

Religion & Liberty

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



What is a Christian's duty as a U.S. citizen?

Jay Richards on
COVID-19's 'tyranny
of experts'

Sally Pipes on the
'public option'

Mike Gonzalez on the
constitutional cure for
cancel culture

EDITOR'S NOTE

Rev. Ben Johnson EXECUTIVE EDITOR

This issue goes to press as the presidential election is ending – both causes for rejoicing. But its theme remains relevant long after the votes are tallied, because politics represents a mere fraction of true citizenship.

These stories trace the full arc of citizenship, showing how religion and liberty intertwine at each stage. Mark David Hall shares the founders' views that religion sustains our republic. Hunter Baker writes that "citizenship in a free country" entails "the corresponding responsibility of stewardship," which he capably defines. In "Repairing the breach," I document how our toxic political culture is tearing families and friends apart – and I lay out five steps to discuss divisive issues in peace. David Deavel writes that earthly citizenship goes well beyond voting: "The good citizen's task is to 'be civilization'" in the full range of our familial, educational, charitable, and commercial lives. Finally, Acton Institute Co-founder Rev. Robert Sirico elevates the dialogue by noting that Christians are "not grounded in mere earthly citizenship. ... As believers, we are first and foremost members of quite another body, the body of Christ."

We're equally excited to welcome a distinguished slate of contributors to this issue. Jay Richards analyzes the disaster of the COVID-19 lockdowns, the theme of his new book, *The Price of Panic*. The Heritage Foundation's Mike Gonzalez presents a constitutional program to defund identity politics, the topic of his recent book, *The Plot to Change America*. Healthcare expert Sally Pipes analyzes the public option, detailing exactly how this allegedly moderate compromise will eliminate private health insurance. And Editor-at-large John Couretas reviews the rarest find: a non-ideological book on environmentalism.

Read and share this issue, and join us in so fulfilling our citizenship in this world that we may be co-heirs in the next.

This issue has been made possible in part thanks to a generous donation from Jeffrey and Cynthia Littmann. Jeffrey and Cynthia Littmann are champions of conservation and the good stewardship of our natural resources as a gift from God.



(Cover Photo: AP Photo / Jeff Roberson.)

COVER STORY

11 What is a Christian's duty as a U.S. citizen?

Hunter Baker



ESSAY

03 The 'public option' will destroy choices

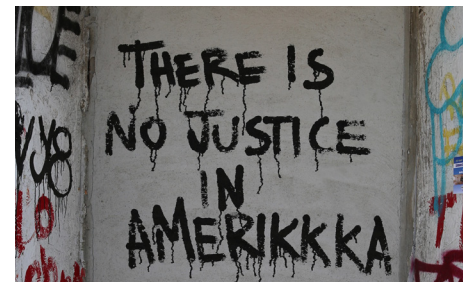
Sally Pipes



ESSAY

05 COVID-19: the tyranny of experts

Jay Richards, Douglas Axe and William Briggs



ESSAY

07 The constitutional cure for cancel culture

Mike Gonzalez

02 Acton Briefs

09 Faithful citizenship: the founders on religion and the republic

14 Henri Landwirth

15 Repairing the breach: bringing peace to politically fractured families and communities

17 Be civilization! Citizenship is more than voting

18 Time to chill about the fiery climate apocalypse

20 Critical theory, critiqued

22 Earthly and heavenly citizenship

(Photo credit: Tim Ides. This photo has been cropped. CC BY 2.0.)

Population bust fueled COVID-19 spread: study

Rev. Ben Johnson

ACTON INSTITUTE

A recent study found that the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 would have been lower if society “had maintained the patterns of fertility, nuptiality, marital stability, and household structure that existed in 1976.” Had population trends held steady, COVID-19 deaths would have been lower as a percentage of society *and* in absolute numbers, according to researchers at the Demographic Observatory of San Pablo University (CEU) in Madrid.

Declining fertility rates mean Spain has 20 million fewer residents under the age of 43, a cohort with a higher coronavirus survival rate, according to the report titled “Coronavirus and Demographics in Spain” (“Coronavirus y Demografía en España”).

The total number of COVID-19 deaths would also be lower were it not for the population bust, because Spaniards traditionally lived in multigenerational families, where children and grandchildren cared for their elders. “[T]he lower presence of the elderly in nursing homes would have limited the foci of contagion among the population with the highest risk,” according to the CEU.

These findings refute the Malthusian notion that overpopulation threatens human survival, a view recently popularized by such diverse figures as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Bernie Sanders, and former royals Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

Instead, a birth dearth is stalking the world. The world’s population will peak at 9.7 billion in 44 years, then contract by almost a billion people by 2100. By that time, 23 nations will see their populations fall by half; Japan has already peaked and will lose 59% of its citizens.

In the United States, the total fertility rate hit 1.7% in 2019 – “another record low for the nation,” the CDC noted. The trend has not yet reached its nadir. The U.S. is headed for “a large, lasting baby bust,” the Brookings Institution predicted in June.

God instituted the family when He observed, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Alienation is no more natural or beneficial at the end of life than it is at the beginning.

Pandemic policies are leaving children behind

Joseph Sunde

ACTON INSTITUTE

Reopening in-person education has less to do with science than politics. An eye-opening article for the *New Yorker* and *ProPublica* by Alec MacGillis states that President Donald Trump’s overtures to reopen schools provided convenient political cover for teachers unions to create a cultural consensus that dismissed scientific evidence – particularly in states and cities that lean leftward.

According to a study by Jon Valant of the Brookings Institution, “there is no relationship ... between school districts’ reopening decisions and their county’s new COVID-19 cases per capita.” However, the study found that “there is a strong relationship ... between districts’ reopening decisions and the county-level support for Trump in the 2016 election.”

In another study, political scientists Michael Hartney and Leslie Finger observed a wide set of national data and concluded that “politics, far more than science, shaped school district decision-making.” They write, “mass partisanship and teacher union strength best explain how school boards approached reopening.”

At some level, the political game-playing was just an excuse – a convenient distraction to hide a more systemic variety of resistance. As Jonathan Chait observes, “the union’s incentives are misaligned with those of their students.”

“For kids and families, in-person education presents a trade-off between the health risks of going to school, and the economic and social costs of staying home. For younger low-income students, the costs of losing in-person school are catastrophic and permanent,” he writes.

“Teachers, on the other hand, are incentivized almost entirely to minimize health risks,” he continues. “They get paid the same salary if they go to school or teach from home. They might feel unhappy about watching their students flail, but they do not have anything like the investment that the families have.”

In the end, however, it is the teachers, not the students, who have the bulk of power and public representation. Amid all adults’ illogical squabbling and self-focused risk calculations, the science is being ignored while children are left to suffer in silence.

What’s driving the decline of religion in America? Secular education

Joseph Sunde

ACTON INSTITUTE

The “rise of the Nones” is by now well known, but the causes behind it have remained obscure. In a new study from the American Enterprise Institute, researcher Lyman Stone identifies two reasons for the decline of religious belief. One of them is “the expansion of secular education.”

The number of people who do not identify with any particular religion has increased precipitously. Yet this trend is not due to some sort of modern intellectual “Enlightenment” – an agnosticism spurred by high levels of academic achievement or breakthroughs in science and technology. “Theories that religion has declined ... because modern, educated people are inherently skeptical of religion get no support in the actual historic record,” Stone observes.

Instead, it has far more to do with who is *controlling* education and the mechanisms through which such information flows.

“More educational spending by the (generally secular) state to teach children may teach not just math and reading but also a worldview or life orientation,” he writes.

“In other words, the content of education matters. Evidence that education reduces religiosity is fairly weak: American religiosity rose considerably from 1800 until the 1970s, despite rapidly rising educational attainment. But the evidence that specifically secular education might reduce religiosity is more compelling,” he continues. “Indeed, statistically, most researchers who have explored long-run change in religiosity find that education-related variables, which I have argued are a proxy for secular education, can explain nearly the totality of change in religiosity.”

Stone proposes several policy initiatives that may diminish the state’s influence and better empower religious communities and educational institutions, many of which have been offered before: school vouchers and other school choice programs, liberalized zoning rules, eased licensure rules for religious institutions, and more. While these steps would surely be beneficial, we need distinct moral communities and a cultural imagination that is clear about what good education and good culture look like, as well as what freedom requires of our communities in a pluralistic society.

ESSAY

The ‘public option’ will destroy choice

Sally C. Pipes

Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has made it abundantly clear that he opposes the “Medicare for All” model of health reform favored by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Instead, Biden proposes creating a public insurance option that would compete against private insurers on the Obamacare exchanges.

On its face, this plan might seem sensible. Unlike Medicare for All, a public option would not abolish private insurance. It would just give people one more choice of health insurance coverage.

But Biden’s public option would upend our health sector in ways that impose real costs on patients and providers alike. In the end, it would yield the same kind of single-payer system that the former vice president has explicitly rejected.

The Biden campaign has outlined in some detail what its government-run health plan would entail.

The public option would be administered by Medicare. It would include at least one plan with no deductible. It would charge no co-pays for primary care. Low-income Americans who are not eligible for Medicaid would be enrolled automatically. And all Americans – even those eligible for coverage through their employers – would be free to sign up.

This model is tailor-made to negate the most common objections to Medicare for All.

For example, most voters are not eager to see private insurance disappear. According to recent polling from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 56% of the country is in favor of Medicare for All. But support drops to 37% when Americans learn that it would outlaw private insurance.

Biden is well aware of this public opinion data. It is why part of his pitch was that he will not take away Americans’ existing coverage. That pitch has proved popular. Two-thirds of the country – including 44% of Republicans – say they favor a public option.

But their support is misguided. “If you like your plan, you can keep it” was not true under Obamacare. And it would not be true under Biden’s plan, either.

The reason is simple. A public option would not have to cover its costs, much less turn a profit. The federal Treasury could plug any holes on its balance sheet. That would give the public option a significant advantage over private insurers, who do not have the luxury of running losses in perpetuity.

Further, the public option would reimburse doctors and hospitals at rates similar to those of Medicare. Those rates are artificially low, because the government has the power to essentially dictate what it will pay. Indeed, hospitals receive just 87 cents from the federal government for every dollar they spend providing care to Medicare’s beneficiaries.



(photo credit: Joe Mabel. This photo has been cropped. CC BY-SA 3.0.)

Private insurers do not have that kind of “negotiating” leverage. So, healthcare providers charge them more – both because they can, and because they need to make up for government underpayments somehow. In 2018, private insurers paid hospitals 247% more for the same services than Medicare did, according to a recent analysis from the RAND Corporation.

These two cost advantages would give the public option a leg up on the private competition. The public plan could attract customers with low premiums that private insurers could not hope to match. Privately insured consumers would understandably drop their coverage and switch to the cheaper public option.

Biden’s plan also strikes a severe blow against the 165 million Americans who have employer-sponsored health insurance by allowing those who have access to coverage through work to decline it – and hop onto the public option. Right now, people eligible for affordable coverage through their employers cannot get taxpayer-subsidized coverage through the exchanges.

Biden’s offer may prove tantalizing to people who see a significant chunk of their paycheck get deducted to cover their share of the premium. The public option may seem like a better deal.

Employers, meanwhile, may decide that they would prefer not to continue spending huge sums on health insurance. They could end up nudging their employees into the exchanges, with a recommendation that they check out the public option.

That is the scenario sketched out in a recent study by KNG Health Consulting. Researchers estimate that one-quarter of those currently insured by their employer would move over to a public option plan by 2032.

Some would make the transition voluntarily. In most cases, employers would simply stop offering coverage.

A booming public option is bad news for doctors and hospitals. They can ill

afford to see their high-paying, privately insured customers become low-paying, publicly insured ones. A separate KNG Health Consulting study estimates that hospitals’ payments could fall by \$774 billion over 10 years under a public option.

A 2016 paper from the Congressional Budget Office projected that between 40 and 60% of the nation’s hospitals were on track to become money-losing operations by 2025. A public option would likely push them further into the red.

To compensate, they might try to raise rates on their remaining privately insured customers. But private insurers would pass those rate hikes on to consumers in the form of higher premiums. Those consumers would respond by cancelling their private coverage and switching to the public option. And the cycle would repeat.

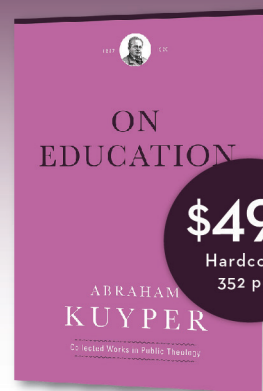
Eventually, the public option would swallow up the entire market. Biden’s plan to give Americans an-

other health insurance choice would end up leaving them with only one choice.

This may be a roundabout way for the government to eliminate private insurance and take over the health insurance sector. But the final outcome is no different than Sen. Sanders’ explicit vision of Medicare for All.

Sally C. Pipes is president, CEO, and Thomas W. Smith Fellow in Health Care Policy at the Pacific Research Institute. Her latest book is False Premise, False Promise: The Disastrous Reality of Medicare for All (Encounter 2020). Follow her on Twitter @sallypipes. [R&L](#)

“Eventually, the public option would swallow up the entire market. Biden’s plan to give Americans another health insurance choice would end up leaving them with only one choice.”



On Education

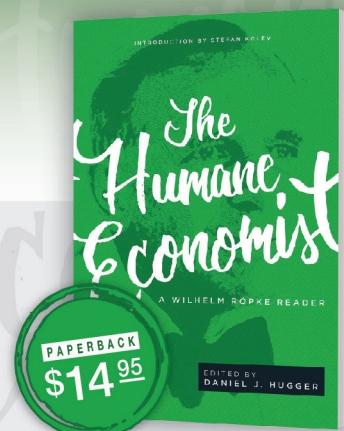
This collection of essays and speeches presents Kuyper’s theology and philosophy of education, and his understanding of the divine purpose of scholarship for human culture.

NOW AVAILABLE

shop.acton.org

THE HUMANE ECONOMIST: A WILHELM RÖPKE READER

Edited by DANIEL J. HUGGER Introduction by STEFAN KOLEV
ACTONINSTITUTE • Paperback 336 Pgs • ISBN 978-1-942503-51-4

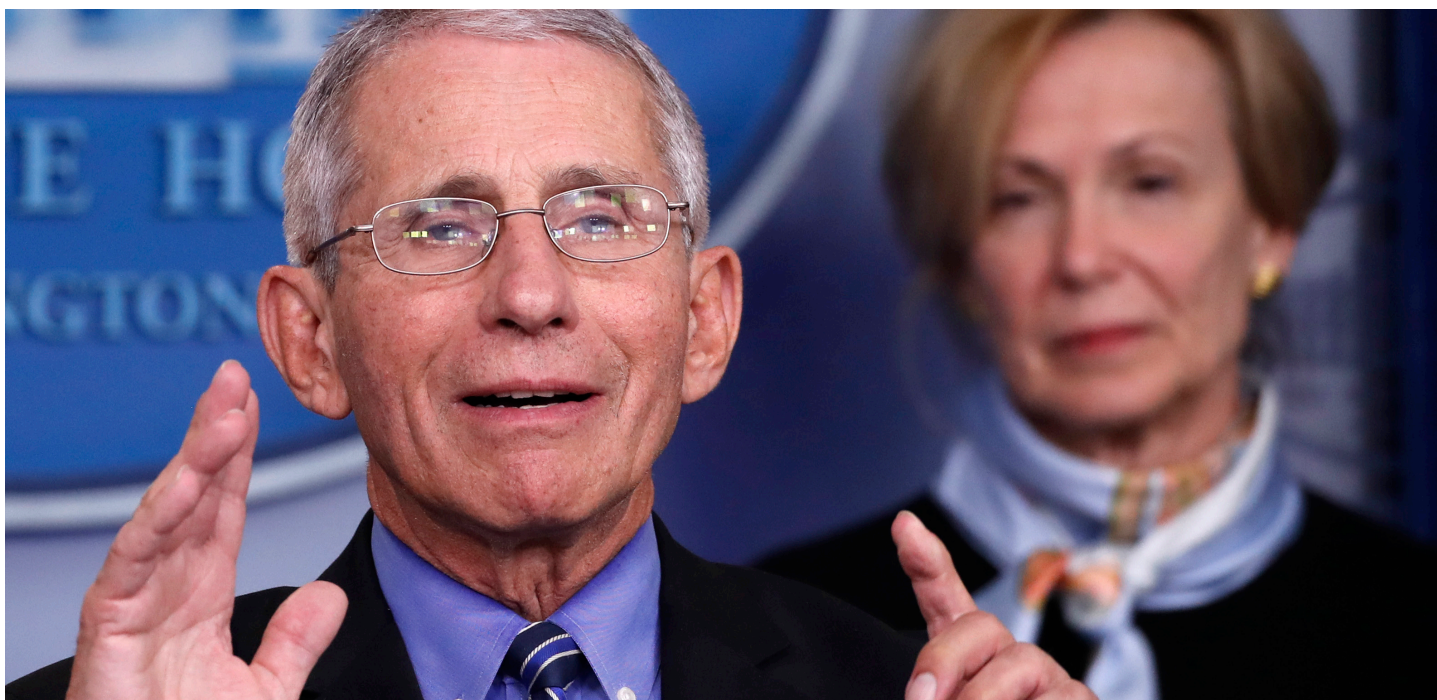


“This volume is a great place for students of society to start to learn about the humane economy and its relevance for the twenty-first century.”

– Peter Boettke, GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

NOW AVAILABLE AT

AMAZON AND SHOP.ACTON.ORG



ESSAY

COVID-19: the tyranny of experts

Jay Richards, Douglas Axe
and William Briggs

You already know the basic story of the 2020 coronavirus global pandemic, but the proper interpretation is still in flux. If we fail to discern the role of the tyranny of experts, we will miss the linchpin that turned a pandemic into a catastrophe.

As a public-health problem, COVID-19 started in late 2019, when a mysterious new coronavirus infected people in Wuhan, China. Within a couple of months, it had spread to every corner of the occupied world. At first, when officials outside China did not know how dangerous it was, reactions varied. In late January, President Donald Trump responded to the news by restricting travel from China. At the time, the World Health Organization still downplayed the risk and criticized limits on

travel. Trump's opponents, from Joe Biden to Nancy Pelosi, accused him of xenophobia. By late March, though, panic was setting in, and Trump's domestic critics were claiming he had not acted fast enough.

In downplaying the danger early on, the World Health Organization seemed to be carrying water for the regime in Beijing. (We provide the details in our new book, *The Price of Panic*.) But in March, the UN agency reversed course. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus pointed to a scary model from the Imperial College London, which predicted as many as 40 million people could die worldwide without draconian efforts to reduce the spread of the virus. It would be more than a month before non-experts learned that the model was little more than high tech, unreliable conjecture.

American public health experts followed the lead of WHO and advised the president accordingly. On April 8, Trump explained that "two very smart people walked into my office and said, 'Listen, these are your alternatives.' And that was a projection of 1.5 to 2.2 million people would die if we didn't close [the economy] up." One of these was public health official Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Dr. Fauci and a few other officials soon became household names, thanks to a viral boost from the press and social media. As a result, government bureaucrats

with narrow expertise gained the status of infallible oracles. This made it politically deadly for the president to weigh their advice against the advice of other experts.

That arrangement, we should now realize, set the stage for disaster. The coronavirus was surely a danger, especially to the elderly who suffered from ill health. But it's not nearly as severe as the Spanish flu a century ago, and it poses less risk than the ordinary flu to the young and healthy. As a result, we argue in *The Price of Panic* that the cost of the public response – which involved untested, population-wide lockdowns rather than targeted quarantines – vastly exceeded even their promised benefits.

Let's grant that the federal government has a proper role to play in public health and, in particular, during a pandemic. Still, public health officials left to their own devices should not have this sort of power over government leaders or public perception. Executing policy is finally the job of elected officials, practical men and women who are accountable to the public and who are charged with balancing the advice of competing experts, not getting rolled by them.

The problem here is not that public health officials are wicked. Let's assume they are all noble and well-meaning. The problem is that they are bound to maximize a certain kind of safety, to the neglect

(Photo credit: AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

of other goods. In this way, they are like anxious doctors who run every possible test on a patient. Looking for problems is a physician's job. Misdiagnosis could be considered malpractice. This makes them risk-averse and hypervigilant. They tend to respond to the worst-case scenario. But you, as a patient, have different aims. What you deem best for you, weighing costs and benefits, may not be what is best for the doctor who is treating you.

In the same way, putting medical specialists in charge of nations – or the whole globe – is asking for overly cautious and even oppressive policies. These experts tend to become fixated on the single malady in front of them, to the exclusion of any other concern – with tragic results for us in the United States and every other country that followed the doctors' orders.

Consider, as Exhibit A, Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel – oncologist, bioethicist, and one-time public health guru under President Barack Obama. Probably for shock value, news outlets quoted him in April saying that the whole country must be locked down for 12 to 18 months until there is a vaccine. "Realistically, COVID-19 will be here for the next 18 months or more. We will not be able to return to normalcy until we find a vaccine or effective medications," he said. "I know that's dreadful news to hear. How are people supposed to find work if this goes on in some form for a year and a half? Is all that economic pain worth trying to stop COVID-19? The truth is we have no choice."

The doctor was wrong: There is always a choice. We could have quarantined the sick, isolated those at high risk, taken commonsense precautions, and then gone on with our lives – just as people did during the swine flu, the Asian flu, the Hong Kong flu, and on and on. Failing that, at least we could have pivoted as soon as we saw that the coronavirus was not as deadly and indiscriminate as predicted.

Why couldn't Emanuel see this? For the same reason that Exhibit B, presidential advisor Anthony Fauci, said: "I don't think we should ever shake hands, ever again, to be honest with you. Not only would it be good to prevent coronavirus disease, it probably would decrease instances of influenza dramatically in this country." This from the man the *New Yorker* called "America's doctor."

In mid-May, Dr. Fauci spoke to a Senate health committee about the dangers

of reopening schools and warned governors of "needless suffering and death" if we reopened states "prematurely." Prematurely, compared to what? The word implies a fixed end date, like a due date during a pregnancy. But Fauci promised no end date to the madness.

Why do public health officials like Emanuel and Fauci say such things? Because they are in the grip of a single goal. Such officials tend to think in bulk, to focus on the quantity of abstract life protected in the near term, rather than the quality of actual lives lived over the long term. Imagine, for instance, what might happen if a risk-averse public health expert who had spent 30 years obsessing over traffic deaths could dictate the driving choices of 330 million Americans, or eight billion humans. It would not be pretty.

The problem is not expertise. We all benefit from experts. The problem is the *tyranny* of experts – when their constricted focus dictates policy for everyone. In a sane world, the media would grasp that experts like Emanuel and Fauci offer one narrow take on a vast and complex problem, and that while we should not ignore them, we should not idolize them, either.

Regrettably, the press weaponized Fauci against President Trump and other politicians who challenged the wisdom of an indefinite shutdown. The headlines reporting on Fauci's May testimony before a Senate committee – when Senator (and doctor) Rand Paul had the temerity to tell him, "You're not the end-all" – were predictable: "Trump's Push to Reopen Schools Clashes with Fauci's Call for Caution"; "Fauci Warns of Colossal, Deadly Mistake. Will Trump Listen?"; "Fauci Warns: More Death, Econ Damage If US Reopens Too Fast."

Of course, Fauci has no expertise in economics, and even his health advice changed over the course of the winter and spring. As Steve Deace noted on May 14:

In January, Fauci did an interview in his native NYC saying coronavirus was just another flu. In February, he wrote virtually the same in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. In March, he said Americans don't need to be walking around wearing masks. Then later in March he told Congress this would kill 10 times more people than the flu. He signed up to lockdown the country based on the

disgraced Imperial College Model in March, too. In April, he sentenced us to further lockdown based on the always wrong IHME model. Later in April he said he wasn't sure we could trust the models. Now in May he's not sure we can send the kids back to school this fall, a linchpin to reopening the country, despite the fact kids are returning to school in China, Japan, Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Denmark, France, Israel, and Sweden.

So, how do you know which Fauci to worship? Your demigod sure does change his mind a lot.

No matter. The press had elevated Fauci and other specialists to the status of infallible oracles – whose most recent pronouncements erased whatever they had said the day before – and dared governors and presidents to challenge them. But challenge them we must, if we're going to avoid a repeat of the 2020 catastrophe.

Jay W. Richards, Douglas Axe, and William Briggs are the authors of *The Price of Panic: How the Tyranny of Experts Turned a Pandemic into a Catastrophe*. [R&L](#)

THE ACTON INSTITUTE INVITES
YOU TO A SPECIAL VIRTUAL EVENT WITH
REV. ROBERT SIRICO, PRESIDENT AND CO-FOUNDER
AND SPECIAL GUESTS

ACTON INSTITUTE
30
ANNIVERSARY
1990-2020

30th
Anniversary Celebration

NOVEMBER 18, 2020 - LIVE ONLINE - 6-7PM EST

For More Information or to RSVP Please Visit: acton.org/30years

The constitutional way to defeat cancel culture

Mike Gonzalez

While Americans have been more divided at other times in history, our current divisions are so profound that dark voices suggest we are on the verge of a new civil war. Portland, Seattle, Kenosha, Chicago, etc., reminded us all summer long that we are on the edge. And the violence that broke out in Louisville on September 23 following the verdict of the Breonna Taylor case demonstrates that it's not over yet. When one sees hard-Left rioters in the streets shooting police officers, attacking restaurants and stores, and in turn attracting the attention of armed right-wing militants, one shudders.

The question is, "What do we do?" Before getting to policy solutions, it is important to recognize how we got here in the first place.

Cancel culture, the division of the country into categories of oppressors and the oppressed, struggle sessions held at work places, the *New York Times'* 1619 Project, victimhood culture — none of these things materialized out of thin air. They have common roots. Their consequences are the riots and disturbances of 2020.

To understand this, we must go back 100 years to Antonio Gramsci, the founder of the Italian Communist Party. Gramsci was sent to prison in the late 1920s in order to, as the prosecutor put it, "stop his brain from working." We know from the example of St. Paul and others that this is counterproductive. In prison, Gramsci had time to think and write.

He realized that, though Marx and Engels had promised the workers would revolt and overthrow the capitalist class, that had only happened in one place during his lifetime: a European backwater called Russia. Everywhere else, including his own country and Germany, revolutions in Western Europe in 1919 had failed to produce soviets.

The reason, he wrote, was that the worker had accepted and internalized all the cultural concepts of the oppressor class: religion, the economic system, the family unit, the nation-state, etc. The capitalist *bourgeoisie* no longer needed to use the threat of force to get the worker to accept his fate. The worker did it on his own, because he had acquired "false consciousness."

In order to rid the worker of this false consciousness, a well-trained revolutionary vanguard needed to put him or her through "consciousness-raising" sessions to understand how he was suffering. A revolutionary consciousness would not be formed "under the brutal goad of physiological necessity, but as a result of intelligent reflection, at first by just a few people and later by a whole class, on why certain conditions exist and how best to convert the facts of vassalage into triggers of rebellion and social reconstruction."

That was Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. The main tool used to put it in practice was critical theory.

Many heard of "critical race theory," because President Donald Trump launched a two-pronged attack on it: his Constitution Day announcement of a 1776 Commission to counter the leftist indoctrination of schoolchildren and his instruction to the Office of Management and Budget to ban federal "anti-racism trainings." On September 22, Trump extended the ban to contractors doing business with the federal government.

Critical race theory is an offshoot of critical theory, as is its law school branch, critical legal theory. Other spinoffs include ethnic and gender studies. Put together, they amount to what I and many others call the "grievance industry." Anyone taking classes at a university, or with sons or daughters there, should understand that they are studying some form

of this theory. In fact, starting next year the California state university system will require anyone wishing to get a B.A. or B.S. take a class on ethnic studies. Similar studies are being extended in K-12 schools.

Critical theory, the main philosophical school of identity politics, is nothing less than an unremitting attack on all of America's norms and traditions. Its goal is to replace them with a "counter-narrative" to introduce such ideas as central planning. The concept dates back to 1937 when Max Horkheimer, the director of a school of thought known as the Frankfurt School, published its manifesto, *Traditional and Critical Theory*. When the essay came out, these Marxist academics had already fled the German city of that name to escape the Nazis and found a new home at Columbia University in New York.

Critical theory replaced universal truths with competing narratives. The Left's job was to destroy the "hegemonic narrative" that Gramsci had described and to impose its own through critical theory. This nihilistic view dated to Nietzsche and was in itself nothing less than an assault on Christian values and all of Western civilization.

Herbert Marcuse, another Frankfurt school academic who settled in America, added a new wrinkle. During the Sixties riots, he realized that the new revolutionary base is not the worker but the "exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors." The locus of revolution shifted from the worker to identity groups asserting victimhood. Very simply, the worker could change his economic status (indeed, under capitalism, he could do so easily) while race, national origin, and sex are immutable traits.

Marcuse also wrote that there will need to be "repressive tolerance," explaining that conservatives' views will need to be repressed. Cancel culture was born. Lastly, one of Marcuse's disciples,

Rudi Dutschke, came up with the idea of a “long march through the institutions,” a clear reference to the Chinese Communist Party’s Long March in China in the 1930s. Marcuse blessed the approach, calling it the only one that will work.

Over the past 100 years, Marxism’s message evolved from an emphasis on economics to an emphasis on culture; the locus of revolution shifted from the worker to the identity group; and armed struggle was replaced by the peaceful takeover of all culture-making institutions like the media, the academy, and Hollywood.

This has given us a nation divided into categories based on the immutable characteristics of race, national origin, sex, even disability status. These traits are said to confer a victimhood status that can then be used to demand attention, respect, and tangible benefits. The grievances that are nourished act as catalysts to transform society, from top to bottom. As result, we have the riots of 2020.

So, the question, again, is, “What to do?” Though much of these divisions are taught in universities, the policies on which they are based emanate from the federal government. That is why activists and ideologues spend so much time working the federal bureaucracy. It is there that we need to look first.

The president’s all-out attack on what he calls critical race theory and his banning of “diversity training” is obviously a good start. It comes late in his term, which could be his only one. But at least he has put these issues in the national spotlight.

“Anti-racism” or “diversity” trainings are indeed racist in the extreme. They posit that traits inhere in race and ethnicity, and that such attributes as punctuality, the use of reason, and love of the written word belong to something called “whiteism.” Noting more toxic could be said to a child, and the president was on target when he called it a form of child abuse.

If Trump wins re-election, conservatives must hold his feet to the fire and assure that he stamps out the struggle sessions mischaracterized as “anti-racism training.” If the president loses, this will be a good cause around which the different factions of the conservative movement can rally. Either way, understanding the origin of the identity politics problem will help us with policy remedies.

In my July 2020 book, *The Plot to Change America: How Identity Politics is Dividing the*

Land of the Free, I call for an era of Civil Rights 2.0, which returns to the colorblind promise of the original civil rights movement. We should follow the old Watergate adage, “Follow the money.” As I write, “To start dismantling identity politics, then, and begin the civil rights movement 2.0, we need to stop the government from handing out benefits to those with a claim of victimhood simply because of membership in a protected group.”

Suborning Americans to adhere to identity categories takes many forms. One clear example is preferential contracting programs that reward businesses certified as “disadvantaged business enterprises,” or DBEs. The owner of a business obtains certification as a DBE by being a member of a victim group and swearing in an affidavit that he or she has been “subjected to ethnic prejudice or cultural bias.” Having succeeded in life by overcoming this obstacle does not prevent certification. University of Maryland Professor George La Noue draws the only possible conclusion: “Thus, social disadvantage is, as a practical matter, established at birth, and cannot be challenged by evidence of a successful life.” DBEs need to be discontinued.

The federal government should conduct an inventory to find out how many federal statutes make non-competitive awards based on race. The last time the Congressional Research Service did this, in 2011, it found that nearly 300 federal statutes “specifically refer to race, gender, or ethnicity as factors to be considered in the administration of federal programs.” The report added that, though its authors had been “as comprehensive as possible,” their findings were “by no means exhaustive.” The next step is to declare that these statutes contravene the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

One of the most visible set-aside programs is affirmative action in university admissions. Vulnerable high school seniors worried about getting into a good college are being encouraged to check one of the identity boxes and produce victimhood narratives that will get them into the college of their choice. This will take the courts to resolve, though the Trump Justice Department took an important step in informing Yale this summer that its admissions program violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act by discriminating against white and Asian-American applicants.

Lastly, the least recognized form of racial discrimination is one of the most important: the doctrine of disparate impact. This allows discrimination to be found in a policy’s outcome, not its intent. This is a civil rights lawyer’s dream and leads to arbitrary legal action, since all policies have a “disparate effect” on people, especially when the categories are artificial.

Gail Heriot of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has a handy solution I have always supported: having the president inventory the instances in which the federal government uses disparate impact, and then asking the heads of agencies:

1. Do you consider your statute, regulation or policy to impose liability for disparate impact?
2. If so, what is the legal basis for that view?
3. How does disparate impact liability work under that statute, regulation or policy ... and what is the agency’s legal basis for thinking so?
4. Finally, why does the agency believe disparate impact liability will survive strict scrutiny?

My own favorite solution has always been getting the government out of the business of category creation. The Office of Management and Budget, for example, created the Hispanic and Asian categories out of thin air in 1977. They made it into the census for the first time in 1980. The different groups jammed into these categories have very little in common except the assumption that they belong to “victims” groups. Thus, they are corrosive to the ethos of *e pluribus unum*.

The American ideal may not have always been achieved, but we should continue to try rather than give up on it. Only when we aspire to live according to these lights can we avoid the mayhem we are currently witnessing in our streets.

Mike Gonzalez, a senior fellow at The Heritage Foundation, is the author of the new book, The Plot to Change America: How Identity Politics is Dividing the Land of the Free. He is a widely experienced international correspondent, commentator, and editor who has reported from Asia, Europe, and Latin America. He served in the George W. Bush administration in the Securities and Exchange Commission and the State Department. [R&L](#)



ESSAY

Faithful citizenship: the founders on religion and the republic

Mark David Hall

Shortly before he left office, President George Washington published an essay commonly referred to as his “Farewell Address.” In it, he observed that:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indisputable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duty of men and citizens. ... [L]et us with caution indulge the suppo-

sition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

America’s founders believed that republican government requires a moral citizenry and that religion is necessary for morality. James Hutson of the Library of Congress suggests that this argument was so widespread that it should be called the “founding generation’s syllogism.”

In the late eighteenth century, every American of European descent, with the exception of about 2,000 Jews, identified as a Christian. And contrary to the assertions of some sociologists, there is every reason to believe that most of these citizens took their faith seriously.

Today, only 70% of Americans identify as Christians, 6% are members of other faiths, and 24% call themselves atheists, agnostics, or unaffiliated. The last group, often referred to as “the nones,” has grown rapidly over the past decade, especially among young people. Only 20% of religiously unaffiliated citizens agree that there are “clear standards for what is right and wrong.”

If America’s founders were correct about the connection between religion,

morality, and republicanism, what do these trends suggest for the future of American politics? In this short essay, I briefly explore the founders’ syllogism and then suggest that even if they were correct, we still have reasons to hope that America’s experiment in constitutional self-government can continue to be successful.

Shortly before America declared independence, John Adams wrote, “Religion and morality alone ... can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand.” He regularly reiterated this conviction, noting in 1811 that “religion and virtue are the only foundations, not only of republicanism and of all free government, but of social felicity under all governments and in all combinations of human society.” Referring specifically to the U.S. Constitution, he wrote in 1798 that “[o]ur constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Among other benefits, religion and virtue help create a unified, safe, and peaceful society. In the words of the minister Elizur Goodrich, “religion and virtue are the strongest bond of human society, and lay the best foundation of peace and happiness in the civil state.” In 1796, future Supreme Court Justice Samuel Chase wrote in a Maryland General Court opinion that “[r]eligion is of general and public concern, and on its support depend, in

(Photo credit: Rosemarie Mosteller / Shutterstock.com.)

great measure, the peace and good order of government, the safety and happiness of the people.” Similarly, Jedidiah Morse preached an election sermon in 1799 where he observed that it is to:

The kindly influence of Christianity we owe that degree of civil freedom, and political and social happiness which mankind now enjoys. ... All efforts to destroy the foundation of our holy religion, ultimately tend to the subversion also of our political freedom and happiness. Whenever the pillars of Christianity shall be overthrown, our present republican form of government, and all the blessings which flow from them, must fall with them.

Nor were such sentiments limited to Protestants. Charles Carroll of Maryland, a Roman Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence, remarked that “without morals a republic cannot subsist any length of time; they therefore who are decrying the Christian religion, whose morality is so sublime and pure ... are undermining the solid foundation of morals, the best security for the duration of a free government.”

Examples of founders insisting that religion is necessary for morality, and that both are necessary for republican government, could be multiplied almost indefinitely. The logic is compelling. If republican government is to work, people need to respect each other. This includes engaging in political debate with civility, treating one's opponents with dignity, telling the truth, and the like. More importantly, religion is a source of internal control, restraining and disciplining each citizen, and thus limiting the need of external control by civil government.

America's founders often spoke generally of “religion”; but there is little doubt that most of them, even those most influenced by the Enlightenment, meant Christianity. The great Chief Justice John Marshall, for example, wrote that in America, “Christianity and religion are identified. It would be strange, indeed, if with such a people, our institutions did not presuppose Christianity.”

An exception to this rule is found in a 1789 letter by Benjamin Rush, where he contended that the “only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in religion. Without this there can be

no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments.” With a liberality unusual in his generation, he continued:

[S]uch is my veneration for every religion that reveals the attributes of the Deity, or a future state of rewards and punishments, that I had rather see the opinions of Confucius or Mahomed inculcated upon our youth, than see them grow up wholly devoid of a system of religious principles. But the religion I mean to recommend in this place is that of the New Testament.

Rush ended where many founders began, with the default assumption that Christianity supports and promotes virtues that allow republican government to flourish. But strong moral systems of non-Christian religions are capable of generating the virtues necessary for republican government.

To be sure, there are extremist interpretations of all faiths that may well undercut liberal democratic values. Almost half of all Americans think that Islam and democracy are incompatible, but American Muslims are overwhelmingly supportive of the United States. American Muslims are as likely to take their faith seriously as American Christians, and they share such values as the importance of working for justice and equality.

Not only can all religions foster the moral commitments necessary for democracy, in many instances believers of all faiths have joined together to pursue common goals. For instance, all religious citizens have an interest in robustly protecting what many founders called “the sacred right of conscience.”

According to Barry Alan Shain, one of the best students of religion in the American founding, eighteenth-century European Enlightenment thinkers such as Nicolas de Condorcet were “well on their way to envisioning a benign human nature and even a perfectible one free of original sin.” Practically, this led them to reject the separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism. “By the 1770s, most leading Enlightenment thinkers embraced unicameralism” and many “leading lights of the Enlightenment” ridiculed American federalism.

America's founders thought that republican government required a moral

citizenry. But they also understood, in the words of St. Paul, that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Moreover, they recognized that believers continue to struggle with sin, so even if elected officials are persons of faith, we must still be wary of political corruption. Like Lord Acton, they were convinced that “[p]ower tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

In *Federalist No. 51*, James Madison observed, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external or internal controls on government would be necessary.” He went on to explain that the separation of powers, and checks and balances, are necessary to prevent corruption and promote justice. The founders also insisted that government power must be strictly limited by law.

America's founders rejected the optimistic view of human nature embraced by some Enlightenment thinkers, as well as utopian theorists before and after the founding era. They desired a religious and moral citizenry, but they designed a constitutional order for fallen men and women.

If the founding generation's syllogism is correct, the decline of faith in America is a cause for concern. Citizens of faith have good reasons to encourage the “nones” to embrace faith, the success of America's experiment in self-government being only one of them. But we should take heart that America's founders did not assume that citizens or elected officials would be virtuous. America's constitutional order may well be robust enough to survive contemporary religious trends.

Shortly after the delegates to the federal convention signed the Constitution, a woman asked Benjamin Franklin if the new nation was to be a monarchy or a republic. Franklin famously replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” Like previous generations, we must work together to keep the republic. Doing so is in the interest of all citizens, regardless of their faith commitments, or lack thereof.

Mark David Hall is the Herbert Hoover Distinguished Professor of Politics and Faculty Fellow in the William Penn Honors Program at George Fox University and the author of many books, including Did America Have a Christian Founding? [R&L](#)

ESSAY

What is a Christian's duty as a U.S. citizen?

Hunter Baker



(Photo credit: AP Photo / Jeff Roberson.)

Saint Augustine famously wrote about the existence of two cities traveling together through time and space on earth. One is the city of man. The other is the city of God. The Christian must live in both and find a way to live faithfully amid the inevitable tension. Early Christians experienced this tension in dramatic fashion. We feel it today, too.

Part of the church's history has to do with periods of intense persecution and martyrdom. Steven D. Smith's recent book, *Pagans and Christians in the City*, relates the incredulity pagan Romans had when faced with the intransigence of Christians. The fundamental difficulty was that the pagans could not understand a conflict between the power of the state and the power of God. Pagan religion was not concerned with searching inquiries into the nature of truth. There are no doctrinal battles in paganism. Rather, pagan religion is simply performative in nature. It involves giving a sacred glow to both nature and institutions through public ritual. In this regard, the Romans considered themselves tolerant and enlightened. The Christians, like everyone else in the empire, could incorporate their Jesus into the broader pantheon of gods. And while they were at it, they could do what everyone else did, which was to render the necessary public performance. It did not matter if they believed it in their hearts; they simply had to say the words or perform the actions. However, they could not. They could only affirm that Jesus is Lord. With that statement came the spoken or unspoken corollary that Caesar is not.

This refusal of Christians to cede authority over essentially everything fit with the teaching of Jesus in Mark 12:13-17. In that passage, we see Jesus questioned about paying taxes to Caesar. He answered that one should render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's. There are at least a couple of important conclusions we can draw from this answer. First, Caesar (the secular government) has a legitimate

zone of authority. There is an important task to be done by the government in restraining sinful actions and punishing wrongdoing. But second, we must recognize that Caesar's reign is not coextensive with God's. He is not God, cannot be God, and must never demand from us what only God justly can, which is obedience and submission at the most fundamental and essential level. That simply does not belong to human government, which rightly wields a more modest authority.

Because of the Sermon on the Mount's emphasis on turning the other cheek and eschewing violence, many early Christians doubted that they could serve as soldiers or policemen. They were willing to pray for the city and to be exemplary citizens in most ways, but they believed the sword was forbidden to them. Martin Luther answered in a way that remains edifying. It is certainly true that we must not strike back when struck and that we should quickly forgive offenses, but there would be little love or virtue in taking such a pacifist approach when watching one's neighbor being killed or beaten. Luther noted that we feel obligated to love our neighbors by giving them food or water if they need it. We should also recognize that our neighbors need safety and order within which to try and live peaceful lives. It is for this reason that God gives us government and obliges us to respect and obey it. Its work is essential work. Per Luther, no Christian should refuse to participate in it, if there is need and he has the capacity to serve.

“As Christians in the United States, we have been given something extremely valuable: citizenship in a free country. With that right comes the corresponding responsibility of stewardship.”

Yet even now we struggle at times with questions such as these. The legendary American soldier-hero of World War I, Sergeant Alvin York, originally refused to serve, because his Christian scruples against killing were so great. It is good and right for us to regularly

evaluate the dictates of Christian conscience over against the requirements of the state. That tension returns regularly and should never be too easily resolved or ignored. We should be attentive to the question at all times.

To this point, we have mostly dealt with the matter of Christians living in tension with the power of government. But there is another angle to consider, which is Paul's strong statement in Romans 13 that everyone should be subject to the governing authorities and should not resist them lest they be found resisting God. Given that Paul himself died in prison, we should probably not find it hard to understand that his comments are not meant to be taken as an unlimited license for government authority. However, we still must deal with this very strong recommendation to “be subject.”

In the pre-democratic era, most human beings were indeed “subjects” rather than citizens as we recognize the term today. For the most part, they were acted upon rather than acting through the mechanisms of representative government. In other words, they typically did not have a choice about what the government did, unless they wanted to mount some kind of revolt. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that some Christians viewed government as simply something to be endured, like the weather. What they viewed as important was their spiritual lives in the church. It is interesting that the American Revolution against the British empire took place after the spiri-

tual revolution of the First Great Awakening, in which many began to see themselves in direct connection with God rather than meeting Him only through institutional hierarchies.

We could do another essay on how the Western world moved toward democracy and human rights, but for now it may

suffice simply to make the point that the broad scope of citizenship, with its various rights and duties, owes much to the influence of Christianity. It is not a giant leap to go from acknowledging that all human beings are made in the image of God to the realization that we



are common inheritors of the gift of reason who deserve to rule ourselves or be governed by our consent.

So, what is the duty of a Christian in a nation like the United States? We are clearly not merely subject to the government. Rather, we share in its sovereignty, the exercise of which depends on our consent. In the American context, we are indeed citizens. In fact, we are a nation that likes to think of itself in the way Aristotle recommended, which is as a middle-class oriented society, filled with people who have experience both in leading and following.

It is here that another passage from Scripture comes to mind, which is the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30. In that story, we learn of the three servants who are given varied resources to safeguard in their master's absence. Two of the servants take what they have been given and invest it, thus returning the principal and adding the increase. One fears his master and buries the talent, which he returns, unenhanced, to the master. The master praises the first two servants and invests them with further resources. But the third servant receives criticism and will not be trusted with more.

While the primary impact of the passage does not relate to citizenship, I think

the logic is easy to extend. As Christians in the United States, we have been given something extremely valuable: citizenship in a free country. With that right comes the corresponding responsibility of stewardship. What will we do with this great boon of self-government? It would be foolish, short-sighted, and ungrateful not to make the most of it by educating ourselves and then participating fully. We have been given various levels of talents and abilities to organize, debate, run for office, judge disputes, etc., but we have all been given something we can put to use in our capacity as citizens. Do not simply endure the government. Instead, approach it as an object of stewardship. We are responsible for using the rights we have.

I would conclude with one caveat: It is not enough merely to be active, but one must be active in ways that are both wise and faithful. Alexis de Tocqueville was impressed by the democratic way of life he observed in America when he visited. However, he also detected a significant problem. Heady with the spread of democracy and the empowerment that comes with it, Americans ran the great risk of confusing the wishes of the majority with righteousness. As we exercise the awesome stewardship of citizenship, we must be ever mindful that the zone once occupied by Caesar – and now occupied by us – is subordinate to God's greater reign. So, let us be sober, thoughtful, and mindful of our own fallen nature as we participate in the power of government. And most of all, let us remember that Christ is the King.

*Hunter Baker, J.D., Ph.D., is the dean of arts and sciences at Union University and an affiliate scholar of the Acton Institute. **R&L***



*Acton Line is the
official podcast of the
Acton Institute*

**LISTEN AND SUBSCRIBE AT
ACTON.ORG/LINE**



The Novak Award

Named after distinguished American theologian Michael Novak, this \$15,000 award rewards new outstanding scholarly research concerning the relationship between religion, economic freedom, and the free and virtuous society.

Applications are now being accepted

Learn more
acton.org/novak-award

ACTON INSTITUTE

HENRI LANDWIRTH

LAURIE P. MORROW, PH.D.

Henri Landwirth (1927–2018) overcame a traumatic childhood during the Holocaust to become a great businessman and philanthropist for terminally ill children. Landwirth and his twin sister, Margot, were born in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1927 to clothing salesman Max Landwirth and his wife, Fanny. When Henri was 13, the Nazis forced his family into the Krakow ghetto, shot Max, then dispersed his surviving family to concentration camps. He would see his mother only once more before she and a thousand other prisoners were loaded onto a ship, which the Nazis sank.

From age 13 to 18, Henri was starved and beaten severely. He finally escaped during the last weeks of the war through Czechoslovakia, eventually finding work as a diamond-cutter in his uncle's factory in Belgium.

In 1949, he arrived in New York City unable to speak English, with only a sixth-grade education, \$20, and a copy of the Torah. After serving stateside during the Korean War, Landwirth studied hotel management on the G.I. Bill. In 1954, he was hired to run the President Madison Hotel in Miami Beach, where he personally performed every job, learning how each one contributes to guest satisfaction.

As hotel manager, one small act of kindness changed his life forever. He loaned his tie to a man, who needed it to eat in the restaurant. That man turned out to be B.G. McNabb of General Dynamics, who was responsible for developing the new space program at Cape Canaveral. With no appropriate



lodging in the area for personnel, McNabb built a 100-room motel and hired Henri Landwirth to run it. Henri met the people who worked on Project Mercury, America's first manned spaceflight program. One of them, John Glenn, became his partner in a new Holiday Inn three miles from Walt Disney World. With success upon success, Henri became one of Florida's most successful hoteliers.

As Landwirth prospered, he offered free hotel rooms to the Make-A-Wish Foundation for seriously ill children. In 1986, a six-year-old named Amy died before her family could finalize the complex travel arrangements. Determined to make these trips stress-free, Landwirth partnered with Disney and others to create the Give Kids the World Village. Rather than perpetually seek hotel rooms for these families, Henri built them an entire village. He opened the 35-acre resort in 1989, in

Kissimmee, Florida. It now covers 89 acres and has 166 villas, each of which provides luxury accommodations for up to six people. Thousands of volunteers ensure that the child's every need or desire is met. As of this writing, Give Kids the World has served 160,000 children from more than 75 countries.

Henri spent virtually every day for 15 years at the village, fine-tuning its operations and joyfully engaging with the children and their families. He explained the reason that he felt drawn to these children was that they were spending their childhood in pain and uncertainty – just as he had – never knowing if each day might be their last.

Henri Landwirth's experience serving customers in business taught him how he could best serve the vulnerable. His intelligence and charisma made the village successful. But Henri believed that something greater was at play: "It must be God – God is right here in this village," he said.

Henri Landwirth cut and faceted his gem of a life into a sparkle that rivaled the stars.

Laurie P. Morrow, Ph.D., holds the designation of Chartered Advisor in Philanthropy® from the American College of Financial Services. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, from the University of Vermont, and her M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Kansas.



ESSAY

Repairing the breach: bringing peace to politically fractured families and communities

Rev. Ben Johnson

The 2020 presidential election will be over shortly after this is written. Unfortunately, it will not end the political fevers that boiled over into violence this summer. On a smaller scale, friends and relatives have become estranged over politics. Bitterness has become ingrained in families as America has become more politicized, more secular, and less tolerant of philosophical diversity.

People of all backgrounds could see themselves in the family conflict of Kellyanne Conway, who left her position as a White House adviser after her husband,

George, publicly attacked her on social media, and their self-described “radical agnostic liberal/leftist” daughter, Claudia, savaged them both on TikTok. At one point, the 15 year old asked her political hero, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to “adopt me.”

In effect, the teenager substituted her politics for her family. Alas, she is not alone. Nearly one-quarter of people who voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 said they stopped talking to a friend or relative over politics. Others admit they cut family gatherings short or skipped them altogether to avoid political clashes with their flesh-and-blood. And 52% of people unfriended real-life friends on social media over politics. Rest assured, this post-election holiday season will offer more of the same.

As everyday life has become politicized, and virtual “communities” replace reality, political differences take on perilous undertones. Fully 62% of Americans say they hold opinions they are afraid to express publicly, according to a Cato Institute survey. Their fear is not misguided.

Antipathy toward people of opposing political views is literally the most explosive force in American civic life. Americans now discriminate against those who hold opposing political views “to a degree that exceeds discrimination based on race,” researchers Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood found. Their survey revealed that 80% of partisans would award a scholarship to a less qualified member of their own party over a more qualified member of the opposing party. Should someone sneak through the academic vetting

process, he’s still not safe. Cato found that 50% of “strong liberals” and a third of “strong conservatives” support firing someone who donated to the opposite party’s presidential campaign.

More alarmingly, viewpoint discrimination increasingly fans the flames of political violence. The Democracy Fund’s Voter Study Group found that 21% of Americans say that physical violence would be justified if the other party wins the 2020 presidential election. In 2018, one-third of college students agreed that “physical violence can be justified to prevent a person from using hate speech or making racially charged comments.” The riots that roiled America’s cities only activated the latent pool of political hatred engulfing society.

The deepening enmity between family members has at least three causes.

First, secularization has deprived us of our identity and our neighbors of their human dignity. Without an identity as a child of God, people seek meaning in something larger than themselves – often in politics – and forge their identities around those views. Without a belief that all people are created in the image of God, those trying to thwart their political project become part of their secular demonology. And, contrary to Mick Jagger, nobody has sympathy for the devil.

Second, the politicization of all aspects of society inevitably breeds animosity. As Friedrich von Hayek wrote in *The Road to Serfdom*, when the government tries to direct the economic decisions of a diverse nation “with widely divergent ideals and

(Photo credit: Anthony Quintano, CC BY 2.0.)

values,” even “the best intentions cannot prevent one from being forced to act in a way” he regards as “highly immoral.” Since each side would instrumentalize the government to compel us to violate our moral values, we view everyone on the other side with hostility. The existence of big government is itself a near occasion of sin.

Third, the resurgence of socialism amplifies these trends. It extends the tentacles of government into every area of life and multiplies the potential for strife. At the same time, socialism substitutes a temporal paradise and situational ethics for the kingdom of Heaven. As its counterfeit values displace authentic religious faith, socialism creates atheists. Impossible utopian egalitarianism rushes to fill the void in a generation of hearts.

Love, however, has not filled that emptiness. The decision to cling bitterly to high-status opinions and social media affirmation encroaches on life’s most sacred vows. *Harper’s Bazaar* advised readers in 2017, “If your partner is a Trump supporter and you are not, just divorce them.” Even ties of blood and birth are not exempt.

All of this is redolent of one of the most chilling analyses in the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul wrote that “perilous times” will come “in the last days,” producing a generation that is “without natural affection” (II Timothy 3:3, see vs. 1–5). Bible commentator Matthew Henry explained:

Wherever there is the human nature, there should be humanity towards those of the same nature, but especially between relations. Times are perilous when children are disobedient to their parents (2 Tim. 3:2) and when parents are without natural affection to their children, 2 Tim. 3:3. See what a corruption of nature sin is, how it deprives men even of that which nature has implanted in them for the support of their own kind; for the natural affection of parents to their children is that which contributes very much to the keeping up of mankind upon the earth. And those who will not be bound by natural affection, no marvel that they will not be bound by the most solemn leagues and covenants.

Dissolving the most intimate connections of family renders society inoperable. The family is the first and most foundational building block of civilization. St.

Philaret of Moscow wrote that it is the Fifth Commandment to honor one’s parents “on which the good order, first of families and afterwards of all social life, depends.” The words of holy people of the past, and our own aching relationships, tell us that politicizing every aspect of life holds corrosive – even potentially apocalyptic – consequences.

But to paraphrase a counterculture phrase, what if they threw a political war and no one came? What if instead people of faith chose to model Christian and classical dialogue with people who disagree, especially family and friends? These five steps may bring peace to our discussions through the holidays and well beyond:

1. **Before you speak, listen.** The great philosopher Mortimer J. Adler of the University of Chicago told William F. Buckley Jr. on *Firing Line* that listening to the other side is the necessary foundation of any discussion. That towering intellect undoubtedly knew that he echoed the Apostle James, who said, “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:19–20). After listening, Adler suggested repeating an accurate summary – and not a caricature – of the other person’s argument back to him with the phrase, “Do I understand you to say...?” Ask if you got his position right and invite clarification. Any argument deserves to be analyzed in its strongest form, which is the method Thomas Aquinas employed in his *Summa Theologiae*.
2. **When you finally speak, proceed with humility.** Friends on the other side are merely drawing the best conclusion they can from the facts that they have. We are all made of the same clay, and we could be wrong. Therefore, we should remember that the Apostle Paul wrote, “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man” (Colossians 4:6).
3. **Don’t view the other person as an adversary.** Unless you are on a debate stage or amid impressionable company, your relationship with the other person is more valuable than winning an argument. This is especially true of family or old friends.

Begin by affirming your respect, shared goals, and any other common ground. Instead of an adversarial posture, invite them to see your discussion as two people on a mutual pursuit of the truth. As the Bible says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17).

4. **Frame your conversation around their values.** Venting our opinions makes us feel good, but it does nothing to convince others. As you speak, try to consider how the other person is processing the discussion and address his or her values. For instance, if he says people only support free enterprise out of “greed,” you could respond that you support free economies because they produce the greatest amount of wealth and the highest living standards for the poor.
5. **Don’t expect an instant conversion.** Our society makes it easy to hermetically seal ourselves off from opposing views (e.g., Pew found that four out of 10 Americans in both political parties say they do not have a single friend who supports the opposing presidential candidate). This may well be the first time the other person has ever encountered your worldview, especially if it is rooted in Christianity. The conversation may only be intended to plant a seed. At the end, reaffirm your common ground, thank the person for agreeing to explore these issues together, and express hope that the conversation continues. As St. Paul wrote, “If it be possible, as much as it lies within you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:19).

Following these steps does not guarantee that your friends or family will reciprocate. But they may and, in time, they may share your goodwill and respect with others. One day, you may be remembered as someone who helped “raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach” (Isaiah 58:12).

Rev. Benjamin Johnson (@therightswriter) is an Eastern Orthodox priest and Executive Editor of Religion & Liberty. [R&L](#)



ESSAY

Be civilization! Citizenship is more than voting

David P. Deavel

Do you want to be a good citizen? You really ought to vote.

Of course, you don't need to read this article to know that. Everybody is saying this in a major election year for the United States. Organizations dedicated to getting people registered and voting are ubiquitous, the most famous of which is perhaps the MTV-affiliated nonprofit, Rock the Vote. Since its beginnings in 1990, it has been joined by a great many other groups, several of which are affiliated with social media companies. Facebook has been advertising that it has helped 2.5 million people register to vote in this election cycle.

Voting is an important act in any democratic republic, and the current elections are extraordinarily important. But is simply rocking the vote enough to qualify as

good citizenship? For many people, the right and duty to vote is a kind of end-all and be-all of citizenship, but even that point of view ought to have some qualifications. More important than voting is voting *intelligently*. Good citizens do the research to find out which parties and candidates will do the most good – or the least harm – in any given race. Good citizens determine the answers to questions on any referendum issues before stepping into the voting booth. Further, they do their best to communicate their views to others about how they will vote and why.

Good citizens will indeed “rock the vote” intelligently, and help educate and inform others about the issues of the day. But voting and the acts around it cannot be the end of the matter: Citizenship goes on after the election cycle and extends throughout the year, because the elections are themselves about representatives who will legislate, judges who will judge, and administrators who will administer the law throughout the year. The Roman Catholic Church's *Compendium of Social Doctrine* observes that participation in the life of a community, especially in a democratic community, should be about much more than simply the every-few-years electoral process. Instead, participation means that the citizens should be involved in decision-making and also the execution of the acts of government and society: “The different subjects of civil community at every level must be informed, listened to and involved in the exercise of the carried-out

functions” (paragraph 190). For good citizens, this involves staying informed about civic life year-round, making sure that they make their views known to their representatives, comment on administrative procedures when there is the opportunity to do so, and do their best to shape public opinion on important issues.

Lest it sound as if good citizenship is really about making politics and administration a full-time job, it is important to observe that while citizenship involves our interactions with government, it is really about much more than that.

Citizenship is perhaps best captured in a story about the great English writer G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) during World War I. Chesterton was accosted on the street by a woman who asked him why he was not “out at the front defending civilization.” On other occasions when he was asked why he was not “out at the front,” the 300-pound journalist turned sideways and said it would become obvious that he really was out at the front. On this occasion, however, he gave a deeper answer. He responded simply, “Madam, I *am* civilization.”

The good citizen's task is to “be civilization,” to foster the good of our earthly city in every way. Good citizenship involves our actions in and toward the entire society in which we live. Clearly, that will involve voting, and it might involve taking up arms to defend one's country, as Chesterton's accuser implied. But it is about much more. It is about using one's authority in every sphere of life to help build up each facet of society, so that justice and human flourishing can occur.

Good citizens cultivate family life. They raise and educate their children, and they care for the elderly. Good citizens establish various kinds of associations to do charitable, social, and cultural work in a community. First and foremost among these associations are the religious groups that bring not just culture and service, but the essential work of worship and meaning to a society. Finally, good citizens encourage and participate in economic initiative, which provides jobs, products, and services for our neighbors.

We might say this broader understanding was first taught in the sixth century B.C., when residents of the old Jerusalem were captive in Babylon. They were no longer in their own country; they could not vote at all, much less rock the vote.


(Photo credit: DVIDSHUB, CC BY 2.0.)

Jeremiah's prophetic words to the people of Judah in exile encouraged them not to give up simply because they lacked their own country and autonomy. Instead, he told them the Lord's message was this: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7). What he meant by seeking the welfare of the city clearly involves the first step of praying for it. The two verses preceding this one fill out the idea even more and match up with this broader understanding of citizenship. "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease" (vv. 5-6).

Be civilization!

This broader understanding of good citizenship is not only true, but it is especially helpful for those who do not get the impression that they are rocking the vote, that their political influence is not making much of a difference in our governmental and public life. It is tempting to despair and give up when one thinks one's vote does not count for much and the whole world's going to Hell. There were no doubt some Judeans in Babylon who were tempted to think this way. Indeed, all Christians and Jews will ultimately feel both a sense of alienation and a temptation to despair because of our knowledge that our final destiny and the final healing of the world is beyond history in a new city, a new civilization, a New Jerusalem that only God can finally bring about.

The word of the Lord is clear, however: We are to seek the welfare of the earthly city, whether we have any control over the levers of power or not. We are to pray, to be fruitful, and multiply. We are to worship, work, and create culture. How successful our earthly city will be is ultimately out of our control. But how faithful we are as citizens, in this full sense of the word, is not.

David P. Deavel is editor of Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture, co-director of the Terrence J. Murphy Institute for Catholic Thought, Law, and Public Policy, and visiting assistant professor of Catholic studies at the University of St. Thomas. He is the 2013 winner of the Novak Award. 

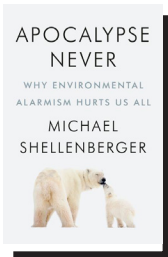
BOOK

Time to chill about the fiery climate apocalypse

Apocalypse Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All

Michael Shellenberger | Harper | 2020 | 432 pages

Reviewed by John Couretas



Standing in a smoke-filled, charred stand of trees in northern California late this summer, Gov. Gavin Newsom delivered an impassioned, blame-shifting analysis of the causes of wildfires that raged through his state. "This is a climate damn emergency," he said. Hyperbolic one-liners crafted for the evening news are the stock in trade for politicians, especially those with presidential ambitions. But you get the distinct impression that he tossed his glancing acknowledgement that fire suppression, or fire management policies, "going back a hundred years" may have contributed to the wildfires out there to dispense with it and move on to the real problem of climate change.

Poor Mother Nature. She's been dragged into these climate debates by politicians, climate "experts," and journalists for so long that she must be at her wit's end. Either she groans in agony as the climate crimes of a stupid and heedless humanity pile up (according to the Left) or Mother is just fine, thank you, and all of this global warming stuff is a Marxist plot (on the Right).

Someone needs to send Gov. Newsom a copy of Michael Shellenberger's new book, *Apocalypse Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All*. Shellenberger, a science writer and researcher, began as a 15-year-old activist for Amnesty International and worked for various green campaigns. Over time, his field work in the Amazon and elsewhere led him to a deeper understanding of the problem. His work is refreshingly free of ideological presets that leave no room for uncomfortable facts.

California wildfires, he points out in the book, are of two types. There are wind-driven fires on coastal shrublands fueled by chaparral. This is also where most residential housing is located. In mountain ecosystems like the Sierras, "there are too few prescribed burns." During the last century, the U.S. Forest Service and other forestry agencies extinguished most fires, which are a natural occurrence. This led to an unnatural accumulation of wood fuel.

Isn't Gov. Newsom correct, then, that the governors who preceded him are the real culprits? And isn't climate change a bigger factor, as we have been told nonstop by news reports? Like a lot of complex questions – and climate conditions must be toward the top of the list – it's not that simple. There are combining factors. Still, Shellenberger puts more weight on disastrously bad fire suppression policies, and not just in the United States. "The bottom line is that other human activities have a greater impact on the frequency and severity of forest fires than the emission of greenhouse gases," he asserts.

And, no, Leonardo DiCaprio and other celebrities weren't correct last year when they mobbed social media to tell the world that fires in the Amazon were "destroying the earth's lungs." That's a fetching image to describe what a forest does for our atmosphere. And it's just wrong.

First of all, the Amazon, according to one ecologist, contributes a net zero amount of oxygen to the world's supply. It stores carbon, but only about 5% of the global supply. This is not to dismiss deforestation as a problem, especially in the Amazon and other old-growth forests around the world. But activists have grossly overstated the problem. "In 2019, the area of the Amazon land deforested was just one-quarter of the amount

of land that was deforested in 2004,” Shellenberger points out.

What’s more, as has been widely observed, the planet is actually greening. Again, a number of factors come into play, including greater carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, greater agricultural productivity, and conservation efforts. “There is little evidence that forests around the world are already at their optimum temperature and carbon levels,” he writes. “Scientists find that higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere available for photosynthesis will likely offset declines in the productivity of photosynthesis from higher temperatures.”

Shellenberger’s telling of the long history of anti-nuclear campaigning by the environmental Left – including Jane Fonda, Bill McKibben, and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – should be required reading for anyone who is serious about reducing carbon emissions. The anti-nuclear crowd’s rank dishonesty and manipulation of public opinion with fearmongering emotional appeals has taken nuclear power off the table for most Americans. Shellenberger writes:

Today, antinuclear groups continue to deceive and frighten the public about nuclear energy in their efforts to shut down nuclear plants in the United States, Europe, and around the world. They do so with an eye to triggering fears of nuclear apocalypse. They claim nuclear is not necessary because of renewables. In reality, whenever nuclear plants aren’t in use, fossil fuels must be used and emissions rise. They claim that used nuclear fuel rods and the plants themselves attract terrorists, when in reality the only ones who have attacked nuclear plants have been antinuclear activists. And they claim that radiation is cartoonishly potent.

Shellenberger also excels in his analysis of twenty-first-century environmentalism as a secular religion, complete with unshakable dogmatic givens and its view of “nature” as a vast, deeply interconnected system.

“[A]pocalyptic environmentalism is a kind of new Judeo-Christian religion, one that has replaced God with nature,” Shellenberger writes. “In the Judeo-Christian tradition, human problems stem from our failure to address ourselves to God. In the apocalyptic environmental tradition, human problems stem from our failure to adjust ourselves to nature.” Here, he adds, scientists replace priests at the altar of this new religion. “I want you to listen to the scientists,” Greta Thunberg, the child activist, chirps.

Apocalypse Never is an honest, balanced book on environmental issues from a writer who cares deeply about real problems. Shellenberger’s work is refreshingly free of ideological givens, and he is confident enough to follow the facts where they lead him. The result is a book that offers hope without sugarcoating the real problems of pollution, a warming climate, and how best to conserve wildlife and wild lands.

If only Gov. Newsom would read it.

John Couretas is editor-at-large for the Acton Institute. **R&L**



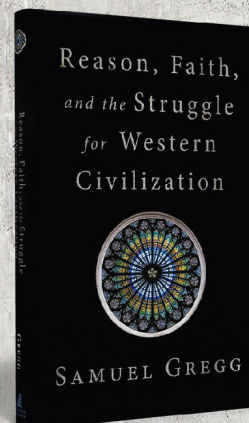
**HELP US PROMOTE A FREE
AND VIRTUOUS SOCIETY**



Support Acton with a gift today

acton.org/donate

**ACTON
INSTITUTE**



Western
Civilization is
under attack...
can it survive?

**AVAILABLE
NOW!**



amazon BARNES & NOBLE BAM!
BOOKS-A-MILLION

Get your copy today!

SHOP.ACTON.ORG



BOOK

Critical theory, critiqued

Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody.

Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay | Pitchstone Publishing | 2020 | 352 pages

Reviewed by Noah Kelly

C*ynical Theories* critiques the modern social justice movement from a politically liberal viewpoint and argues that liberalism can exist without critical theory or identity politics. As the authors state, the book is written “for the liberal to whom a just society is very important, but who can’t help noticing that the Social Justice movement does not seem to facilitate this and wants to be able make a liberal response to it with consistency and integrity.” The authors, who are academics, joined Peter Boghossian in the “Grievance Studies Hoax,” in which they fabricated absurd or unethical academic papers and had them published in peer-reviewed journals to show the corrupting influence these fields have had on scholarship.

The authors present their book as a case against critical theory (or “Theory”) from a traditional Western, liberal perspective. The authors describe Western liberalism as follows:

The main tenets of liberalism are political democracy, limitations on the powers of government, the development of universal human rights, legal equality for all adult citizens, freedom of expression, respect for the value of viewpoint diversity and honest debate, respect for evidence and reason, the separation of church and state, and freedom of religion. ... Liberalism is thus best thought of as a shared common ground, providing a framework for conflict resolution and one within which people with a variety of views on political, economic, and social questions can rationally debate the options for public policy.

This tradition of liberalism, according to the authors, is compatible with both American social/political liberalism and moderate conservatism.

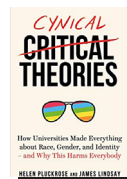
The bulk of the book is organized chronologically around the three stages of the development of critical theory. The first was its origin in postmodernism in the 1960s–1980s. The authors describe the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard and the resulting skepticism toward “a belief in objective knowledge, universal truth, science (or evidence more broadly) as a method for obtaining objective knowledge,

the power of reason, the ability to communicate straightforwardly via language, a universal human nature, and individualism.” They call this phase the “high deconstructive phase,” which was characterized by nihilism and playful cynicism. It bequeathed to critical theory two principles and four major themes.

The first principle is “the postmodern knowledge principle,” which consists of a “radical skepticism as to whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism.” According to this principle, what we call “truth” is just a social construct, and we should not assume that it corresponds to anything “out there” in reality. The second principle is “the postmodern political principle,” which is the “belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how.” This is the belief that society is based, not on truth, but on power, and that even our appeals to truth and reason are only veiled attempts to exercise power over others.

These two principles are fleshed out in the following major themes:

1. The blurring of boundaries. Boundaries and categories of thought previously accepted as true (e.g., gender) are viewed as oppressive attempts to exercise power over others.
2. The power of language. Words do not refer to anything “out there” in objective reality, but rather consist of an endless, self-referential system with no anchor in the external world. Since they are not “true” in any meaningful sense, they are viewed as the means by which dominant groups oppress the powerless.
3. Cultural relativism. Since language does not deal in truth but in power, attempts to evaluate one culture from the standpoint of another are simply an attempt by one group to exercise power over another (colonialism). Furthermore, one’s own culture can only be critiqued using the value system (based in the biases) of that culture. Critiques by those in places of privilege are only attempts to maintain one’s own privileged position, while critiques by the oppressed are to be validated as a means of empowerment.
4. The loss of the individual and the universal. The individual and the



universal are simply cultural constructions. Critical theorists focus instead on identity groups and their positions in the hierarchy of society *vis-à-vis* one another.

The second stage in the development of critical theory took place in the 1980s through the early 2000s, when postmodernism mutated from its high deconstructive phase into what the authors call “applied postmodernism.” In this stage, the concepts of postmodernism were put to use in various academic disciplines as tools for social activism. This mutation was characterized by a shift from simply theorizing about the problems of knowledge to a highly moralistic program for social change. It also limited its skepticism in one important area: “under applied postmodern thought, identity and oppression based on identity are treated as known features of objective reality.”

The authors spend a large portion of the book detailing the individual academic subdisciplines that arose during this time: postcolonialism (chapter 3), queer theory (chapter 4), critical race theory and intersectionality (chapter 5), feminism(s) and gender studies (chapter 6), and disability and fat studies (chapter 7). They survey the development of each field and its major authors and works, showing how the two postmodern principles and four major themes play out in that discipline.

The third stage in the development of critical theory, which the authors call “reified postmodernism” or “Social Justice scholarship,” took place in the 2010s. In this phase, the presuppositions of applied postmodernism have become accepted as self-evident “truths” that are beyond discussion. This has resulted in a focus on identity-related epistemology. The authors give examples of several works that show how this school of thought “refuses to submit its ideas to rigorous scrutiny, rejects that kind of examination on principle, and asserts that any attempts to subject it to thoughtful criticism are immoral, insincere, and proof of its thesis.”

Chapter 10 is the authors’ proposed solution to the trends they discuss throughout the rest of the book. The core of their response is a contrast between Theory and traditional Western liberalism. They describe liberalism as “a system of conflict resolution, not a solution to human conflicts.” Whereas reified postmodernism is functionally a

self-confirming system of faith (as John McWhorter has argued), liberalism is a self-correcting system for distinguishing truth from falsehood through freedom of debate and the scientific method.

The authors provide two prescriptions for dealing with reified postmodernism. The first is to avoid institutionalizing it. They argue that, just as with any other religious belief system, one should be free to believe it or not without being penalized for dissent. The second, in keeping with the principle of free debate, is to challenge critical theory on its merits: “We do not believe that bad ideas can be defeated by being repressed ... Instead, they need to be engaged and defeated within the marketplace of ideas, so that they may die a natural death and be rightly recognized as defunct.” They conclude with some examples of how to articulate opposition to social injustice while rejecting the ideology of social justice.

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in having a clearer understanding of our current cultural situation. The authors have succeeded in painting a compelling picture of both the dangers of critical theory and the merits of traditional Western liberalism. The single most important contribution of this book is the clarity with which it explains the philosophical principles behind critical theory. The authors draw out Theory’s central principles and themes in an accurate and lucid manner and show how its roots connect beneath the surface of our culture.

The book’s only mild weakness came in its explanation of the relationship between critical theory and other ideas and movements, apart from postmodernism. For example, the authors leave mostly untouched the connection between critical theory and Marxism. I also wondered at times where political and social conservatives such as myself exist in the landscape of traditional liberalism as they envision it. The “moderate conservative”

is invoked but never appears in their account. One suspects that the authors consign religious conservatives to the domain of the “far-Right.” Finally, the authors seem to underestimate the philosophical assumptions behind modernity and modern science. While postmodernism is presented as a belief system, modern science is viewed as nothing more than an objective practice. At the risk of diminishing their argument (which I generally agree with), this oversimplification conceals important questions about the philosophy of science.

Despite these critiques, this book largely accomplishes its goal of providing



an important critique of critical theory and its academic and activist offshoots. The Christian reader will not agree with all of the points made by the authors. (See the work of Neil Shenvi for an excellent supplement that brings a Christian worldview to bear.) But for sheer comprehensiveness, this book should be the go-to primer for anyone who wants clarity on the issues related to critical theory and modern social justice.

Noah Warren Kelley will graduate with a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies (New Testament) from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in December 2020. His area of interest is in Greek grammar and linguistics. He blogs at Earthen Vessel. [R&L](#)

Editorial Board

Publisher: Rev. Robert A. Sirico

Executive Editor: Rev. Ben Johnson

Graphics Editor: Iron Light

The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty promotes a free society characterized by individual liberty and sustained by religious principles. Letters and requests should be directed to:

Religion & Liberty, Acton Institute.
98 E. Fulton Street, Grand Rapids,
MI 49503.

The Acton Institute was founded on the basis of ten core principles, integrating Judeo-Christian truths with free market principles.

- Dignity of the Person
- Social Nature of the Person
- Importance of Social Institutions
- Human Action
- Sin
- Rule of Law and the Subsidiary Role of Government
- Creation of Wealth
- Economic Liberty
- Economic Value
- Priority of Culture

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.

For archived issues or to subscribe, please visit www.acton.org. The views of the authors expressed in *Religion & Liberty* are not necessarily those of the Acton Institute.

© 2020 Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty.

COLUMN

EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP

Rev. Robert A. Sirico



Every election year, it seems our world becomes ever more dominated by politics. Without fail, each election is trumpeted as the most important of our lifetime. Alarms are sounded by politicians and the mass media, and the public is often consumed by polarized rhetoric, heated arguments, and far too often hatred of strangers, neighbors, or even family and friends. While the issues facing our nation are serious – from the COVID-19 pandemic to widespread racial and civic unrest – our response in the form of partisan politics too often is not. How do we take our rights and duties as citizens seriously?

Citizens are, according to the oldest etymological roots of the word, city dwellers. As such they are members of a *polis*, the ancient Greek word from which we derive politics. According to Aristotle, the city itself is composed of its citizens, who share a common way of life under laws directed towards justice, to realize the good of its individual members. How strange and wonderful this conception sounds in the face of what passes for political discussion in our current time!

Moving away from our present climate of political polarization requires us to step outside of the welter and waste of our fevered partisan battles and take our rights and duties as citizens to heart. It requires us to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).

This is what people of faith are called to do always. Unlike the noble, albeit idealized, conceptions of politics in the classical age, Christians know that their identity is not grounded in mere earthly citizenship. We are not, at bottom, part of the state. As believers, we are first and foremost members of quite another body, the body of Christ. We are called to participate in, not be consumed by, politics.

Jesus Christ has commanded us to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's” (St. Mark 12:17). The Apostle Mark then tells us that those who heard this were “amazed at Him.” Lord Acton, at the conclusion of his lecture titled “The History of Freedom in Antiquity,” describes this as a repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom: “To maintain the necessary immunity in one supreme sphere, to reduce all political authority within defined limits, ceased to be an aspiration of patient reasoners, and was made the perpetual charge and care of the most energetic institution and the most universal association in the world.”

The body of Christ, that most energetic and universal of associations, is uniquely positioned by its calling to be a light in times of political darkness. It is free to take its citizenship seriously precisely because it belongs to a kingdom that is not of this world. This election season, and every season, exercise your rights and duties as citizens according to your conscience, directed toward justice and for the good of your fellow citizens. Pray for the welfare of this nation and for the whole world, but do not confuse the politics of this world with your eternal destiny in the next. This is the sort of faithful citizenship which is most needed both to realize the common good of all and our flourishing together.

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is co-founder of the Acton Institute. 



POVERTY CURE SUMMIT

AN ACTON INSTITUTE EVENT



ENHANCE
OPPORTUNITY.



REMOVE
BARRIERS.

PROMOTE HUMAN
FLOURISHING.

NOVEMBER 18-19, 2020

For event details and registration, visit povertycuresummit.org

ACTON
INSTITUTE