

Notes

November/December Vol. 31 No. 6



A message from our president

Kris Alan Mauren

I was honored to be the master of ceremonies for the 31st anniversary of the Acton Institute. While every Annual Dinner is special, this year was particularly significant.

It was a celebration of my friend and co-founder, Father Sirico, who transitions into his new role as president emeritus. I'm encouraged knowing that Father will remain actively involved in Acton's public intellectual work for years to come.

The Annual Dinner was also the occasion for my assumption of the office of president. It is an honor and

privilege to serve in this new capacity, continuing Acton's vital work of building up a free and virtuous society.

In this issue you will learn about that great event as well as the recent address by John Bursch of the Alliance Defending Freedom on the future of religious liberty in America. Lord Acton saw religious freedom and freedom of conscience as the foundations on which a free society is built, and Bursch's lecture gives a timely appraisal of their current prospects in the United States.

Included also is a brief on a recent op-ed by Dan Hugger, librarian and research associate at the Acton Institute, in *The Detroit News* about the recent removals of public statues. Hugger's perspective on these actions takes seriously the role of monuments and memory in

shaping our shared future.

Lastly, there is a brief on the recent release of the book *Digital Contagion* by the Acton Institute's senior research fellow Michael Matheson Miller. Miller's book assesses both the promises and dangers of digital life today and provides concrete steps you can take to help protect yourself, your family, and your business from the perils of digital technology.

None of this would be possible without the generous support of our donors. Thank you! Your help and encouragement are crucial. A free and virtuous society is only possible if the ideas that undergird it are nurtured. If you are just learning about Acton, be sure to check out our website, and please prayerfully consider supporting us in our mission. N

Acton Events REGISTER AT ACTON.ORG/EVENTS • WATCH ONLINE AT ACTON.ORG/LIVE		
DATE	EVENT	LOCATION
FEB 24	Business Matters <i>This one-day conference brings together entrepreneurs and business leaders to explore the moral good that business does. Join us in-person or online for panel discussions, interviews, and networking. To register, visit acton.org/businessmatters.</i>	Grand Rapids, MI
JUN 20-23	Acton University <i>Come build the foundations of freedom at Acton University. Explore the intersection between faith and free markets. Acton University is not your typical conference. It's a four-day celebration with 1,000 of your newest liberty-loving friends from all over the world. Each day is packed with thought-provoking presentations on the intellectual foundations of a free society. Sharpen your intellect. Expand your worldview. Explore theology, philosophy, business, development, and market-based economics at this unique conference in the liberty movement. To register, visit university.acton.org.</i>	Grand Rapids, MI

John Bursch advocates for freedom of religion

Sarah Negri

On October 28, Acton welcomed John Bursch, lawyer, author, and vice president of appellate advocacy for Alliance Defending Freedom, to deliver its second in-person monthly lecture since March 2020. More than 80 attendees filled the auditorium and listened avidly to his assessment of religious liberty in America today.

Bursch began with the statement that current attacks on religious liberty misunderstand what such a concept even means. The First Amendment of the Constitution protects not only the practice but also the free exercise of religion, which means Americans have the legal right to live out their deeply held religious beliefs in the public square as well as in their churches.

Bursch pointed to the 1990 Supreme Court case *Smith v. Oregon* as a misstep for the protection of religious freedom in America, explaining how it departed from precedent and effectively neutralized the Free Exercise Clause. He pointed to the legislative reaction to *Smith*—the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA)—and enumerated many specific cases in which RFRA provided protections for religious liberty, including contemporary cases like *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo*, which struck down discriminatory COVID-19 restrictions on religious assemblies.

While emphasizing the encouraging

fact that 18 of 19 religious liberty litigants have won their cases in the Supreme Court, Bursch cautioned that the future of religious liberty is not secure. Many of these victories, he said, were narrow in scope and did not provide a broad enough precedent to settle an increasing number of cases threatening religious freedom in the lower courts.

How can Americans outside the legal system help? Bursch emphasized the importance of knowing and explaining to others why religious liberty matters. For almost the whole of western history, religion was the custodian and engine of charity and culture in the public sphere, and we need to fight for the free exercise of religion so that we don't lose "this beautiful common good." Bursch reiterated that as recently as 1993, Americans shared a "common belief that religious liberty was worth protecting." And so he posed the question to all of us—*Is it still today?* **N**





FEATURED STORY

The Acton Institute celebrates 31st Annual Dinner

Ben Stoner


On November 17, the Acton Institute hosted its 31st Annual Dinner at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel in downtown Grand Rapids, Mich. Nearly 600 friends and supporters of Acton gathered together for this special event. Not only was Acton's important work in 2021 highlighted, but the event also celebrated the legacy of Acton's co-founders and a momentous occasion in Acton's history: Rev. Robert A. Sirico transitioned from president to president emeritus, and Kris Alan Mauren was formally announced as Acton's second president.

To set the tone for the evening, Debra Perry and Majestic Praise opened with a performance of the gospel standard "Oh Happy Day." Mrs. Perry, a Grand Rapids native, runs her own record label and recording studio and has been nominated for two Grammy Awards. Following the inspiring song, Mauren took the stage to provide the opening remarks. He shared his excitement for the future and how humbled he was to be named Acton's new president after 31 years of service as executive director. Later he introduced a short film that highlighted how Acton creatively responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by

embracing new digital technologies. This allowed Acton to begin production on a new documentary and host many world-class conferences, both online and in person, helping the institute reach new and broader audiences. Mauren then introduced Rufus Mathew, a senior at Cedarville University and a graduate of Acton's Emerging Leaders internship program. Mathew offered a thoughtful alumnus reflection, sharing the impact Acton had on his life, which he capped with an invocation.

After dinner, Betsy DeVos, former U.S. secretary of education, provided a short address to honor and express her gratitude to Rev. Sirico. "Over all these years you've been a dear friend, a confidant, and a rock for my family in times of joy and of sorrow," said DeVos, nodding at Rev. Sirico. "I cherish our friendship."

When Rev. Sirico took the stage, he first paused to recognize the movement to emeritus status as "sobering," but also acknowledged the great benefit of having a co-founder "sixteen years his junior." Sirico explained how this longtime partnership was both unique and the reason for his "great confidence" in Mauren's new leadership position. Sirico then addressed the growing division in the world and the peril of trying to bridge the divide using the same tired tactics. "My point is that if we keep doing what we have done before, saying things in the same way we have said them, we cannot expect to get a different result." In this volatile world full of political and cultural conflicts, Rev. Sirico suggested that people adopt a more "winsome" disposition and that to be successful "we must engage...and broaden our audiences with a new mode of conversation."

The video recording of Acton's 31st Annual Dinner is available on Acton's official YouTube channel: youtube.com/actoninstitute. 



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of Acton's 31st Annual Dinner.

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BRIEF

Dan Hugger writes article on the removal of public statues for *The Detroit News*

Ben Stoner

The Acton Institute continues its bimonthly publication partnership with *The Detroit News*. This November, Dan Hugger, Acton's librarian and research associate, wrote a piece on the tearing down of public monuments.

Hugger begins with a brief history, explaining why for thousands of years people have created these public works. "Monuments serve as physical vessels through which cultures the world over not only remember their heritage but also continue to transmit that heritage to the next generation." Considering their ability to effectively transmit memories, Hugger notes it is not surprising that monuments are at the center of the culture wars.

Hugger highlights two recent incidents in London and New York City. In London, a group is petitioning the Imperial College London to remove a statue of Thomas Henry Huxley, while in New York a group unanimously voted to remove a statue of Thomas Jefferson from City Hall. Both groups propose that these men had ties to racism and should not be celebrated. But, Hugger explains, it is their achievements in science and civics that are being celebrated with those monuments, not racism.

To conclude, Hugger imagines a hopeful, less destructive way forward. "There is no option to erase the past and start anew; what we imagine we were will determine, in part, what we become, and a transformative grace applied to our past will secure a brighter future."

Read the full article at acton.is/monuments.

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BRIEF

New release: *Digital Contagion* by Michael Matheson Miller

Nathan Mech

Digital Contagion: 10 Steps to Protect Your Family & Business from Intrusion, Cancel Culture, and Surveillance Capitalism has just been published. As society becomes increasingly dependent upon digital technology, many new threats to safety and privacy originate from the digital realm. Big Tech collects data from nearly everything we do online before selling it and using it for behavior modification. Social media has been shown to harm the mental health of many users. Cancel culture threatens the platforms of many businesses and individuals.

Michael Matheson Miller, senior research fellow at the Acton Institute, takes a realistic approach to these problems. Acknowledging that there is nothing we can do to completely avoid these threats, he nevertheless proposes 10 practical steps that each person can take to mitigate them. Drawing on thinkers like Cal Newport and Neil Postman, his recommendations are easily actionable and do not require one to disconnect from society as we know it.

Miller proposes, finally, a broader vision for cultural and societal flourishing in a digital age, which he calls the "Tocqueville Option." Building communities on human-centered institutions and creating technologies that decrease reliance on Big Tech and the state are key to this renewal. Miller challenges his readers to find innovative solutions that preserve freedom and human dignity in a rapidly changing world. **N**



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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2022

Visit **acton.org/businessmatters** to view videos from last year's conference and sign up to be notified when Business Matters 2022 registration is open.

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