CHAPTER 23

# The Democratic Deficit of Theocracy

**Presupposes:** the ground/mind conflation (Ch. 10); the great moral conflation (Ch. 16); the perfection/infallibility distinction (Ch. 17); bipolar authoritarianism (Ch. 22).

**Establishes:** the divine wall of discrimination; the three structural transformations required for democratic compatibility; what remains for religion after them.[1]

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**In brief.** Laws can ban segregation and police the workplace; they cannot compel friendship, love, or marriage. Behind that boundary — the wall of private intolerance — the only tool with power is speech; the form most resistant to it is the belief that someone is not good enough to be *right*. The divine wall is that belief given eternal sanction: God separating souls by creed and not character, the celestial line projected onto earth. Conditional on the empathic constitution of morality (Ch. 16), the argument derives three transformations — theocratic to humanistic, absolutist to democratic, creed-based to merit-based — already under way inside the traditions. What is removed is the claim to absolute authority, not faith.

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## 1 Introduction

This chapter applies the analysis to the most socially consequential form of absolutism: religious absolutism. It argues that theocratic morality generates a specific structural deficit in democratic capacity through a mechanism the analysis is uniquely positioned to identify: the elevation of creed-based evaluation over character-based evaluation, sanctioned by the doctrine of divine judgement by allegiance.

The argument develops the concept of the divine wall of discrimination: the structural consequence of a doctrine in which God separates souls by creed rather than character, projected from celestial judgement onto earthly social relations (§3). It first identifies four convergent results from earlier chapters that bear on theocratic morality (§2), then locates the divine wall within the broader spectrum of discrimination and the progression from the jungle state through the zoo state toward the home state (§§2.1–2.2). From there it derives three structural transformations required for religious compatibility with democratic peace (§4), and examines what remains for religion after these transformations (§5).

A note on tone. This chapter engages with doctrines that are held with deep sincerity by billions of people. The chapter's argument is structural: it targets specific doctrinal features (creed-based judgement, scriptural infallibility, the ontological superiority of God over humanity) and derives consequences from them. It does not target faith as such, devotion as such, or religious community as such. The chapter's obligation is to reconstruct the strongest self-understanding of the traditions under critique before identifying the consequences the analysis reveals. Where the argument falls short of this obligation, the failure is the chapter's, not the traditions'.

**A note on conditionality.** The argument that follows is conditional. If morality is constitutively empathic, as Chapter 16 argued, then creed-based evaluation is a conflation of orthotic with empathic evaluation, and the consequences identified in this chapter follow. A theist who rejects the empathic constitution of morality, holding instead that morality is constituted by divine command, can resist the chapter's conclusions by resisting the premise. The chapter's target is the credal strand within the traditions; a conduct-centred tradition (§3.1) has little to revise.

The conditional structure is maintained throughout, since each key derivation proceeds from the premise "if morality is constitutively empathic, then…". The chapter does not pretend to neutral ground, because it develops consequences of the established results. A theist who finds the premise implausible should therefore direct her critique to Chapter 16, where the premise is argued for on four independent structural grounds. The chapter's obligation is to show that if the premise holds these consequences follow, and that the consequences are significant enough to warrant the theist's sustained engagement with that premise.

## 2 Four Convergent Results

The preceding chapters have established four results that converge on theocratic morality.

First, the incoherence of origination from non-being. The grounding terminus is unintelligent; creation pictured as a transition from non-being is structurally incoherent, while creation as sustaining dependence survives (Chapter 9, §2.3); divine simplicity cannot be conjoined with intelligence. Second, the constitutively empathic character of moral evaluation. Morality is empathic response to the emotional consequences of conduct for others; orthotic assessment is derivative (Chapter 16). Third, bounded authorship. The unified causal model shows that no conscious agent authored her evaluative hierarchy; the perspectival asymmetry shows that absolute moral responsibility is structurally incoherent (Chapter 18). Fourth, the authority-dependence of absolutism. Absolutism disables the conditions for deep persuasion by foreclosing the legislative process — violating the second law of social equality, the requirement that keeps the deliberative field open to every perspective (Chapter 22, §4.4).

The convergence generates consequences that no individual result produces alone. Consider a religion that claims a God who produced being from its absence, grounds morality in divine command, presupposes unbounded authorship to justify eternal punishment, and treats its doctrines as unreformable. Each of its central claims is independently undermined, and because the four combine, the effect on democratic capacity is structurally significant.

## 2.1 The spectrum of discrimination and the wall of private intolerance

Before developing the divine wall, the chapter must locate it within a broader structural analysis of discrimination. Discrimination is the act of judging someone as inadequate or unworthy based on a partial or incomplete evaluation, typically reducing a person to a single feature while ignoring the rest. Intolerance is a form of discrimination, expressed across a broad spectrum. At the public end, people may be killed, imprisoned, or otherwise silenced for who they are. A society can enact laws to restrict or punish these public forms: by banning racial segregation, protecting workplace rights, or enforcing equal access to services.

But private intolerance is harder to reach, because laws cannot compel friendship, love, or consensual marriage with those against whom we harbour prejudice. This legal boundary, the wall of private intolerance, cannot be dismantled by force, so behind it the only tool with real power is speech.

Yet even persuasion becomes difficult in the face of the form of discrimination most resistant to it, found at the most private extreme of the spectrum: the belief that someone is not good enough to be right. This is the core of closed-mindedness — to reject a person's claim because of who is making it rather than because of its merit — and it is what divides a society most, since it is refusal rather than disagreement. That refusal echoes in both relativism and absolutism, two ideologies that, in different ways, disqualify the speaker before the idea is heard.

The divine wall, as §3 will show, operates at this most private end of the discrimination spectrum, where law cannot reach and only deep persuasion has power.

## 2.2 Three states of social integration

The progression from intolerance to peace can be understood through three states. The first is the jungle state: open conflict, violent imposition of creed, beatings, killings, imprisonment. Communities fight to impose their moral frameworks on one another.

Eventually, exhausted by violence, the communities agree to separate: building walls, drawing borders, establishing rules of non-interference. This is the zoo state, where animals coexist harmoniously so long as they are kept in cages. Legal enforcement holds public discrimination at bay while walls of private intolerance continue to divide communities across countries, regions, cities, and boroughs. Many would claim this is an acceptable endpoint. By the analysis of Chapter 21, however, a walled coexistence is managed conflict, because the contained preferences persist and the arrangement holds only while its overriders hold.

The zoo state should be treated as temporary, because it is possible to move on toward a time when people interact as they do within their

own communities. Not merely in a state of law-enforced public coexistence, but in one of widespread private acceptance. This is the home state, where individuals treat one another with respect, care, and an absence of prejudice, as fellow members of a single community rather than as strangers held apart.

**The contact evidence.** The zoo-to-home progression is the contact hypothesis in structural dress, and the social-psychological literature that has tested it should be named, since it supplies the empirical spine the imagery lacks. Allport (1954) proposed that contact reduces prejudice under specifiable conditions — equal status between the parties, common goals, cooperation rather than competition, and the sanction of authorities and custom — and half a century of accumulated studies confirms the effect meta-analytically, with the largest reductions where the contact is personal, sustained, and capable of producing friendship (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

The base carries a measured qualification, because confined to experimental designs the effects run smaller, with delayed outcomes rarely measured (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2019). The spine therefore supports the progression at the strength the trials license and no more.

Allport's conditions read, in the present vocabulary, as the operating requirements of deep persuasion across a wall. Equal status is standing (Chapter 22, §4). Cooperation toward common goals is the shared field in which hierarchies are exchanged. Institutional sanction is the zoo's legal scaffolding doing its one legitimate job: holding the space open while the walls come down from inside.

What the framework adds to the hypothesis is the mechanism underneath the correlation. Contact works when and because it converts the other from a category into a registered evaluative field, which is why superficial or competitive contact fails where Allport's conditions predict failure, and why the home state cannot be legislated into being but only made structurally available.

The progression from zoo to home requires that dialogue resume, since if it does not, the zoo remains the only alternative to the jungle. To move toward lasting peace, where conflict is neither merely suspended

nor sealed off, people must speak freely, listen openly, and confront opposing views face to face. It is only through deep persuasion that the walls can fall. The divine wall is the most structurally entrenched of these walls, because it is sanctioned by the doctrine of divine judgement itself rather than by human authority.

## 3 The Divine Wall of Discrimination

The chapter's central argument can be stated formally before the detailed analysis that follows:

**(W1)** Morality is constitutively empathic: what makes an evaluation moral is the evaluative modality's oriented response to the emotional consequences of chosen conduct for others. [Argued in Chapter 16, where it carries as constructed.]

**(W2)** Creed-based evaluation is orthotic: it checks persons against a doctrinal standard (correct belief, correct allegiance) and registers conformity or non-conformity.

**(W3)** Orthotic assessment is not moral evaluation. [From W1: moral evaluation requires empathic engagement with the emotional consequences for others, whereas orthotic assessment requires only conformity-checking.]

**(W4)** Therefore creed-based moral evaluation, the evaluation of persons' moral worth by their doctrinal allegiance, is the great moral conflation in its most consequential social form.

The remainder of §3 develops the social consequences of this conflation.

### 3.1 The structure of creed-based judgement

In many religious traditions, God is believed to judge human beings ultimately by their allegiance to Him. Those who believe in God and follow His commandments are destined for salvation, while those who wilfully and conclusively reject Him face eternal separation or punishment. The specific criteria vary across traditions, since some emphasise belief, others practice, others a combination, though the

structure under examination is constant: when the primary criterion of divine evaluation is creed, what you believe about God, rather than character, how you treat other persons, the consequences described below follow.

A preliminary qualification is essential for the chapter's structural integrity. Traditions vary enormously in the weight they assign to creed versus character. At one end of the spectrum, some traditions are primarily orthopractic: they evaluate persons mainly by conduct, with doctrinal belief playing a secondary role. Judaism's emphasis on mitzvot (commanded actions) and Buddhism's emphasis on the Eightfold Path place conduct at the centre of moral evaluation. At the other end, some traditions are primarily credal: much of evangelical Protestantism's sola fide (faith alone) doctrine, and certain strands of Sunni and Shia Islam that condition salvation on shahada (declaration of faith), place creed at the centre. Most traditions occupy intermediate positions. The chapter's argument applies most directly to traditions in which creed-based evaluation is primary, and applies with diminishing force as the tradition moves toward the conduct-based pole. A tradition that already evaluates persons primarily by character and not creed has less to revise.

Creed-based evaluation is orthotic assessment applied to persons. The person is checked against a doctrinal standard — right belief, right commands, right community — with conformity registered as moral worthiness and non-conformity as failure, while the empathic evaluation of how she treats others is structurally secondary.

Plantinga (2000) develops the most sophisticated epistemology in the neighbourhood. On his account the sensus divinitatis produces warranted belief in God; its failure to operate is a cognitive malfunction, much as colour-blindness is a perceptual deficit. That is a claim about warrant alone, and Plantinga nowhere infers the second from the first; reformed epistemology, read on its own terms, builds no wall.

The analysis engages the position only to mark the inference the divine wall requires and the epistemology does not license: from "her faculty malfunctions" to "her moral standing is diminished." Even if the

sensus divinitatis is a cognitive faculty, the question is whether its deliverances should take priority over empathic evaluation in the assessment of persons. A person with perfect colour vision and no compassion is not thereby morally superior to a colour-blind person of profound empathic sensitivity, and a cognitive achievement, however real, is not the criterion the empathic constitution of morality makes primary. The wall is built where a tradition makes that inference; the analysis's answer, grounded in Chapter 16, is that the inference is the conflation itself.

Plantinga's (1995) defence of exclusivism draws the same line from the other side. He argues that holding one's religious beliefs true, and the incompatible beliefs of others false, is neither arrogant nor unjustified even in full awareness of the piety those others display, and the chapter grants the point entire, since exclusivism about truth is an epistemic stance and no wall. The wall is exclusivism about standing: the further step from "her creed is false" to "her moral worth is less", a step Plantinga's defence does not take. A tradition can hold its doctrine true and its rivals mistaken while evaluating persons by character, which is what the third transformation (§4.3) asks of it and all it asks.

A stronger opposition comes from Hauerwas (1981), who argues that the church's distinctiveness from secular culture is itself a moral achievement: the community's moral life is constituted by its particular narrative, so dissolving creed-based boundaries would destroy the community's capacity for moral formation.

The response must distinguish two operations the Hauerwasian position runs together. The first is creed-based community formation, the voluntary association of persons around shared commitments. The second is creed-based moral evaluation of persons outside the community, the judgement that a non-member's moral standing is diminished by her non-membership. The first is legitimate, since voluntary association around shared evaluative orientations is itself a form of deep persuasion, and the chapter does not target it. The second is what the divine wall identifies.

Hauerwas's strongest case supports the first without entailing the second, because a community that forms around shared commitments can recognise the moral standing of those outside it without compromising its own identity. A believer who treats others badly may be forgiven if her creed is correct; a non-believer who treats others well may be condemned if her creed is wrong. This is the great moral conflation in its most consequential social form.

**Creed as proxy for character.** A further defence of creed-based evaluation must be addressed, because it is the strongest available. The theologian may argue that creed matters less as a direct moral criterion than as a predictor of character: what you believe about God shapes how you treat people, so evaluating by creed is a practical proxy for evaluating by character.

The response has two steps. First, the correlation between creed and character is empirical and defeasible, since non-believers can have excellent character, believers can have terrible character, while the correlation varies enormously across individuals, communities, and historical periods. Creed is therefore an unreliable proxy for character.

Second, and more fundamentally, relying on a proxy when the thing itself is directly available is the great moral conflation in its predictive form. Character — how a person actually treats others, whether she alleviates suffering, whether she promotes flourishing — is directly observable. Creed, what a person believes about God, is a secondary object whose derived value, its association with tradition, authority, and community, may or may not predict the primary value, the person's actual empathic conduct. Evaluating by creed when character is available resembles evaluating a gymnast's performance by the reputation of her coach instead of by her score: the proxy may carry information, while the direct measure is both available and more reliable.

Creed-based judgement systematically prioritises derived value, the value a person acquires through association with the right doctrinal community, over primary value, the value constituted by her actual conduct toward others. The divine wall is the structural expression of

this inversion: derived value overrides primary value in the evaluation of persons.

## 3.2 From celestial judgement to earthly division

When God is believed to separate souls into eternal factions according to allegiance, religious communities inherit this celestial line of separation and project it onto earthly relationships. The doctrine does not merely describe a post-mortem event, because it constitutes a present-tense evaluative framework. If God judges persons primarily by creed, then creed becomes the primary criterion by which the faithful evaluate one another in this life. The result is a doctrinal divide between the "blessed" and the "doomed", a partition more profound than any based on character, conduct, or contribution, because it carries the weight of eternal consequence.

This is the divine wall of discrimination. The wall operates through evaluative separation rather than hatred: a structural boundary between those who are on the right side of the divine standard and those who are not. It operates at the most private level of intolerance, since what it holds is not merely that someone is bad but that someone is not good enough to be right — that a non-believer's moral perspective is disqualified by her creed, regardless of its content.

In the vocabulary of the preceding chapter this is a violation of non-exclusion. Equal deliberative standing turns on the fact that a perspective's eligibility to enter the field as a candidate for uptake does not depend on prior approval of its source (Chapter 22, §4), and the wall withholds that very eligibility. The divine wall is therefore not only the great moral conflation in social form but the religious instance of the exclusion that disables receptivity, foreclosing deep persuasion across the doctrinal line at its root.

**The witnessing defence.** The strongest defence of creed-based evaluation must be addressed here, because it is the response that intelligent, compassionate believers are most likely to offer, and because it accepts the chapter's own terms.

The defence runs as follows. “You have misidentified our motivation. We do not evaluate non-believers by creed because we are performing an orthotic check. We evaluate them by creed because we empathically care about their eternal fate. If I really believe my neighbour will suffer eternally for her unbelief, then my urgency about her creed is empathic concern — I am responding to the emotional consequences of her situation for her. Witnessing, evangelism, and even social pressure to convert are expressions of empathic love rather than orthotic conformity-checking. A doctor who insists you take medicine you do not want is not being orthotic; she is being empathic. We are the doctor.”

This is the strongest version of the creed-based defence, because it does not retreat to “God said so”, which the great moral conflation analysis has already addressed. It claims instead that creed-based urgency is empathic urgency, real concern for the other’s suffering, and therefore satisfies the chapter’s own criterion for moral evaluation. The defence deserves three responses, each operating at a different level.

First, the empathic element must be acknowledged without reservation. A believer who fears for her neighbour’s eternal fate is experiencing a real emotional response: a real oriented attraction toward the neighbour’s well-being and a real repulsion at the prospect of the neighbour’s suffering. The evaluative modality is engaged. This is not pseudo-empathy, directed at an object that does not feel; it is empathic concern for a person the believer loves. The chapter does not question the sincerity or the emotional reality of the response.

Second, the structural problem must be identified. The empathic response is directed at a consequence, eternal damnation, whose reality depends entirely on a doctrine, creed-based divine judgement, that is itself the product of the orthotic layer. The believer empathically fears for her neighbour’s fate, while the fate she fears is constituted by the very doctrinal framework the chapter is examining. The empathy is real; its object is doctrinally constituted.

The analogy can be run the other way. A doctor who insists you take medicine for a disease she diagnosed is motivated by empathic

concern for your suffering. But if the disease exists only within the doctor's diagnostic framework, which is what is being questioned, then the empathic urgency does not validate the framework, because it is a product of it. The concern is real; it does not establish that the condition it responds to is.

Third, the circularity must be made explicit. The doctrine of creed-based judgement creates the danger, eternal separation for unbelief. The empathic response to the danger is then cited as justification for the doctrine's social consequences: pressure to convert, creed-based evaluation of persons, the divine wall. So the circle runs: the doctrine posits a suffering that the believer empathically responds to, and the empathic response is used to justify the social structure the doctrine generates. But the suffering is internal to the doctrinal framework, since a non-believer who does not accept the doctrine does not face the danger the believer fears for her. The empathic urgency is therefore urgency about a consequence the believer's own framework has posited, directed at a person who does not share the framework.

The structural parallel is complete. It is as though a doctor diagnosed a disease that only her diagnostic manual recognises, prescribed treatment the patient does not want, and cited her concern for the patient's health as justification, while the patient, examined by every other diagnostic framework, is perfectly well. The empathic element is real in the doctor; the disease is an artefact of the framework.

The witnessing-as-empathy defence therefore does not escape the divine wall analysis. It reveals the wall's most intimate mechanism, since the doctrine generates a fear, the fear generates empathic urgency, so the urgency sustains the social structure — all within a framework the non-believer has no reason to accept. The believer's love is real; the condition it responds to is doctrinally constituted; and the social consequence, the evaluation of the non-believer's moral standing by her creed, is the divine wall in its most compassionate and therefore most resistant form.

One limit of this diagnosis must be owned where it operates, rather than only in the chapter's preamble. Against the believer inside the

framework the circularity argument does not persuade, because for her the danger is real, the "doctrinally constituted" description is the disagreement restated, and the doctor analogy begs what she disputes — her manual, she holds, is the one that diagnoses truly.

The argument's addressee is therefore the reader assessing the framework and the doctrine from outside, and its force is the conditional force announced at the outset: if morality is constitutively empathic (Chapter 16), the witnessing defence fails to convert creed-based evaluation into empathic evaluation. Deep persuasion of the believer herself must travel through that premise and her engagement with it, rather than through this section's diagnosis, which maps the structure of her position without supplying her a reason she recognises to leave it.

## 3.3 Conditional divine love

The divine wall generates a further consequence: the conditionality of divine love. Many traditions claim that God's love is unconditional. But if judgement awaits those who make the "wrong" choice, and if hell is the consequence of sincere disbelief, then the love is conditional on allegiance, and the structural reframing holds regardless of the language in which the doctrine is expressed.

Stump (2010) argues that God's love is unconditional on creedal allegiance, directed toward the beloved's flourishing — an account structurally aligned with the empathic constitution of morality, since God loves persons because of who they are rather than what they believe. If Stump is right, the conditional-love consequence is not a feature of the deepest theological understanding but a distortion introduced by the creed-based overlay. The convergence is structural while the divergence is metaphysical, because Stump presupposes a creator God and the analysis does not.

The analogy with parental love makes the consequence vivid. Consider a parent who says: "When you turn thirty, I will judge you. If you have not done what I expected, I will abandon you — forever." No one would call this unconditional love. The structure is identical whether the judge is a parent or a deity.

Hick's (1989) pluralist hypothesis is the most developed philosophical alternative to creed-based exclusivism: the major traditions are different culturally conditioned responses to the same transcendent reality, "the Real", so salvation is available through all of them. Hick dissolves the divine wall by removing the creed-based criterion, arriving at the right structural conclusion through a different route — the phenomenology of religious experience rather than the orthotic/empathic distinction.

The divergence is equally important. Hick posits a transcendent Real behind the traditions, a postulate the analysis does not require, since its convergence on merit-based evaluation follows from the empathic constitution of morality and does not depend on whether a Real exists. A theist who accepts Hick's pluralism and one who accepts the framework arrive at the same practical conclusion for different reasons; the practical convergence matters more than the metaphysical disagreement.

The conditionality of divine love reinforces the divine wall by providing its ultimate sanction. To love someone across the wall (a non-believer, a member of another faith) is to love someone whom God has, or will, condemn. Such love is not merely difficult; it exists in structural tension with the doctrine of creed-based judgement. The divine wall does not prohibit love across its boundary; it makes such love structurally costly, requiring the believer to hold in tension her love for the person and her acceptance of the person's condemnation.

## 3.4 The interfaith test case

The most vivid manifestation of the divine wall is the struggle surrounding interfaith marriages. Such unions could serve as among the greatest catalysts for social integration and peace: when people of different faiths fall in love and build families together, the boundaries between communities dissolve organically. Repeated across generations, such unions erode creed-based division at its base.

But the divine wall makes interfaith marriage structurally difficult. The believing community must reconcile the member's love for a

person with that person's position on the wrong side of the doctrinal divide. The result is predictable: pressure to convert, conditions on the marriage, social distance from the non-believing partner's family, or outright refusal.

The social consequences are empirically observable. Putnam and Campbell's *American Grace* (2010), the most comprehensive empirical study of religion and social life in the United States, found that personal acquaintance with members of other faiths corresponds to warmer attitudes toward those faiths. It found interfaith marriage the most intensive form of such acquaintance. The Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Studies corroborate the finding at the population level (Pew Research Center, 2015).

These are correlations rather than demonstrations of causation, which the chapter presents them as. But the correlations are consistent with a structural prediction: interfaith marriage dissolves the divine wall by creating families in which creed-based evaluation is structurally impossible, so the dissolution reduces the private intolerance the wall maintains.

A complication internal to the same study must be registered, because it appears to cut the other way. Putnam and Campbell's larger finding is that religion in the contemporary United States both divides and bridges: dense networks of religiously diverse personal ties, their "Aunt Susan" and "My Friend Al" effects, generate unusually high interfaith tolerance. Religiously observant Americans are, they find, on average more accepting of other faiths rather than less.

Taken flat, this looks like evidence against the divine wall. But the two findings operate at different levels, and the framework predicts their co-occurrence rather than being embarrassed by it. The wall is a property of creed-based doctrine, the evaluation of persons by allegiance, rather than of religious sociality as such, while bridging is produced by the mechanism this chapter endorses: personal contact across the doctrinal line.

What Putnam and Campbell record is therefore the wall being dissolved from below by interfaith acquaintance faster than doctrine

rebuilds it — deep persuasion operating through the very contact that such ties supply. Read as a claim about religious people's attitudes, the bridging data would tell against the thesis. Read as a claim about the structural tendency of creed-based evaluation, the bridging effect is the wall coming down rather than evidence that it was never standing.

**A test the thesis can fail.** Stated so, the reading courts the structure it must not have, where tolerance counts as the wall coming down and intolerance as the wall standing, so that every observation confirms. The exposure therefore calls for a test the thesis can fail.

The divine-wall thesis is a claim about doctrine, so it predicts a doctrinal gradient. Private intolerance, and resistance to interfaith intimacy above all, should track the creedal weighting of the tradition — highest where standing before God is conditioned on allegiance, lowest in the orthopractic and universalist strands. It should persist among the doctrinally committed even at high levels of interfaith acquaintance. A bridging pattern flat across that gradient, with exclusivist and orthopractic traditions equally warmed by equal acquaintance and doctrine adding nothing once contact is controlled, would be evidence that the wall is an artefact of contact scarcity rather than a doctrinal structure. The thesis would then be wrong, with reinterpretation unavailable. Putnam and Campbell's own comparisons across traditions are consistent with the gradient, though their design does not isolate it. The point here is the test's shape rather than its verdict: the thesis stakes itself on doctrine's residual effect after contact, and can lose there.

**The survival objection.** The case as so far stated is one-sided, and the objection it invites should be met on the analysis's own terms rather than waved past, because at first sight it turns the framework's central commitment against the framework's conclusion.

A member of a small or historically threatened tradition may resist interfaith marriage not out of creed-based contempt for the other but out of concern for the survival of a community whose continuity depends on transmission. The dissolution this section celebrates is, from within that concern, the slow disappearance of a people, a language of worship,

a form of life. This is not obviously the divine wall. It presents itself as an empathic consideration in its own right: a response to the anticipated suffering of loss, of ancestors' sacrifice rendered vain, of a grandchild who will not know the tradition, of a community that thins toward vanishing. The framework cannot dismiss this as mere prejudice without abandoning the very account of morality it has defended, on which the felt significance of a threatened good is a real evaluative datum rather than an error to be corrected by fiat.

The reply grants the datum and locates the confusion, and the distinction it draws is the one the whole chapter turns on. The empathic concern for a community's continuity is real and morally weighty; what does not follow is the evaluation of the prospective partner by creed. The two come apart as empathic evaluation and orthotic assessment come apart (Chapter 16). A parent may grieve the anticipated attenuation of a tradition, an empathic response to a real loss, without judging the person their child loves to be, on account of his creed, less worthy, less good, or less fit to be loved.

The wall is therefore not the grief. It is the transfer of the grief onto the person, so that his standing is fixed by his allegiance rather than his conduct. A tradition can pursue its own continuity by every means deep persuasion permits — by teaching, by drawing the partner in through invitation rather than condition, by making the form of life worth transmitting — and violate nothing the analysis identifies. It crosses into the divine wall only when continuity is secured by evaluating the outsider as inferior for being an outsider, which is the point at which an empathic concern has been made to license an orthotic judgement of persons.

So the objection, correctly handled, refines the analysis rather than overturning it. The survival concern is admitted as real and even honoured; what is denied is that it warrants the creed-based evaluation of the person. The empirical bridging effect (Putnam and Campbell) suggests, moreover, that the traditions which distinguish the two — welcoming the partner while sustaining the practice — are not the ones that dwindle. On the same evidence, they are the ones best able to transmit a faith worth choosing under conditions of freedom.

The interfaith test case reveals the divine wall's deepest consequence: it obstructs the dissolution of creed-based boundaries through the most intensive form of contact the empirical record identifies, the shared life of an interfaith family.

## 3.5 The comparative evidence

**The comparative literature.** The doctrinal-gradient prediction should also be placed against the comparative literature on religion and democracy, because that literature has already tested, and embarrassed, the cruder claims in the neighbourhood, where the difference between those claims and this chapter's is what the placement makes visible.

The crude claim is that religiosity as such depresses democratic capacity, and the data are unkind to it. Highly religious societies sustain durable democracies, the United States and India being standing cases, and survey evidence from the World Values Survey shows publics across the major traditions, Muslim publics included, endorsing democratic ideals at comparable rates, with the measurable divergences concentrated on gender and sexuality rather than on democracy itself (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

The specific findings sharpen the picture. Fish (2002) found a strong association between Muslim-majority status and authoritarian government; Stepan and Robertson (2003) showed the gap to be Arab rather than Muslim once the two are separated; Donno and Russett (2004) re-examined both results and found the linkages running chiefly through the status of women. Stepan's (2000) broader finding frames the field: democracy requires "twin tolerations", religious authority tolerating democratic lawmaking and democratic authority tolerating religious expression, and traditions across the spectrum have historically constructed both.

The framework's prediction is the doctrinal gradient of §3.4, so the comparative record is what that gradient expects rather than what it must explain away. The thesis indexes the deficit to creed-weighting — to the evaluation of persons by allegiance, backed by infallibility and authority-dependence — and creed-weighting cross-cuts religiosity.

A highly observant society whose traditions weight conduct over creed is therefore predicted to be democratically capable, where the standing counterexamples to the crude claim are of just this kind. The religiosity the United States sustains is denominationally plural and competitive, which structurally weakens any single creed's claim to condition civil standing, while the Indian case combines intense observance with largely orthopractic traditions. Stepan's twin tolerations name, in institutional vocabulary, what the second and third transformations of §4 derive structurally: a tradition that accepts revisable law and does not condition standing on allegiance has already made the moves the analysis identifies. The comparative literature therefore constrains the thesis without deciding it, because it rules out religiosity as the operative variable, which is what the framework claims; it has not yet measured doctrine at the grain the gradient requires.

**The confounds, specified in advance.** The interfaith-marriage test of §3.4 is where that grain can be had, and its confounds should be specified in advance, since a gradient not isolated from them decides nothing. Three matter most.

Endogamy can be ethnic rather than doctrinal, a boundary of peoplehood rather than of creed, so the test requires comparisons within an ethnicity across doctrinal weightings, and across ethnicities within one. Endogamy can also be a survival strategy of small or historically threatened communities, the concern §3.4 has already distinguished from the wall, so group size and minority status must be controlled. And religious sorting tracks socioeconomic sorting, so apparent doctrinal effects must survive controls for education, income, and geography.

A fourth confound survives those three and must be met by design rather than by control: boundary maintenance as such. A community may guard its boundary for reasons that owe nothing to creed — continuity, kinship, the reproduction of a way of life — and closure of that kind is indistinguishable from creedal weighting in any survey that measures only the boundary's strength. The discriminating comparison is therefore between traditions of similar closure that differ in creedal weighting: an orthopractic community and a credal one, each strongly

endogamous, matched on size, minority standing, and ethnicity. The wall predicts that private intolerance thins under interfaith acquaintance in the first and persists in the second, whereas closure alone predicts no difference. The same comparison can be run within one tradition, across congregations of one ethnicity that differ in the weight they place on standing before God; it is there, rather than across whole traditions, that the gradient is cleanest to read.

The prediction, stated with its controls: among communities matched for ethnicity, size, and socioeconomic position, resistance to interfaith intimacy — and the intergroup suspicion it indexes — should track the creedal weighting of the tradition, and should persist among the doctrinally committed at high levels of contact. A flat result under those controls falsifies the divine wall as a doctrinal structure; a gradient confirms it. The chapter stakes the thesis there.

The stake can be made actionable, because data adequate to a first approximation already exist. The Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Studies (Pew Research Center, 2015) carry intermarriage measures by tradition; the General Social Survey carries religiosity and social-distance batteries under demographic controls; the Faith Matters survey behind Putnam and Campbell's analysis records interfaith ties alongside doctrinal commitment. A first-pass gradient can be estimated from these under partial controls, while the full test, with the within-ethnicity comparisons specified above, awaits data collected at that grain.

Where the argument stands: four convergent results have been assembled (§2), the divine wall has been derived and its most compassionate defence answered (§3), and the thesis has been staked on a doctrinal gradient that can fail. What follows derives the transformations a tradition would have to make.

## 4 Three Structural Transformations

The divine wall is not inevitable. It is a consequence of specific doctrinal features that are, in principle, removable — structural in the sense that the features generate it wherever the projection of §3.2

occurs, and empirical in whether they do, which is what §3.5 stakes. The three transformations that follow reduce, when their derivation is traced, to the acceptance of Chapter 16 by a tradition's own resources; the reform voices cited are contested minorities; what the section adds is the structural reason their resources point where they do. This section derives three transformations and engages with internal reform movements within the traditions that have already moved in each direction.

## 4.1 From theocratic to humanistic religiosity

In theocratic religiosity, God is more important than humanity, since He is ontologically superior and devotion to Him takes priority over love for persons. This hierarchy is the root of the divine wall: if God outranks persons, then allegiance to God outranks conduct toward persons, and creed outranks character.

The first section of this book established that no mind can occupy the foreclosing ground of being (Chapter 10). A God who is a mind therefore stands within the hierarchy of diversity, either as the sustainer on whom all else depends or as a companion who shares existence (Chapter 24, §4.1). On neither reading does the theocratic ranking follow, for the reason Chapter 16 gives.

Morality is conduct's bearing on those it affects. A God who feels holds standing as an affected party just as persons do (Chapter 22, §4): graded by what is done to him, and by nothing he made or sustains. Devotion to God and care for persons are therefore two instances of one evaluation, so a framework that ranks the first above the second has replaced the empathic evaluation that makes either moral with an orthotic test of allegiance. The transformation follows: humanistic religiosity — devotion to God expressed through love for persons rather than in competition with it — is the structurally coherent form.

Internal reform movements have already moved in this direction, and three worked cases show the structure. Within Islam, An-Na'im (2008) argues that Islamic values are best served by a secular state, since the state's coercive imposition of Islamic law corrupts the very

values it purports to enforce — theocratic imposition being enforcement rather than deep persuasion. He argues further that the incompatibility of state-applied Sharia with citizenship and equality is recognised within the Islamic scholarly tradition itself, which has always distinguished the eternal principles of the Quran from their historically contingent applications.

His structural move, separating the principles from their applications and subjecting the applications to revision, is the distinction between the empathic foundation — the principles of justice and compassion the revelation embodies — and the orthotic superstructure, the legal codes derived from them in particular contexts: the foundation preserved, the superstructure made revisable.

Within Christianity, Volf (2011) argues that the public expression of faith must be governed by the recognition that Christians share civic space with non-Christians, and that this recognition is a consequence of the Christian commitment to love of neighbour rather than a concession to secularism. The analysis provides the explanation, since the love commandment is the empathic foundation and creed-based evaluation an orthotic distortion the foundation, correctly understood, repudiates. His engagement with pluralism accordingly treats non-Christians as persons of equal moral standing rather than as souls to be saved, and liberation theology reaches the same ground from the other side, locating devotion in service to the marginalised and the suffering (Gutiérrez, 1971/1973).

Within Judaism, Borowitz (1991) develops a covenantal theology in which the covenant between God and Israel is a living relationship rather than a static set of commands. It evolves as the Jewish people's understanding of God's will deepens, so human moral insight is a partner rather than a mere recipient. On the present analysis, Borowitz preserves the empathic core while making the orthotic layer responsive to each generation's evaluative engagement.

The Talmudic tradition's own internal mechanisms of interpretation are structural resources for the second transformation: the principle of makhloket l'shem shamayim, dispute for the sake of heaven, and the

recognition that both positions in a halakhic dispute may be "words of the living God" (Eruvin 13b). A tradition that recognises legitimate disagreement as a vehicle for deepening understanding has already internalised the structural conditions for deep persuasion within its own interpretive framework. The analysis therefore does not ask such traditions to import alien values; it asks them to extend the interpretive openness they already practise internally to their engagement with the broader democratic community.

These movements show that the transformation from theocratic to humanistic religiosity is not imposed from outside. The traditions contain the resources. Two qualifications apply. The engagement above is with each figure's structural move — the distinction each draws between a foundation and its revisable application — and not with the whole of any position, so the appropriation is by the framework's lights and each figure would state the move in his own. And these are contested minority positions: An-Na'im and Abou El Fadl within Islamic scholarship, Borowitz from Reform rather than Orthodox Judaism, Volf from progressive rather than dominant Christianity. Their minority status does not diminish their structural relevance, since the point is that the traditions contain these resources; whether the traditions follow these voices is a matter of deep persuasion within each, and the framework's contribution is the structural explanation of why the resources point where they do.

## 4.2 From absolutist to democratic religiosity

In absolutist religiosity, scripture is treated as infallible, so it becomes an unreformable standard that cannot be challenged, revised, or corrected by human insight. This is the four-stage anatomy of dogma (Chapter 17, §6) in its home case — empathically earned insight codified, extended beyond its warrant, hardened, and severed from the foundation that gave it authority. What the fossilisation costs is the ratchet (Chapter 17, §7.1), since the layer that would bank the community's empathic corrections is converted into the layer that holds them out.

The transformation follows. Democratic religiosity treats its moral traditions as the current best, subject to revision through future persuasion as democratic law is. That is the perfection/infallibility distinction (Chapter 17) applied to the tradition's own standards. The community's moral insight is preserved while its claim to infallibility is relinquished — the ratchet restored to forward operation, the anatomy run in reverse.

Within Islam, Abou El Fadl (2001) distinguishes the authoritative, the scholarly tradition's careful engagement with the sources, from the authoritarian, the imposition of a single interpretation as permanently binding. He argues that the Islamic tradition's own principles — shura (consultation), ijtihad (independent reasoning), and ikhtilaf (legitimate disagreement) — support a democratic rather than an absolutist approach to religious law.

Within Christianity, the historical-critical method of biblical scholarship, practised by theologians within the traditions rather than imposed from outside, treats scripture as a historically situated text whose meaning is enriched by critical engagement. Sachedina (2001) provides a systematic account of Islamic foundations for pluralism. He argues that the Qur'anic concept of fitra, the innate disposition toward God shared by all human beings, grounds a form of merit-based evaluation available within the Islamic tradition itself. On Sachedina's reading, the Qur'an's emphasis on righteous conduct — "compete with one another in good works", 5:48 — provides the resources for a merit-based evaluation that calls for the deepening of Islamic identity rather than its abandonment. The movement is from a creed-centred to a conduct-centred understanding of what God requires. Within Judaism, the makhloket tradition already cited (§4.1) does the same work here, since interpretive disagreement is treated as a feature that keeps the tradition alive rather than a defect.

## 4.3 From creed-based to merit-based evaluation

If morality is constitutively empathic, then the morally relevant criterion for evaluating persons is their character rather than their creed:

how they treat others, whether they alleviate suffering, whether they promote flourishing.

The transformation follows: if persons are evaluated by character and not creed, the divine wall dissolves. A non-believer who treats others with compassion is morally superior to a believer who does not, regardless of their respective allegiances. Merit-based evaluation — judging persons by their empathic conduct and not their doctrinal conformity — is the structurally coherent form of moral evaluation within any religious community.

The merit-based direction is already present within the traditions. The Quranic verse “the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you” (49:13) grounds divine evaluation in taqwa (God-consciousness expressed through righteous conduct), not in tribal or doctrinal identity. The Christian parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46) evaluates persons by their conduct toward “the least of these” — the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner — not by their doctrinal confession. The Jewish emphasis on tikkun olam (repairing the world) grounds moral obligation in the practical work of making the world more just, not in credal conformity.

The analysis does not claim that these traditions have fully implemented merit-based evaluation, since many have not. It claims that the traditions’ own deepest resources point toward merit-based evaluation, so the creed-based overlay is the structural anomaly rather than the merit-based foundation.

## 5 What Remains for Religion

The three transformations remove specific doctrinal features: the ontological superiority of God over humanity, the claim of scriptural infallibility, and the primacy of creed over character. They are independently motivated and can be adopted incrementally, since a tradition could adopt one without the others — moving from absolutist to democratic religiosity while retaining a strong creed-based identity, for example, or abandoning scriptural infallibility while preserving a traditional God-concept. The analysis identifies the direction of reform

without requiring that every tradition arrive at the same destination simultaneously. What remains after the transformations is substantial.

Faith in a God of infinite diversity remains coherent and untouched by the structural arguments: a sustainer on whom all else depends, or a companion who accompanies humanity through existence (Chapter 24, §4.1), powerful, knowledgeable, and loving on either reading. The next chapter develops the second of these in full.

Institutional religion retains its value as a source of community, contemplation, ritual, moral education, and empathic formation. The practical resources of religious life — communal worship, practices of compassion, traditions of reflection on suffering and flourishing — work because they engage the evaluative modality, so they can be preserved without the doctrinal features the transformations remove.

C. Taylor (2007) provides the most comprehensive account of how religious life can persist and deepen in a secular age. The "conditions of belief" have changed irreversibly, since faith is now one option among many, and a faith chosen under real pluralism may be deeper than one held by social default, because it is constituted by primary value, direct engagement with the transcendent, rather than by derived value, the authority of a monopolistic tradition. The three transformations are compatible with Taylor's account, because they remove the derived-value elements while preserving, and potentially deepening, the primary-value engagement he identifies as the authentic core of religious experience.

Contemplative practice — prayer, meditation, reflective engagement with sacred texts — retains its value as a means of deepening the modality's capacity to detect evaluative differences, since a practice that heightens empathic sensitivity is a real resource for the moral life whether or not the practitioner believes the contemplative object is a creator God. Moral education within religious communities retains its value insofar as it cultivates empathic engagement rather than orthotic compliance. What is lost is the claim that moral authority derives from divine command; what is gained is the freedom to revise

moral teachings in light of deeper empathic insight, a freedom infallibility claims foreclose.

What is removed, then, is the claim to absolute authority rather than faith. What is preserved is the evaluative engagement with the transcendent that gives religious life its depth, meaning, and beauty. The question is not whether religious life survives the structural critique, since it does, substantially, but whether the structurally incoherent elements are essential to what believers love about their traditions, or whether what they love can be preserved, and perhaps deepened, once those elements are set aside.

## 6 Objections and Replies

### 6.1 The blasphemy objection

*Objection.* The chapter asks religion to give up its most fundamental commitments — God's supremacy, scriptural authority, and the salvific importance of faith — so the "transformations" amount to asking believers to abandon their faith.

*Reply.* The chapter asks religion to give up three specific claims: that God is ontologically superior to humanity in the foundational sense the theocratic framework requires, that scripture is infallible, and that creed determines moral worth. These are distinct from faith in God, love for God, or the value of religious community, since a person can maintain a loving and profound relationship with God while recognising that God did not produce being from its absence, that scripture is humanly mediated, and that persons should be evaluated by character.

The internal reform movements of §4 show that believers have already made this distinction. Liberation theology's preferential option for the poor is grounded in empathic engagement with the suffering of the marginalised rather than in creed-based evaluation of their doctrinal correctness (Gutiérrez, 1971/1973), and progressive theology more broadly, from Tillich's (1952) "God above God" to the process theology of Chapter 24, has consistently moved in the direction the analysis identifies.

## 6.2 The secularism objection

*Objection.* The chapter systematically dismantles religious claims while leaving secular ideologies unchallenged.

*Reply.* The analysis challenges any ideology, religious or secular, that disables the conditions for democratic peace. Wolterstorff (2012) argues that the Rawlsian demand for "public reason" is itself a form of secularist exclusion, while Stout (2004) argues that democratic deliberation requires citizens to translate their religious convictions into reasons their interlocutors can engage with rather than to bracket them. The framework is closer to Stout, since deep persuasion requires that all evaluative hierarchies, including religiously grounded ones, enter the deliberative field — because persuasion engages the parties' actual commitments rather than sanitised substitutes. Habermas's (2006) institutional translation proviso is the intermediate position: religious reasons admitted in the informal public sphere and translated into generally accessible terms at the legislative threshold. The framework's line falls where Habermas draws that threshold, since the field must admit the conviction as it is held, and the law codifies only what the field has come to share.

What it adds is the structural diagnosis. The problem is not that religious reasons enter deliberation, since they should, but that the claim to infallible authority disables the deliberation's capacity to produce transformation: the citizen who brings her empathic convictions is engaging in deep persuasion, while the one who asserts infallible authority forecloses persuasion altogether. The previous chapter argued that moral relativism is as structurally destructive as moral absolutism, and the divine wall is targeted because religious absolutism is, empirically, the most socially consequential form. The analysis is democratic.

## 6.3 The reform-from-within objection

*Objection.* Religious traditions have always reformed from within. The chapter's transformations are unnecessary because the traditions already have the resources.

*Reply.* The chapter agrees (§4). The three transformations are not imposed from outside; they are derived from structural results that the traditions can engage with on their own terms. The chapter's contribution is to provide a structural foundation for these movements — to show that the direction of reform is a structural consequence of what the preceding chapters have established.

## 6.4 The scope objection

*Objection.* The chapter claims to target "traditions in which creed-based evaluation is primary" but many of its arguments apply more broadly.

*Reply.* The qualification is a matter of degree, since no sharp boundary is implied. The chapter's argument is a structural gradient: the more a tradition weighs creed over character, the more intensely the divine wall operates, and the more the tradition's democratic capacity is structurally compromised. A tradition that already evaluates persons primarily by character has less to revise, while it still benefits from the explanation of why the conduct-centred direction is the correct one.

## 6.5 The eschatological objection

*Objection.* The doctrine of divine judgement concerns the afterlife; human social arrangements are another matter. The projection from celestial judgement to earthly division is the chapter's inference, not the tradition's.

*Reply.* The projection is the tradition's rather than merely the chapter's. When a community believes that God will ultimately separate the blessed from the damned by creed, that belief constitutes a present-tense evaluative framework, since it tells the believer who is on the right side and who is not, right now.

The interfaith marriage case (§§3.4–3.5) is where the thesis stakes itself empirically. The doctrinal gradient — endogamy norms and intergroup suspicion tracking the creedal weighting of the tradition — is consistent with the available comparisons (Putnam and Campbell) though not yet isolated by them, so the projection is falsifiable there,

under the controls §3.5 specifies. That the prediction runs along the tradition's own doctrinal axis is the reply's point, because the gradient tests whether the projection is the tradition's, where the chapter's inference could lose.

### 6.6 The pastoral concern

*Objection.* The chapter's analysis is intellectually coherent but pastorally insensitive. For many believers, the doctrines under critique provide comfort, meaning, and structure. Removing them creates a pastoral vacuum the analysis does not fill.

*Reply.* This objection deserves the most careful response in the chapter, because it identifies a real cost that intellectual analysis alone cannot address. This chapter asks more of its readers than any other in the book. The beliefs under critique are not merely propositions to be assessed; they are the structures within which many people have built their lives, their relationships, and their sense of who they are. Releasing them is not a philosophical exercise but, for many, a form of bereavement. The evaluative modality, the analysis's own concept, explains why: the believer is losing secondary objects, the derived value of traditional associations, that have populated her evaluative hierarchy for a lifetime. The grief is real.

What the chapter also means to show is that the loss is not total. The remedy is what §5 describes: the preservation and deepening of the evaluative engagement that gives religious life its depth. The tradition that emerges may be deeper, not shallower, than the one it replaces — because its evaluative engagement is grounded in primary value and not in derived value that rests on structurally incoherent foundations.

## 7 Conclusion

The chapter yields three results, all constructed.

**The divine wall.** The divine wall is the consequence of creed-based evaluation applied to persons — orthotic assessment in its most consequential social form — wherever post-mortem judgement by allegiance is projected onto present standing; that the projection occurs

is staked on the doctrinal gradient of §3.5. It operates at the most private level of intolerance and is structurally resistant to legal enforcement.

**Three transformations.** Three structural transformations follow as consequences of the established results: from theocratic to humanistic religiosity, from absolutist to democratic religiosity, and from creed-based to merit-based evaluation. Internal reform movements within the major traditions — Volf, An-Na'im, Borowitz, Abou El Fadl, and the Talmudic and Quranic resources cited — have already moved in these directions, for which the analysis provides the structural explanation of why these resources point where they do.

**What remains for religion.** What remains is substantial, since faith in a God of infinite diversity, institutional community, contemplative practice, moral education, and empathic formation survive intact. Only the claim to absolute authority and the evaluative primacy of creed over character are removed. Removing the doctrinal features the preceding chapters have shown structurally incoherent therefore opens space for a form of theism that preserves what believers value most — community, contemplation, devotion, the experience of the sacred — while dissolving the evaluative barriers creed-based judgement erects between communities.

The next chapter completes the movement by asking the converse question. This chapter argued from the conditions of democratic peace to the forms of religion that obstruct them; Chapter 24 asks which conception of God those conditions leave standing, drawing its answer from the metaphysical results of the book's first half. The two directions meet in a single figure — a God who is the structural negation of the theocratic God examined here, a companion who persuades where the absolutist commands — and in a constructive account of what God and faith could be once the structurally incoherent claims have been removed: what theism looks like after zero complexity.

## Grades and Dependencies

1. **Conditionality and scope.** All three results are *constructed*, and the chapter is conditional on the empathic constitution of morality (Ch. 16): a divine-command theist resists by resisting that premise. The argument is a gradient, strongest where creed-weighting is primary (§§3.1, 6.4). The circularity diagnosis addresses the assessor outside the framework; for the believer within it maps, without persuading (§3.2). The Premise Register carries the chain.

2. **Evidence and limits.** Putnam and Campbell's findings are correlations; the bridging effect is read as the wall dissolving through contact, kept falsifiable by the gradient test: flat under controls refutes (§§3.4–3.5). Comparative work rules out religiosity as the variable (Fish; Stepan & Robertson; Donno & Russett) without measuring doctrine at that grain. §4's reform voices are contested minorities; their weight is structural, not demographic.

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