

BOOK REVIEW

Democracy Needs Religion

by Hartmut Rosa

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Hartmut Rosa, who is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Jena and Director of the Max Weber Center at the University of Erfurt, Germany, has written a short book based on a lecture he gave in 2022 at the Diocese of Wurzburg, Germany. Therein, he rejects the view held by numerous social scientists that the “church is an anachronism that has no place in today’s ideological reservoir and clashes with the self-perception of a modern society” (7). Taking issue with the view that religious institutions are undemocratic and authoritarian and are responsible for encouraging people of different faiths to engage in violence, Rosa asks for the embracing of what he labels a “listening heart” (3). For him, modern societies and individuals are “severely lacking in listening hearts—politically and in all other possible respects as well” (11). In short, we have lost the ability to actively and sympathetically listen to those with whom we disagree. Instead, taken to its extreme (which has so often been the case), we dehumanize and demonize the “Other.”

Although I wholeheartedly agree with Rosa that: “Democracy is our society’s central article of faith, but it needs voices, ears, and listening hearts to avoid being dysfunctional” (40), realistically I do not see much evidence of this happening soon. As I tell my students who ask my opinion about what is happening in America and the world, I say that “I live in optimism.” However, I qualify this by stating that I’m a “naïve optimist,” one who continues to believe that truth will triumph over lies, light will overcome darkness, without much recent evidence to support my position. This is why I’m a Christian, and one who believes that a “listening heart” is still possible. And this is also why I am grateful for someone with the stature Rosa has as a sociologist, who also believes in this possibility.

Rosa, in this short volume, argues that it “is the religious traditions and institutions such as churches have at their disposal and narrative, cognitive reservoirs, rites, practices, and spaces in which a listening heart might be cultivated and experienced” (42). I confess I do not know enough about other nations (Rosa is writing in Germany) to venture an opinion on their specific relationships to religion and democracy, but it’s obvious that there is extreme polarization in the United States, which cries out for America’s churches to call for “listening hearts.” So much of America’s polarization, I’m convinced, is due to a misunderstanding of what each side stands for, producing a dire need for “listening hearts.” Democracy is not only being challenged more so than any time in our history, it is tottering on the brink of collapse. My belief is that the

polarization of politics and culture in the USA is at its core the result of a clash by MAGA Republicans (many of whom are fundamentalist Christians) and a secular intelligentsia that regards religion (specifically Christianity, America's largest religion) as a relic of a nostalgic past, a remnant of an era that has given way to the advances of science. This is not to imply that all MAGA Republicans are fundamentalist Christians nor that all America's intelligentsia are secular. It's just that a dominant portion of each group can be labelled as such, and are politically in positions to advance their views.

Given this polarization, I hold that democracy sorely needs religious values to function. But not the Christian religion we now see, which only denigrates and demonizes its opposition, who, in turn, demeans believers as ignorant people who are easily fooled and who blindly follow a leader like Donald Trump. True, even many Christian clergy and leaders, in their search for power, cannot or will not acknowledge that Trump is devoid of any vestige of a moral compass. In so doing, Christianity's leaders are no better than the secular intelligentsia who hold that moral values are situational.

Until both sides attempt to embrace the concept of a "listening heart"—I say attempt because it's not easy to change one's viewpoint—we will continue to move away from democracy.

In conclusion, I am in complete agreement with Rosa's final "answer to the question of whether today's society needs religion can be nothing but a resounding *yes!*" (66). And I pray this "yes" will incorporate the values of non-violence, equality, and justice that Jesus taught, and will bring them to fruition.

As I write this, I do not know what the results of the 2024 American presidential election will be. But what I do know is that if Christian churches do not take the lead in calling for "listening hearts," the polarization that grips the USA will continue to worsen.

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