

Resident Arsonists: The Postliberal Ecclesiology of Project 2025

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When the ninth edition of the Heritage Foundation's *Mandate for Leadership* – also known as Project 2025 – was published in April 2023, it launched a furious amount of commentary about what a second Trump administration would portend for the country.¹ Now that we are well into Trump 2.0, it is clear that this Project is functioning for Trump much the way the first *Mandate*, published in January 1981, functioned for Reagan. According to the nonpartisan Project 2025 tracker online, Trump 2.0 has already implemented 51 percent of the new *Mandate* after one year in office.² This equals the amount that Reagan achieved in his first year in office.

But the formal similarities between the 1981 and 2025 *Mandates* obscure a far more significant difference. Heritage cofounder Ed Feulner, in his afterword to Project 2025, quotes his foreword to the original *Mandate* and says that the goal of both agendas is the same: “to revitalize our economy, strengthen our national security, and halt the centralization of power in the federal government.”³ And yet Project 2025, as many have noted, repeatedly advocates for policies that centralize power in the executive branch. This comes out most clearly in the opening section (titled “Taking the Reins of Government”) where Russ Vought, who now serves almost as a shadow-president, makes his case for dramatically increasing the power of the president to unilaterally execute his vision.⁴

Let me briefly tell the story of how we got from 1981 to 2025. The original *Mandate* was conducted under the agenda of what *National Review* editor Frank Meyer called “fusionism,” which referred to the fusion between freedom and virtue, between libertarians and social conservatives, which New Right activist and Heritage cofounder Paul Weyrich implemented.⁵ This old fusionism agreed to fight against abortion rights while advocating for economic deregulation – giving the Christian Right their key issue while promoting free trade and individual liberties. The result of this, however, was that neoliberalism ran amok while abortion remained legal. The problem with libertarian freedom, according to this new group, was that it led to “open borders” and “globalization,” something they associated with both the loss of manufacturing jobs and the growing multicultural pluralism in Western nations. To address this, the new right-wing movement advocates for stronger borders, national isolationism, and a renewed Western cultural tradition defined by Christian supremacy.⁶

The new coalition is composed of various groups both old and new. While many of the old Reaganite fusionists are still involved, the new fusion has largely replaced both sides

with new actors. Instead of the Moral Majority, the new coalition has a mix of Reformed Christian nationalists and independent charismatics. Instead of the neoliberal libertarians, the new coalition has a mix of National Conservatives (NatCons), common-good conservatives (also known as integralists), and America Firsters. This latter group also goes by another label: postliberalism. This is the philosophical glue that I argue holds the entire project together. Extending my recent work, I argue there is an earlier, theological postliberalism that can help us better understand this new coalition and its political agenda.⁷

Why Postliberalism?

When Donald Trump was first elected in 2016, much was made of him winning over 80 percent of the evangelical vote. In the wake of January 6th, there was extensive commentary about the New Apostolic Reformation and the rise of Independent Network Charismatic Christianity.⁸ These are all important groups – to be sure – but the influence of these groups on Trump 2.0 is, at best, mixed. On the one hand, Trump's administration made a big show of effectively killing the Johnson Amendment, something evangelicals had been clamoring for for many years, and especially since Trump first took office, and Trump began his second term by creating the White House Faith Office and installing independent charismatic leader Paula White-Cain as the head.

Probably the most obvious connection between independent charismatics and Trump 2.0 is the Seven Mountains Mandate (7M), which was popularized by Lance Wallnau. According to the 7M, the goal of Christians is to take charge of each “mountain” of society: religion, education, family, government, media, arts, and business. In a sense, one can see Trump's authoritarian efforts to control every aspect of American life as the fulfillment of this mandate. But there are some problems. The 7M mandate is conceived and promoted as a means for generating national revival and conversion, and it has no other theoretical purpose beyond expanding and building the church. To be sure, we could simply

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In response to populist antigovernment and anti-immigrant rage, a new right-wing coalition emerged in 2016, initiated by the Tea Party movement and mobilized by the *Obergefell* decision in 2015 that legalized same-sex marriage. This new coalition replaced the old fusion of *freedom and virtue* with the new fusion of *authority and tradition*.

redefine revival as a broadly far-right political agenda, as many do, but then we would be importing an agenda from some other theoretical foundation. I want to suggest that this foundation is postliberalism.

I am using the term “postliberalism” in an intentionally broad way to refer to a loose coalition of right-wing religious and political thought. Today, the term has been more or less fully coopted by a network of far-right thinkers and activists, including the likes of Patrick Deneen, Gladden Pappin, Yoram Hazony, Sohrab Ahmari, Adrian Vermeule, Rod Dreher, R. R. Reno, and others. As a concept, postliberalism is defined by what it is against, namely liberalism, which in one way or another has been a hallmark feature of the right-wing coalition since the 1920s and 30s, when the conservative political movement began as anticommunism and anti-New Deal liberalism. In this sense, postliberalism is a natural extension of the conservative movement. If, however, we want to understand what it is about liberalism that the postliberals reject, many of the current theorists offer a convoluted and at times contradictory picture. Deneen is the best of that crowd, but even his analysis veers into the nonsensical, with totalizing claims about how liberalism is a lawless anticulture that destroys time and place. The full picture is certainly more complicated, but Deneen and his fellow postliberals fail to provide a coherent picture of liberalism or their postliberal alternative beyond very broad strokes. Theirs is a rant trying to do the work of theory.

We would do better, I suggest, placing today’s political postliberals, as I call them, in dialogue with the theological postliberals of the 1970s and 80s, typically associated with the so-called Yale school of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, among others.⁹ Most view these two groups of postliberals as completely disconnected, and for good reason. Most of the postliberal theologians were trained in liberal mainline Protestantism and were not card-carrying members of the political right, at least at first. The political and theological postliberals appear, at least on the surface, to be entirely different. In this article, I want to disabuse us of those appearances.

In what follows, I will first present what I take to be the shared agenda of postliberal theology, focusing especially on its ecclesiology. I will follow this by examining how this ecclesiology translates into the postliberal politics of Project 2025.

Resident Aliens: The Agenda of Theological Postliberalism

Theological postliberalism sets out to solve two central problems facing Christianity in the mid-twentieth century: (1) first, how to make sense of Christian language for God when such language is no longer second nature; and (2) second, how to unite different Christian traditions without establishing a single church and theology (which is, of course, impossible). The two problems are closely related. Both of them stem from the unsettling social conditions brought about by modernity – conditions that have fragmented any semblance of religious or political unity. Postliberal theology is a project aimed at restoring the kind of coherence and unity that Christianity once had in medieval Europe, but without the institutional support of Christendom.

As the postliberals see it – here I am thinking especially of Hans Frei, Robert Jenson, George Lindbeck, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Stanley Hauerwas – Christians in the era of Christendom had a shared story, a unifying narrative provided by scripture. The story of the Bible simply *was* the story of the world in which they lived. This was a kind of *biblical universalism*. The Bible and the cosmos were a single coherent whole. That narrative coherence, however, was shattered with the Enlightenment. In place of a biblical universalism, Enlightenment liberalism offered an alternative account of human existence. On the one hand, liberalism provided a *philosophical universalism* rooted in ideas of history or nature, depending on the philosopher, that served to replace the biblical cosmos with a scientific cosmos. On the other hand, and crucially for the postliberal account of the world, this alternative universalism was ultimately empty and groundless, for it was constructed on the starting point of the *individual human*, disconnected from any larger story. In Hauerwas’s words, “Liberalism . . . presupposes that society can be organized without any narrative that is commonly held to be true.”¹⁰ As the postliberals argue, you

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cannot build a grand story of human existence on the basis of a storyless individual.

For the postliberals, there is no going backward to some lost golden age. Indeed, many of them saw the current liberal regime as an apocalyptic crisis that had destroyed any connection to the past, thus necessitating a new approach – one rooted in a strategy of survival for a postliberal future. We see this articulated most famously in MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, a work that has inspired both theological and political postliberals with its apocalyptic story of the modern ethical wasteland where the language of virtue no longer has any meaning. Instead of trying to recreate Christendom, postliberal theology aimed instead at withdrawing from the project of universalism entirely. Rather than trying to provide a grand, all-encompassing framework, the postliberals retreated into particular cultural communities, typically under the banner of the church. For MacIntyre and Hauerwas, this looked like communities of virtue and character where the old practices of Christian ethics could be cultivated. For Frei and Jenson, this looked like interpretive communities where the narrative of scripture could be authentically understood and adopted as one's own narrative. For Lindbeck, this looked like cultural-linguistic communities that spoke the same religious language and shared the same practices, rituals, and norms. And Dreher proposed a literal "Benedict Option" – a reference to MacIntyre's closing suggestion in *After Virtue* – before decamping to Hungary.¹¹

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While each theological postliberal had their own distinctive elements, their visions were remarkably consistent with each other and shared four common features:

1. **Communalism.** For the postliberal theologians, the core problem of liberalism is its individualism, or what Lindbeck called "experiential-expressivism."¹² By this he meant that Christian language expresses an individual experience that is private to each person. Against this the postliberals argued that Christian language has meaning only in terms of communal norms – what they called "culture." The correct culture, in their view, is the ancient tradition of the Christian church. Whereas liberalism dilutes or dissolves this traditional culture, postliberalism cultivates various strategies, both intellectual and practical, to preserve and strengthen it.

2. **Homogeneity.** While the postliberal theologians accepted the reality of a pluralistic world, they did not accept the possibility of pluralistic religious communities. In the cultural-linguistic framework developed by Lindbeck and embraced by the other postliberals, a religious community was defined by a common culture, a shared language, and thus cultural homogeneity was a precondition for religious unity and identity. Whereas Christians traditionally were divided along doctrinal lines – so, for example, Lutherans rejected Calvinists, both rejected Anabaptists, and all three rejected Roman Catholics – the postliberals argued that theological propositions were of secondary importance. What really mattered was whether different groups of Christians belonged to the same culture or not. So Catholics and Presbyterians could belong to different theological traditions but still be part of the same cultural-linguistic community.

3. **Isolationism.** In order to protect a culturally homogeneous community, it becomes necessary to cut that community off from contaminating influences. The postliberals did so through their concept of *untranslatability*.¹³ One of the most consistent refrains among the theological postliberals is the idea that Christian language and practices are untranslatable. Robert Louis Wilken, effectively speaking for all postliberals, writes in *First Things* that "if there is a distinctly Christian language, we must be wary of translation."¹⁴ Wilken and Lindbeck describe religions as grammars, rather than ideas. Ideas can be translated from one language to another, but grammars cannot. From this position, Lindbeck describes the world as a battleground of grammatical worldviews all vying for supremacy, and Christianity, he hopes, will come out on top.

4. **Supremacy.** It is not enough to simply isolate one's community from contamination. A truly supreme worldview

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must subdue other cultures by colonizing them. Frei and Lindbeck theorized this colonial strategy through their doctrine of intratextuality. Lindbeck articulated this most clearly: “Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.”¹⁵ The theme of absorption appears throughout their work, and Lindbeck in his later writings talks about “intratextual social or ecclesial embodiment,” which is a jargony way of saying that the world-absorption occurs in the social body of the church.¹⁶ Put another way, the church is the agent of colonial absorption as it brings other cultures and languages into the Christian community, thus making the church ever more supreme and dominant over rival worldviews.

To summarize this analysis: Postliberalism sees liberalism as an apocalyptic threat that destroys tradition by forcing the whole world to conform to its transcultural ideology of individualism, and it responds to this threat by creating culturally homogenous communities with fixed, impermeable borders between the righteous inside and the unrighteous heathens outside, and it seeks to dominate the unrighteous by absorbing as many of their resources as possible to enrich and strengthen the holy inner circle.

The postliberal theologians framed all of this in pious theological language pertaining to the church. While many of them avoided talking directly about politics, some made the connection. An obvious example is John Milbank, but Hauerwas is more instructive. He is typically seen as an outspoken opponent of American nationalism, and while that is technically true, it is only because Hauerwas associates America with liberal democracy. As he and William Willimon stated clearly in *Resident Aliens*, the system of democracy “destroy[s] the church” because “the primary entity of democracy is the individual.”¹⁷ Individualism is the enemy. This is why, in a dialogue with Brian Brock published in 2017, Hauerwas could say: “I don’t talk that much about democracy. I’m not sure I know what it is. The rule of the people scares the hell out of me. It depends on who the people are.” And then a few lines later, he adds: “I’m not necessarily against monarchy, you know! It depends on who the king or queen happens to be and how it’s structured.”¹⁸

It depends on who the people are. It depends on who the king or queen is. These are classically postliberal statements that reject the legitimacy of a government unless the leaders and institutions reflect the sectarian cultural values and assumptions of Christianity. *This*, I want to claim, is the underlying theology behind Project 2025. It is a theology that is quite ready and willing to torch the project of democracy in the name of achieving cultural homogeneity and Christian supremacy. In 1989, this took the form of calling Christians to become “resident aliens.” In 2025, this same way of thinking has taken a more militant form, as antiliberals on the right have now become *resident arsonists*, setting fire to American institutions and norms. Or as *National Review* editor Philip Klein put it, blowing them up.¹⁹

From New Haven to Project 2025

The historical and institutional connections between theological and political postliberalism are too complex to discuss here, but I can note some of the key links. The Hartford Appeal for Theological Affirmation was a manifesto published in 1975, and it is one of the founding documents of postliberalism. The Appeal was signed by many of the figures who were or would become key to postliberal theology, including George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas, Avery Dulles, Peter Berger, Robert Wilken, Richard Mouw, and Richard John Neuhaus. It is important to point out that I am not suggesting any of these figures have or would have joined forces with today’s MAGA postliberals to set fire to American democracy. No doubt most of the theological postliberals would find the likes of Trump, Vance, and Vought horrifying. But intellectual leaders have a way of losing control of the ideas and movements they set into motion.

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Neuhaus is an especially important figure as the founding editor of the conservative Catholic magazine *First Things*, which not only provided a publishing outlet for many postliberal theological ideas but also became a hub for right-wing political activism. When Reno took over its editorship, he pushed it in the direction of “America First” postliberal nationalism – announcing the death of the old Religious Right and the birth of the new antiliberal, isolationist order. Neuhaus was also an important figure in the early days of the Heritage Foundation. He used to give the annual invocation at the Heritage Foundation’s New York City media dinner. Ed Feulner, founder and former president of Heritage, published a eulogy for Neuhaus on the Heritage website.²⁰

Genealogical connections aside, what interests me most are the ideological similarities. In lieu of a more comprehensive analysis, I will look briefly at the four promises that Heritage president Kevin Roberts outlines in the foreword to Project 2025 and compare these with the features of theological postliberalism noted above:²¹

1. **“Restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children.”** Roberts says that government is an “unnatural” loyalty that competes with our “natural” loyalties to family, work, church, school, and other local groups. According to Roberts: “The name *real people* give to the things we do together is *community*, not *government*.” Here we see the postliberal emphasis on *communalism* appear clearly. The goal of both theological and political postliberalism is to reject Enlightenment liberal ways of organizing humanity in favor of “natural” communities that define our given culture.²²

2. **“Dismantle the administrative state and return self-governance to the American people.”** The “administrative state” is a code word within political postliberalism that stands for the liberal enforcement of globalism, open borders, and transcultural movement – which the postliberals attack under the labels of DEI and “woke.” The administrative state is what supports antiracist policies in education and the workplace, among other things. By dismantling the administrative state, what they mean is letting “real Americans” (i.e., white Christians) control the culture of the nation. As Roberts writes in this section, by “bring[ing] the Administrative State to heel,” they will “in the process defang and defund the woke culture warriors who have infiltrated every last institution in America.” Here we see the postliberal focus on *homogeneity*, enforcing a unified culture.²³

3. **“Defend our nation’s sovereignty, borders, and bounty against global threats.”** Here we have the clearest expression of postliberalism, especially the theme of *isolationism*. The talk of enforcing sovereignty and closing the borders reflects the consistent postliberal emphasis on protecting the purity of the community’s tradition and

culture from outside threats and contamination. The theological postliberals speak about this with respect to the church; the political postliberals speak about this with respect to the nation. That Roberts sees a theological connection here is evidenced by his use of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s concept of “cheap grace” to describe open borders.²⁴

4. **“Secure our God-given individual rights to live freely.”** While cloaked in classically liberal language, this final section does a bait and switch on the reader. After beginning by quoting the Declaration of Independence on the pursuit of individual happiness, Roberts says, rather remarkably, that “our Constitution grants each of us the liberty to do not what we want, but what we ought.”²⁵ In other words, the only freedom in view is the freedom to fulfill God’s will. The theological postliberals, influenced especially by Karl Barth, were the ones who most clearly articulated this theme in their work. The church has a particular culture, defined by communal norms, and the only way for members to live freely is to inhabit this culture and spread it to others. Here again we see an emphasis on the postliberal theme of *homogeneity* but also the overriding theme of *supremacy*.

This has only been a cursory look at the relation between postliberal theology and today’s MAGA New Right. The connections here, which are more viral than causal in nature, should not surprise us. Postliberal theology erected an intellectual edifice rooted in the idea that church and world (or church and the Liberal Administrative State) are in a metaphysical battle to the death, with only one potential victor, in which the only hope for humanity is to gather in small-scale, homogeneous communities where proper Christian virtue and character may be cultivated and lived out. Most people, however, do not have the capacity to leave their jobs and social networks behind to establish a commune in the woods, and most do not wish to flee to Hungary, as Dreher has done.

Christians catechized on a diet of Lindbeck, Hauerwas, and Milbank (along with their students) were taught to view the modern liberal state as an inherently violent order grounded in a false account of the world that stands in antithetical tension with the Christian gospel. Many of their disciples remained committed to a kind of exilic, separatist politics, under the assumption that Christian existence in the “time between the times” is inherently tragic. But not all of their disciples have continued to think this way, and surely this should be expected. If the modern liberal state is antichrist – if the church is the true *polis*, the proper political community – then would it not be an act of supreme faithfulness to Christ to take over the reins of political power in the United States and elsewhere? The idea of having the

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template for a happy life but resigning oneself to a largely passive politics of lament would strike most as an unnecessary form of defeatism. That might have made sense to a Cold War generation taught that utopian ideals were the enemy of America, but to post-Cold War Christians sensing the decline of the American empire, the chance to mold the nation in their image is too great a temptation to pass up.

The theological postliberals were often and rightly charged with sectarianism, but today that has matured into the authoritarianism of the political postliberals, represented most clearly by Project 2025.²⁶ They all share one conviction: a diverse liberal democracy is the enemy, and they are committed to burning it to the ground. 

Notes

1. *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project, ed. Paul Dans and Steven Groves (The Heritage Foundation, 2023). Hereafter *Mandate 2025*.
2. Project 2025 Tracker: <https://www.project2025.observer/en>, accessed January 8, 2026.
3. *Mandate 2025*, 886–87.
4. *Mandate 2025*, 19–85.
5. Matthew Continetti, “Frank Meyer, Founding Fuser,” *National Review*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2023/11/frank-meyer-founding-fuser/>.
6. See R. R. Reno, “A New Fusionism,” *First Things*, April 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/04/a-new-fusionism> [no longer available as it redirects to the updated version]. Reno updated his notion of a “new fusionism” five years later when he advocated for a fusion between “right-wing progressives” (Silicon Valley tech Republicans) and “social conservatives.” See R. R. Reno, “A New Fusionism,” *First Things*, January 10, 2025, <https://firstthings.com/a-new-fusionism>.
7. For my earlier work on this topic, see David W. Congdon, “What Has New Haven to Do with Hungary? On Theological and Political Postliberalism,” *The Journal of Religion* 105, no. 4 (2025): 415–37.
8. See Brad Christerson and Richard W. Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy* (Broadleaf Books, 2024).
9. I have an unlikely ally in this project in R. R. Reno himself. In December 2025, he published a piece in *First Things* called “What Does ‘Postliberalism’ Mean?” (*First Things*, December 26, 2025), in which he claims that his postliberal professors at Yale pioneered the critique of liberalism: “Long before Patrick Deneen penned his influential book, my teachers judged that when it came to theology, liberalism had failed.” According to Reno, a friend gave him my *Journal of Religion* article, to which he responded in “Postliberalism and Theology” (*First Things*, January 30, 2026). Reno criticizes my article not for its genealogical argument about the relation between New Haven and Hungary but because of my strong criticism of

postliberalism. For my response to Reno, see David W. Congdon, “Live, Love, and (Post-)Liberalism: A Response to R. R. Reno,” *Postpostliberalism*, February 7, 2026, <https://dwcongdon.substack.com/p/live-love-and-post-liberalism-a-response>.

10. Stanley Hauerwas, “Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses (1981),” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Duke University Press, 2001), 114.
11. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (Sentinel, 2017).
12. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster Press, 1984).
13. Most clearly presented in George A. Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability,” *Modern Theology* 13, no. 4 (1997): 42–50.
14. Robert L. Wilken, “The Church as Culture,” *First Things* 142 (2004): 35.
15. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 118.
16. George A. Lindbeck, “Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Intratextual Social Embodiment,” in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (InterVarsity, 1996), 221–40.
17. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon, 1989), 32.
18. Brian Brock and Stanley Hauerwas, *Beginnings: Interrogating Hauerwas*, ed. Kevin Hargaden (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 172–73.
19. Philip Klein, “The New Fusionism of Wanting to Blow Stuff Up,” *National Review*, January 29, 2025, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2025/01/the-new-fusionism-of-wanting-to-blow-stuff-up>.
20. Edwin J. Feulner, “The Lasting Legacy of Fr. Neuhaus,” *The Heritage Foundation*, January 14, 2009, <https://www.heritage.org/civil-society/commentary/the-lasting-legacy-fr-neuhaus>.
21. The text in bold are the promises found in the Project 2025 *Mandate for Leadership*. All emphasis is in the original.
22. *Mandate 2025*, 4.
23. *Mandate 2025*, 6, 9.
24. *Mandate 2025*, 9, 11.
25. *Mandate 2025*, 13.
26. As a final caveat, the genealogical link between theological and political postliberalism is not a necessary one. Most theological postliberals did not travel into the arms of MAGA—but some did. Others did not join MAGA but became antiliberals of other sorts, sometimes on the Left. They may not have joined Trump’s coalition, but they equally did not labor to preserve and reform pluralistic democracy. The point here is not to blame the theological postliberals for the problems in American politics today but to see the way that political theology that can appear faithful in one era can lend support, often unwittingly, to destructive political ends.