

A Response to Amanda Marcotte on religion's death throes

By [Gawain de Leeuw](#)

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[Amanda Marcotte got the memo](#). Religion in America is dying, and the religion of bigotry is finding it hard to maintain its followership.

We liberal protestants have known institutional decline for about forty years. Since Sgt. Pepper's and Vietnam, our communities have slowly been devastated by all sorts of economic and social forces.

But it's not the old order. The old order she refers to is young. It arose in reaction to liberal Protestantism's social victories, especially around race. Once, fundamentalism was considered by the elites a backwater worldview held by hicks and southerners. Its theology was historically condemned by the church Catholic. But after race was confronted institutionally in private schools by the federal government, Ralph Reed and his associates organized conservative churches into their current political force as a cohesive wing in the Republican Party. Like Amanda, I look forward to its self-destruction.

Overall, however, I'm not as sanguine about what a godless country means. For the American religion has also been diverse, sometimes thinly held, and pragmatic. In particular, I'm thankful for liberal Protestantism, once a powerful part of American politics.

For at the [Ohio Wesleyan Conference](#) in March, 1942, the Federal Council of Churches created the moral framework for the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, decolonization, and civil rights. Its leaders included industrialists, policy makers and heads of churches. In England, the [Malvern Conference](#) gave the spiritual support for the modern British welfare state. It is no coincidence that the most important successes of liberalism came

with the support of powerful religious institutions.

Yes, I know. Religion's horrible. Remind me, again, about the children's crusade; the religious wars and the inquisition, [Galileo's excommunication](#), and [the Scopes trial](#). But I've yet to read a serious scholar who argued they weren't also about resources, personality and urbanization.

Yet while the power of religious institutions has declined, citizenship has not improved. The country pays lip service to Martin Luther King, but the plutocrats read Ayn Rand. The elites themselves have been delivered from even paying lip service to Christian virtue, jettisoning the justice of any kind of restraint. While the patriarchy has diminished, evolutionary psychology is now the faith of young men. While liberal religion is mocked, it has been replaced with a much more powerful faith in tax-cuts. And believing in tax-cuts is just that: a faith, a faith that is more powerful than the burdens of Christian conviction.

I'm skeptical that this is improvement.

The collapse of religious institutions will not necessarily mean enlightenment or justice. Instead we may be rewarded with competitive cynical technocrats, shielded by a cool irreverence, disinterested in any sort of ideals save the power of the market or the military. I'm skeptical that we should be cheery about the Brave New World that may replace it.

We remain creatures who need hope, meaning and a just imagination to limit the power of those who consider the restraint of religion arduous. Religion provided that language, however insufficiently its institutions followed its own rules. The dismantlement of the sacred and reverence may merely mean more people who worship consumer culture.

Surely, the end of ignorance means the capitulation of some traditional religious teaching. Let those particular traditions wither on the vine. But it will not mean that superstition and illogic has been defeated. Nor will what comes next be an explosion of peace, charity, or wisdom. Those will remain rare, the narrow road, the eye of the needle. Fortunately, we need only a mustard seed's worth for the

world to keep moving, for redemption to remain on the horizon.

I trust that the churches may still, in perhaps a much more modest form, cultivate apostles who can speak truthfully, be charitable to their opponents, be open to conflict, and willing to change their mind when proven wrong. Perhaps we can dispense with ideology, and return to seeking what wisdom remains in our precarious, broken, and imperfect world.

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