

Flourishing and the Temptations of Epistemic Isolation

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Abstract: Religious communities are sites of shared meaning and belonging that foster human flourishing. They can also be sites of contrastive identity, in and through which friends are distinguished from enemies. In fact, cultivating enemies can bind communities, including religious communities, more tightly together. This essay explores how religious communities can serve as sites of parochial altruism and epistemic isolation. In conversation with Lisa Tessman, I contest the notion that flourishing can be enhanced through cultivating enmity and isolation, arguing that these compromise a community's capacity to seek truth. I look to contemporary U.S. Christian evangelicalism as an example of a religious community that has embraced epistemic isolation, while arguing that evangelicals and other Christians have at their disposal theological resources for resisting the temptations of parochial altruism and embracing inclusive forms of sociality conducive to genuine flourishing.

Keywords: Epistemic isolation, Flourishing, Inclusive sociality, Parochial altruism, Partisan epistemology

According to Aristotle (*Politics*, 1253a1-3) humans are political animals, inclined by nature to live in society. Aquinas elaborates this thought in his tiered account of natural human inclinations. There are inclinations shared with all creatures, those shared with other animals, and those proper to rational animals, to live in society and worship God (*Summa Theologiae* I-II.94.2). Today, evolutionary and comparative psychologists characterize humans as hyper-cooperative.¹ Like other highly social mammals, we characteristically live in groups and cultivate close, lasting social bonds with both relatives and non-relatives. We also create elaborate forms of

¹ (Burkart, Allon, Amici, et al, 2014); (Tomasello and Vaish 2013).

cumulative culture, build sprawling cities, design intricate infrastructures, and develop complex technologies that support vast populations. We live in worlds no individual can fully fathom and that no individual could possibly recreate. We flourish in community and cannot flourish without community.

Religion has long played a critical role in sustaining human communities and thus in fostering human flourishing.² Shared practices, rituals, beliefs, narratives—all of these help to create common worlds of meaning and belonging. Of course, many other forms of community are sites of shared meaning and belonging: families, neighborhoods, workplaces, clubs, political movements. One of the historic strengths of religious communities flows from the fact that many of these other sites have historically overlapped with religious communities: one worshipped with other family members, in one's neighborhood, which was close to one's workplace. Yet what distinguishes religious community from these other sites of social belonging is the way in which religious beliefs and practices seek to align human cares and concerns with shared understandings of what is most ultimately real. Religious communities are not just sites of love and acceptance, of care and camaraderie, of shared activity and common purpose. More than this, to participate in religious community is to be taken up into a communal affirmation that the deepest structure of reality is not fundamentally alien and indifferent to what is good, true, and beautiful but rather its ground and source. In the midst of complex, changing, often overwhelming circumstances, religious communities, local and global, can sustain narratives that make sense of pain and loss as well as joy and new life.

Yet membership in religious communities can also be a site of contrastive identity, in and through which friends are distinguished from enemies. In fact, cultivating enemies can bind communities, including religious communities, more tightly together. In what follows, I sketch the ways in which religious communities can serve as sites of parochial altruism and epistemic isolation. While acknowledging that these can serve a unifying social function, I contest the idea that flourishing is enhanced through cultivating enmity and isolation. I develop this point in conversation with philosopher Lisa Tessman. Tessman believes that while "moral goodness" requires inclusive sociality, flourishing does not. Resisting this move, I argue that epistemic isolation compromises a group's ability to seek the truth and

² (Herdt 2014, 241–242). There is a growing body of empirical research that explores correlations between participation in religious communities and various dimensions of flourishing, most specifically health. E.g., (Chen, Kim, and VanderWeele 2020); (Pawlikowski, Bialowolski, Weziak-Bialowolska, and VanderWeele 2019). (Vanderweele 2017, 476–481) offers a helpful overview and addresses evidence for causality.

thereby undermines their flourishing. I look to contemporary U.S. Christian evangelicalism as an example of a religious community that regards itself as persecuted and that therefore has adopted epistemic isolation even as evangelicals have become increasingly politically influential in ways that belie their narratives of persecution. Evangelicals and other Christians have at their disposal theological resources for resisting the temptation of parochial altruism and epistemic isolation. Yet no one is immune from the temptation. Cultivating a keen awareness of its workings can help agents embrace forms of religious community whose inner bonds are strengthened by the commitment to remain open. Here, there is a possibility to participate in the kind of mutual self-offering in inclusive sociality that Christians understand as characterizing the divine life into which believers are invited.

1. From Chosen Identity to Parochial Altruism

If membership in religious communities was once closely aligned with other largely given forms of identity, today in late industrial Western nations, religious communities are experienced by more and more people around the globe as aspects of chosen identity.³ They are more likely to overlap with one's chosen rather than given families and with one's political identity. In the 1950s, civil rights leaders were fond of pointing out that "11 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of American life."⁴ Today, while many congregations remain segregated along racial lines, political sorting is now an even more noticeable phenomenon (with Roman Catholic parishes offering only a partial exception). And as religious affiliation in these societies has declined, there is an increasing likelihood that membership in a religious community is a site of contrastive identity. "We" in this community of faith understand what is ultimately real, but those outside do not. In such contexts, the sense of belonging and identity go hand in hand with a sense of alienation from those outside. It is not just that the world is a site of suffering, loss, and death as well as of joy and love, but that other people, other communities, are experienced as failing to recognize the truth and as turning from the good, or even as actively repudiating the truth and persecuting the good. Precisely because religious communities are sites of communal anchoring in what is taken to be the ultimately

³ (Taylor 2007, 505–535).

⁴ The quote has variously been attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Marie Johnson (wife of Charles Johnson, president of Fisk University), Kenneth Miller, president of the New York City Mission, and Helen Kenyon, former moderator of the Congregational-Christian Churches. Kenyon appears to have been the first, as reported in "Worship Hour Found Time of Segregation," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1952, 26.

real, perceived threats to these communities are experienced as particularly high-stakes and existential in character.⁵

One might expect communities to break apart under persecution, but persecution often strengthens group loyalty and social bonds within a group. In fact, political leaders, grasping this dynamic, have long manufactured external threats precisely in order to shore up internal unity and loyalty. Carl Schmitt famously analyzed collective forms of friendship and enmity as the essence of politics, arguing that state unity is achieved through opposition to some other framed as enemy.⁶ Enemies are thus frequently manufactured for this purpose, whether consciously or subconsciously. Sometimes political leaders create enemies out of religious minorities, often framing them as sources of infection or contamination within the body politic. The targeted religious group need not be large or powerful to be perceived as a potent source of infection. But religious communities themselves are prone both to create enemies of other groups and to claim the status of the persecuted. When a community constructs a narrative of itself as persecuted, it is thus important to ask about the (often complex) social realities behind this narrative. A dominant group may perceive itself to be persecuted if there is even a small diminution of its relative social power and influence.

Evolutionary anthropologists theorize that these tendencies have deep evolutionary roots. They have dubbed the phenomenon “parochial altruism,” suggesting that the human tendency to form strong social bonds and group identities, and to be willing to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the group, is mediated by the same mechanisms as the tendency to demonize and attack outgroups.⁷ Oxytocin, the bonding hormone, is associated both with parental care and defense of helpless young and with raging attacks on anything perceived as a threat to offspring.⁸ It is this same two-edged phenomenon, generalized from the family to the larger social group, that is behind both intense feelings of belonging and patriotism, on the one hand, and xenophobia and ethno-nationalism, on the other.

2. Flourishing and Inclusive Sociality

How shall we respond to these observations concerning the workings of the friend-enemy distinction, the evolutionarily deep roots of parochial altruism? What does

⁵ The Scottish philosopher David Hume began analyzing these dynamics in the 18th century, (Herdt 1997).

⁶ (Schmitt 2007, 26).

⁷ (Rusch 2014); (Greene 2013).

⁸ (Tomasello 2016, 87).

all of this mean for flourishing in religious communities? It would, of course, be possible to define flourishing in such a way as to regard the flourishing of persons in religious communities to be enhanced by these contrastive and conflictual forms of belonging. One thinker who does this is Lisa Tessman. That she does so is surprising. In her influential 2005 book *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Studies*, Tessman draws attention to the ways in which contexts defined by structural injustice and oppression limit possibilities for cultivating the virtues as well as for flourishing. Tessman believes that “moral goodness” requires broadly inclusive sociality: “a pursuit of not just my own well-being, and not just the well-being of those whose well-being I depend on, but also the well-being of those whose very lack of well-being might have been a condition of my privileges.”⁹ Parochial altruism is thus in tension with “moral goodness.” But Tessman believes that moral goodness and flourishing are themselves in tension with one another, in such contexts. While moral goodness requires inclusive sociality, flourishing is possible on the basis of exclusive forms of sociality that favor the in-group: “humans are not dependent on a sociality that is inclusive of everyone; interdependent community can be constructed to support the flourishing of those within it, disregarding or even undermining the flourishing of those excluded.”¹⁰ Tessman points to Aristotle in support of this claim. Aristotle took for granted that flourishing was possible for leisured adult Greek males within the polis. This flourishing required a kind of sociality, directed towards one’s peers. But it was “compatible with sexism, class divisions and economic exploitation, xenophobia and nationalism, pernicious ethnocentrism, and that which, since modernity, can be called racism.”¹¹ Tessman for her own constructive purposes turns instead “to a conception of flourishing implicit in the liberatory goals of communities that are struggling against oppression.”¹² Here she finds a conception of flourishing as inclusively social in character. Yet she considers the condition of inclusive sociality to be stipulative in character. One chooses, in other words, to reject the kinds of flourishing compatible with exclusion and oppression.

I share Tessman’s concern with Aristotle’s blithe acceptance of the thought that flourishing was only within reach for the privileged few. But I would offer a different diagnosis and thus a different remedy here.¹³ There is important insight in

⁹ (Tessman 2005, 76).

¹⁰ (*Ibid.*, 76).

¹¹ (*Ibid.*, 74).

¹² (*Ibid.*, 75).

¹³ I am here drawing on and developing an argument set out in (Herdt 2022a, 219–220).

the notion of the “epistemic privilege of the oppressed.”¹⁴ There are indeed important dimensions of social reality that are relatively inaccessible to those in positions of power and privilege, and visible from the undersides of society. Epistemic privilege does not, however, guarantee access to truth. And it is unfortunately not always the case that communities struggling against oppression avoid reproducing the evils they oppose. It is always a temptation for the formerly oppressed to become oppressors themselves. There is no guarantee that communities struggling against oppression will endorse or live out a commitment to a conception of flourishing that is inclusively social.

I would instead hold on to a key Aristotelian claim that Tessman abandons: that there is no genuine flourishing, only apparent flourishing, without the virtues. Flourishing is a constitutively normative notion, bound up with what it is to be perfected as the kind of creature one is. It cannot be reduced to thin, subjectively-defined notions of well-being. This insistence makes possible a stronger internal critique of Aristotle’s own acceptance of exclusive sociality. Aristotle was wrong in thinking that it was possible for Athenian elites to flourish on the backs of women and the enslaved; both their virtues and the kind of flourishing that was available to them were significantly compromised. We can build on a key insight of Tessman’s here: that “being able to think of oneself as morally good and being able to sustain the intersubjectively confirmed understanding of the good life as one that does not depend on the flourishing of all requires an epistemic isolation.”¹⁵ Epistemic isolation is a condition that we should seek to overcome, as it compromises our ability to arrive at the truth.¹⁶ Insofar as we deliberately cultivate such epistemic isolation, or modes of self-deception that paper over our epistemic isolation, we are not just cutting ourselves off from access to the truth. We are also, insofar as we cut off reason-giving exchanges with those outside or on the underside of our community, exhibiting the vice of disrespect. We are failing to flourish as the kind of creatures we are.

3. Epistemic Isolation in Contemporary Christian Evangelicalism

There are many potent contemporary examples of epistemic isolation cultivated in order to shore up bonds of communal loyalty. I want to spend a bit of time unpacking one contemporary instance that raises important questions concerning

¹⁴ This is a concept first articulated by (Lukács 2012) but developed further within feminist standpoint epistemology by theorists such as Nancy Hartsock, e.g., (Hartsock 1983) and (Wylie 2003).

¹⁵ (Tessman 2005, 79).

¹⁶ (Kvanvig 1992); (Herdt 2014).

flourishing in religious communities, particularly Christian communities: U.S. evangelicalism.¹⁷ While drawing on a number of sources, I will rely for the most part on Tim Alberta's 2023 book *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*.¹⁸ Alberta's book is written by someone who understands evangelical Christianity from within and is based on extensive interviews with many evangelical Christian leaders.

Evangelical Protestants now account for 23% of all U.S. adults, making up a larger share of Christians in the population than any other group.¹⁹ Despite their well-established and relatively privileged place in society, Evangelicals have absorbed a narrative of persecution. In the early 19th century, Evangelical Christianity was the dominant mode of religious expression in the nation, which itself with some justification could be regarded as a Christian nation even though many of the Founding Fathers were religious rationalists, not orthodox Christians.²⁰ The more progressive mainline denominations slowly increased in influence, with a peak in the mid-20th century (the term itself arises out of the fundamentalist-modernist debates in the 1920s and 1930s). While mainline denominations have focused on social justice and have tended to accept historical-critical approaches to the Bible, evangelicals have accepted more literal interpretations of the Bible. Evangelicals are also distinguished by their emphasis on the importance of a personal experience of religious conversion and on sharing the gospel with others.²¹

As mainline Christianity grew in influence, evangelicals initially sought to remain aloof from "the world" and from politics, which was seen as a source of taint. Evangelical Christians focused on the cultivation of personal piety. The Scopes trial was an important turning point: convinced that society had turned against them, evangelicals "responded by retreating into their own subculture, a vast and interlocking network of churches, denominations, and educational institutions, which shielded them from the corruptions of the larger world."²² In the 1960s, Jerry Falwell preached "separatism" and frowned on civic activism and political involvement, although his denunciation of the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* suggests that he did think evangelicals had important

¹⁷ My discussion is focused in particular on white evangelicals. Black evangelicals share an emphasis on being "born again" but are much more likely to identify as Democrats and to express concern for structural injustices in American society, (Orcés 2021).

¹⁸ (Alberta 2023).

¹⁹ (Smith et al. 2025). Note that the Pew Research Center differentiates Evangelical Protestants from Mainline Protestants and Historically Black Protestants in its surveys and reports.

²⁰ (Balmer 2016, x).

²¹ (*Ibid.*, xi).

²² (*Ibid.*, x).

stakes in broader social developments.²³ Since that time, evangelicals have become increasingly active in U.S. politics. In the early 1970s, Jerry Falwell proclaimed at Liberty Baptist College (later to become Liberty University) that “this idea of ‘religion and politics don’t mix’ was invented by the devil to keep Christians from running their own country!”²⁴ By the 1980s, “evangelical” was synonymous with “conservative Christian,” and not long after that, with “white conservative Republican.”²⁵ Alberta, a more traditional evangelical focused on personal piety, sees this as a crisis: “instead of seeing ourselves as exiles in a metaphorical Babylon, the way Peter describes the first-century Christians living in Rome, we have embraced our imperial citizenship. Instead of fleeing the temptation to rule all the world, like Jesus did, we have made deals with the devil.”²⁶ In the 1970s, evangelicals focused on enemies outside the nation, in particular the USSR and “godless communism.” With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the narrative shifted to focus on enemies within.

For decades, now, evangelical leaders have proclaimed “that godless Democrats would one day launch a frontal assault on Christianity in America. . . . It was only a matter of time, they knew, until secularists weaponized the government to eradicate the Almighty from public life.”²⁷ Religious decline has been cast no longer as a failure of piety that calls for religious revival, but rather as a deliberately engineered secularist assault, an assault not just on faithful Christians but on “America,” understood as a Christian nation, a nation chosen by God to display and defend liberty. Jerry Falwell spoke often of threats coming from “secular liberal elites and godless government bureaucrats.”²⁸ Increasingly, evangelicals have depicted Christian America as “under siege” (a favorite phrase of evangelical Robert Jeffress), and have encouraged believers to look to divinely-elected savior figures to rescue them from persecution.²⁹ COVID lockdowns were interpreted as deliberate efforts to suppress worship, reinforcing narratives of persecution.³⁰ Surprisingly,

²³ While white evangelicals sometimes claim that abortion was the issue that led them to become politically active, scholars point out that the facts on the ground do not support that narrative; it was *Brown vs. Board of Education* that prompted evangelical politicization, a quarter-century before *Roe v. Wade*, and evangelicals only slowly shifted into pro-life commitments, (Gorski and Perry 2022, 68–69).

²⁴ (Alberta 2023, 53).

²⁵ (*Ibid.*, 11).

²⁶ (*Ibid.*, 13).

²⁷ (*Ibid.*, 20).

²⁸ (*Ibid.*, 53).

²⁹ (*Ibid.*, 120).

³⁰ (*Ibid.*, 40).

evangelicals have been increasingly willing to accept as saviors public figures who are not themselves people of faith and whose character is anything but exemplary. In 2011, the Public Religion Research Institute found that only 30% of white evangelicals said that a politician who behaved badly in their personal life could perform public duties with integrity. Only five years, later, that figure had shifted dramatically, to 72%. Donald Trump was cast as “the latest in a long tradition of flawed men who were being used by God to advance his purposes,” a long tradition that could be traced all the way back to King Cyrus of Persia, who defended God’s Chosen People despite being an unbeliever with an unsavory character.³¹ Radical measures are seen as justified by the extremes of the situation in which evangelicals find themselves. Eric Metaxas depicted the situation of evangelicals in America as a “Bonhoeffer moment,” in which actions akin to that of assassination are justified. He argued in 2016 that a Democratic Party win would threaten America’s very existence. Supporting Trump was “for the survival of the nation.”³²

One might think that as evangelicals moved from a stance of “separatism” to political involvement they would have become more engaged with the broader society. Because they understood themselves to be persecuted by society at large, and took contact with that society to be a source of contamination, however, this was not the case. Instead, evangelicals sought ever more wholesale disconnection from broader social institutions. This is nowhere more visible than in evangelical flight from public education. Evangelicals have left the public schools in favor of homeschooling and evangelical Christian academies in record numbers and are the segment of the U.S. population most likely to choose home-schooling.³³ Michael Farris, president of Patrick Henry College, depicted this push to create an alternative evangelical educational system, including evangelical institutions of higher education, as part and parcel of a “battle to take the land” that is modeled explicitly on Joshua’s biblical conquest of the Promised Land.³⁴ His 2005 book was titled *The Joshua Generation: Restoring the Heritage of Christian Leadership*, and Patrick Henry College is the fruit of his efforts. Institutions like Patrick Henry College and Hillsdale College provide contexts within which evangelical students can be taught about the shining past of Christian America and the threats posed by godless Democrats. They can encounter competing narratives and worldviews in tightly controlled

³¹ (*Ibid.*, 24).

³² (*Ibid.*, 316).

³³ “For a Lot of American Teens, Religion is a Regular Part of the Public School Day,” Pew Research Center, October 3, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/03/for-a-lot-of-american-teens-religion-is-a-regular-part-of-the-public-school-day/#74ffae977f946175dcf5eac864ce984a>.

³⁴ (Farris 2005).

environments in which they can be taught precisely how to counter these perspectives. They are thereby inoculated from future encounters.³⁵

4. Possibilities for Flourishing in Christian Community

What shall we say about the possibility of flourishing in contemporary evangelical Christian communities? We might note for starters that white evangelicals are unlikely to claim that they are flourishing without qualification, for several reasons. First, inasmuch as they understand themselves to be members of a persecuted minority, they are likely to regard their flourishing as compromised by persecution. Second, inasmuch as they, together with other Christians, regard their own efforts at Christian discipleship to be hampered by sin, they will understand this to limit their flourishing. And, third, given that they anticipate an afterlife of perfect flourishing in comparison with which all earthly happiness will pale, they will regard whatever flourishing they now have as a mere foretaste of what is to come. At the same time, evangelicals will likely regard their religious communities as contributing positively to their flourishing. And it is reasonable to think that there are dimensions of their well-being that are indeed enhanced by their membership in these communities in some of the ways discussed at the outset of this essay. With some luck, they experience a sense of belonging, of being known and loved and accepted by others. They experience the satisfactions of shared activity and common purpose. They are supported and accompanied through life's inevitable difficulties. They take part in liturgies that align their bodily movements, even their breathing, with others in their community, forging a profound sense of unity. They hear preaching that reinforces their sense of alignment with God's purposes and thus with the grain of the universe. They inhabit a world of mutually-reinforcing elements that provide assurance that despite whatever loss and suffering their experience in their personal lives, despite their own sins and failures, and despite whatever persecution they undergo collectively, their lives are in tune with the ultimately real.

In these and other ways, then, we will want to affirm that participation in religious community is enhancing the flourishing of these evangelical Christians. At the same time, I think we ought to suspect that the kind of epistemic isolation I have described as characteristic of evangelical Christianity today undermines the flourishing of persons in these communities in quite significant ways. David Roberts has spoken memorably of the dangers of "tribal epistemology," in which

³⁵ I discuss this more fully in (Herdt 2026).

“information is evaluated based not on conformity to common standards of evidence or correspondence to a common understanding of the world, but on whether it supports the tribe’s values and goals and is vouchsafed by tribal leaders.”³⁶ I’ve discussed this and associated phenomena elsewhere under the heading of “partisan epistemology,” noting that “it arises when there is a failure of trust in transpartisan authorities, institutions, and norms, such that people do not simply regard themselves as competing against other social groups as rival teams on a shared playing field, but rather regard rivals as utterly unworthy of engagement.”³⁷

Yet while there are reasons to think that evangelical Christianity in the United States suffers from epistemic isolation, there are also powerful resources at the heart of Christianity that can be drawn upon in order to resist these tendencies. This is not as easy, though, as pointing to Jesus’ teaching to love one’s enemies (Matthew 5: 43–45). The command to “pray for those who persecute you” can be coopted into the strategy of construing one’s own group as the persecuted party, regardless of the facts on the ground. Part of the challenge of enemy love is learning when not to construe a neighbor as an enemy. Happily, there are additional resources at hand. Oliver O’Donovan suggests that the refusal of partisan epistemology is deeply rooted in biblical traditions of prophetic speech: “any voice within the public realm which could address the community about the common good had to be heard, lest the voice of true prophecy should go unheard.”³⁸ “To the extent that we are incapable of communicating truly,” he notes in a different context, “we fail to communicate, even if the syntactical forms of our language are unimpaired, and to the extent that we fail to communicate, we fail to engage in and renew community.”³⁹ Epistemic isolation endangers our capacity to recognize and communicate the truth and thereby undermines community in the deepest sense. Christian communities, by honoring the prophets, cultivate reminders to listen even to voices that disturb and challenge. Stanley Hauerwas, meanwhile, insists that “the truth of the adventure tale [that is the Christian narrative] is . . . partly tested by how it helps me negotiate the existence of the other both as threat and as a gift for the existence of my own story.”⁴⁰ John Howard Yoder, similarly, argued that there is a vision of

³⁶ (Roberts 2017).

³⁷ (Herdt 2022b, 4).

³⁸ (O’Donovan 1996, 269).

³⁹ (O’Donovan 2017, 184).

⁴⁰ (Hauerwas 2020, 250). I discuss these dynamics more fully in (Herdt 2015, 38), where I insist that “the church’s gift to the world of truthfulness is a gift that can be given only insofar as the church

Christian community capable of offering a model for a pluralistic democratic civil society: “in Christian community, where the Word of God is proclaimed, all should be free to speak and all should listen critically (1 Cor. 14). If that is the way divine truth is to be articulated in the words of our world, then those who have learned the skills of listening critically and speaking prophetically should be able as well to apply them to debates about human justice.”⁴¹ Indeed, Yoder made the stronger claim that Christian congregational governance traditions historically influenced the development of ideals of free speech and democratic government by contributing these critical skills of epistemic openness.

I put forth this last example advisedly. Yoder’s claims stand under a dark cloud, given his longstanding abusive relations with women and his elaborate evasion of community efforts to hold him responsible for his actions.⁴² Far from supporting the speech of these others, Yoder used his keen intelligence to undermine the credibility of their speech. Yoder was a walking contradiction. He serves as a vivid example of the ways in which human beings can deceive themselves and others even—or perhaps especially—when it comes to forms of epistemic injustice. Epistemic openness is not secured by paying lip service to critical listening and prophetic speech while shaming and silencing and running rhetorical circles around others. Recent scholarship has begun to develop much richer accounts of the demands of epistemic justice, which take into account the realities of unequal distribution of power and the ways in which these realities shape who can speak and with what credibility.⁴³

Conclusion

The temptation to censor and silence, the temptation to build echo chambers, is universal. We might think, for instance, of the ways in which progressives in the academy have in recent years invoked crisis—Ferguson, Standing Rock, George Floyd, the flood of refugees at the southern U.S. border—in order to justify dogmatic assertions insulated from critical scrutiny.⁴⁴ It is easier to diagnose the ways in which others are engaging in epistemic isolation in service of parochial altruism than it is to see how one’s own communities are lapsing into echo chambers. Yet the more

does not simply show itself forth to the world but also speaks with the world, asking for and giving reasons in a risky and imaginative process of plural particularities”.

⁴¹ (Yoder 1984, 166).

⁴² (Goossen 2015).

⁴³ E.g., (Fricker 2007); (Medina 2012).

⁴⁴ (Gutkin 2025, 516–517).

fully we can understand these temptations to create enemies and latch on to narratives of persecution, the more completely we grasp all-too-human tendencies to resist inclusive sociality in the service of narrower forms of belonging, and the more deeply we appreciate how partisan epistemology undermines our pursuit of truth and thereby the modes of flourishing made possible by such communities, the more hope there is for living into more life-giving, truth-yielding alternatives.

Christians understand Jesus to have come in love “while we were enemies” of God (Romans 5:10). Christians worship a God whose very life is understood as self-offering and who invites creatures to participate in that life of endlessly self-giving love. God does not retreat behind an impenetrable fortress or wait for the hostilities to cease before reaching out, or ensure invulnerability before making contact. The coming of Jesus was nothing if not an exercise in vulnerability. There are thus rich resources at hand for Christian cultivation of forms of belonging that embrace inclusive sociality as they seek alignment with the deepest structure of reality. And there are possibilities here for genuine flourishing in religious community, opened up to ever fuller responsiveness to the good, true, and beautiful.

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