

The
WORLD 
Is About to *TURN*

*Mending a Nation's
Broken Faith*

**RICK ROUSE
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Foreword by Peter Marty



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*We dedicate this to our grandchildren
as well as to the other visionaries and dreamers
who will help make this world a better place,
for all people and for all of God's creation.*

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Foreword by Peter W. Marty

No shortage of opinions exists among people with differing ideas about the proper date of America's founding. When, exactly, were the seeds of the American experiment planted, seeds that would eventually form the distinctive shape we see in modern American life? Was it in 1776, the year that thirteen separate states declared their independence from Great Britain? Some people argue quite persuasively for 1789, when the US Constitution became the supreme law of the land. Then there is 1863, the year President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, altering the legal status of 3.5 million enslaved African Americans; or 1865, when the outcome of the Civil War changed *these* United States to *the* United States of America. Some enthusiasts for America's immigrant origins prefer the significance of 1886, the year the Statue of Liberty was dedicated in New York Harbor; or 1903, when Emma Lazarus' famous sonnet was affixed to the statue's base. More recently, 1619 has gained favor as a date for our founding significance—the year enslaved people first began arriving by ship from West Africa.

For contemplating America's earliest underpinnings, my own preferred date of reference is 1630. In April of that year, while on board the ship *Arbella* en route to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Puritan leader John Winthrop delivered the sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity." In it, Winthrop laid the groundwork for some of what later came to be known both positively and negatively as American exceptionalism. "We must bear one another's burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren," he said. "We are entered into covenant with [God] for this work." Any breach of the covenant, which might occur through selfish or carnal pursuits in the present age, might well incite the wrath of God. Winthrop memorably referred to such wrath as a shipwreck.

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God. For this end, we must be knit together . . . we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other's necessities . . . we must delight in each other; make other's conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together.

This common bond of mutuality would be tested many times over the centuries. Citizens of America have experienced both remarkable success and failure in making other peoples' condition their own. The report card for our nation is mixed when it comes to consistently and wholesomely rejoicing together, mourning together, and laboring and suffering together. Every chapter of American history has engaged its own form of the debate on whether "we the people" refers more to a profound sense of community or merely to a collection of individuals.

For those enamored with personal rights, a rugged individualism has defined American identity. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett are emblematic heroes of this impulse. Marching to the beat of one's own drum, charting one's own course, and following one's own dreams in a spirited way has enabled many to embrace a life dominated by self-interest. In place of cherishing transcendent biblical ideals like those expressed by Winthrop, hyper-individualists typically are more interested in making sure they get a sufficient piece of the American pie they consider their own.

For those Americans who understand the good life to be something greater than a disparate group of lone rangers claiming their individual rights and autonomy, the common good remains a prized concept. In their best moments, these individuals believe that the well-being of the whole is as important, or more so, than their own well-being. Some of those who celebrate what Winthrop called "our bonds of [human] affection," understand that what they believe and think is not just their own business; it's also business that affects others. In other words, what's in their own hearts ends up impacting and shaping the ways they act in society. They consider both their citizenship and their faith to be something other than a self-project.

Any serious vision for mending a nation like ours, where the fabric of community gets frayed by competing religious and political forces, or sometimes shredded when those forces get weaponized, must include a deep sense of the way faith can inspire goodness. Not only do the best forms of faith teach us how to practice compassion and mercy; they also help us learn how to integrate acts of considerate justice for the sake of people who yearn for such.

Rick Rouse and Paul Ingram seem to grasp that *diversity* in and of itself is not a virtue. It's simply a demographic or geographic reality. When people with different backgrounds, languages, and identities live in relatively close quarters, there is diversity. The achievement of interfaith cooperation, however, does something with this diversity. It cultivates respect for people with different identities, encourages relationships between those who come from different tribes, and builds commitment among all toward a common good.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, wrote about the ways in which we are all tied together despite our differences. We are all “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” said King, “tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality.”

From Winthrop’s concept of covenant and mutual regard to King’s inescapable network of mutuality, the American story is filled with promptings for its people to consider the needs and interests of others. For those who get excited by the prospect of building a life of meaning and possibility for the sake of other people enjoying similar goodness, this book serves as a fine resource. Only by threading our lives together with the divine gifts of justice, mercy, and humility will the torn or frayed fabric of our republic ever be mended.

—Peter W. Marty, publisher, *The Christian Century*

Preface

Honoring difference has never been easy, but it is a particularly complex issue for our time. The resurgence of racial, ethnic, and national loyalties in an increasingly interdependent world; tensions caused by social class, racial, ethnic, and gender differences residing in greater proximity; the consequences of growing diversity in our churches; relationships among the religions of the world; the impact of postmodernism on the normative visions we have used to manage difference; and the struggle to understand the meaning of reconciliation in conflicted contexts have all converged to mandate new approaches to diversity.

Dealing constructively with difference is also a new challenge for the mission of the church at the end of Christendom. Even as we continue to tell the Christian story in new ways, we must learn how to live without domination as partners and neighbors in a world in which Christianity and western enlightenment categories no longer predominate and in which there are many different ethnic traditions and religious options contending for allegiance on a shrinking planet. The agenda is comprehensive. It requires the best thinking from the social sciences and from theology in order to set a steady course through murky and sometimes turbulent water.¹

—Rev. Dr. Herbert E. Anderson, practical theologian

Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in
me,
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past to the end
of the age to be.
Your very name puts the proud to shame, and to those who
would for you yearn,
You will show your might, put the strong to flight, for the
world is about to turn.
My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn . . .
From the halls of pow'r to the fortress tow'r, not a stone will be
left on stone.
Let the king beware for your justice tears ev'ry tyrant from his
throne.
The hungry poor shall weep no more, for the food they earn;
There are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed, for the world is
about to turn . . .

“Canticle of the Turning” by Rory Cooney¹



Introduction

It is the tenth of November as we write this on the eightieth anniversary of Kristallnacht. Referred to as the “Night of Broken Glass,” this was the night of November 9–10, 1938, when German Nazis conducted a massive attack on Jewish persons and property. Throughout Germany and Austria, Jewish-owned stores and synagogues were seriously damaged by SA paramilitary forces and civilians while authorities looked on without intervening. What is so chilling is that only two weeks ago a lone gunman invaded the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg during Sabbath morning worship, killing eleven members of the congregation. It was reported to be the deadliest attack on Jews in US history.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported shortly after this incident that hate crimes in the United States were up 17 percent overall in 2017 with crimes of anti-Semitism leading the spike. A government report indicated that there were alarming increases in attacks motivated by racial bigotry and religious bias, as well as a victim’s sexual orientation. While the report showed a nearly 23 percent increase in religious-based hate crimes, those against Jews soared by 37 percent. What is so alarming is that this seems to reflect a serious erosion of our core values as Americans.

Pastor Valerie Gittings of First Baptist Church in Fairmont, West Virginia suggests that religious people may be part of the problem when she says, “It breaks my heart that so many people now equate Christianity with againstness: that Christians are against gay people, against women in ministry, against Muslims. That’s not the gospel. The gospel is a wonderful and astonishing message of love and compassion for a God who created all of us and would never, ever want someone to be cast out and separated from the community.”

It is said that the opposite of love is not hate but fear. Fear of the other often leads one to hate. And hate can lead to violence. In the movie *A Wrinkle in Time*, one of the three wise women offers this profound advice: “The powers of darkness want us to fear—for fear turns us to hate, which then turns us to violence. And then the darkness has won.” This describes the human story

that has been replayed time and again through acts of prejudice and aggression, hate crimes, and war. One of the most horrifying examples is the Jewish Holocaust.

A few days following the tragic shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue, several clergy of various religious traditions met with civic officials and a rabbi of a Jewish congregation in the Seattle area. These leaders of local faith communities wanted to express their solidarity with their Jewish sisters and brothers in light of what had happened in Pittsburg. The rabbi told them about “the Talk” that many rabbis traditionally have with their youth prior to their bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah. Jewish youth learn how German Christians used their religion to justify—or at the very least turned a blind eye to—the persecution and suffering of Jews under the Third Reich (1933–1945), which led to the extermination of 6 million Jews—two-thirds of the Jewish population in Europe.

Finding a Way Forward

There is a chilling yet hope-filled photo that has been making its appearance on the Internet. It shows a Jewish menorah sitting on a windowsill while outside one can see banners bearing the Nazi swastika draped on buildings. The location is Kiel, Germany, and the year is 1931. The caption on the photo proclaims, “Our light will outlast their flag.” This suggests that the light of one’s faith can shine hope in the midst of darkness and perhaps help one find a way out of the darkness. It is our hope that this book can help summon our “better angels” as we seek a way forward to a more just and civil society as citizens and people of faith.

Americans appear to live today in a culture of violence and fear of the other in which many are tempted to despair. There is a concern that the country has lost its soul or at least its moral compass. People seem to have lost faith in most institutions, including government and even the church. Yet faith communities are intended to be agents of transformation and hope. We believe that the church, the synagogue, and the mosque all have important roles in the public square and can offer a space for open dialogue about basic core values that are found in a variety of religious traditions. We seek to offer a biblical and interreligious approach to the question of “How does God intend for us to live well together in the common life?”

We begin this journey together with an analysis of how we arrived at this fragile time in our history. We will look at what we consider the failure of the American religious experiment. We then turn to Judeo-Christian scripture and the writings of other faith traditions that reveal common values such as compassion, hospitality, justice, and care of creation. The words of the

Prophet Micah offer a guide to what God requires of us in order to live in peace and harmony together. Finally, we suggest that one path forward is to build community through interfaith dialogue. This book is intended to be a guidebook for use in a variety of religious communities (schools, congregations, synagogues, mosques, etc.) in the hope of making a positive difference in our corporate life together.

• • •

This Introduction began with words from “Canticle of the Turning” by hymn writer Rory Cooney, based on the Magnificat from Luke 1:46–55. This hymn suggests that the world is about to turn, to undergo transformation. God’s reign of mercy and justice is breaking in. This should strike terror into the hearts of some while others will find solace in the good news. The proud and the mighty are about to be toppled. But for those on the margins, the oppressed, the poor, and the sorrowful, night is nearly over, and the dawn is about to break in upon them. People of faith can help make a difference for good. We can make this world a better place for all to live.

O God, who created all peoples in your image, we thank you for the wonderful diversity of races and cultures in this world. Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship, and show us your presence in those who different most from us, until our knowledge of your love is made perfect in our love for all your children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(The Book of Common Prayer)

Rick Rouse and Paul O. Ingram