CHAPTER 23

The Democratic Deficit of Theocracy

A woman marries a man of another faith. No law stands in her way. Her family may still press him to convert. A state can ban segregation and protect people at work. It cannot order anyone to make a friend or take a spouse.

Behind that legal boundary, the chapter says, speech is the only tool with real power. It calls the boundary the wall of private intolerance. One form of prejudice resists speech more than any other. It is the belief that someone is “not good enough to be right”. A claim gets refused because of who makes it, and its merits are never heard.

The chapter argues that one religious doctrine gives that refusal eternal backing. Suppose God is held to judge souls by creed, meaning what a person believes about him. Suppose character, meaning how she treats other people, comes second. Then believers inherit that heavenly line and use it on earth. The chapter calls the result the divine wall of discrimination. From there it derives three changes a tradition would have to make.

All of this is conditional, as the chapter insists from the first page. Its conclusions follow if morality is by its nature empathic, as Chapter 16 argued: an evaluation counts as moral when it responds in feeling to what conduct does to others. A theist who holds instead that morality is whatever God commands can resist the chapter by resisting the premise.

Jungle, zoo and home

The chapter sorts social integration into three states. In the jungle state communities fight to impose their moral frameworks by force. Exhausted, they agree to separate, and build walls, borders and rules of non-interference. That is the zoo state, where animals coexist so long as they are kept in cages. By the argument of Chapter 21 this is managed conflict, since the contained preferences persist. The home state is the third. There people treat one another with care and without prejudice, as members of one community.

Gordon Allport argued in 1954 that contact between groups reduces prejudice under certain conditions. Later studies confirmed it, though the chapter notes the effect runs smaller in experiments alone.

Judging a person by her creed

The central argument comes in four steps. First, morality is constitutively empathic, which Chapter 16 argues at the constructed grade. Second, creed-based evaluation is orthotic, the book’s word for checking something against a standard. Third, a conformity check is no moral evaluation, since moral evaluation engages with what conduct does to others. Fourth, judging a

person’s moral worth by her allegiance is therefore the great moral conflation. That is the book’s name for mistaking conformity for morality.

A believer who treats people badly may be forgiven, provided her creed is correct. A non-believer who treats people well may be condemned if hers is wrong.

One thing the chapter grants outright. Holding your own faith true, and others mistaken, is a stance about truth and builds no wall. The wall is the further step, from her creed is false to her moral worth is less. A tradition can keep its doctrine and still judge persons by character.

Traditions differ in the weight creed carries. The argument bites hardest where creed is primary and weakens toward the conduct pole. A tradition that already judges by character has little to revise.

The doctrine does more than describe an event after death. If God sorts souls by allegiance, the faithful use that criterion now. In the vocabulary of Chapter 22 this breaks non-exclusion. A perspective should be eligible to enter deliberation without prior approval of its source. The wall withholds that eligibility, so persuasion across the doctrinal line is foreclosed.

A test the chapter can fail

Interfaith marriage is where the chapter stakes its claim empirically. Such unions could be among the greatest catalysts for integration. The wall makes them structurally difficult. Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s study of American religious life found the matching pattern. Knowing people of other faiths goes with warmer attitudes toward them, and marriage is the most intensive form of knowing. The chapter presents these findings as correlations only. Their larger finding appears to cut the other way. Observant Americans are, on average, more accepting of other faiths. The chapter puts the two findings at different levels. The wall belongs to doctrine, and the warming belongs to contact across the doctrinal line. On that reading the data record the wall coming down from below, faster than doctrine rebuilds it.

The chapter then catches itself. A reading on which tolerance shows the wall falling, and intolerance shows it standing, can never be wrong. So it states “a test the thesis can fail”. Private intolerance should track how heavily a tradition weights creed. It should be highest where standing before God is conditioned on allegiance, and lowest in the conduct-centred and universalist strands. It should persist among the doctrinally committed even where contact is high.

That prediction comes with controls. Communities must be matched for ethnicity, size and wealth. They must also be compared with others equally closed off, since a boundary may be guarded for reasons owing nothing to creed. A flat pattern under those controls, with doctrine adding nothing once contact is held steady, would refute the wall as a doctrinal structure. Existing

surveys allow a rough first pass, and the comparisons so far fit the gradient without isolating it. The full test awaits data gathered at that grain.

The chapter also meets a cruder claim nearby. That claim is that religiosity as such depresses democratic capacity, and the evidence goes against it. Highly religious societies sustain durable democracies, the United States and India among them. Surveys find publics across the major traditions, Muslim publics included, endorsing democratic ideals at comparable rates. Devoutness is not the variable. The chapter ties the deficit to the weight a tradition puts on creed, and that weight cuts across how religious a society is.

Three changes, and what religion keeps

The wall is removable in principle, the chapter argues, because the doctrinal features that generate it can be dropped.

The first runs from theocratic to humanistic religiosity. In theocratic religiosity God outranks humanity, so allegiance outranks conduct and creed outranks character. Chapter 10 argued that no mind can occupy the ground of being. A God who feels has standing as a party affected by conduct, as persons do. Devotion to God and care for persons are then two instances of one evaluation.

The second runs from absolutist to democratic religiosity. Treating scripture as infallible makes an unreformable standard of it. Chapter 17 distinguished perfection, where no error has been found, from infallibility, where none is possible. Democratic religiosity treats its moral traditions as the current best, open to revision.

The third runs from creed-based to merit-based evaluation. Judge persons by character and the wall dissolves.

The three are independently motivated, and a tradition could adopt one without the others. The traditions already contain these resources, the chapter holds. Abdullahi An-Na’im argues that Islamic values are best served by a secular state. Such voices are contested minority positions, and their weight here is structural.

What remains is substantial. Faith in a God of infinite diversity stands untouched, as sustainer or as companion. Community, ritual, contemplation and moral education keep their value, because they engage the capacity to feel. What goes is the claim to absolute authority, with scriptural infallibility and the placing of creed above character.

The objections the chapter answers

The chapter calls the witnessing defence the strongest, because it accepts the chapter’s own terms. A believer says her urgency about a neighbour’s creed is empathic care. She fears eternal suffering for someone she loves. The feeling is real, and the chapter grants this without reservation. Its object is another matter, since eternal damnation is real only inside the doctrine under

examination. And the reasoning turns in a circle. The doctrine posits the danger, the danger produces the care, and the care is used to justify the social structure the doctrine generates. The chapter then concedes a limit in the open. Against the believer inside the framework this argument does not persuade, because for her the danger is real. Its addressee is the reader assessing the doctrine from outside.

A second objection comes from small or threatened traditions. A parent may resist an interfaith marriage out of concern for a community's survival. That concern is empathic in the chapter's own sense, and the chapter grants it as real and morally weighty. What does not follow is a verdict on the partner's worth. The wall is the transfer of the grief onto the person, so that his standing is fixed by his allegiance.

What the chapter claims

All three of the chapter's results are graded *constructed*, the rung below *established*. That grade means the best account the book can assemble, with live rivals still standing.

The first result is the divine wall itself: creed-based judgement of persons, carried from judgement after death onto standing now. Whether that projection actually occurs is staked on the doctrinal gradient, and the chapter says the thesis can lose there. The second result is the three transformations. The third is the account of what religion keeps after them.

Every result carries the condition announced at the outset. Each key derivation runs from the premise that morality is constitutively empathic, which Chapter 16 argues at the same grade. The second and third results carry a further condition inherited from earlier chapters, that the hierarchy of grounding terminates.

Chapter 24 turns the question around. This chapter asked which forms of religion obstruct democratic peace. The next asks which conception of God those same conditions leave standing.