



# Sickness and Health in the Body Politic:

Religious Traditions of Social Boundaries, Justification, and Policy

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## Abstract

The social body, also known as the body politic, is a compelling root metaphor for creating social boundaries, justifying them, and prescribing policy. Body politic rhetoric draws on ancient religious, philosophical, and cultural understandings of what causes disease. Two primary ways of answering that question, or disease etiologies, lead to different policy outcomes. 1) Invasion etiologies stress internal community purity and boundary control. 2) Harmony etiologies stress careful management of diversity through differentiated, usually hierarchical, roles. This paper explores the effects of these etiologies of disease through three case studies of religious and cultural traditions of the body politic and their modern policy outcomes. The most extensive investigation is on the Christian communities, but South Asian and Chinese traditions and policies are also briefly highlighted. In all three case studies, the etiology of disease shaping local body politic traditions has had profound ongoing effects on modern policy.

**Keywords:** *Body Politic, Metaphor, Invasion, Harmony, Body of Christ, Rhetoric*

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## 1. Introduction

**H**umans are a social species. Whom to include or exclude in our communities, why, and what to do about it are perennial human problems. Constantly forming groups and sub-groups gives us our sense of belonging, of being “in,”... but always by keeping “them” out.

Many fields of work attend to inclusion and exclusion – intergroup contact theory and other wings of sociology and psychology, hate crimes studies and prevention work, movements creating empathy, and a multi-billion-dollar diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) industry.<sup>1</sup>

However, one familiar frame profoundly shapes how people form groups that none of these fields consider: the *root* metaphor of the social body. The social body, or *body politic*, is frequently used to visualize society and its boundaries.

Metaphors might not seem powerful, but the science of cognitive linguistics argues otherwise. Theory in this field says that humans create their reality through metaphors, which make incomprehensibly complex ideas accessible through simpler concepts. That theory also says the metaphor we start with is often the metaphor we are stuck with.<sup>2</sup> So, we tend to provide solutions to a metaphorical construction of the problem rather than the objective problem.

**“...humans create their reality through metaphors, which make incomprehensibly complex ideas accessible through simpler concepts.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Just for example, out of endless literature on these topics: Intergroup contact theory: Loris Vezzali and Sofia Stathi, eds., *Intergroup Contact Theory: Recent Developments and Future Directions* (2017). Hate crimes studies: Aaron T. Beck M.D, *Prisoners of Hate: The Cognitive Basis of Anger, Hostility, and Violence* (2000). Movements for empathy: “Home,” [Empatico](#). DEI industry: “Global Market for Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) to Reach \$24.3 Billion by 2030,” [Yahoo Finance](#).

<sup>2</sup> Donald A. Schön, *Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-Setting in Social Policy* (1993); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980); Tim Cresswell, *Weeds, Plagues, and Bodily Secretions: A Geographical Interpretation of Metaphors of Displacement* (1997).

Finally, while every individual can use the *body* metaphor to envision their ideal society and advocate for it, only some have the power to enact those boundaries.

So, it is worthwhile to examine the *root* metaphor of the social body and the ways that its themes, such as *disease*, *contamination*, or *harmony* in the body, are used to decide who is in or out of a group, why, and what to do about it. To do so, I first offer some examples to show how the *body* metaphor viscerally justifies *social policy*. I go on to describe some rhetorical tropes and how they define *community boundaries*, provide *justification*, and prescribe *policy*. I then give a short history of the religious roots of this metaphor from several diverse global traditions and how these traditions influence religious and political policy. Because my training is in Christian history, I focus on those traditions, but I point to two other traditions to encourage further exploration of these issues.

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## 2. Disease or Unity in the Social Body

Members of the public who have been chosen for reeducation have been infected by an ideological illness. They have been infected with religious extremism and violent terrorist ideology, and therefore they must seek treatment from a hospital as an inpatient. ... If we do not eradicate religious extremism at its roots, the violent terrorist incidents will grow and spread all over like an incurable malignant tumor.<sup>3</sup> – *Chinese Communist Party (CCP) radio message*

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This pestilence [communism] will ask no man's permission to put an end to the democracies ... there must be an immunization of the people against this poison while the international carrier of the bacillus must itself be fought. Only when this Jewish bacillus infecting the life of peoples has been removed can one hope to establish a cooperation among the nations which shall be built up on a lasting understanding.<sup>4</sup> – *Adolf Hitler*

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<sup>3</sup> Sigal Samuel, *China Is Treating Islam Like a Mental Illness*, *The Atlantic* (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Haig A. Bosmajian, *The Magic Word in Nazi Persuasion*, (1966).

We are facing another ‘ism,’ just like we faced Nazism, and fascism, and imperialism and communism, ... This is Islamism, it is a vicious cancer inside the body of 1.7 billion people on this planet and it has to be excised.<sup>5</sup> – *Michael Flynn*

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Trump Is a Cancer in American Politics: Only Indictments Can Treat the Disease. ... If you doubt that the sickness has metastasized, consider that the Republican National Committee censored Republican Senator Liz Cheney and Representative Adam Kinzinger for serving on the January 6th Committee that is investigating the insurrection, ... The Department of Justice (DOJ) is key to excising Trumpism from our body politic. ... Without indictments in the near future, Trumpism will continue to spread throughout American politics.<sup>6</sup> – *The Santa Barbara Independent*

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Each of these four quotes epitomizes the use of the *social body* metaphor to establish: 1) Boundaries – *who* should be out of a society; 2) Safety – *why* some people are safe or dangerous; and 3) Policy – *what* to do about it.

1) Each statement establishes boundaries by defining some individual, group, and/or idea as a dangerous and spreading *sickness*: Uighur Muslims, Communism and Jews, “Islamism,” and Donald Trump and his supporters.

2) They each state why that individual, group, or idea is *dangerous*: violent terrorist incidents will spread, Communism or Jewishness will destroy civilization, Islamism is implied to be opposed to democracy, and the breakdown of democratic processes as epitomized by the January 6th insurrection will spread.

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Kaczynski, *Michael Flynn in August: Islamism a ‘vicious cancer’ in body of all Muslims that ‘has to be excised,’* [CNN](#) (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Sulnick, *Trump Is a Cancer in American Politics,* [The Santa Barbara Independent](#) (2022).

3) Each argues for some policy *outcome*, stated or implied.<sup>7</sup> The first two are fully actualized examples: Uighur Muslims have been segregated and “reeducated” in ways intended to erase their culture and belief systems, and Jews and Communism were destroyed like a “bacillus,” meaning that Jews and Communists were murdered *en masse*. The last two are incomplete in that the policy outcome has not been fully enacted: the cancer of Islamism has to be “excised” or destroyed, and Trump-style politics must be “excised” through the legal system.

**Each of these four quotes epitomizes the use of the social body metaphor to establish:**

1. Boundaries – *who* should be out of a society;
2. Safety – *why* some people are safe or dangerous; and
3. Policy – *what* to do about it.

Each of these examples uses the *body* and related metaphors of *disease* to exclude certain people.

On the other hand, the *body politic* metaphor can also be used powerfully to create a deep sense of belonging. Inclusive body rhetoric also tends to reiterate social norms as the “why” of the statement and even policy implications. Two quick examples:

Before the arrival of European settlers, five Indigenous nations made peace after a time of war, encouraged by the Peacemaker. The Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca agreed to end their fight, uniting the five tribes into a whole, with each maintaining a unique role.

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<sup>7</sup> For examples of other policy outcomes, see, e.g., Cresswell, *Weeds, Plagues, and Bodily Secretions*, (1997).



When the peace was made between the 5 nations, the Peacemaker told us to think of us all living together under one longhouse. Just like a longhouse, every nation will have their own council fire to govern their people. But they will govern their people under one common law, one heart, and one mind.<sup>8</sup>

In 1977, the U.S. Special Assistant to the President addressed the Board of the UN Children's Fund, pledging increased U.S. support and urging other nations to follow.

The nations of the world must acknowledge their interdependence and join together to dedicate their minds, their hearts, and their talents to the solution of those problems which threaten the survival of us all. ... We must establish a world order of peace, justice, and compassion in which we acknowledge that we are one body of people with shared problems dependent on one body of resources.<sup>9</sup>

In both cases, defined boundaries include the five Indigenous nations or all nations in the Board council, *social health* is defined by inclusivity and collaboration of these nations, and policy is recommended on these bases.

As these few examples show, the idea of the social body powerfully influences community understanding of *who* in the corporate body is dangerous or safe, *why*, and *what* to do about it. To dive more deeply into how this rhetoric works, we must review the extensive sets of language or rhetorical tropes associated with it.

**“...the idea of the social body powerfully influences community understanding of *who* in the corporate body is dangerous or safe, *why*, and *what* to do about it.”**

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<sup>8</sup> A beaded belt, showing five separate symbols united in a line gives a visual representation. This text is a modern description of that visualized unity based on the oral tradition. *Hiawatha Belt, Onondaga Nation*,(2014).

<sup>9</sup> Peter G. Bourne, *Bourne Speech to UN Childrens Fund Board, Annual Meeting of the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund*, (1977).

### 3. Members, Disease, & Harmony – Rhetorical Tropes of the Body

The social body is simply the aggregate of people in a population. It is also a *root* metaphor, “a taken-for-granted system of language that shapes how we think about a phenomenon.”<sup>10</sup>

Most Western uses of social body language can be traced to Greco-Roman culture. However, the concept is so intrinsic to the embodied human experience that similar metaphors have emerged independently in cultures worldwide. The social body *root* metaphor uses extensive networks of related rhetorical tropes.<sup>11</sup> Some of these are obvious: the leader is the *head*, individuals are *members* or *limbs* of *corporate bodies*, and we speak of social *ills* that need a social *cure*.

**“Some of these [*rhetorical tropes*] are obvious: the leader is the *head*, individuals are *members* or *limbs* of *corporate bodies*, and we speak of social *ills* that need a social *cure*.”**

Other tropes are less overtly anthropomorphic, including concepts of social purity or contamination, thought contagion, concern over boundaries, and interest in harmony or unanimity. Even these non-anthropomorphic terms of balance and harmony were historically understood to apply to the *body* so that the traditions of meaning are rooted in the same issues and function rhetorically in the same ways to justify *social policy*.

The *social body* is also complex in ways that are intuitive to our embodied experience. We quickly recognize the body’s porous, changeable, and vulnerable nature. We also recognize its sub-units, organs or limbs, that have their own uses and boundaries that might be further subdivided.

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Berente, *Agile Development as the Root Metaphor for Strategy in Digital Innovation*, (2020).

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the technical terminology of body rhetoric here, see Allison K. Ralph, *The Functions of Homonoia in the Rhetoric of Constantius II: Persuasion, Justification of Coercion, Propaganda*, (2019).

This complexity suits the reality of *human social life* where a population is subdivided by differences like caste, religion, behavior, or just by specific interests. Each subgroup also tends to control its *boundaries*. But unlike the human body, the *social body* is profoundly always a united whole *and* a separable collection of individuals, each of whom might influence the whole.

## 4. Boundaries, Safety, & Policy

Body politic language allows anyone to envision their own social body and argue persuasively for it. Some people have more *power* than others in making or enforcing those visions of:

- 1) Boundaries – *who* is in or out of their community
- 2) Safety – *why* people are safe or dangerous
- 3) Policy – *what* to do about it.

### 4.1 Boundaries

Social boundaries can be constructed of almost any difference, including immutable characteristics like *race*, *ethnicity*, or *national origin*. Social boundaries can also be based on whether individuals believe or do certain things—like believing Catholic doctrine or Communist ideology on the one hand or doing things like stealing or disruptively protesting on the other. Subgroups have their own in-group fights over boundaries as well.

Social boundaries are profoundly important to *human well-being*. We are social animals, and the fields of psychology, anthropology, and sociology note the pull for any group of individuals to develop a set of rules for who gets to be “in,” and then to protect those boundaries instinctively and at personal risk. This is called “groupiness.”<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that social boundaries are important to humans because of the *social body root* metaphor. Rather, the metaphor provides a universally available way of imaginatively constructing those boundaries.

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<sup>12</sup> Rachel Kranton, Matthew Pease, and Seth Sanders, *Deconstructing bias in social preferences reveals groupy and not-groupy behavior*, (2020).

**“... the [social body root] metaphor provides a universally available way of imaginatively constructing those [social] boundaries.”**

## 4.2 Justification

Body metaphor rhetoric uses the tropes of *health* and *sickness* to describe what is *safe* or *dangerous*, to answer “what makes us sick.” For at least three thousand years, there have been two basic answers to that question or two etiologies of disease – *invasion* or *harmony*.<sup>13</sup> In body politic rhetoric, these etiologies of disease justify the policy prescribed to heal.

**1) Invasion:** A body is safe or healthy when all members share the same essential characteristics for membership. It is endangered when *alien forces* like germs, demons, or moral contamination invade it. Whenever an infecting or contaminating substance or people get in, it must be immediately found and then removed or destroyed to keep the body *healthy*.

**2) Harmony:** A body is safe or healthy when all its internally diverse members *work together* in harmony according to a (usually hierarchical) plan. It is endangered when individual members become imbalanced, stop performing their usual roles, or, in the worst case, encourage other members to abandon their roles, leading to *social breakdown*.

Thought contagion – that ideas and behavior can spread from person to person – is dangerous in both etiologies for different reasons. Thought contagion is best known via Richard Dawkins’ *Meme* concept, an idea that replicates itself like a gene and can spread like a *virus*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, (1995). Martin has made the most extensive study, and I follow his layout of two etiologies.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (1976). There have been many works exploring this concept since then. See, for example Peta Mitchell, *Contagious Metaphor*, (2014). My favorite on the spread of behavior in networks is Damon Centola, *Change: The Power in the Periphery to Make Big Things Happen*, (2021).

**“Thought contagion – that ideas and behavior can spread from person to person – is dangerous in both etiologies for different reasons.”**

In an etiology of *invasion*, where *spiritual purity* might be a boundary issue, thought contagion can spread sinful ideas and behavior, rapidly *contaminating* a group with sin. In an etiology of *harmony*, thought contagion can spread *dissent*, such that one protester can spark a *revolution*.

Confusingly, both etiologies are likely present in most societies at any time. That is especially true now, as millennium-old traditions are mingling across the globe. Also, individuals can be influenced by both sets of ideas. This is undoubtedly true in the American context, not least due to the influence of Christianity and its Body of Christ concept, on which more later.

Both etiologies appear regularly in public discourse, sometimes used by the same speakers. The two etiologies typically result in separate policy goals.

### **4.3 Policy**

Once some person or group has determined who makes the *body politic* sick and why, a wide variety of policies can be justified to “heal” it. By policy, I mean formal, government-enforced rules about “if this happens, then that happens.” Policy is implemented informally as well by vigilante-style boundary policing or by enforcing behavioral norms through social snubs.

A social body shaped by an etiology of invasion tends to concern itself with controlling boundaries, maintaining *purity* (e.g., of ethnicity or holiness), and removing *contamination*. Policy results include stringent border control, policing standards of behavior or belief, and immediate removal of offenders through imprisonment, exile, or capital punishment.

Social bodies envisioned with an etiology of harmony tend to be concerned with *internal hierarchies* and *cooperation*.<sup>15</sup> They are not bothered by internal differences; instead, these societies structure differences through roles such as “this group of people are leaders, those are laborers.” Policy results include established incentives for cooperation and peace, public condemnation or punishment for attempts to change the social structure, and strong punishment for open dissension that is or would lead to mob violence.

**“Once some person or group has determined *who* makes the *body politic* sick and *why*, a wide variety of policies can be justified to “heal” it.”**

## 5. Religious Traditions of the Body as Society

There is nothing inherently good or bad about the *body* as a *root* metaphor for society. Neither of the etiologies of disease, *invasion* or *harmony*, is inherently good or bad. They are merely ways of imaginatively constructing our communities and what is essential about those communities. These visions of the *social body* can be hurtful because they can be used to exclude, but they also make us feel included and at home in our group(s), motivating us to be trustworthy and ethical in our relationships. They encourage us to feel sympathy whenever another member is hurt or endangered, and they can pull us to action to protect the group.

Several *ancient* traditions of the social body continue to shape *modern* body rhetoric, including ancient Greco-Roman and Mediterranean traditions, which influenced Christian and Muslim traditions, South Asian Hindu traditions, and East Asian Confucian traditions. The language of the social body has both shaped and become ingrained in everyday language over thousands of years, shaping our very sense of what it means to *belong*. I will explore Greco-Roman and Christian traditions here most deeply because that is my area of specialty. I also raise two other examples that should be more fully explored.

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<sup>15</sup> Allison K. Ralph, *Their Speech Spreads Like a Canker*, (2018).

**“The language of the *social body* has both shaped and become ingrained in everyday language over thousands of years, shaping our very sense of what it means to *belong*.”**

## 5.1 Ancient Greco-Roman and Mediterranean Traditions

In Greco-Roman antiquity, the *social body* was a primary way of imagining community.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, this metaphor and its permutations were recognized as a type of persuasive speech taught in schools as *homonoia* rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> *Homonoia* is the Greek word for “of one mind;” the Latin version of this word is *unanimitas* and is the source of the English “unanimity.”

The Greco-Roman world of antiquity and late antiquity was itself wildly diverse due to the growth and change of Greek, Roman, Carthaginian, Egyptian, Persian, and other empires and extensive trading across southern Europe, northern Africa, Arabia, and South Asia. Cultures across these continents met, mingled, and influenced each other. As cultures mingled, different ways of defining *who* was in or out, *why*, and *what* to do about it also mingled.

Certain traditions heavily influenced future developments, though, including the Stoic and Platonic traditions of Greek philosophy that developed over eight centuries between the 4th centuries BCE and CE.<sup>18</sup> Philosophers in this combined tradition envisioned the universe as a giant, essentially hierarchical, body, literally ringing with the harmonious music of the spheres.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, (1995); Allison K. Ralph, *Metaphors of Sickness and the Social Body in the Constantinian Era*, (2015).

<sup>17</sup> This section is drawn largely from my previously published paper, Ralph, *The Functions of Homonoia in the Rhetoric of Constantius II*, (2019).

<sup>18</sup> For Plato’s influence on this aspect of Stoic thought, see also: See Michelle V. Lee, *We Are the Parts of One Great Body: Understanding the Community as Christ’s Body in 1 Corinthians 12 in Light of Hellenistic Moral Philosophy*, (2001); Roger Brock, *The Body as a Political Organism in Greek Thought*, (2006).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Mariken Teeuwen, *Harmony and the Music of the Spheres: The Ars Musica in Ninth-Century Commentaries on Martianus Capella*, (2022).

**“Certain traditions heavily influenced future developments, though, including the *Stoic* and *Platonic* traditions of Greek philosophy that developed over eight centuries between the 4th centuries BCE and CE.”**

They also saw this *cosmic body* as the divine template for a harmonious society and the healthy human body, whose humors were balanced.<sup>20</sup> Plato himself is explicit about the *head* being the ruling mechanism for the individual and the metaphorical collective, where the “head governs the microcosm of the body.”<sup>21</sup> To him, the human body was a tiny version of the cosmic body.

To keep a harmonious body *healthy*, each part needed to stay in its divinely ordered place and be of one mind with its neighbors. In other words, *homonoia* rhetoric centered consensus as a *natural good* ordained by the gods as part of the natural order of the harmonious universe and society.<sup>22</sup> Diversity was welcomed since many diverse roles, such as leader, worker, administrator, or priest, had to be filled. But any discord or disagreement endangered the well-being of society. For believers in these Stoic notions, the goods of *harmony* and *unanimity* implicitly justified coercive action to protect those goods.

While the elite in the Greco-Roman world of Late Antiquity tended to hold to these Stoic and Platonic concepts based on the etiology of *harmony*, the etiology of *invasion* was also common, if considered low-class.<sup>23</sup> At this time in history, the etiology of *invasion* was usually expressed as concern over *moral purity* or worries about invading demons that were believed to cause individual or social *sickness*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> On the association of human and social bodies, see, e.g., Plato, *The Republic V.462-Belles Lettres editions*, (1920–2012).

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 69d, 70b, in Roger Brock, *Sickness in the Body Politic: Medical Imagery in the Greek Polis*, (2000).

<sup>22</sup> Rachana Kamtekar, *What’s the Good of Agreeing? Homonoia in Platonic Politics*, (2004); Klaus Thraede, *Homonoia (Eintracht)*, (1994).

<sup>23</sup> Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 161–62.

<sup>24</sup> Martin, 282, note 5; Ida Fröhlich, “Evil in Second Temple Texts, (2013).



An immense variety of local Mediterranean and Mesopotamian cultures expressed views in line with these ideas, but among them was the already ancient culture of the Jews. Jewish belief systems emphasized purity of action, personal hygiene, taking great care of food, and healing disease by expelling demons.

## 5.2 Christian Traditions

Christianity arrived and developed in this diverse world of Late Antiquity, taking on elements of both etiologies over the first four centuries CE.<sup>25</sup> The two etiologies are most easily identified in two different constructions of the *Body of Christ*—the mystical body of all Christians—and in how these constructions have influenced Christian communities.

This vein is far too rich to explore fully here; for brevity, I highlight two case studies: 1) the etiology of *harmony* influenced the strict hierarchy of the Catholic Church culminating in the doctrinal authority of the Bishop of Rome, and 2) the etiology of *purity* and *invasion* shaped the deep worry for individual and group purity among some Protestant denominations. I will also note how these structures have influenced American politics and policies. I begin with a brief history of the concept of the *Body of Christ* and its versions based on *invasion* and *harmony*.

**“The two etiologies [*invasion and harmony*] are most easily identified in two different constructions of the *Body of Christ*—the mystical body of all Christians—and in how these constructions have influenced Christian communities.”**

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<sup>25</sup> For an extensive development of how the two etiologies influenced the development of Christian theology and hierarchy through the 4th century CE, see Ralph, *Metaphors of Sickness and the Social Body in the Constantinian Era*, (2015).

## 5.2.1 Body of Christ

The phrase “Body of Christ” may refer either to communion bread and wine, described by Jesus as “my body” at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19-20), or to the mystical body of all Christians, united by belief, membership in a church, and/or participation in communion.<sup>26</sup> This body was first described by the Apostle Paul.

Paul had been a Jewish man of deep faith with something of a Greek education who, through a conversion experience, became probably the most influential of the early Apostles despite having never met Christ. Paul traveled across Anatolia and southern Europe, founding Christian communities and writing letters back to them. Some of these survive in the New Testament.

The community in Corinth was internally divided over how much purity of belief and action was required to be a member of the Christian community. Paul’s letter to them is known as 1 Corinthians (1 Cor). In it, Paul revealed his Greek education and his Jewish concerns for *moral purity* in the way he used the *body* metaphor throughout the 12th chapter. Most directly, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ,” he writes, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor 12:12-15).”

### 5.2.1.1 Invasion

The initial description of the body does not express an etiology, but throughout the epistle, Paul shows genuine concern that Christians remain *pure* in their actions. He argues that Christians cannot remain members of the *Body of Christ* if they sin *because their sin contaminates the whole*. According to Dale Martin, Paul’s idea of *instantaneous spiritual contamination* is most clearly seen in 1 Cor 5.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Taking communion is the act of receiving through ingestion of bread and sometimes wine, which is also called the Body and Blood of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross in payment for others’ sins. There are now dozens of defined theologies of the mystical Body of Christ and the sacrament of communion. An examination of this sacrament lies outside the scope of this paper, but it does offer what I believe to be a uniquely tangible, and therefore very powerful, repetitive ritual of becoming a member of the social Body of Christ.

<sup>27</sup> Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, chap. 7.

There, Paul admonishes his readers to clean out all the old yeast from the Christian community because “a little yeast will leaven the whole loaf” (1 Cor 5:6). Yeast here being a *person*, their *sin*, and *guilt* of that sin. The answer to what to do about the problem is: “Drive out the wicked from among you” (1 Cor 5:13).

Paul does not say, “drive the wicked to the fringes of society.” He says, drive them out from among you, employing the Deuteronomic formula used repeatedly to prescribe the *death penalty* for leading the Jewish community into *idolatry*.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, he also uses the theme of yeast to warn how a *tiny intruder*, such as a *sin*, can change a *whole body* (Gal 5:9). The policy principle is to *expunge the contaminant* and strengthen boundaries to *protect* the spiritual health, salvation, of the whole community.<sup>29</sup> Excommunication is not about the individual; it is about the *purity* and the *salvation* of the group.

**“The policy principle is to *expunge* the contaminant and strengthen boundaries to *protect* the spiritual health, salvation, of the whole community.”**

#### 5.2.1.2 Harmony

With this foundational view of the *Body of Christ* and the continued influence of Pauline teachings generally, *purity* was central to Christian notions of community in the first few centuries CE. However, as the small, scattered congregations grew and spread across and beyond the Roman Empire, they faced bewildering challenges in heterodox gospel writings, diverse definitions of *sin*, and conflicts with local non-Christian religious and imperial leaders.

For all these reasons, the communities relied increasingly on local bishops to coordinate with each other to decide on answers to these conflicts and to maintain connections between the members of the *Body of Christ*.

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<sup>28</sup> Deuteronomy 13.5; 17.7; 19.9; 22.21-24. Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Scripture and Eschatology in 1 Corinthians*, (2016).

<sup>29</sup> Tellingly, the Greek word for salvation is *soterios*, which can also mean health. [Strongs's #4991: Soteria - Greek/Hebrew Definitions - Bible Tools](#).

Up to the third century, this nascent hierarchy conceived bishops as a collective of equals (more or less), with each serving as *head* of their own community. One particularly formative moment was the mid-third century, and one particularly formative character was Bishop Cyprian of Carthage. I will offer a more extended analysis here because it is essential to show how the Catholic tradition of *hierarchy* and *harmony* developed under real social pressures that might otherwise have pulled the community to pieces.

### 5.2.2 Cyprian of Carthage and the Shift to Harmony

In 250 CE, the emperor Decius required every Roman citizen to perform a sacrifice to the gods for the health of the emperor. Christians, banned from such sacrifice by their monotheistic belief in the Christian God, had to choose whether to perform the sacrifice or face torture, imprisonment, or death. Many chose to sacrifice, becoming known as “the lapsed.” Many of these *lapsed* congregants then tried to re-enter their communities, and some local bishops admitted them without enforcing processes of *penitence* and *reconciliation* or by allowing *confessors*, rather than bishops, to administer them.

This situation gave rise to two primary challenges in maintaining *cohesion* across the broader Christian community, with each challenge aligning with one of the two disease etiologies: 1) To *harmony* – disobedience against the office of Bishop, and 2) To *purity* – fear of contaminating sin. As Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, and his contemporaries worked through the tragedy of the *persecution* and the question of the *lapsed* Christians, they partly struggled over the definition of health in the *social body*.<sup>30</sup>

**...two primary challenges in maintaining  
*cohesion* across the broader Christian  
community, with each challenge aligning  
with one of the two disease etiologies, [are]:**

1. To *harmony* – disobedience against the office of Bishop, and
2. To *purity* – fear of contaminating sin.

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<sup>30</sup> Ralph, *Metaphors of Sickness and the Social Body in the Constantinian Era*, chap. 5.

Cyprian himself was heir to both traditions of *social body* theory as a Greek-educated convert to Christianity. Early in the crisis, Cyprian argued for the Pauline model of the pure *Body of Christ*. Yet, events pushed him to turn away from that model of community, using instead the model of *harmony* and *hierarchy*.

Against the first challenge of disobedience, Cyprian argued that only bishops, not confessors, could extend the grace of Christ to the lapsed. Cyprian himself excommunicated some confessors and even some other bishops for failing to follow orders.<sup>31</sup>

In the second challenge, many other Christians feared the contaminating sin of the lapsed and separated themselves. One such group became the focal point of other schismatic communities: a small schismatic group in Rome led by the rigorist presbyter Novatian. To Cyprian, schism was the literal dismemberment of the Body and at least as dangerous as contamination.

**“To Cyprian, schism was the literal dismemberment of the Body and at least as dangerous as contamination.”**

Pushing back against the dual challenges of 1) disobedience of his Episcopal authority and 2) dismemberment from fear of contamination, Cyprian increasingly emphasized the model of *hierarchy* and *harmony*. He believed Episcopal authority was the solution to both challenges, defining membership in the *Body of Christ* as unity *with the parent stock*, that is, the *hierarchy*.

God is one, and Christ is one; His Church is one and the faith is one; and the cement of fellowship binds all the people together into the body's solid unity. That unity cannot be broken; that one body cannot be divided by any cleavage of its structure, nor cut up in fragments with its vitals torn out. Nothing that is separated from the parent stock can ever live or breath apart; all hope of its salvation is lost.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Epistle 41, in Cyprian of Carthage, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, (1984).

<sup>32</sup> On unity, see, e.g., Maurice Bévenot, trans., *Cyprianus: De Lapsis and De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate*, (1971).

Cyprian's central argument is that membership in the church, which also provides access to *salvation*, is defined by *obedience* to the bishop. Ironically, it was Cyprian's success in discrediting the schismatic leader in Rome that would ultimately strengthen the *hierarchy*, thus creating the *Papacy* by raising the bishop of that city above all others.

**“Ironically, it was Cyprian’s success in discrediting the schismatic leader in Rome that would ultimately strengthen the *hierarchy*, thus creating the *Papacy* by raising the bishop of that city above all others.”**

### 5.2.3 Roman Catholic Hierarchy and Harmony

Hierarchy continues to be a central theme of the Catholic Church, but the Catholic community is also incredibly internally diverse. The language of *harmony* helps the Church to organize and direct this diversity into productive cooperation. Pope Francis recently used this language in his address to the General Assembly of Synods of Bishops in October 2023. There, the Pope emphasized *harmony*, not necessarily perfect agreement, but *overall collaboration*, as the goal.

The Church: a single harmony made up of many voices and the work of the Holy Spirit. That is how we should think of the Church. Each Christian community, each individual is distinctive, but this distinctiveness must be included in the symphony of the Church, and that symphony is made “just right” by the Spirit: that is not something we can do. We are not a parliament; we are not the United Nations; no, we are something else. The Holy Spirit is the source of harmony among the Churches.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, while harmony can be an inclusive way to manage differences, the underlying presumption that *harmony* and *overall collaboration* are divine justifies the punishment of *open dissension*. Like Cyprian, Pope Francis has been leading his community through a period of public dissension over the definition of *sin*. Like Cyprian, Francis is also excommunicating or removing from power those who dissent from his leadership.

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<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, *Opening of the Works of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, (2023).

**“...while harmony can be an inclusive way to manage differences, the underlying presumption that *harmony* and *overall collaboration* are divine justifies the punishment of *open dissension*.”**

Recently, for example, the Pope first removed the Bishop of Tyler, Texas, for public disapproval of Francis’ program of doctrinal adjustments in the Church<sup>34</sup> and then censured American Cardinal Raymond Burke for “sowing disunity” in the Church.<sup>35</sup>

#### **5.2.4 Protestantism and Purity**

Protestant theology and community boundaries have always been deeply informed by the ideal of *Christian purity*. In examining primary sources from the mid-sixteenth century, Klaus Yoder shows how Protestant theologians viewed “material, moral, and ideological purity” as interlinked in their struggle to identify and protect their own nascent communities.<sup>36</sup> As Protestant communities struggled to separate themselves from Catholic people and religious ritual, he argues, “It was no mistake that a favorite proof text for the defenders of Evangelical ritual purity was the image, shared between the Gospels and the Pauline letters, of a bit of leaven contaminating the dough, as in Galatians 5:9.”<sup>37</sup>

The emphasis on “material, moral, and ideological purity” has continued to shape the Protestant idea of *self* and *community*, especially in America. Puritans, so central to the American story, received their name as a denunciation by fellow Anglicans for their zeal at *purifying* the Church of England of any residual *contaminating* Catholic religious elements.

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<sup>34</sup> Nicole Winfield, *Pope Francis Removes a Leading US Conservative Critic as Bishop of Tyler, Texas*, [AP News](#) (2023).

<sup>35</sup> Jason Horowitz, *Pope’s Critics Feel the Sting After His Patience Runs Out*, [The New York Times](#), (2023).

<sup>36</sup> Klaus C. Yoder, *Purity and Pollution in Protestant Ritual Ethics*, (2017).

<sup>37</sup> Yoder, 39.

Today, purity concerns most influence evangelical and charismatic denominations within the broader Protestant movement—these concerns for group and individual purity often center on either *sexual purity* or *racial identity*. The first has spawned the evangelical “purity culture” movement,<sup>38</sup> while the second has driven White evangelicals to increasing levels of support for *xenophobic* and *racist* policies.<sup>39</sup>

Standards for *community purity* have also driven a penchant for division among both Black and White sections of the evangelical communities, particularly the Baptist denominations.<sup>40</sup> As one author notes, you are “not a real Baptist until you’ve been through a church split.”<sup>41</sup>

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S.,<sup>42</sup> has lately ousted one of its largest and most successful churches, Saddleback, and four others for having women pastors. While Saddleback and its head pastor, Rick Warren, remain conservative stalwarts in other ways, why would SBC drive them out? As the Executive Director of Baptist News Global put it, “The most ultra-conservative faction of the SBC believes the Bible explicitly condemns women as pastoral leaders in the church. To remain ‘in fellowship’ with anyone who sees that differently would be *spiritually ruinous*. They care nothing about the numerical health of the SBC or its public reputation; they care only about *doctrinal purity*.”<sup>43</sup>

In other words, if a group includes a member holding *doctrinal error* or *sin*, that sin contaminates all. The policy outcome, then, is to split officially from the sinner – thus, Saddleback and four other churches have been officially disfellowed from SBC. The SBC, like Paul, drove out the wicked from among them to maintain the pure *Body of Christ*.

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<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*, (2018).

<sup>39</sup> On Christian Nationalism and racial separation, see, e.g., Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead, *Christian Nationalism, Racial Separatism, and Family Formation: Attitudes Toward Transracial Adoption as a Test Case*, (2015).

<sup>40</sup> Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History*, (2015).

<sup>41</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (2019).

<sup>42</sup> Dalia Fahmy, *7 Facts about Southern Baptists*, [Pew Research Center](https://www.pewresearch.org/2019/07/11/southern-baptists/), (2019).

<sup>43</sup> Mark Wingfield, *A Primer on Why Southern Baptists Are Fighting over Women in Ministry Once Again*, [Baptist News Global](https://www.baptistnews.com/2023/01/10/a-primer-on-why-southern-baptists-are-fighting-over-women-in-ministry-once-again/), (2023).



## 5.2.5 American Body Politic

Both traditions of the *Body of Christ* have profoundly influenced concepts of the American body politic, though the internally diverse citizenry makes the connection between *rhetoric* and *policy* more tenuous.<sup>44</sup> I will highlight one example that shows how rhetorical descriptions of Islam as an *invasive disease* and referencing the letters of Paul justified the so-called Muslim ban.

### 5.2.5.1 Islam as Cancer and the “Muslim Ban”

In August 2016, former Lt. General Michael Flynn gave a speech in which he described Islam itself as a *cancer*, arguing that it must be “excised.”<sup>45</sup> Three months later, Flynn accepted the position of National Security Advisor to President-Elect Donald Trump.<sup>46</sup>

In January and March 2017, President Trump signed versions of his executive order banning foreign nationals from Muslim-majority countries.<sup>47</sup> Then, in a May speech in Saudi Arabia,<sup>48</sup> he referenced Paul’s injunction to “Drive out the wicked from among you” (1 Cor 5:13). Dana Rohrabacher, Representative of California, quoted this speech approvingly a month later on the House floor, “drive the terrorists out of your mosque; drive the terrorists out of your country.”<sup>49</sup>

“...in a...speech in Saudi Arabia, [President Trump] referenced Paul’s injunction to ‘Drive out the wicked from among you’”.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Bernd Herzogenrath, *An American Body-Politic: A Deleuzian Approach* (2010); Kirsten E. Wood, ‘Join with Heart and Soul and Voice’: Music, Harmony, and Politics in the Early American Republic, (2014).

<sup>45</sup> Ret. Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, *Field of Fight*, [YouTube](#) (2016).

<sup>46</sup> Eric Bradner, Sara Murray and Ryan Browne, *Donald Trump Offers Michael Flynn Job of National Security Advisor*, [CNN Politics](#), (2016).

<sup>47</sup> ACLU of Washington, *Timeline of the Muslim Ban*, (2017).

<sup>48</sup> Donald J. Trump, *President Trump’s Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit*, [The White House](#), (2017).

<sup>49</sup> Representative Dana Rohrabacher, speaking on President Trump’s May speech in Saudi Arabia, *Congressional Record*, (2017).

Near the end of 2017, Representative Louie Gohmert of Texas articulated the connection between the concern to close off community boundaries and the Muslim ban:

“Anybody can see that *people could come* in from countries where radical Islam was destroying the countries, and there were messages from the *leaders of those radical Islamic groups who said: We are getting our soldiers into these groups of refugees that are going into Western civilization so that we can destroy them.* I mean, they weren’t even hiding what they were doing.”<sup>50</sup>

There are endless examples of how the *social body* metaphor and its affiliated tropes appear in American political rhetoric, but the rhetoric associated with the Muslim ban shows an unusually clear link. Politicians repeatedly tied the themes of *Islam* and *terrorism* together with *cancer*, *purity*, and the *protection of boundaries*. This language leaned heavily on the metaphor of the *body* and the etiology of *invasion* to define American boundaries, provide justification, and prescribe policy.

**“Politicians repeatedly tied the themes of *Islam* and *terrorism* together with *cancer*, *purity*, and the *protection of boundaries*.”**

### 5.3 Hindu and Chinese Traditions

I will highlight two additional instances of *body* metaphor found in Hindu and Chinese religious and cultural traditions, where its influence appears significant. I point out these examples even though they are outside my area of expertise because I aim to make this metaphor and its various uses visible, including outside the Christian and Western traditions.

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<sup>50</sup> Representative Louie Gohmert, speaking on the Muslim ban, *Congressional Record*, (2017)-Emphasis added.

### 5.3.1 Hindu Traditions

In Hinduism, multiple ancient texts, including the Rigveda and the Bhagavad Gita, describe society as comprised of diverse roles in action, represented by different body parts of the God Brahma.<sup>51</sup> The earlier text, Rigveda, describes “a cosmic man, made up of ‘four transactional arenas, corresponding to the various tasks required for the operation of the world. At the top ... is Brahmin, the teacher and the priest.... The next group, the *Ksatriyas*, are identified with the arms and serve as warriors and politicians. The *Vaisyas* or merchants are associated with the thighs, the workers or *sudras* with the feet.”<sup>52</sup> This is an intensely hierarchical image.

**In Hinduism, multiple ancient texts...describe society as comprised of diverse roles in action, represented by different body parts of the God Brahma”.**

The Bhagavad Gita, written later, then doubled down on this *hierarchical* image of society as the *cosmic man*, eventually creating and justifying the “systemic, societally controlling mechanism” of the *caste system*.<sup>53</sup> South Asia is astonishingly diverse, a trait which the caste system, like other hierarchical bodies politic, manages by attempting to order the diversity.

I point out the image of the “cosmic man” here in the ancient religious texts Rigveda and the Bhagavad Gita to note the indelible mark the metaphor of the *body politic* has had and continues to have on policy and people. Though India officially abolished the caste system in 1950, *caste identity* and *discrimination* continue in India and among South Asian diaspora to this day.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Abilash Chandran Ramchandran, *Bhagavad Gita: The Paradox of Dharma and Its Ontology*, (2020).

<sup>52</sup> On the age of Rigveda, see, e.g., Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton, *The Rigveda: A Guide*, (2020); Ramchandran, *Bhagavad Gita*, 62-63.

<sup>53</sup> Ramchandran, *Bhagavad Gita*, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Deepa Fernandes and Gabrielle Healy, *Caste Discrimination Persists in the U.S. How Are Legislators Addressing It?*, [WBUR-Here&Now](#), (2023); Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, (2020).

### 5.3.2 Chinese Traditions

Chinese culture, helped by government rhetoric, maintains ancient traditions celebrating *harmony* and the *unity of diversity*. Currently, the government is pursuing a policy of “Sinicization” that aims to ensure that all citizens prioritize fundamentally “Chinese” values over any other identity they may have. I suspect that the two are related.

Harmony is a core value in Chinese culture, according to Zhang Lihua at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, because it can “unite diversity,” bringing different things “together in the appropriate manner allows them to develop from an uncoordinated state to one of coordination; from asymmetry to symmetry; and from imbalance to balance.”<sup>55</sup>

This conception of harmony, focusing on *balance*, *coordination*, and *unity*, resonates with the concept as it has appeared in ancient Greek philosophy and other traditions since. Likewise, it is similarly connected to *hierarchy* and *obedience to authority*. This emphasis on authority and hierarchy is particularly strong in China, even among East Asian cultures that were also influenced by the Chinese philosopher Confucius. One study showed that of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Taiwanese respondents, Chinese respondents rated “interpersonal harmony and relational hierarchy” the highest.<sup>56</sup>

As with most cultures shaped by harmony, *diversity* in China is carefully managed. China is perhaps unique because it is also Communist, which requires a certain amount of repression to succeed.<sup>57</sup> Yet its cultural traditions of *harmony*, *hierarchy*, and the *coordination of diversity* provide strong rhetorical foundations for the Chinese Communist Party’s policy aims.

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<sup>55</sup> Zhang Lihua, *China’s Traditional Cultural Values and National Identity*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2013).

<sup>56</sup> Yan Bing Zhang et al., *Harmony, Hierarchy and Conservatism: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Confucian Values in China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan*, (2005).

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan R. Adelman and Walter Bacon, *Terror And Communist Politics: The Role Of The Secret Police In Communist States*, (2019); Bruce J. Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century*, (2023).

Lately, these policy aims have included a wide range of “Sinicization” policies that require *religious teachings* and *customs* to align with Chinese values. The CCP has particularly focused on Uighur Muslims, a minority Turkic group concentrated in a single province that had already been the focus of ethnic Han Sinicization efforts that previously sparked protests.<sup>58</sup> The CCP radio message I quoted earlier in this paper referenced this ethnic group and the CCP’s “reeducation” efforts responding to previous Uighur protests and terrorist attacks – efforts I read as pushback on the Chinese vision of a *harmonious* and *hierarchical* society.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to make visible the profoundly powerful role of social body language in justifying inclusion and exclusion.

Human beings all share three fundamental experiences. We need to belong to and feel secure in a group, we use simple metaphors to understand complex concepts like society, and we all experience embodiment. In other words, to expand on Mary Douglas’ classic formulation, the image of a *human body* is the most readily available system of meaning by which humans can *shape* and *limit* the groups we need to survive.<sup>59</sup> Put simply, the *body politic* is us, and we are driven to protect it as we are driven to protect our own skin and bones. That means *excluding* or *controlling* those who would endanger it.

Religious and cultural traditions are a natural place for this metaphor system to root. Such traditions are how we receive our membership and pass it on to others. Religious and cultural traditions typically are where a society inscribes its behavioral norms, understandings of the natural order, and expectations for human relationships. The fact that the *body* metaphor can be made to explain all this and more makes it particularly powerful. Because various conceptions of the body metaphor are mixing and mingling in this age of globalization, it is an essential lens to analyze the universal struggle to find *community*.

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<sup>58</sup> Ian Urbina, *The Uyghurs Forced to Process the World’s Fish*, [The New Yorker](#), (2023); Eric Levitz, *China Declared Islam a Contagious Disease—and Quarantined 1 Million Muslims*, [Intelligencer](#), (2018).

<sup>59</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, (2003).

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## **About CFG**

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically-informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

## **About the Author**

Allison K. Ralph, Ph.D., is the Founder & Principal of Cohesion Strategy. A thought leader in religious pluralism and social cohesion, Allison brings 20 years' experience in strategy, research, and nonprofit and philanthropic leadership. She previously worked at The Aspen Institute Religion & Society Program, where she served as Assistant, Associate, and Interim Director of the program and Director of its Religion and Philanthropy Initiative. She also managed events at the El-Hibri Foundation and The Catholic University of America. During her five-year tenure at Aspen, Allison edited *Pluralism in Peril: Challenges to an American Ideal*, developed a seven-component framework to understand the system of religious pluralism, published both academic and industry papers on religion and philanthropy, and contributed to a special journal issue on Religious Literacy in Education. She has spoken from the mainstage at the International Religious Freedom Summit and the El-Hibri Foundation Peace Awards Ceremony, and has given talks at Upswell, United Philanthropy Forum, and the American Academy of Religion. Allison has a Ph.D. in church history from The Catholic University of America, and an M.Phil. from Cambridge University. Her graduate research focused on how societies manage or fail to manage their internal diversity, and how they create and maintain social boundaries.

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