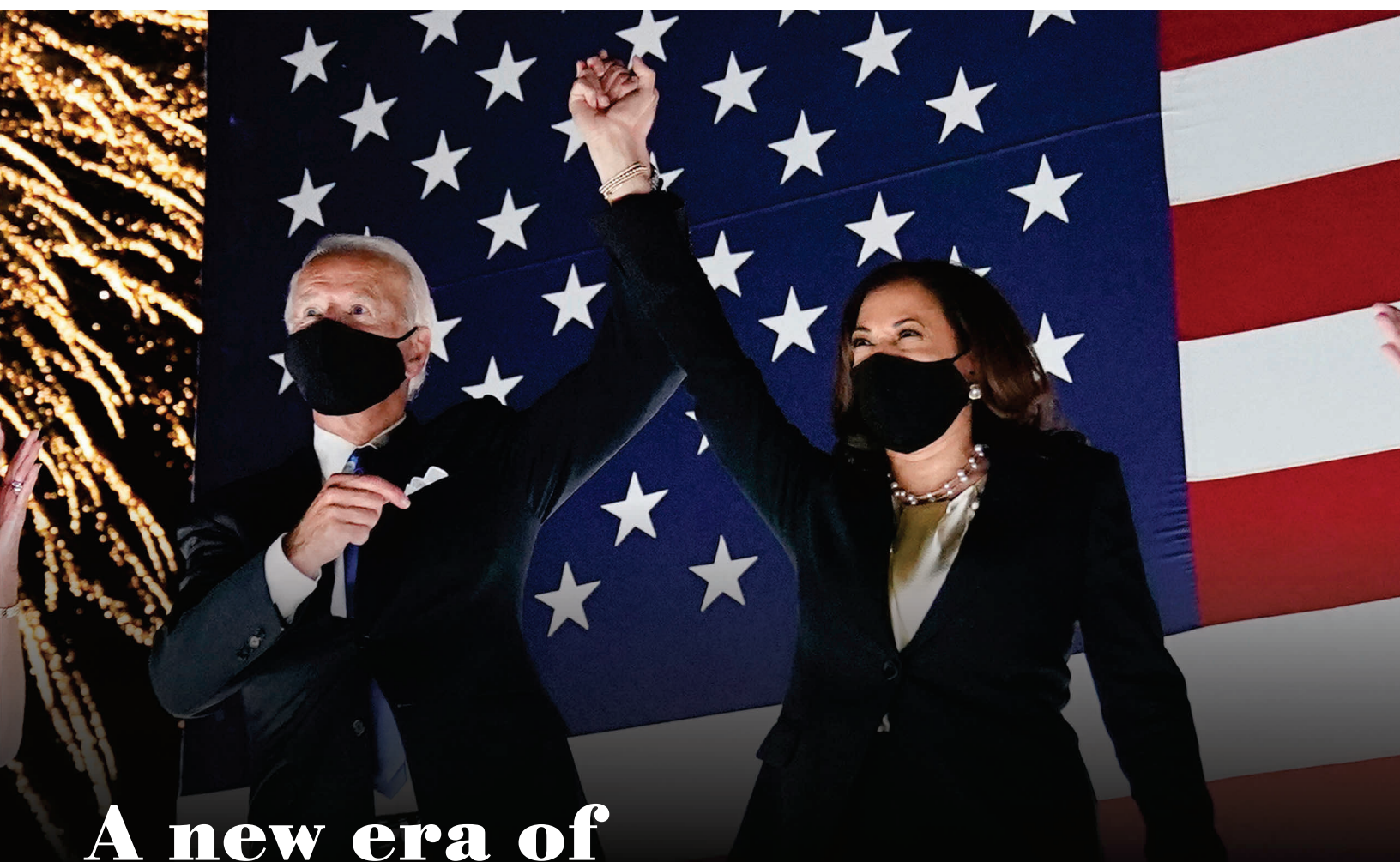


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Religion & Liberty

ACTON INSTITUTE'S INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RELIGION,
ECONOMICS AND CULTURE



A new era of constitutional drift

Institutionalizing the
critical race revolution

Russell Kirk's path
to Christ

The 3 things you need to
make 'socialism' work

EDITOR'S NOTE

Rev. Ben Johnson EXECUTIVE EDITOR

While political fortunes ebb and flow, our destiny remains in our own hands. That balanced approach to the newly installed Biden–Harris administration guides this issue of *Religion & Liberty*, which is a special one for me.

Alexander William Salter offers his first contribution. “We’re in the midst of a constitutional revolution,” he warns. “Constitutional drift refers to the tendency for *de facto* government to diverge from *de jure* government,” he writes. He offers one ray of hope: That this nation will experience a new birth of freedom, one individual at a time.

Heritage Foundation scholar Mike Gonzalez turns his gimlet eye on critical race theory, the “bizarre ideology,” which “has, sadly, become our new state religion.”

Up-and-coming young author Chris Nagavonski notes how enormous (and often deceptive) new spending bills threaten both our economic standing and our place in global affairs.

The Discovery Institute’s Wesley J. Smith warns that “something authoritarian this way comes”: a coordinated attempt to force Christian medical providers to perform abortions, gender reassignment surgeries, and assisted suicides. Preserving the right of Christians and other faithful believers to express their values in their work life is “the next civil rights struggle.”

Bradley Birzer and Ray Nothstine glean insights from the lives of Russell Kirk and Eugene McCarthy.

We pause to remember Walter Williams and take a somewhat tongue-in-cheek view of how “socialism” can succeed.

On a personal note, this is my final issue as Executive Editor. You will appreciate the way economics motivated my decision to decline another year at the Acton Institute. Although our journey together comes to an end – or at least a pause – with this issue, the quality of the talented writers in these pages gives me solace. Please join me in recommitting yourself to the Lord, to liberty, and to the U.S. Constitution understood through the original intent of our Founding Fathers. Please stay in touch. And until we meet again, God bless.

Rev. Ben Johnson (@therightswriter) is Executive Editor of the Acton Institute.



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School shutdowns hurt struggling students, girls the worst: Study

Rev. Ben Johnson

ACTON INSTITUTE

In-person school closures due to COVID-19 lockdowns widened the gap between the rich and poor, a recent study conducted by Oxford University has found. While young people of all demographic groups fell behind during the period of remote learning, those from the least educated homes were the hardest hit.

Researchers studied elementary students from age 8 to 11 in the Netherlands, because they found the country best suited to endure the pandemic. Dutch schools test students twice a year, and 2020 tests fell just before and after the eight-week suspension of in-person education. The nation also has the world's highest level of broadband penetration, and its schools distributed electronic devices to families that lacked them.

"[O]ur results reveal a learning loss ... equivalent to one-fifth of a school year, the same period that schools remained closed," the researchers find. That is, students learned nothing during the eight-week break.

Like most things in life, the well-off endured the hardship better. The children's "learning loss was particularly pronounced for students from disadvantaged homes, confirming the fears held by many that school closures would cause socioeconomic gaps to widen," the Oxford report states.

Levels of learning loss were "up to 60% larger among students from less-educated homes, confirming worries about the uneven toll of the pandemic on children and families."

The policy put kids from deprived families even further behind. People with the highest educational attainment earn on average 47% more income than those with an upper secondary education, according to the OECD. That should concern any nation devoted to eradicating income inequality.

Worse yet, COVID-19 lockdowns placed poorer families under additional pressure. "Concurrent effects on the economy" caused by closing the economy "make parents less equipped to provide support, as they struggle with economic uncertainty or demands of working from home," the study says.

Researchers also discovered, although differences between the sexes were slight, girls sustained modestly greater learning loss than boys.

Foreign aid pays for Muslim imams to preach against smoking

Rev. Ben Johnson

ACTON INSTITUTE

A Western foreign aid program paid researchers to insert material into the sermons of Muslim imams. The UK allocated £795,463 in taxpayer funds (\$1.1 million U.S.) for imams to preach about the dangers of second-hand smoke.

Researchers gave anti-smoking talking points to the Islamic religious leaders of 45 mosques in the Mirpur area of Dhaka, Bangladesh, in the hopes of reducing indoor smoking. "These messages will be worded within the mainstream Islamic discourse, using faith-based decrees on addiction, hygiene, health promotion, self-harm and inflicting harm to others, and sanctity of human life," the grant stated.

Bangladesh already bans indoor smoking in most public places, but citizens refuse to comply due to "existing social attitudes." (There is a broader lesson here that applies to other nanny state programs and gun control laws.)

Though taxpayer funding doesn't flow *directly* to the imams, foreign aid dollars altered the content of their sermons. "To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical," wrote Thomas Jefferson in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. He was speaking about state funding of the Episcopal church; one can only imagine his thoughts about funding Bangladeshi imams to preach against tobacco.

Should the government funding influence any religious figure to alter the content of his sermons? Who will be wielding this power? And which clergy will be on the take?

Perhaps a future U.S. administration could declare that homophobia is a public health crisis and pay clerics to change Christian teachings on sexuality and marriage. In 2015, then-Secretary of State and presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton declared that "religious beliefs" opposing abortion or same-sex marriage "have to be changed."

People of all backgrounds should support the separation of mosque and state. And religious leaders entrusted with sharing God's message must never substitute the talking points of the secular government for the Word of God.

The economics behind the COVID-19 baby bust

Rev. Ben Johnson

ACTON INSTITUTE

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, some academics predicted a "baby boom," as couples found themselves locked down with nothing to do. But those familiar with economics knew differently – and the data have now backed us up.

The coronavirus "baby boom" has turned into a "baby bust." The CDC reported that U.S. births in the month of December 2020, nine months after the lockdowns began, fell by 8% compared with December 2019. The same pattern is seen in state-by-state results reviewed by the media, in places like Hawaii (30%), California (10%), Florida (8%), Ohio (7%), and Arizona (5%).

The Brookings Institution has estimated 300,000 to 500,000 American babies will never be born due to the global pandemic. And the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research forecasted the baby bust will last until August – the longest streak of lowered fertility in 100 years, including the Great Depression and the 2008 recession.

Economics impact all of life, including the formation of new life. "When the labor market is weak, aggregate birth rates decline; when the labor market improves, birth rates improve," wrote Brookings scholars Melissa Kearney and Philip Levine.

As I wrote at *The Stream* in 2016:

Due to the Great Recession 151,082 American women will never be mothers. Princeton researchers Janet Currie and Hannes Schwandt found that more than 400,000 Americans will never be born, because women became skittish about marriage and childbearing after living through a period of high unemployment and the uncertainty it brings.

This underscores a simple yet underappreciated truth: Economic policy affects the health and well-being of families. Healthy family life and economic flourishing walk hand in hand.

The root word of "economics," οἰκονομικά, means the management of a home. Social conservatives concerned about the nation's plunging marriage and fertility rates should support policies that lead to economic prosperity.

ESSAY

The road to Sino-serfdom

Chris Nagavonski

President Joe Biden has kicked off his administration by confidently calling for another four years of wasteful and harmful spending. Unfortunately, the Biden-Harris administration's fiscal agenda will slow the American people's economic growth at home, and undermine America's ability to support its allies and challenge its competitors abroad.

Biden's proposed infrastructure bill, the "American Jobs Act," offers a worthwhile starting point. For decades, Democrats and Republicans alike have turned to infrastructure spending as a way to demonstrate their willingness to "reach across the aisle" and "get things done." After all, the public largely supports fixing roads and bridges, and there seems to be no political or cultural agenda attached to such bills.

Or so one would think. First of all, Americans are increasingly skeptical of big infrastructure spending boondoggles. In 2018, 64% of the population supported President Donald Trump's \$1 trillion dollar infrastructure plan – an impressive level of consensus given the anti-Trump hysteria on the Left at the time. But a CNBC nationwide survey from early in April 2021 showed that only 36% of respondents backed Biden's \$2.25 trillion proposal. The same respondents supported measures like fixing roads and expanding broadband internet by large margins, so it would seem that something else is raising people's suspicions about the plan.

As it turns out, Americans are absolutely right to be skeptical about what the Biden-Harris administration plans to do with that \$2.25 trillion – because actual improvements to transportation, utilities, and communication make up less than half of the proposed spending.

An analysis of the bill by *Politico*, which relied on a generous definition of "infrastructure," showed that only around \$930 billion of the bill's proposed spending would go toward roads, bridges, broadband, and similarly tangible projects. (Interestingly, that's pretty close to the price tag of Trump's \$1 trillion plan.) *Politico* describes the Biden administration's efforts to classify the remaining \$1.3 trillion in the bill as "infrastructure" as either "stretching things," "very distant," or "not even close" to the truth. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., may believe that anything can be infrastructure, but a \$10 billion "civilian climate corps" and \$20 billion in grants to inept city governments and far-Left nonprofits under the guise of "racial equality and environmental justice" are not infrastructure by any meaningful definition of the term.

But the Biden administration is not just spending more than \$2 trillion on a grab bag of big government plans and progres-



Joe Biden addressed a joint session of Congress about his infrastructure bill on April 28, 2021. (Photo credit: Melina Moya/Pool Photo via AP, File)

sive politicians' wish lists. The president is requesting a \$753 billion budget for the Department of Defense in the next fiscal year – even more than this year's \$740 billion. Like the “infrastructure” plan, though, this proposal stretches the definition of defense to include green energy and climate initiatives.

The pandemic stimulus package from earlier this year was also filled with wasteful, even harmful spending: \$129 billion went to public schools, with no condition that they reopen their doors. Another \$750 million went to overseas health programs, and more than \$1 billion went to a “racial justice in farming” initiative that included an “equity commission” – presumably to ensure that an explicitly race-based program did not accidentally help the wrong people. All the while, our national debt has soared past \$28 trillion.

The Biden-Harris' administration's utterly misplaced budget and policy priorities are an excellent way to weaken the international community's confidence in America – and the status of the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency. What incentives will any nation have to cooperate with a country that seems hellbent on digging itself deeper into debt in order to pursue a frivolous, self-sabotaging agenda?

Worse, our irresponsible spending makes it easier for our rivals to undermine us. The United States owes at least \$1.1 trillion to China, a country that has been engaging in dishonest practices for years – including economic (as well as governmental) espionage and the theft of intellectual property – in order to maintain its export advantage. Now, China is taking the lead on developing a digital currency that has the potential to displace the dollar as the world's reserve currency.

Cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Ethereum have great potential as means of payment that transcend national borders. They offer increased confidentiality and remain immune to inept or malicious monetary policy inflicted by governments.

But while China's digital yuan may be a tempting choice for nations facing sanctions from the United States, it is also

likely to give the Chinese regime greater control over world affairs. Privacy and decentralization are supposed to be the main advantages of any digital currency. One that is controlled by an authoritarian state hostile to the West would offer none of these benefits.

It is not clear how America can stop China from implementing a digital yuan. China's ascension as

a global economic powerbroker will not be reversed anytime soon. But the U.S. government can certainly take steps to strengthen the dollar as much as possible and cement its legitimacy with the international community. At the very least, this would mean only spending money on our needs. Infrastructure funds should go toward roads and bridges, and defense spending should go toward providing for our national security instead of waging wars of choice abroad and political purges of the armed services at home.

To truly get America back on track, though, significant cuts are needed across the board – an approach the Biden administration is unlikely to consider. Conservatives need to get serious about opposing every bit of wasteful and unconstitutional spending in the next four years, even when it is not politically expedient to do so. And they need to keep opposing that spending after the next Republican administration takes power.

If most of Biden's spending bills become law, the American people will take a hit. Democrats will find innovative ways to separate people from their money. That includes a proposed capital gains tax hike that seems to be aimed squarely at middle-class Americans who increased their investments during the pandemic, as well as a proposed mileage tax (now on hold) which would target drivers. The latter would have a particularly harsh impact on rural Americans.

Despite these tax increases, the United States will have to borrow more money to finance both parties' government-expanding agendas, often loaned to us by China. Alternately, the government can simply print more money as it did at the height of the pandemic and hope that inflation rates won't soar.

This is not how serious countries maintain their financial health, much less how superpowers maintain their influence. This is how declining world powers cede ground to more pragmatic and determined competitors – and leave other nations with no choice but to accept the growing power of a ruthless authoritarian state like China. Being more than \$28 trillion in debt is a serious challenge. So is malicious behavior by China. We will never be able to take on hostile foreign nations if our own government remains hostile to the principles of responsible spending and governance.

Chris Nagavonski is a writer and translator from Washington, D.C., who specializes in Eastern European affairs. [R&L](#)

Institutionalizing the critical race revolution

Mike Gonzalez

More and more, Americans are becoming cognizant of something called critical race theory and the growing role it is playing in their lives now that the Biden-Harris administration has elevated this approach to the status of official state ideology. CRT is hardly new, however, and has been building momentum for years, if not decades – wreaking havoc in schools, workplaces, and legislatures. To vastly simplify matters, CRT is the belief that racism in America is structural, institutional, and systemic; therefore, to extirpate it from our lives, we must radically alter all structures, institutions, even the American system itself through training programs and curricula that deconstruct our assumptions and thoughts. All racial disparities are evidence of this deeply embedded racism and compel the heavy-handed use of racial preferences. CRT rejects the traditional view that racism is an individual issue, one in which racist individuals can be prosecuted when they act upon their racism by using the statutes created after the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ended state-enforced racism.

What CRT is in practice was already on display in New York City three years ago, well before Joe Biden acceded to the presidency. One standard-bearer was Richard Carranza, the chancellor of the New York City Department of Education. He is in charge of the largest public school system not just in the United States, but in the world. More than 1.1 million children are taught at the city's 1,700-plus public schools. Carranza oversees an annual budget of \$25 billion, which makes him extraordinarily powerful, and potentially dangerous. Having drunk deep of the witches' brew of identity politics and CRT, he gets to use his position to impose his views on a staff of 135,000, includ-

ing 75,000 educators and, of course, the most impressionable one-eighth of the Big Apple's population.

Carranza flexed his muscles in early 2019, when he ordered that principals, central office supervisors, and superintendents undergo mandatory training to root out the "white supremacy culture" and the "implicit bias" supposedly rampant in New York schools. With an almost religious zeal, Carranza said of the training programs:

It's good work. It's hard work. And I would hope that anybody that feels that somehow that process is not beneficial to them, I would very respectfully say they are the ones that need to reflect even harder upon what they believe.

Matt Gonzales, an outside adviser on Carranza's school diversity task force and director of the advocacy group New York Appleseed, states the obvious when he says of the reeducation camps, "it requires discomfort." That pain is supposed to be felt by the educators, and that is bad enough – but they are adults who can walk away and seek other employment. What the consciousness-raising struggle sessions aimed to do among the students is much worse.

In order to root out "white-supremacy culture," teachers are drilled on stamping out "individualism," "objectivity," "perfectionism," "either/or thinking," a "sense of urgency," and "worship of the written word." The training programs for teachers, in other words, amount to an attempt to replace the hegemonic narrative of America and the West – capitalism, freedom, and democracy – with a counter-narrative that sees reason, logic, truth, and objectivity as instruments to universalize patriarchal Western oppression.

This is critical race theory, and post-modernist deconstruction has turned into a multimillion-dollar industry of outside

consultants. Even worse, it is hurting children. As I wrote in the *New York Post* in 2019:

Perfectionism and love of reading are human traits, as evidenced by the fact we have all perfected our way from the Stone Age and now read on hand-held tablets. All of these traits contribute to academic and lifetime success. Without striving for perfection, a person will accept shoddy work; love of reading will lead to learning; linear thinking makes a person try to work through contradictions.

Carranza's identity politics will not just waste scarce resources, and cause discomfort among educators, but it will seriously imperil the future chances of a generation of schoolchildren, many of whom already face difficult odds.

Carranza personifies the damage that identity politics perpetrates on the nation day by day, and why it is so urgent that our citizens understand its nature – and force their policymakers to do something about it. The problem has metastasized, because this type of thinking was not confronted until late in the Trump Administration, when President Trump banned CRT trainings from federal workers and contractors. There are now Commissar Carranzas in every school district and every HR department at every company in America.

Diversity seminars such as the one Carranza forces on his staff are not contradictory by happenstance. The designers of these struggle sessions understand that children need to read and write, and thus need to appreciate the written word; they know that objectivity is essential to solving quadratic equations; they are aware that individualism incentivizes hard work. They know the achievement gap in education that they say they are trying to fix is a serious problem. Their objective is not the

children (who are just collateral damage, the eggs broken on the way to making the social-engineering omelet), and they understand that they are not offering a better pedagogy. What they want to do is destroy the liberal, free-enterprise system that best offers protection for man's natural rights. Whether one believes these rights come from God or nature does not matter; what matters is that our rights are under attack. The seminar designers do not hide their intentions, and they justify the complete systemic overhaul they seek on the claim that racism is deeply ingrained in America's very social framework. They attempt to intimidate and shame their critics into joining the fight against "white supremacy."

They are slightly less forthcoming about what they want to replace capitalism and democracy *with*. Not many outside the circles of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez come out and say, "We are rooting out individualism, objectivity, and perfectionism from the classroom, because we want to introduce socialism." But the mask slips often enough, and they have moments of candor. What they want is socialism – a large, Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxist state that will force people to behave in ways the social engineers have defined as good. This goes against the grain of the American system – a "system" that proponents of these ideologies denounce as racist and in need of an overhaul.

Seminars such as the ones Carranza required are the product of critical race theory, the smorgasbord of half-baked ideas at the center of identity politics that Americans are now having to reckon with in the age of Biden. Critical race theory is the mutant child of critical theory and owes its birth to a workshop held in a convent, of all places, outside of Madison, Wisconsin, in 1989. "Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step by step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law," wrote Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in their primer on the subject. Unless we do something drastic, "something inherent in the nature of our capitalist system [that] ineluctably produces poverty and class segregation ...



will continue to create and chew up victims." Economically, "[t]he free enterprise system, which is built on the idea of winners and losers, will continue to produce new ones every day."

In this way, the victimization and oppressor-oppressed narratives become handy justifications for ever-growing government intervention and the consequent diminution of our rights. Equality, the core principle of the Declaration of Independence and the central notion of the American way of life, is dropped in exchange for its functional opposite, which critical theorists call "equity." Equity requires unequal treatment by the schools, corporations, even the law. Whereas equality is understood to mean equality of opportunity, equity focuses on equality of outcome, which requires the redistribution of resources to those deemed to have a victim status – whatever their real socioeconomic status may be. "If I had a poor white male student and I had a middle-class black boy, I would actually put my equitable strategies and interventions into that middle-class black boy because over the course of his lifetime he will have less access and less opportunities than that poor white boy. That's what racial equity is," training consultant Darnisa Amante said at one of Carranza's workshops. One of the top critical theorists, Iris Marion Young, succinctly described the new dogma when she wrote that, in America, "racism, as well as other group oppressions ... condition the lives of most or all [b]lack, Latinos,

Asians, American Indians and Semitic peoples." That demands "different treatment for oppressed and disadvantaged groups. To promote social justice, I argue, social policy should sometimes accord special treatment to groups."

This bizarre ideology – which aims to profoundly transform America – has, sadly, become our new state religion. "Equity" has become the byword of the new administration. In his very first act as president, Joe Biden signed an extensive executive order that puts equity – again, unequal treatment by government – on steroids. In mid-March, the administration's Department of Education posted a new proposed rule saying that it would give priority in grants to history and civics programs that followed the dictums of CRT. We now have a situation not unlike our neighbor to the south. Mexico's old Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) emerged after the Mexican Revolution (1915–1920) as the ruling party in what became, for a century, a one-party state. Many critics puzzled about how an entity could at the same time be revolutionizing and institutional. Under Biden, our state ideology aims at completely overhauling the state. It cries out "a million Carranzas now!"

Mike Gonzalez is a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation. This essay is adapted from his book The Plot to Change America, How Identity Politics is Dividing the Land of the Free, first published in July 2020. [R&L](#)



ESSAY

A new era of constitutional drift

Alexander William Salter

Just over 100 days into President Joe Biden's administration, whatever hopes we held out that he would govern as a moderate are gone. The president seems determined to transform American society from the top down. Candidate Biden promised national unity and the restoration of lawful government. President Biden has, thus far, given us budget-busting spending packages, interference in the courts, and a flurry of executive orders of dubious constitutionality. These are not just bad policies; Biden's program strikes at the heart of self-government itself. Americans must be alert: We're in the midst of a constitutional revolution.

President Biden's legislative agenda is both dangerous and dishonest. The \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan was sold to the public as a COVID-19 relief act, but less than 10% of that bill was directly devoted to fighting the virus. The vast majority of the bill was a payout to longstanding progressive constituencies. Bailouts for profligate state governments and insolvent pensions might be good politics, but they have nothing to do with stemming the pandemic.

The same applies to the president's \$2.3 trillion infrastructure proposal, the American Jobs Plan. "Infrastructure" is defined so broadly that it's become an internet meme: "Everything is infrastructure!" When most Americans hear about an infrastructure bill, they think of things like roads, bridges, harbors, and airports. They don't think of housing, climate change, and child care, all of which the bill funds to the tune of billions of dollars. Biden is using infrastructure investment as an excuse to politicize the allocation of valuable capital.

The president's designs for the Supreme Court are even worse. Biden recently announced an exploratory commission for increasing the number of Supreme Court justices. Democratic legislators in both the House and Senate introduced a bill to expand the court from nine to 13 seats. It's unclear whether Democrats seriously want to pack the courts or merely to bully the sitting justices into submission. While the former is particularly appalling, both are flagrant challenges to the separation of powers, supposedly an essential component of the American constitutional system.

As for executive orders, Biden has acted as a *de facto* legislator, without any of the traditional checks on legislative processes. By April 15, the president signed more than 60 executive orders, a greater number than any president over the same period in their administrations: 23 of these specifically targeted the policies of his predecessor. When major policies can be reversed by presidential whim, the stability of American government suffers. Citizens won't know what to expect from the state if dueling factions nullify each other's policies every time one captures the White House. Furthermore, governance by executive fiat clearly usurps power intended to rest with Congress alone. This isn't what the rule of law looks like.

While Biden's actions are undoubtedly calculated to advance Democratic interests, it would be a grave mistake to regard these policies as mere partisanship. Instead, Biden's executive overreach should be understood as a symptom of a systemic problem in American politics: The Biden administration is giving us a real-time view of *constitutional drift*. This has been an issue long before Biden, and

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris raise hands on August 20, 2020. (Photo credit: AP Photo/Andrew Hamik)

in all likelihood will be a problem long after him. If we have any hope of preventing constitutional drift, we must understand how it works.

Constitutional drift refers to the tendency for *de facto* government to diverge from *de jure* government. In other words, it means there's a widening gulf between the paper Constitution and the real constitution. The procedures and immunities enshrined in America's governing charter no longer reflect the realities of political power. This is especially pernicious given Americans' reverence for the Constitution and, hence, constitutional means for addressing government abuses. If citizens think the Constitution is one thing, whereas politicians know it's something else, the people won't be able to discipline those who govern them.

Americans sometimes have a hard time understanding constitutional drift because of their attachment to formal constitutionalism. We think the way to get lawful government is to write down a set of rules for rule-making – the Constitution – and then tell public officials to follow them. Unfortunately, this rests on a narrow and parochial understanding of constitutions. Philosophers of politics have been writing about constitutions for millennia. For Aristotle, a constitution meant the balance of forces among holders of political power, which determined how the state made decisions. On this view, all constitutions are *de facto* constitutions.

Prior to the Enlightenment, political philosophers would have regarded writing down a specific blueprint for government as silly. Either the formal constitution would match the informal constitution, in which case the formal constitution is redundant, or the formal constitution would not match the informal constitution, in which case the formal constitution is useless. Thus, the lacuna in Americans' beloved formal constitutionalism: We mistakenly think we can make politics algorithmic. Unfortunately, power follows a logic of its own. We erred when we assumed the legislative branch would zeal-

ously guard its powers from the executive branch. In reality, Congress seems happy to fork over as much of its remaining prerogatives as the president wants.

Tragically, Joe Biden is a consummate constitutional politician, with a lower-case c. Those of us who dread the inevitable consequences of his policies must learn that our complaints about unlawful government are full of sound and fury, signifying nothing to those who know first-hand that the real law is something quite different than we imagine. I, too, wish Congress were a meaningful policymaking organ, that elected officials exercised restraint in disbursing public revenues, and that the Ninth and Tenth Amendments were regarded as more than mere curiosities. If only wishing made it so.

How, then, can citizens participate in their government and hold it accountable? What we, the people, must learn is that the only

way to anchor a drifting constitution is to punish those who set it adrift. This is the citizen's role in a democratic republic. We aren't supposed to be passive spectators of the latest Washington boondoggles. The willingness of citizens to impose costs on executive branch adventurers, as well as those who aid and abet them in Congress, is a crucial part of the American system. Unfortunately, our electorate has a habit of excusing political overreach when their team is in power. Until and unless a critical mass of voters proves itself willing to discipline politicians who do the wrong thing for the right reason, the Constitution will remain lost at sea.

It's probably too late to restrain the forces President Biden has unleashed. Although it will be masked by the post-coronavirus recovery, the massive increase in the scale and scope of government will eventually cause political-economic sclerosis. "Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change," Milton Friedman warned. "When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around." This time, "the ideas that are lying around" better be more substantive than mar-

ket liberalization. Economics is important, but it's downstream from politics. We must prepare now to right the ship of state when the opportunity presents itself. The longer the constitution drifts, the harder it is to set it back on course.

F. A. Hayek famously extolled the virtues of a "constitution of liberty." Because of constitutional drift, these constitutions are exceedingly hard to ordain or keep. Citizens' vigilance may not be enough to fix things. But it's the only option we've got left, and ordered liberty is always worth a try.

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Citizens' vigilance may not be enough to fix things. But it's the only option we've got left.



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ESSAY

Medical conscience rights: the next civil rights struggle

Wesley J. Smith

Something authoritarian this way comes. Powerful forces are striving to impose a secular ethic on the entire medical profession which – in the name of “patients’ rights” – seeks to compel doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other medical professionals to violate their religious beliefs on issues like abortion. At stake is the right of doctors to practice medicine consistent with the Hippocratic Oath, and specifically of Roman Catholic hospitals and other religious medical institutions to run their institutions in conformity with their faith’s moral teachings.

For most of our history, health care was not culturally controversial. In recent decades, that consensus shattered. Substantial disagreement now exists about the meaning of “do no harm.”

This rending began in earnest after *Roe v. Wade* invented abortion as a constitutional right. *Roe* tore the moral fabric of the country apart. In the years since *Roe*, the country has continued to splinter on the morality of health care. Many now see health care not only as about curing sickness, but also as a technocratic endeavor extending well beyond maintaining physical health. It now includes helping patients attain life satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

These differences have exacerbated our cultural discord over what constitutes “harm” in the medical context. For exam-

(Photo credit: Chaiwat Subprasom / SOPA Images/Sipa USA/Sipa via AP Images)

ple, is it a harmful to block the puberty of a child diagnosed with gender dysphoria to prevent the development of secondary sexual characteristics – or, is it a harm *not* to do so, because a later gender transition would become more difficult?

The same intractability exists regarding the contentious issue of physician-assisted suicide. Opponents see assisted suicide as the ultimate harm to a patient, because it *intends* to cause death; moreover, is explicitly proscribed in the Hippocratic Oath. But supporters of what is euphemistically called “aid in dying” insist that the real harm comes from denying assisted suicide, because doing so “forces” a suffering patient to remain alive.

These dichotomous views are incapable of reconciliation. Until recently, this growing cultural divide was successfully bridged by a truce: States that permit assisted suicide did not force doctors to participate in them against their will. The same arrangement existed around abortion.

The uneasy peace that has allowed these radical ethical differences to coexist has been shattered. The most prominent and influential names in bioethics now urge that doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and others be *required* to provide patients with any legally available medical procedure they seek – even when the provider morally objects – so long as the request will provide the patient with his or her desired medical benefit.

According to this view, destroying medical conscience is a matter of supporting “patients’ rights.” The bioethicist Ezekiel Emanuel – a prime architect of the Affordable Care Act and a prominent adviser to Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden – put it this way in a 2017 column titled “Physicians, Not Conscripts – Conscientious Objection in Health Care,” co-authored with bioethicist Ronit Y. Stahl in the *New England Journal of Medicine*:

Making the patient paramount means offering and providing accepted medical interventions in accordance with patients’ reasoned decisions. Thus, a health care professional cannot deny patients access to medications for mental health conditions, sexual dysfunction, or contraception on the basis of their conscience, since these drugs are professionally accepted as appropriate medical interventions.

This would mean that a faithful Catholic doctor who opposes contraception would have to prescribe birth control – even if she informed her patients before being retained that she practices medicine according to her Church’s moral teachings. Emanuel and Stahl also make it explicit that pro-life OB/GYNs should be *required to participate or be complicit in a non-therapeutic abortion*, because “abortion is politically and culturally contested [but] it is not medically controversial. It is a standard obstetrical practice.”

The authors would drive dissenting doctors out of medicine:

Health care professionals who are unwilling to accept these limits have two choices: select an area of medicine, such as radiology, that will not put them in situations that conflict with their personal morality or, if there is no such area, leave the profession.

Similar articles have been published in such notable medical and bioethical professional publications as the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *Journal of Medical Ethics*. The point of such advocacy is not just to coerce doctors to adopt secular values in their professional lives but to impose a uniform ideology throughout the healthcare system.

The campaign to destroy medical conscience has gone well beyond the debate stage. The ACLU and others have brought lawsuits to force compliance with the new medical orthodoxy. For example, Catholic hospitals have been sued – so far, without success – for refusing to allow abortions and sterilizations on their premises. Catholic institutions have been targeted for refusing to permit hysterectomies as part of transgender sex transition procedures.

One of these cases, *Minton v. Dignity Health*, shattered the religious freedom barrier when the California Court of Ap-

peals allowed the suit to proceed. There were two bases for Dignity Health’s refusal to permit the transgender operation. First, the surgery would have removed a patient’s healthy uterus. Under Catholic health care directives, a functioning organ can only be removed to treat or prevent pathologies. Second, the surgery would have sterilized the patient. Under Catholic teaching, medical acts resulting in sterilization can only be performed to treat serious conditions.

Note that these Catholic directives apply universally and do not invidiously target particular patients. In other words, it is the *purpose* of the procedure that is objectionable. Thus, a woman would be denied a hysterectomy at Dignity Health that removed a healthy uterus for the purpose of not having children. But if

she had uterine cancer, the hospital would perform the surgery even though it would cause her sterilization as a secondary effect. At the same time, a transgender patient with a broken arm i would receive the same care as every other patient; indeed, it would violate Catholic Healthcare Directives to do otherwise.

But none of that mattered to the Court of Appeals, which ruled that the refusal to remove the transgender person’s uterus violated California’s anti-discrimination law – and freedom of religion offered no defense. If the case goes to trial – the California Supreme Court refused to take the case and the U.S. Supreme Court has not ruled on a petition to grant a hearing – and if

large damages are assessed by the jury, legal attacks against Catholic hospitals will proliferate.

Meanwhile, medical conscience is also under attack at the federal level. In 2016, the Obama administration issued a rule that interpreted the Affordable Care Act’s nondiscrimination provision on the ba-

Forcing medical professionals to choose between living out their religious beliefs or pursuing their careers would harm the healthcare system and make a toxic prescription for our divided country.

sis of sex as applying to gender identity – meaning that it would require doctors and hospitals to provide gender transition surgeries. Notably, there was no religious exemption to the rule.

In the years since, several courts have enjoined its enforcement under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). But a judgment enjoining enforcement on that basis has just been appealed. The issue may well be finally decided by the Supreme Court.

Of course, that assumes that RFRA remains relevant to the dispute. It could become moot if the “Equality Act” becomes law. In the name of equal rights, the act would destroy medical conscience rights by explicitly removing existing protections for pro-life doctors and nurses on the grounds that their views constitute discrimination against women based on pregnancy. The Charlotte Lozier Institute’s associate scholar Richard Doerflinger explained:

The Equality Act’s new free-standing ban on pregnancy discrimination ... adds the new requirement for women to receive “treatment” for pregnancy that is as “favorable” as treatment for any other “physical condition” ... And it negates the existing religious freedom law that allows believers to seek an exemption from such requirements based on sincere religious beliefs such as respect for human life.

President Biden has promised to sign the bill if it reaches his desk.

Even worse for pro-life or religious medical professionals, the bill would gut RFRA as a defense against any acts the bill deems discriminatory. Among other wrongs, this could force Catholic hospitals to perform sterilizations, abortions, and transgender surgeries.

Do we really want to require doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and others to participate in such acts if they consider them to be immoral and sinful? Should healthcare policy declare lived faith to be *non grata* in the medical professions? Are we willing to see the free exercise clause of the First Amendment, and religious protections in federal law, so gutted that they no longer protect freedom of conscience in health-care? For those seeking to impose a uniform ideology of health care, the answer clearly is yes.

But such a course could have a dramatic and deleterious practical impact. If we force health care professionals to violate their moral beliefs, we could see a mass exodus from the medical professions of our most talented doctors and nurses. Meanwhile, gifted young people may avoid the field altogether, knowing that to pursue a career in health care would require them to leave their moral beliefs at home. Alas, I suspect that is precisely what medical conscience opponents want.

Opponents of medical conscience claim that granting conscience rights is a means of authorizing discrimination against women and sexual minorities by stealth. But the protection is *not* aimed at discriminating against patients but at protecting medical professionals from being compelled to participate in procedures that violate their most deeply held moral beliefs. America has always recognized that religious liberty is a definitive civil rights issue, too.

This country protects the conscience rights of individuals who hold the most heterodox viewpoints. We even permit religious conscientious objectors to legally refuse military service in a time of war. If this country legally allows *that extent of disagreement* when the country’s very survival is at stake, surely federal and state law can accommodate healthcare professionals who find taking lives morally offensive, particularly when there are others willing to provide the requested procedure.

Some will worry that this protection could result in patients being abandoned. But medical conscience protections are generally – and properly – restricted to what is sometimes called “elective” treatment. So-called non-elective interventions (that is emergency care and life-sustaining treatment) are specifically removed from these protections. The International Declaration in Support of Conscientious Objection in Healthcare puts it succinctly:

In health care, conscience plays an essential role in the professional judgment – often subtle and delicate – that practitioners must exercise in their daily work. If health care workers are not to be reduced to mere functionaries (of the state, of the patient, of the legal system),

they must be free to exercise their professional judgment and to allow their consciences to inform that judgment. This freedom of professional judgment informed by conscience must translate into the freedom not to be involved in certain activities or practices to which there is a conscientious objection.

Who would want to force someone to perform medical procedures under duress? Who would want to deny practicing Christians and other conscientious people the right to engage in the healing arts? This issue is really about one side of our culture wars asserting hegemony over a vital sector of society.

They might very well prevail. But at what cost? Forcing medical professionals to choose between living out their religious beliefs or pursuing their careers would harm the health care system and make a toxic prescription for our divided country.

Award-winning author Wesley J. Smith is chairman of the Discovery Institute’s Center on Human Exceptionalism and a consultant to the Patients Rights Council. [R&L](#)



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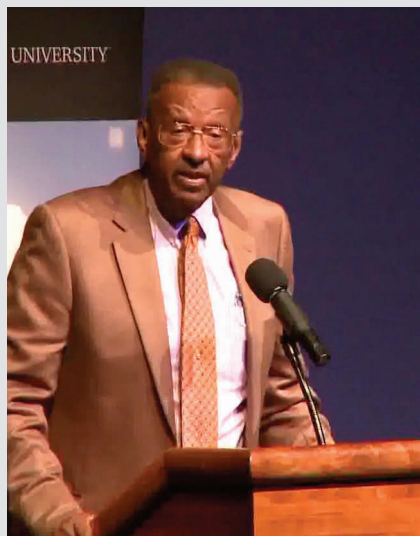
WALTER WILLIAMS

REV. BEN JOHNSON

The world lost a voice for logic, liberty, and love of the U.S. Constitution when economist Walter Williams died on December 2, 2020, at the age of 84. Williams worked his way out of grinding poverty in the Philadelphia housing projects to chair George Mason University's economics department, author 10 books and more than 150 publications, and become one of the most insightful commentators of the last four decades. Williams spread his message of racial equality, the dignity of work, and the morality of capitalism through his syndicated newspaper column, PBS documentaries, and frequent radio and TV appearances.

Walter Edward Williams was born on March 31, 1936, in Philadelphia. His father abandoned the family, leaving his wife, Catherine, to raise their three-year-old son and two-year-old daughter. Williams credited his (illegal) child work history with instilling the drive and habits that propelled him to success.

Williams earned his Ph.D. in economics from UCLA in 1972 and taught at Philadelphia's Temple University for five years before moving to George Mason University, where he chaired the economics department (1995–2001). For 40 years his nationally syndicated column, "A Minority View," appeared in 140 newspapers. He wrote 10 books, beginning with 1982's *The State Against Blacks*, often dealing with provocative questions, such as 2011's *Race and Economics: How Much Can Be Blamed on Discrimination?* He produced multiple documentaries for PBS, starting with 1985's *Good Intentions*, and served as the guest host of Rush Limbaugh's radio show.



Williams leveraged his expertise in economics to promote the cause of racial equality – and to encourage his fellow citizens to root out all forms of state-sanctioned discrimination. He opposed the artificial barriers and robust state interventionism that kept black people down in the Jim Crow South. (He wrote a full-length book on the statist economic underpinnings of South African apartheid, as well.) At the same time, he believed all Affirmative Action programs, set-asides, and other forms of reverse discrimination should be abolished – putting him at odds with modern so-called “antiracist theorists” like Ibram X. Kendi.

He believed the free market's “virtuous cycle” allowed all talented people to thrive. “The people who are for discrimination are also against markets, because they know markets tend to be colorblind,” he said. “The morality of the free market should be stressed because it is far superior to any other method of allocating resources.” Williams stead-

fastly warned against seeking a unitary political solution to a problem rooted in innumerable personal choices.

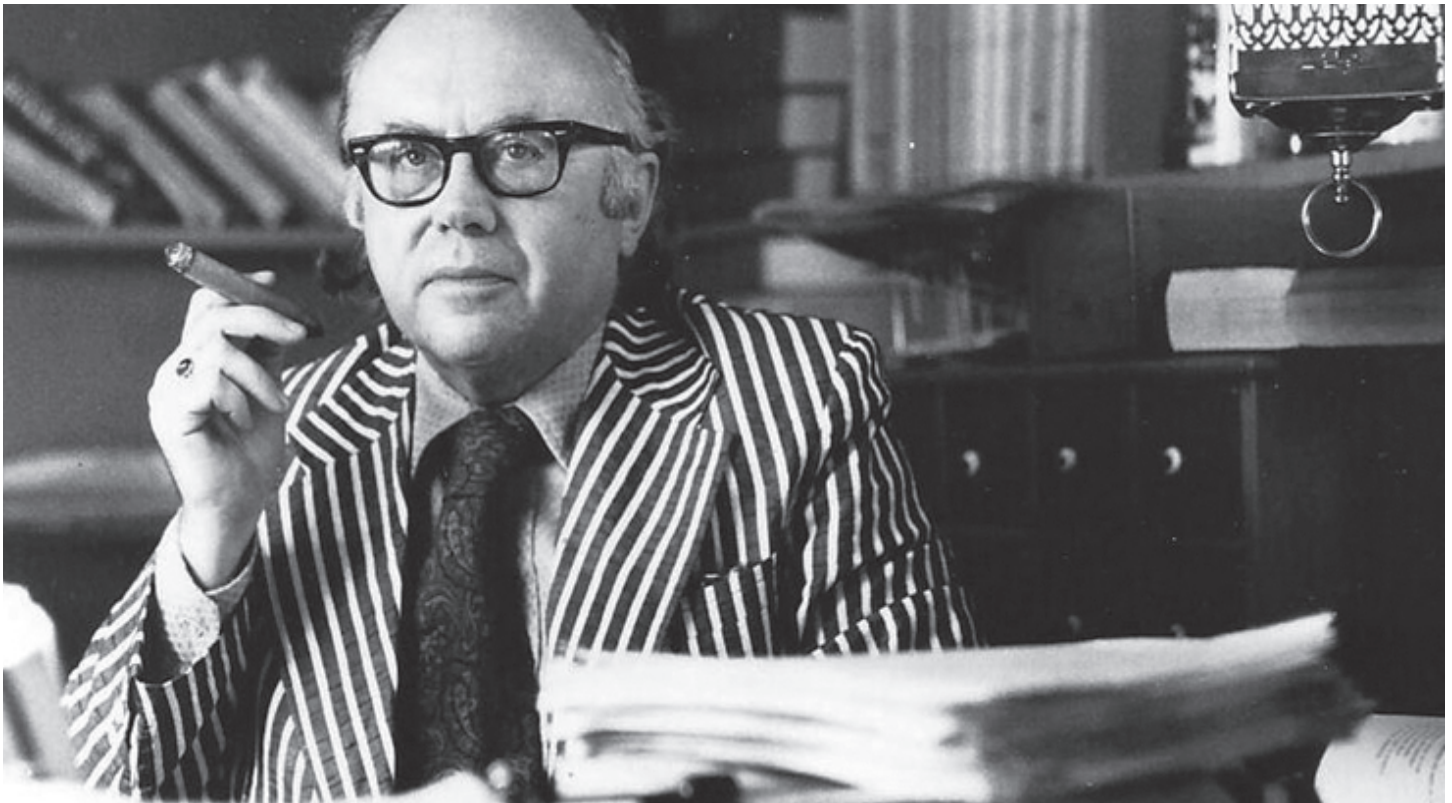
He found a multitude of government programs retarding black progress: the minimum wage, occupational licensing laws, and the welfare state. A high minimum wage increases unemployment by requiring unskilled employees to demand more money than their work could justify. Occupational licensing laws limit competition and prevent poor-but-industrious individuals from bettering their lot in life. And he demonstrated with mathematical precision how social assistance programs underwrote the destruction of the black family.

He often reminded complacent readers of American exceptionalism. Echoing Lord John Acton, Williams said, “Liberty is the rare state of affairs in mankind's history. Arbitrary abuse and control by others is the standard.”

Williams also highlighted the necessity of faith and virtue in maintaining our inalienable rights. “The attack on Christian ideas and Christian public displays is part and parcel of the leftist control agenda,” which demands “that our primary allegiance be with government,” he wrote. “As such, there must be an attack on allegiances to the teachings of the church and family,” including its traditional teachings on marriage.

Williams' superlative work, singular intellect, and unfailing honesty are sorely missed. In addition to his daughter, he leaves behind a gaping hole in academia and a grateful world of friends and readers who benefited from the fruits of his scholarship.

Rev. Ben Johnson (@therightswriter) is the Executive Editor of the Acton Institute.



ESSAY

Russell Kirk's path to Christ

Bradley J. Birzer

Every once in a while, someone online, being either sincere or sincerely mischievous, loves to ask about the status of unrecognized saints. Who is the person most likely to be sainted that the church has yet to recognize and, therefore, deserves our petitions for intercession? That list is fairly easy for me: my maternal grandfather (1907–1982); J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973), whom I've been asking for intercession since the late 1970s; and Russell Kirk (1918–1994). You don't know my grandfather, of course, but you do know — as a matter

of public record via his letters — Tolkien and his several mystical experiences in life, his extreme devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, and his religious instruction to his sons. But what about Russell Kirk, the writer of horror stories, the author of postwar conservatism, and a practitioner of the occult arts (specifically tarot) late into his adult life?

Kirk's journey to Christian orthodoxy is a fascinating story and, at times, a fractious one. Like many poor but learned families in America and England at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Kirks had embraced an intellectual variety of spiritualism. Though descended from New England Puritans, the Kirk family had come to practice séances, ghost writings, and levitations. For all intents and purposes, the Kirk women, especially, were witches.

As Kirk grew into adulthood, he rejected the explicit tenets of Christian faith — whether heterodox, heretical, or orthodox — but he remained fiercely interested in the spiritual manifestations he had witnessed as a child. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Kirk the horror writer would not have come into being

had it not been for the young Kirk being exposed to the excesses of spiritualism. He was, especially, obsessed with the idea of ghosts, an obsession that remained to his dying days.

"Some mediums are charlatans, but others possess genuine, if inexplicable and dangerous power," Kirk argued in 1967. "I advise no one to meddle with the next world who is not very strong of mind and heart." As late as 1973, Kirk continued to read tarot cards for guests, and he maintained his love of Halloween — "an annual occasion of dreadful joy at my house" — to the end of his life. "Kirk was old hand at telling fortunes by the Tarot, long before the art was taken up by hippies," he wrote of himself in a publicity brochure. "My fortunes invariably are melancholy, and as invariably come to pass," he believed.

From his earliest memories as a child, Kirk believed in ghosts. Having been raised among deracinated Puritans, Spiritualists, and Swedenborgians, he witnessed "that uncanny business" of automatic writing, the levitations of great-grandmothers, chairs rocking on their own, musical instruments mystically playing, and visita-

(Photo credit: The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal.)

tions from the dead (sometimes in spectral form). Séances were a normal part of his upbringing. "Henry James was a man with Swedenborgian forebears who didn't believe in ghosts; I am one with Swedenborgian forebears who DOES believe in ghosts," Kirk wrote in a private letter to the political philosopher Eric Voegelin. "Everybody who stays here in my ancestral house of Piety Hill becomes a more fervent believer than even I am," he continued. According to Kirk, the ghostly phenomena only increased with the passing of years, until 1975, when the house burned to the ground in a freak accident. Consumed by fire, all the ghosts departed Piety Hill, Kirk believed.

Sometime in his college years, between 1936 and 1940 – influenced by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More – Kirk adopted a form of Stoicism as his religion. Indeed, when called into the service of the U.S. Army in 1942, Kirk bought and took with him the complete works of Plato and of the Stoics. He found Marcus Aurelius especially comforting during the Second World War. He also came to love the works of St. Augustine, even though he disagreed with most of the saint's theological stances. Kirk wrote of his grandfather:

His high virtues were more Stoic than Christian, although he lacked not charity, either material or spiritual; such habits and customs had run in the family, ever since Abraham Pierce had settled at Massachusetts' Plymouth in 1623. Puritanism among the Pierces had faded to the shadow of a shade by the 1920's, my grandfather and his household never attending any church – although the domestic circle's ways might have been approved by Free Methodists, no strong drink ever being drunk nor any cigarette ever smoked in that commodious bungalow by the railroad tracks. There occurred no family prayers and no domestic sermonizing; all teaching was by example, not by precept, and it prevailed. Two or three generations earlier, the family's sojourn in the Burnt-Over Country of northern New York, seedbed of strange dissents, seems to have left the Pierces with no dogmata

but belief in a divine power, in a life eternal, and in personal rectitude. Tradition, adherence to this tradition, was the sheet-anchor, and it held.

Taken with the Stoic conception of the Logos as well as St. Augustine's description of the City of Man and man's many follies, Kirk came to a sort of monotheism in the fall of 1942, while stationed in a Utah desert chemical weapon's facility. Strangely enough, his awareness of monotheism came on a hike into the desert wilds. In a private letter to his best friend, he wrote:

I've grown to endure the country in true Stoic fashion, and take a certain pleasure in feeling that I'm a tough inhabitant of one of the most blasted spots on the continent. There's enough leisure here, and that's a lot; the winters are said to be dreadful, but I have found fears exceed realities here, as everywhere. Already we have very cold mornings and evenings, and as I write a great sand-laden wind very chilly, is howling around the shacks of Dugway. Coming here tends to make me lean toward the Stoic belief in a special providence – or, perhaps, more toward the belief of Schopenhauer that we are punished for our sins, in proportion to our sins, here on earth; for I'd been talking of Stoicism for two or three months before I burst into Dugway and there never was a better and sterner test of a philosophy, within my little realm of personal experience – to be hurled from the pleasures of the mind and the flesh, prosperity and friends and ease, to so utterly desolate a plain, closed in by mountains like a yard within a spiked fence, with everywhere the suggestion of death and futility and eternal emptiness. But, others, without any philosophy, live well enough here; and, as Marcus Aurelius observes, if some who think the pleasures of the world good still do not fear death, why should we?

For all intents and purposes, Kirk became Kirk the day he had this revelation.

How Kirk became a Trinitarian remains a mystery. In his personal letters, he of-

ten cited the opponents of Christianity, whom he loathed, as inspiration to become a full-blown Trinitarian. In the early 1950s, while teaching at the University of Detroit, Kirk began to take instructions on becoming Roman Catholic from a Jesuit priest. For whatever reason – and, frankly, it's not clear from the historical record exactly why – Kirk decided not to take the final step to be baptized and confirmed in the Roman Catholic faith.

However, nearly a decade later – in the early 1960s – Kirk fell in love with a devout Roman Catholic, Annette Courtemanche, and, in 1964, just prior to his marriage to her, he fully converted and became Russell Amos Augustine Kirk. Not surprisingly, his confirmation saint was Augustine, and, throughout the remainder of his years (1964–1994), Kirk remained deeply immersed in the Roman Catholic tradition. Kirk firmly believed in his faith intellectually, and few men (or women; especially regarding his wife Annette) would ever reach similar heights of charity. The Kirks not only housed the homeless and the unwanted (sometimes as many as 30 refugees from Cambodia and Ethiopia at a time), but they gave away substantial sums of their income to the poor and needy. Rarely, in my life, have I encountered souls as charitable as the Kirks. This was where Kirk's winding path to Christ ultimately led him.

Bradley J. Birzer holds the Russell Amos Kirk Chair in History at Hillsdale College. He is also the author of numerous books and the co-founder of the website, The Imaginative Conservative. [IR&L](#)



ESSAY

Eugene McCarthy, St. Damien of Molokai, and the limits of politics

Ray Nothstine

Former U.S. Senator Eugene McCarthy, D-Minn., ran for president four times, but his most memorable campaign was in 1968, where a strong insurgent showing led to the political downfall of President Lyndon Baines Johnson. McCarthy, in his first run, challenged LBJ as a peace candidate in the first-in-the-nation primary of New Hampshire, garnering a shockingly high 42% of the vote

against the sitting president of his own party. President Johnson won but did not even reach 50% support from the voters. Politically eviscerated by Vietnam and the growing unrest at home, Johnson withdrew from the race a few weeks later, in a televised speech in March 1968.

In many ways, the late 1960s was the high tide of American liberalism. With the Great Society recently implemented and Johnson's "guns-and-butter" policies in full swing, there was a belief that the nation could wage war during a U.S.-Soviet arms race while spending prodigiously on social engineering. Optimism in state power and bureaucratic expertise morphed into what Amity Shlaes called "an almost mystical belief in the infinite potentials of American society."

McCarthy, a devout Roman Catholic, was liberal on many issues, but even his entrance into the race as a peace candidate was a testament to the limits of politics, or that the government couldn't solve everything. His thinking would evolve even more with time, as he withdrew deeper into philosophical pursuits and his love for poetry. He even jolted his own party in 1980, endorsing Ronald Reagan. It was far from the first or last time. Russell Kirk, who supported one

of McCarthy's more obscure runs for the presidency in 1976, once said he had a "poet's attachment to the truth."

McCarthy was known for his wit and humor, but there was a tinge of brooding when he made statements like this one: "Being in politics is like being a football coach. You have to be smart enough to understand the game and dumb enough to think it's important."

In McCarthy's book *No-Fault Politics*, editor Keith Burris introduced him as "a Catholic committed to social justice but a skeptic about reform, about do-gooders, about the power of the state and the competence of government, and about the liberal reliance upon material cures for social problems."

Despite McCarthy's glamorized quest for the presidency in 1968 and its infamous campaign slogan, "Clean for Gene," he was mistakenly memorialized on screen as "Joseph McCarthy" at the 2008 Democrat National Convention, confusing him with the former Republican senator from Wisconsin who had already been dead for more than 50 years.

That itself is a lesson on the limits of politics, as is much of McCarthy's political trajectory. Seemingly, McCarthy's stature and example as a prolific voice of

Eugene McCarthy waves to supporters during the 1968 New Hampshire primary. (Photo credit: AP Photo.)

conscience had too little staying power within his own party to be remembered by his own name. At first a deep thinker, and an oft-times forgotten footnote, he was increasingly disillusioned by the direction of politics and what it could solve. It's a disillusionment we should all feel, as politics and governmental power gets elevated into spheres today where it never belonged.

Right now, one can actually find a striking contrast to the political shallowness and selfishness in Congress on the grounds of Capitol Hill. National Statuary Hall, adjacent to the Rotunda, houses two figures from each state. One of the figures representing Hawaii is the Belgian native Damien De Veuster, more popularly known as Fr. Damien of Molokai. Damien gave his life serving the undesirable lepers quarantined on the island of Molokai in the nineteenth century. Damien eventually contracted the debilitating disease that disfigured and killed him in 1889.

Damien played an important role in my own turn away from the lure of politics. When I worked on Capitol Hill, near tears amidst a miserable day, I was pacing the halls and stumbled upon the bronze statue of Fr. Damien. I recognized Damien immediately, because I had lived in Hawaii for a little over three years. I knew all about his life and story of sacrifice. The statue in Washington is essentially identical to the statue at the state Capitol building in Honolulu, which is frequently adorned with flower leis. Damien, who was 49 years old when he died, is depicted as looking much older, his body ravaged by leprosy.

Damien provides a contrast of competing servants, some oriented towards the things of this world and others oriented toward the next. He reveals a different path. That encounter helped to quicken my enrollment in seminary and away from the political center of Washington, D.C.

Damien's legacy offers another contrast related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a member of the clergy, he's the opposite of our modern social distancer. He cleaned, helped bathe, and meticulously took care of the lepers under his charge, often not taking the precautions advised by health experts and church officials.

This kind of service and sacrifice to the afflicted towers over the culture of

fear still persisting in a post-vaccine America. We see it incessantly through social media viral videos and in many of our own firsthand experiences. Fear has caused some to beg for ever-more restrictive directives from federal and state governments on COVID-19.

Fear can at times be an important leveling device. But fear, too, comes from a lack of faith. This is a phenomenon that is particularly visible during the coronavirus pandemic, and it's unraveling society in new ways – where the fearful empower the state to fill the void of uncertainty. For many of a secular or even a modern mind, a fear of death trumps everything else.

Given that truth, one of the biggest mistakes many churches have made during COVID-19 is not offering an alternative to this powerful narrative of fear that has swallowed up so much of our culture, allowing us to see the folly of centralized power and directives. We all know the Church by definition limits the state, and it should not serve as its handmaiden. The many missed opportunities by the Church to speak to those consumed by fear not only harmed the Church's witness, but it diluted the paths to freedom beyond the material world. One of the greatest characteristics of politics is that it provides so many lessons beyond politics.

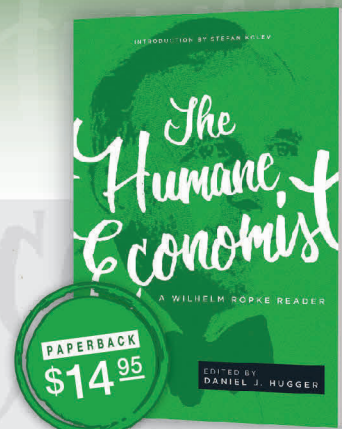
Turning back to McCarthy, whether or not one agreed with his peace campaign, he did offer a model of courage to say something was amiss. He restored many people's hope in institutions and the vital significance of a voice of conscience against herd-minded state action.

The enduring lesson is that all of us have to do a better job of collectively recovering a courageous voice of conscience, if we desire to remind people of the proper limits of government. It's vitally important that we do so, or our disordered political world will continue to spill over and consume the deeper truths – truths which, while seemingly hidden away, are desperate to be recovered.

Ray Nothstine is opinion editor at the Carolina Journal, a publication of the John Locke Foundation in Raleigh, North Carolina. He is a graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary (M.Div.) and is the former managing editor of Religion & Liberty (2007-2014). R&L

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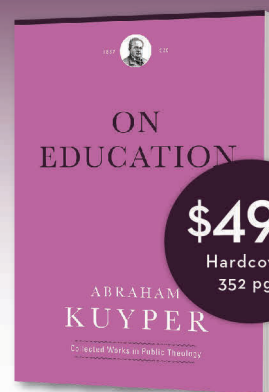


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The 3 things you need to make 'socialism' work

Rev. Ben Johnson

Occasionally, our antagonists think they have discovered the silver bullet argument in favor of "Christian socialism." One such apology recently came into my inbox. In its entirety, it read:

Acts Chapters 4 and 5 Tell of The Holy Spirits Work with The Apostles to Establish SOCIALISM for The Christian Church...What further proof is needed ???

Recourse to the exceptional model of charity practiced by the early Christian community in Acts 4:31-35 is as perpetual as it is erroneous. As I've noted in print and on television, the early church was not socialist. The "lived experience" of my church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, has concluded that socialism will do anything to eradicate Christianity, and every other religion.

However, let's agree that the apostles, in exactly one of the many church communities they founded, "had all things in common" – that believers gladly laid all their earthly goods "down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need" (Acts 4:31-35).

There are still communities that follow the early church model of radical sharing. They're called monasteries.

Before exploring how monasteries show us how "socialism" can work, let me acknowledge that I'm hesitant to present monasticism as "socialism." The voluntary profession of monasticism has nothing to do with the state seizing the means of production or the mass terror that inevitably

follows in its wake. For our purposes, let's grant the extremely tenuous assertion that these are somehow extraneous (rather than intrinsic) features of socialism. Furthermore, monks and nuns often support themselves through enterprise. As Dylan Pahman has shown in his work on markets and monasticism, some monasteries did (and do) acquire vast communal wealth through market-oriented exchange. But if you're less interested in social engineering than in living a life where people share all things in common, monasteries are the only viable alternative.

When monks and nuns enter the monastery, they give up all their worldly goods and vow to own nothing of their own. All the monastery's goods are distributed by the ruling abbot or abbess, who redistributes from each according to his ability, to each according to his need. The abbot's supersensitive spiritual life, and knowledge of the individuals who confess to him, discerns the unseen spiritual needs of each. All monks offer their *ora et labora* in common, without regard to personal benefit, because that best serves the salvation of their (relatively modest) portion of the population. If they find monasticism does *not* further their salvation, they may voluntarily leave and return to the dog-eat-dog world at any time.

Other arrangements of communal living have been tried and found wanting. Joshua Muravchik noted that the median existence of early socialist communes amounted to a mere two years. The Israeli kibbutz system similarly broke down over parents' wishes to give the children of the *kibbutzim* a better life.

Compare communes' record of failure with monastic success. The world's oldest monastery, the Coptic Egyptian Monastery of St. Macarius the Great at Scetis, has lived the monastic lifestyle continuously since 360 A.D. (Some claim that distinction belongs to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's St. Athanasius Monastery in the tiny Thracian village of Zlatna Livada.) A 2008 study found that "Benedictine monasteries in Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria and German speaking Switzerland have an average lifetime of almost 500 years" – 463 years, to be specific. Monasticism is, in other words, a going concern.

These monastic example prove that, if it ever hopes to succeed, Christian "so-

cialism" has to include two vows beyond dedication to economic equality: chastity and obedience.

Chastity: Monks and nuns vow a life of celibacy, abstinence, and sexual purity (including in thought). Monastics take this vow so seriously that they will often not speak to a member of the opposite sex. In fact, women are barred from visiting Eastern Orthodoxy's holiest monastic site, Mt. Athos. "Do not let your intellect be taken prisoner by lust through assenting to sexual thoughts, defiling yourself inwardly," wrote St. Mark the Ascetic in the collection of monastic texts known as the *Philokalia*.

The West does everything in its power to obliterate this virtue, from encouraging teenagers to wear dresses that fit four year olds to Planned Parenthood's disturbing sex "education" curriculum. Monasticism demands the spirit of renunciation of earthly things, even in their licit use. This would lead to an austere life of asceticism – a necessary disposition for anyone living under socialism. After all, monks take a vow of *poverty*. Notions of "Fully Automated Luxury Communism" are bunk.

Obedience: Monks and nuns agree to follow the orders of the monastery's leader unquestioningly. The abbot or abbess assigns work assignments and gives out material possessions – and privileges – as he or she sees fit. Decisions are absolute, and there is no court of appeals.

Socialism mimics this, but it transfers the power to the secular state's monomaniacal ruler. Slowly, the nation becomes a cult of personality. Even benign forms of socialism demand coercion. Jeremy Corbyn once informed the media, "Under socialism, you'll all cooperate." Socialism substitutes following government *diktats* for walking in God's commandments – and the love and liberty they bring.

Chastity and obedience are prerequisites that make a life of sharing possible. One cannot underestimate the fact that, as celibates, monks do not fret themselves over the material well-being of their children (nor spousal nagging about it). But is that the full explanation: "no money, no honey"? All three monastic vows omit the most important thing that made early church "socialism" work:

A living, active, and obedient faith in Jesus Christ: Monks and nuns living

the ascetic life do so to completely consecrate their lives to Jesus Christ. Researchers have found themselves unable to explain why, for instance, monasteries do not have the frequent turnover of communes. In a 2009 paper, Nathan Smith ascribed this to the “addictive” character of worship:

What makes monasteries different is that when monks and nuns engage in worship (for which the monastery provides an especially favorable environment) they also build spiritual capital, thus acquiring an increasing “taste for” (or “productivity in”) worship, which makes them unlikely to wish to leave the monastery in future. ... The “addictive” character of worship solves the turnover problem and enables monasteries to make (voluntary) socialism work.

But why, precisely, is worship so intoxicating? This author has heard church choirs and cantors whose vocal stylings mimicked withdrawal symptoms. Smith is missing something profound.

The intangible success behind this life of sharing and self-denial is the indwelling and perpetual cultivation of the Holy Spirit. The father of Western monasticism, St. Benedict of Nursia, concluded his Rule by exhorting monks to “fulfill with the help of Christ this minimum Rule which we have written for beginners; and then at length under God’s protection you will attain to the loftier heights of doctrine and virtue.” Such pure selflessness cannot come about except by a profound, all-encompassing, and total faith in our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. “God is the beginning, middle and end of everything good,” wrote St. Mark the Ascetic, “and it is impossible for us to have faith in anything good or to carry it into effect except in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.” This alone explains how they live a heavenly life on earth.

Those who wish to live this kind of lifestyle are invited to do so. But those who speak of remaking society must be willing to go the full distance, beginning with themselves. Trying to make “socialism” work with anything short of this full commitment is the prelude to futility, apostasy, and destruction.

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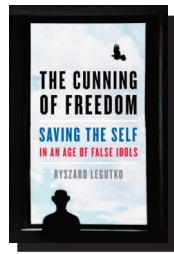
BOOK

Ryszard Legutko: the cursing of freedom

The cunning of freedom: saving the self in an age of false idols

David P. Deavel and Jessica Hooten Wilson, eds. | University of Notre Dame Press. 2020 | 392 pages

Reviewed by Kai Weiss



What is freedom? Do we need freedom? And if so, to what extent? These are questions that have been debated for millennia. Particularly in our time, when everyone is allegedly in favor of freedom and liberality, the discussion has heated up. In *The Cunning of Freedom: Saving the Self in an Age of False Idols*, Ryszard Legutko aims to define “freedom,” but also to make a scathing critique of prominent definitions of the term in our modern culture.

Legutko is undoubtedly one of the more interesting figures in the ascending national conservative crowd. A philosophy professor at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, he has simultaneously become a Member of the European Parliament and co-chairman of the European Conservatives and Reformists. He’s one of the most prominent political figures – and the intellectual heavyweight – of Poland’s Law & Justice Party, which has been engulfed in controversies over its allegedly illiberal policies.

Legutko reflects on three major themes of freedom: negative freedom, positive freedom, and inner freedom. Negative freedom is understood as freedom from coercion. It is best embodied in the mantra of “being able to do whatever one wants to do as long as one doesn’t hurt anyone.” For Legutko, there are varying degrees of negative freedom. He finds “absolute freedom” – which means being completely free as an individual from anyone else, depicted by Robinson Crusoe on a lonely island – to be a “nightmare” of “loneliness.” Similarly, “maximum freedom” – the state-of-nature ideal of Locke and Rousseau but also the “department store” version of libertarianism – is unrealistic and bound to fail, according to Legutko, for it dismisses anything beyond mere individual pleasure and pain.

Legutko understands the least extreme version of negative freedom, “freedom from tyranny,” having lived through Soviet Communism. However, he still is dissatisfied by the emphasis on freedom itself. Isn’t there much more to life than freedom? For Legutko, political systems only based on individual liberty are nonsensical. More so, there are no inalienable rights – or any rights whatsoever, from natural rights to modern human rights. It is somewhat strange that a Roman Catholic like Legutko brushes aside any notions of God-given rights, but he seems to interpret the debasement of human rights – which includes abortion and LGBTQ rights – as indicting the whole system.

Legutko makes a convincing case that setting maximum freedom as an ideal is not only wrong, but also incompatible with human anthropology as social and political beings. Libertarians, he argues, may think that a society is possible in which everyone can simply pick what he or she wants. But this is impossible in practice, because the citizens’ many, competing longings – religious beliefs, cultural and religious norms, and traditions – are incompatible with one another and, therefore, cannot always coexist in the same polity. A libertarian society can only realistically work if it gets rid of everything opposed to this openness, he argues. Legutko seems too pessimistic about the prospects of pluralism and diversity, but at the same time, he raises legitimate concerns.

The second part of the book – positive freedom – presents different ways to actively strive for freedom by presenting different personality types: the philosopher,

aristocrat, entrepreneur, and artist. It is clear that while he thinks all of them are on the wrong track in today's world, he sympathizes the most with the first two. Neither the philosopher nor the aristocrat strives for self-fulfillment, nor do they pursue goals based only on a cost-benefit analysis – and they do not align with the politically correct status quo for fear of being canceled. They try their best not to succumb to bodily/worldly needs and pleasures, unlike most of Western society. Rather, they strive for self-control, cultivation of virtue, and greater knowledge, especially of transcendent matters. This is, he explains in the third part, the “inner freedom” we should want to achieve. Particularly this third section of the book, where Legutko analyzes the preconditions of “inner freedom,” is stimulating and may give all readers food for thought in their personal lives. Yet his explanations occasionally suffer from an extreme form of dualism between body and mind: It is unclear why the “theology of the body” makes no appearance. Nonetheless, this is the strongest part of the book.

If only the same could be said about his analysis of the entrepreneur. He starts with a long quotation by Michael Novak on how the entrepreneur “is made in the image of God” and, through his creativity, pursues a “noble vocation,” to quote Pope Francis’ *Fratelli Tutti*. Nonetheless, Legutko descends into a heavy-handed critique of the “entrepreneur without a soul,” who lacks the courage to stand up for his own values and does what society wants him to do. Legutko may even be right about the “Woke entrepreneurs” of Big Tech whom he has in mind. But he hardly differentiates between Woke capital and the many entrepreneurs who are not social justice warriors and pursue God’s work through their innovations.

This is precisely the main problem with *The Cunning of Freedom*: It lumps together different notions of freedom, liberalism, and entrepreneurship that are quite different in reality. This is most noticeable in the conclusion. Legutko argues that his critique of liberalism holds for left-wing liberalism, classical liberalism, libertarianism, *ad infinitum*, because “in each version, the problem remains the same.” He subsequently moves on for a final attack, showing how the types of freedoms he has analyzed result in creating “liberalism as a super-theory” which eventually encompasses – indeed, *forces* top-down – all of society’s currents and processes into one bland whole of “openness,” “diversity,” and “pluralism.” Everyone who does not agree with what the liberals think is “freedom” will be ostracized.

This is in many regards a shockingly accurate critique of left-wing liberalism as we see it in its most extreme forms (and how Legutko has undoubtedly experienced it in the European Parliament). But how is this a critique of classical liberalism? Similarly, why is Woke capitalism used to bedevil free enterprise as a whole? Why is it necessary to throw out any notion of rights because human rights have been so falsely reconstructed? Why, indeed, is it necessary to throw the baby out with the bathwater?

This is all the more frustrating, since Legutko actually glances a potential solution. A few pages buried in the section on “inner freedom” laud David Hume’s emphasis on “habits, social practices, and a general rootedness in [a] society” that has evolved over time and history – “a social conservatism” not based on government force, but on “the power of custom.” Le-

gutko pairs this idea of *spontaneous order* with an equally important argument by Blaise Pascal: Even an individual in such an organic society needs faith and reason to attain inner freedom. Indeed, those who want to be free still need to cultivate themselves and their communities.

“The evolution of modern philosophy gradually undermined custom and social convention,” Legutko writes. It was this “weakening of custom and the decline of classical metaphysics, epistemology, and Christian religion” that put us on the wrong path of freedom. But why abandon the liberal order completely? Why not try to rebuild *this* idea of freedom based on individual and communal liberties and responsibilities, the cultivation of virtues – the spirit of free enterprise, with traditions, mores, and institutions building a strong social fabric?

Sadly, Legutko doesn’t answer that question in *The Cunning of Freedom*.

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BOOK

How irrationality triumphed

The rise and triumph of the modern self: cultural amnesia, expressive individualism, and the road to sexual revolution

Carl R. Trueman. B&H Academic. 2020. 407 pages.

Reviewed by by Josh Herring

One of the great benefits of the university lies in the leisure for advanced study. While the tenured professor may be a dying breed, the ideal of a profession whose adherents study important questions so that they might then share their learning through writing, teaching, and speaking remains an important ideal for the university. While that ideal is rarely realized, Carl R. Trueman's *The rise and triumph of the modern self: cultural amnesia, expressive individualism, and the road to sexual revolution* brings together years of scholarly reading to provide an analysis explaining a specific intellectual shift.

Gender studies and critical theory classes are now common in the collegiate space, but Trueman wants to explain how *der zeitgeist* has shifted such that a person who has never taken such a class could say with complete sincerity, "I am a woman trapped in a man's body." There is, Trueman argues, an intellectual journey that has occurred in higher education whereby that statement is theoretically justifiable. How does a person who has never read Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, or Simone de Beauvoir make such a claim? And why is such a statement received as a deep, personal expression of identity? These are Trueman's questions, and to answer them, he combines deep reading with clear explanations reflecting a career spent communicating to undergraduates and writing for a public audience.

Reading *Triumph of the modern self* is its own education. Trueman takes his readers on a *tour de force* of key concepts developed by Jean Jacques Rousseau, key Romantic poets, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, Freud, Phillip Rieff, and Charles Taylor. By his conclusion, Trueman equips his readers with the tools to understand the shift in our public perception of reality, from a fixed to "plastic" self, and he closes by extrapolating future trajectories of societal change in coming decades.



This volume is a diagnostic book; it does not offer extensive solutions. Though written by a career academic, Trueman's writing style is accessible and didactic. He explains complex philosophical concepts and theories in a way that makes this book accessible to the educated layman. This is a book for readers concerned about the current course of the Western world: Teachers, clergy, academics, and educated laymen who want to understand our cultural moment will benefit from reading *Triumph of the modern self*. In *Irreversible Damage*, Abigail Schrier outlines the rise in "rapid onset gender dysphoria" in teenage girls; the pseudonymously authored "When Sons become Daughters" series of essays by "Angus Fox" published by *Quillette* chronicle a similar rise in ROGD in teenage boys. Trueman provides the theoretical apparatus to help traditionalists, conservatives, and religious individuals understand how mainstream society reached the point of losing touch with such fundamental aspects of reality as biology.

Trueman builds his argument carefully. In the first two chapters, he crafts a theoretical apparatus from Phillip Rieff, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. From Rieff, Trueman extracts and explains the terms "the triumph of the therapeutic, psychological man, the anticulture, and deathworks."

Perhaps the most helpful concept from Rieff is the description of three "worlds" of culture. First worlds and second worlds "justify their morality by appeal to something transcendent, beyond the material world." First world cultures, like those of ancient Greece and Rome, rely upon fate; second world cultures depend on faith and reason. Rieff classifies the biblical faiths (Judaism and Christianity) as second world cultures. Third world cultures reject transcendence and, thus, have no concept of the sacred. "The culture with no sacred order therefore has the task – for Rieff, the impossible task – of justifying itself only by reference to itself."

Part of our dilemma, Trueman argues, is the Christian's perception of the world through a second-world cultural lens when the secular majority perceives reality through a third-world cultural lens. Both individuals can then look at the same phenomenon, but lack the ability to share a common explanation. Rieff's vocabulary pairs neatly with the analysis of Charles Taylor. Trueman leans on Taylor for "the

dialogical nature of selfhood; the “social imaginary;” and how “the politics of recognition allow for answers to the question of why certain identities (e.g., LGBTQ+) enjoy great cachet today while others (e.g., religious conservatives) are increasingly marginalized.” Trueman closes his theoretical chapters by drawing on Alasdair McIntyre to show that “modern ethical discourse has broken down because it rests ultimately on incommensurable narratives and that claims to moral truth are really expressions of emotional preference.” These three thinkers provide the vocabulary in which Trueman’s argument makes sense.

Trueman contends that the outward symptoms of our modern malaise (disagreement about sexual identity and behavior) are fundamentally caused by a shift in what it means to “be a self.” Beginning with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Romantics, Trueman traces the development of what Taylor terms “expressive individualism.” In this understanding of the self, each person forms his or her own selfhood through relationships with others; the choices one makes become determinative for expressing the developing sense of self. Rather than the older understanding of the self as fixed, the modern sense of self is “plastic,” malleable and changeable. The modern sense of self, Trueman concludes, is one that expresses itself in the ability to choose its own nature. While the Christian may balk at such a notion, and insist he could never be swayed by it, Trueman claims that “we are all part of that revolution, and there is no way to avoid it.” In shifting from a second to third world culture, “expressive individualism has detached these concepts of individual dignity and value from any kind of grounding in a sacred order.” The absence of an agreed upon sacred order, Trueman argues, made the West “a decreed world, exemplified by its sexual chaos. It had come to reject the created, divine image as the basis for its morality, and there was nothing left but a morass of competing tastes.”

Sexual immorality makes an easy target, but the outward symptoms of “sexual chaos” are themselves the result of a shift in the understanding of the self. “To address the symptoms adequately, we need to think long and hard about the causes, their wider ramifications, and our relationship as Christians to them.” When the church comprehends these divergent

views of the self, Trueman suggests, the Christian message can be communicated more clearly. Our cry is not about the evils of polyamory or transgenderism as such, but rather a message concerning creatures who have a place in God’s created order as bearers of the divine image. When we can recover this stronger view of the self, and thus address a deeper cause, the symptoms will be more effectively treated.

Trueman closes with three suggestions for the contemporary church. The first is “that the church should reflect long and hard on the connection between aesthetics and her core beliefs and practices.” For the Christian church to maintain doctrinal consistency, Trueman argues, she must reject the emotivist, testimony-driven, aesthetic argumentation which the LGBTQ+ community asserts is the route to truth:

The debate on LGBTQ+ issues within the church must be decided on the basis of moral principles, not on the attractiveness and appeal of the narratives of the people involved. If sex-as-identity is a category mistake, then the narratives of suffering, exclusion, and refusals of recognition based on that category mistake are really of no significance in determining what the church’s position on homosexuality should be.

Clear reasoning from the doctrine of the church should determine the church’s stance on sexual concerns.

Second, Trueman stresses the necessity of the church being “a community.” If Taylor is right that “selves are socially constructed and only come to full self-consciousness in dialogue with other self-consciousness,” then the church as the primary community for the people of God becomes of primary importance. The church becomes the community that shapes the self-consciousness of her members.

Trueman closes with a third application: “Protestants need to recover both natural law and a high view of the body.” Trueman recalls the work of James K.A. Smith in highlighting the need for Protestant Christianity to consider the implications of humans as “embodied souls.” Neither Gnostic nor Platonic, Christianity has clear teaching about the union of soul and body in the bearing of the divine image. Through the neo-Thomist movement, Roman Catholic thinkers have done substantial work

in reviving natural law thinking in recent decades; Trueman contends this is an area where Protestant thinkers need to do the same. Through a philosophically thick understanding of natural law, Protestants can ground their views on sexuality in the nature of the body as God’s creation (and, thus, subject to his laws). Much more work remains to be done to articulate a Christian response to the present moment.

For those looking to understand the intellectual history of the present cultural landscape, and its fixation on sexual identity and selfhood, there is no better guide than Carl R. Trueman. Across 407 pages, Trueman offers a “prolegomenon” to the coming conversation between Christian scholarship and the secularizing West. In coming years, the church will be pressed to defend her teachings and pass them on faithfully to new generations. Where previous iterations of American Christianity have been able to presume a cultural homogeneity privileging biblical reasoning, the twenty-first century resembles instead an era where the broader culture grows increasingly hostile to Christian teachings, a time when “a pluralist society has slowly but surely adopted beliefs, particularly beliefs about sexuality and identity, that render Christianity immoral and inimical to the civic stability of society as now understood.” Through analysis and explanation of Philip Rieff, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre – and by tracing the evolution of selfhood across the Enlightenment through modernity – Trueman shows the connections between selfhood and sexual expression that restore the church to a place she has been many times before: a “stranger in a strange land” sojourning to a new home. Trueman’s scholarship is a gift to the church, and his message could not be timelier.

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The notion of shared values on both sides of the Atlantic has received new attention. Leaders like France's socialist ex-president François Hollande cite "democracy, freedoms and the respect of every individual" as key values. But what about religious liberty, the breakdown of the welfare state, advancing secularism and the health of civil society? R&L Transatlantic will cover these issues here with new articles.

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COLUMN

THE POLITICAL TEMPTATION

Rev. Robert A. Sirico

Serious proposals to fundamentally change the governance of these United States, made by unserious yet politically powerful people, are made with ever-increasing frequency: statehood for the District of Columbia, the packing of the Supreme Court, and one of the world's largest taxes on capital gains have all been placed on the table and are now the subject of public debate. Any reasonable observer knows that these proposals would alter the composition of the American republic, compromise its separation of powers (arguably the most important contribution the American founding offered to political arrangements), and radically alter its capital markets. Underlying all of these fundamental proposals is a deep-seated suspicion that our democracy, institutions, and economy as currently configured cannot meet the challenges we face today, or that they were utterly corrupt from the outset. These suspicions deserved to be addressed honestly, because they contain valid criticisms.

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the ineffectual response to it by our political leaders, is a case in point. Massive government bailouts, pervasive restrictions on civil liberties, and enormous economic displacement have become commonplace. While scientific innovation, the extraordinary sacrifices of individuals, and the innovative adaptations of communities to the crisis have contributed to advances against the pandemic, the political class has proved to be more of an obstacle than an aid to progress.

Liberty, Lord Acton famously said, is the delicate fruit of a mature civilization. Of course, change in life as well as politics, is often necessary and even salutary, but ill-considered change can imperil that delicate fruit. Such change is the fruit of a childish and intemperate civilization that is unconnected to the wellsprings of human flourishing.

Effective governance flows not out of a tempestuous and polarized politics, but from the virtue and vigilance of ordinary citizens. In a time of frustration, it becomes all too easy to blame others; real solutions lie not in politically hungry policy proposals that empower the already powerful, but in the and honest and ruthless examination of ourselves. Michael Nagler, writing of the thought of Mahatma Gandhi, put it nicely when he said: "As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world ... as in being able to remake ourselves."

This is an essential truth of human nature: We be both free and responsible. Our freedom gives us the concrete opportunity to respond to the crises of our moment by taking the initiative to transform our own lives and communities. We can only grow in virtue through creative service to others in our own contexts, within our families, churches, businesses, and our local communities. When we lose sight of our freedom and responsibility, it becomes easy to become captive to abstract "solutions" promised by power-hungry politicians.

The political philosopher Eric Voegelin taught that believing that the disorder we see around us can be overcome by some special knowledge was really the retrieval of the ancient error of Gnosticism and that the desire to implement policies based on this knowledge was really an effort to "immanentize the eschaton," as Voegelin phrased it: that is, to bring about Heaven on earth by means of public policy. To sidestep human freedom and responsibility, to outsource dealing with the challenges of the human condition, is not at all unlike the final temptation that Christ faced in the desert: "The devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to Him, 'All these I will give You, if You will fall down and worship me.'"

At a moment of many challenges, with a polarized and ever-changing political climate, such temptations are routine. The only answer is the one Jesus gave Satan – a refusal, coupled with a renewed life of service to God and neighbor: "Then Jesus said to him, 'Begone, Satan! for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve''" (Matthew 4:8-10).

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is co-founder and president of the Acton Institute. **R&L**

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