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# The “American Experience” and the Death of Evangelism

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Every culture and civilization embraces a certain set of assumptions about life, truth, significance, and what it means to be human. Without these shared assumptions, common life would be impossible. Individuals within these societies may not give much active thought to these common assumptions, but their decisions, expectations, and general dispositions reflect the presence of these assumptions as what some philosophers call background ideas.

Out of these assumptions an entire way of life emerges. Background ideas move into the foreground as morals, manners, and the culture at large begins to reflect the decisive influence of these ideas. In America, an identifiable “American way of life” rules as an operational worldview for many persons — perhaps even replacing more fundamental convictions.

“The American way” involves, among other things, patriotism, a sense of fair play, equality, personal autonomy, and limitless opportunity. We expect each other to respect these assumptions and ideals.

But, is God accountable to the American way?

Responding to a recent report from the [Barna Research Group](#) indicating that Americans Christians are increasingly unwilling to believe that their non-Christian neighbors are going to hell, Boston College sociologist Alan Wolfe [explained](#):

*“It’s just part of a 200-year working out of ideas about personal autonomy and equality that are sort of built into the American experience. The notion that someone is going to burn in hell because they have their own beliefs is just not resonant within our larger political ideals.”*

Wolfe, who directs the [Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life](#) at Boston College, suggests that Americans are confusing the American experience with the ways of God. Without doubt, assumptions about autonomy and equality “are sort of built into the American experience.” These ideas are now just taken for granted. Americans generally assume themselves and their fellow citizens to be unconditionally autonomous, free to make and remake themselves in protean fashion, and thus the unfettered captains of their own souls.

Americans are not sure what to do with ideals of equality and fairness, but we are generally certain that equality and fairness are the right categories to employ, regardless of the idea or context.

People who think themselves autonomous will claim the right to define all meaning for themselves. Any truth claim they reject or resist is simply ruled out of bounds. We will make our own world of meaning and dare anyone to violate our autonomy.

The same research report indicates that a majority of American Christians pick and choose doctrines, more or less on the basis of those they like as opposed to those they dislike.



This certainly explains a great deal about the current shape of Christianity in American today. Specifically, it points to at least one fundamental reason that so many Christians — including a significant number who claim to be evangelical — no longer believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven.

That reason: Eternal punishment in hell is not consistent with “the American experience” or “the American way.” The God of the Bible, in other words, does not act in ways consistent with what many people consider to be American ideals. Sending people to hell is just not fair.

The Bible never claims that God acts fairly, of course. Fairness is the best we mortals can often hope to achieve. We want our children to learn to play fairly and each child learns all too quickly to cry out, “No fair!”

But God does not claim to be fair. The God of the Bible is infinitely greater than we are. He is faithful, just, holy, merciful, gracious, and righteous. A morally perfect being does not operate at the level of mere and faulty human fairness, but at the level of his own omnipotent righteousness. We hope to make things fair. God makes things *right*.

I think Alan Wolfe is on to something really important here, and Christians should think carefully about what he is saying. The Holy One of Israel, the ruler of all and the sovereign of universe, is now to be judged by his own sinful creatures by the standard of fairness. Doctrines ruled to be “unfair” are cast aside and overridden by our cherished cultural assumptions. Evangelism will die the thousand deaths of cultural awkwardness.

As much as Christians in this blessed nation should respect and cherish our democratic ideals and system of government, we must keep ever in mind that the Kingdom of God is ruled by a higher and infinitely more perfect law and system of governance.

Be warned: God is not running for office, and heaven is not a democracy.

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See “[Most US Christians Define Own Theology](#),” by Jane Lampman, *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 14, 2009.

