

A LETTER TO MY ANXIOUS CHRISTIAN FRIENDS

From Fear to Faith in Unsettled Times

DAVID P. GUSHEE

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To every Christian who tries to love America

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. America: Who Are We?	5
2. Christians: Where Are We in This Country?	11
3. Democracy: A Christian Way to Govern?	17
4. Parties: What Do We Make of Today's Democrats and Republicans?	23
5. Fractures: Portrait of a Divided Country	28
6. Judges: They Didn't Sign Up for This	36
7. Character: Freedom under Discipline	41

8. Patriotism: (How) Should Christians Love America?	47
9. Race: One White Christian Tries to Figure It Out	52
10. Police: Has It Always Been This Bad?	58
11. Sex: Why We Never Stop Arguing about It	64
12. Abortion: The Sad Song That Never Ends	70
13. Aliens: About Who Belongs Here and Who Doesn't	76
14. Guns: Our Most Obvious Sickness	81
15. Money: Beyond Competitive Selfishness	88
16. Climate: The Ultimate Rorschach Test?	94
17. War: Have We Had Enough Yet?	101
18. Executions: A Strange Anachronism	108
19. Education: Are All Our Children Learning?	113
20. Health Care: The Unfinished Reform	119
Conclusion: Faithfulness and Other Strange Christian Virtues	123

INTRODUCTION

MY DEAR FELLOW AMERICAN CHRISTIANS: I WOULD LIKE to write you a letter about our country and how Christians should think about it and live in it right now. My main goal is to help American Christians to see our reality more clearly, assess that reality more thoughtfully, and act more faithfully. Are you interested in this? I hope so.

There is little question that Americans as a whole are anxious, with economic, cultural, and security anxieties at the top of the list for many of us. While the nation has by some measures recovered from the Great Recession of 2007–2008, many Americans have never really made it back to prosperity or just breaking even. Our cultural differences over all kinds of issues, such as race and sex, are like a scab that keeps getting torn off.

And we are more scared than we have ever been that if we go to a mall or a movie theater, someone is going to try to kill us.

Americans who claim a Christian identity share many of the same anxieties as everyone else but often have distinctive concerns. Our country is becoming more religiously diverse. Fewer people claim Christian identity, and the nation as a whole seems less culturally and publicly “Christian” than ever. A great many of our churches are struggling. Lifetime churchgoers often find that their children and grandchildren aren’t interested in the faith. And cultural conflicts never just remain “out there”; often they migrate “in here” to our congregations and even our dinner tables.

In this book, I offer a series of brief, understandable reflections on some of the major anxiety-causing issues that we face together. In a context of vicious partisan fighting, I will do my best to offer peaceable, constructive ideas that can make sense to Christians who identify very differently in their politics. I hope to inject a note of realistic and empowering hope into a cultural and Christian climate filled with pessimism. That might be kind of nice, don’t you think?

This book reflects a lifetime of working at the intersection of faith and politics, but I will not bore you with the footnotes or fancy words to prove it. Think of what follows as a letter from me to you, or twenty little letters, or maybe just us sitting over coffee and hashing a few things out as fellow Christians. There is a rough logic to the book’s structure: the first eight chapters deal more with broad issues about American culture and democracy, while the remaining chapters tackle

specific issue areas. But feel free to read the chapters in the order that interests you.

One final thought: the assumption lying behind this book is that it is okay for Christians to care enough about the country they live in to be anxious about it. It is, indeed, perfectly acceptable for Christians to be patriots, to love their country with a robust and full heart. Many of my fellow Christian leaders do not agree with me on this, and they have good reasons for their views. Mainly their worry is that American Christians, in particular, have a hard time distinguishing between God and country when they attempt to love and serve both. I think that I can point to a path of critical, informed patriotism through the various reflections offered here. But I acknowledge that I do love this country, and precisely because I do, I want it to be the best country it can be. If you agree, read on.

Chapter 1

AMERICA

Who Are We?

IT IS PRETTY MUCH IMPOSSIBLE TO WRAP OUR MINDS around this vast country called the United States of America. But here are a few forays, just for some perspective.

America is the third-most populous country in the world, with 320 million people. By land mass, we are the third- or fourth-largest country in the world. Stretching across an entire continent, with friendly neighbors to our north and south, geographically we are (were?) one of the most secure places on earth. We are also one of the most diverse in terms of geography and climate. The whole world, in a sense, is reflected on our soil. That's pretty cool.

Thinking of ourselves as one vast, continental, “sea to shining sea” country is, of course, quite natural. But

it is helpful sometimes to think also of the United States in terms not so much of the fifty states (not to mention our territories and possessions) but of profoundly different local and regional cultures. These include, for example, the various contexts and life experiences of those who live in urban, suburban, exurban, and rural parts of America. These differences would occur in just about any country, or any similar country. Beyond this, however, think about the differences among our various regional cultures. Consider how different it is to live in the American South versus the Northeast. Then contrast both with the Northwest, and all the above with the Southwest and Midwest. And there's always the Republic of Texas. A lot of what baffles and divides us is regional. The idea that we are the "United" States of America sometimes feels fictional. One can easily imagine scenarios where this continent might have ended up with two, three, or even more separate countries if history had worked out differently. The Western States of America. The Duchy of New England. And so on.

By many measures of national strength, we have certainly gained numerous advantages by staying together. For example, we are uniquely favored with abundant and diverse natural resources across the length and breadth of our land, contributing to our tremendous economic power. We have developed a massive and productive economy that has remained strong in every era. Despite perceptions of American economic decline, and many individuals and families who struggle, as a nation we remain the single most powerful economic actor on the world stage and have

the largest gross domestic product. We are a rich, innovative, economically productive and powerful country, even though we have an appalling number of people who are very poor.

The population of the United States began with native tribes who never recovered from the spread across the continent of European settlers and their own displacement and defeat in war. Surviving Native American tribes and individuals became America's most invisible people, and in some ways they remain our most troubled and impoverished population. It is striking how little attention Native Americans receive in contemporary U.S. politics and culture. Perhaps we would rather not think about it.

European settlers from many nations, though ultimately dominated by the British, and the African slaves they eventually brought here became the major early elements of the U.S. population. It must not be forgotten that Latin American (now often called Hispanic or Latino/a) people have been present in what became the United States ever since Spaniards reached Florida in the sixteenth century. Vastly more Latinos were incorporated into the U.S. population when the territory of the nation expanded to the west and southwest. Then successive waves of immigration over decades brought people from every nation to our own. For a long time, the United States has been one of the world's most ethnically diverse nations.

U.S. culture cannot be understood apart from thinking about the evolving layers of our population. Later we will return to the hot-button issue of immigration, but for now it is important to note that the powerful

core founding population of settlers of European background (often called “white people,” and there’s much more to say about that) developed a deep sense of entitlement for controlling the politics and culture of what became the United States of America. This, tragically and unforgivably, included a sense of entitlement on the part of many to enslave persons from Africa and of African descent—and then to treat them as second-class noncitizens after they won their freedom from slavery. All these generations later, a much more diverse United States is experienced as threatening and unfamiliar by many of those who hail from European stock and still feel something of that sense of entitlement. Others excitedly wait and work toward a fully multicultural nation, with more people sharing in cultural, economic, and political power than ever before.

By any standard measure, the United States is one of the world’s most stable countries. We have operated under the same democratic (federal, republican) system of government and the same constitution since 1789. That constitution, with its separation of powers, its checks and balances, and its shrewd understanding of human nature, became a model for other nations, many of whose people can still only dream of enjoying our level of political stability. Our founding political order has proven capable of serving a country larger and much more complex than the drafters could have imagined. The political design of our government and the civic culture that has helped sustain it over centuries are worthy of every American’s respect and gratitude. But it is not merely an academic question to ask whether a sense of complacency about the

impervious and enduring nature of our political system has tempted us to think that it can survive whatever abuses we actively inflict or passively permit.

I am among those who think that the wars of the twentieth century subtly affected our government and our culture while changing America's role in the world. We began as a loose group of colonies that, sufficiently outraged by British colonial injustices, banded together in the first successful anticolonial revolution of the modern era. We had, and still have, a great deal of "Don't tread on me" spirit in our national DNA. So it was certainly not inevitable that we would one day become a global superpower that would tread on a whole lot of other countries and peoples in the name of freedom or security.

But our smashing victories in World War I and World War II increased our confidence and global power. The Cold War left us as one of two global superpowers leading whole blocs of nations, everyone dangling over the nuclear-arms precipice and terrified of one another. The collapse of the USSR left us briefly as the world's only superpower, and we strutted a bit. Now the rise of radical Islamist terrorism has us terrified again.

The United States has become accustomed to vast global military, political, and economic power; to a massive and far-flung military and security apparatus; and to constant fighting around the world. This has strained our warriors and their families, as well as our constitutional order, because a constant state of emergency and war has never fit well with democratic governance.

As for religion, it is most fair to say that the colonies and then the United States began with a combination of personally devout and merely cultural Christianity, peculiarly mixed together with early Enlightenment religious skepticism and huge blind spots associated with slavery and race. All of this was characteristic of the situation of white European settlers in the era this continent was colonized. What has now become of this national religiosity is the topic of my next chapter.

The simple model I am working from in this open letter to you, my fellow American Christians, has three parts: see, assess, and act. I hope this brief reflection has helped you see a bit more clearly the grand epic that is the American story, an epic with much to celebrate but also much to mourn. I hope that sources of continued national strength are more visible now, and thus the current attitude of apparent national panic might be stilled a bit, at least in your heart. Ours is a great country, but like any country, it is a living, organic reality that changes over time. Some of those changes are constructive, some are dangerous, and some are subject to conflicting interpretations. Our actions and inactions as Christian citizens will be pivotal in affecting the direction that we now go as a nation.

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