evil. It pollutes the inhabitants of a region. It pollutes those who look on. . . . There is nothing free from evil where everything is steeped in evil.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, today, Masterpiece Cakeshop and Memories Pizzeria—and *Gone With the Wind*.

For icons, too, the ancient-modern comparison is apposite: “Many pagans believed that the statues of gods rendered the deities [alive] in the minds of those who passed by. Yet, for Christians, the deities living in the statues were now identified with demons . . . in which devils lay in waiting.”<sup>25</sup> Thus the rage of the mob was boundless: “At Palmyra, the

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<sup>22</sup> James O’Donnell, “Paganus,” Georgetown University: “To address someone like Vettius Agorius Praetextatus as a ‘hick’ on the ground of a worship shared with men whose boots squished with more than mud was both funny and biting”—revealing a class sensibility shared between fourth- and twenty-first-century “Woke.”

<sup>23</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (University of Michigan Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>24</sup> G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, eds., *Interpreting Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.



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head of the goddess Allat-Athena was knocked off the torso, the facial features were then scrupulously obliterated, and the statue was . . . hacked to pieces.”<sup>26</sup>

We see the same fear, the same rage with the living idols of Robert E. Lee and Christopher Columbus. Just as the Divine Washington has been toppled from his dais, his statue wreathed in a burning American flag.<sup>27</sup>

Pagan temples remained untouched for a time. Yet they were slowly desacralized: “In about a century, a total revolution had happened. That which had defiled the space in the eyes of pagans sacralized it in the eyes of Christians.”<sup>28</sup> Surviving temples were even converted into churches, including the Parthenon.<sup>29</sup> Hence, sacred geography too is being transformed, like Mainline Protestant houses of worship bedecked in rainbow banners, offering transsexual devotional services for children.

Fourth-century Christianity shows us precisely how a civilization gets dismantled. The substance and value of ideas is not the issue here, but rather the striking similarity of how it got done.

### *Is our “Great Awakening” as big as the Roman transformation?*

We know Wokeism is *not* driven by imperial zeal, like Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, which quickly achieved the opposite of what it intended.<sup>30</sup> This revolution is not directed by The Leader. Moreover, it has been unfolding for 55 years.

We know that this is *not* a French or Russian blood payback, after centuries under elite boot-heel: “‘Il faut du sang pour cimenter la révolution’ (There must be blood to cement revolution), said Mme Roland.”<sup>31</sup> Ours is an elite-wide-engineered *coup de main*.

Perhaps we should look to the sweep of American Mission. From John Winthrop’s “City on a Hill,” the old American religion is a grand rapids of pietistic enthusiasms, from revolution to awakenings to abolition to suffrage to temperance to progressives to American Federation of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>27</sup> Soo Kim, “George Washington Statue in Portland Toppled, Covered in Burning US Flag,” *Newsweek* (June 19, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> *Interpreting Late Antiquity*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Cyril Mango, “The Conversion of the Parthenon into a Church: The Tübingen Theosophy,” *Epistēmēs Metron Logos*, Δελτίον ΧΑΕ 18 (1995), Περίοδος Δ’ • Σελ. 201-203.

<sup>30</sup> Julia Lovell, “The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History 1962-1976 by Frank Dikotter,” *The Guardian* (August 11, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 858; see also, Alan J. Spitzer, “Review: Narrative’s Problems: The Case of Simon Schama,” *Journal of Modern History*, 65, no. 1 (March 1993), 176-192.

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Labor to New Deal to civil rights—including our endless evangelizing, millennialist wars—all of them.<sup>32</sup>

Yet each crusade was ritually folded into America's big tent church—and new holy figures were officially anointed alongside all the other deities and heroes of our pantheon.

We know the Church of Woke rejects the fundamental sacred postulate of the old American religion—and seeks its destruction. Like early Christians, Wokeists refuse to even enter the Pantheon, let alone be seated there. They plan on tearing it down, perhaps keeping the old temple building as they re-consecrate it with new apostolic statuary.

We know how its project to destroy Racism, Patriarchy, and Heteronormativity will proceed. We also know that it is on the very cusp of taking power, where it can push its civilizational project, like Theodosius II, decisively ahead.<sup>33</sup> Thus we know how success will go down—because we have the whole story of its progenitor.

Yet we also have the example of a resistant Mundus, whose millions of believers stuck to their guns: as Peter Brown writes, “We cannot understand the tenacity of paganism if we do not realize the sense of warmth and intimacy which pagans experienced as they worshipped their many gods. These gods crowded into the huge gap between heaven and earth, filling it with energy and life. The gods bridged heaven and earth.”<sup>34</sup>

Americans still love their founders and their way of life: liberty, community, and family. The old national religion and its veneration abides. For now.

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<sup>32</sup> John Winthrop, “Dreams of a City on a Hill, 1630,” *americanyawp.com*; Martin Conkling, “Pietism on the American Landscape,” *Concordia Journal*, 41, no. 3, Article 5.

<sup>33</sup> J. Jaric, “Late Roman anti-pagan laws and its appearance in the research of Roman theatres in the Republic of Macedonia,” ЗБОРНИК НА ТРУДОВИ, ОД МЕЃУНАРОДНАТА КОНФЕРЕНЦИЈА ОДРЖАНА НА 13 И 14 ДЕКЕМВРИ 2016 ГОДИНА ВО СКОПЈЕ.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xlv.