

Religion & Liberty

FALL 2023

**The Legacy of
Compassionate
Conservatism**

MARVIN OLASKY

Saving St. Louis

RACHEL FERGUSON

**The Prosperity
Pyramid Scheme**

MICHAEL MATHESON
MILLER

**Mistaken
About Poverty**

SAMUEL GREGG

**Spurgeon &
the Poverty-
Fighting Church**

CHRISTOPHER PARR

**Creating an
Economy of
Inclusion**

PHILIP BOOTH

**THE
ISSUE IS
POVERTY**

**THERE IS
NO ONE
SOLUTION.
THERE
ARE MANY
SOLUTIONS.**

Special Feature in Honor of
C.S. Lewis' 125th Birthday

**C.S. Lewis and
the Apocalypse
of Gender**

J.C. SCHARL

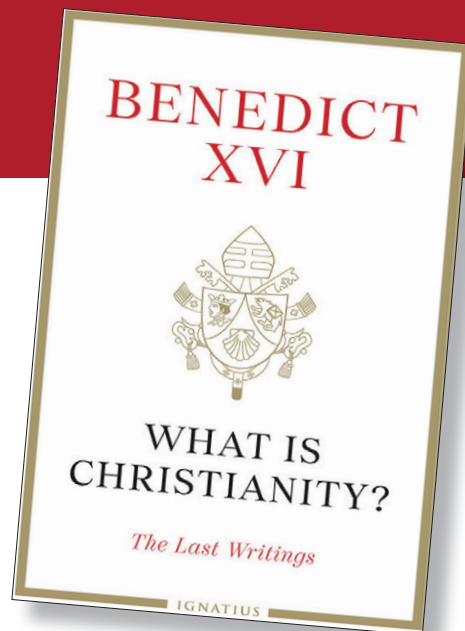
ALSO INSIDE: WILFRED M. McCLAY, MICHAEL F. BIRD, DANIEL B. KLEIN,
JAMES PATTERSON, DANIEL N. GULLOTTA, AND MICHAEL J. LYNCH

AND: JONATHAN SILVER ON LORD JONATHAN SACKS
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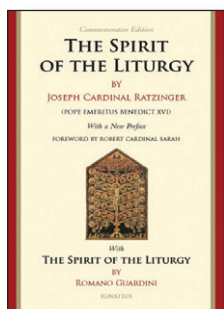
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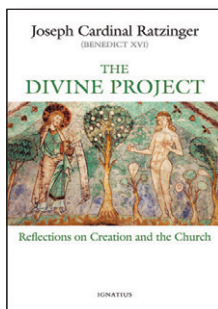
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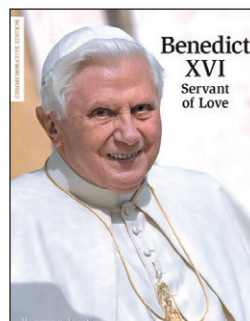
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THE ISSUE THIS TIME

BY ANTHONY SACRAMONE

On the subject of poverty you will discover a stream of demoralizing commentary reaching back to the ancients. “Poverty has this defect,” wrote Euripides, “it prompts a man to evil deeds.” Thanks. “The worst unhappiness of poverty is that it makes men ridiculous,” which is pretty much what you’d expect from Juvenal. “Poverty is the open-mouthed, relentless hell which yawns beneath civilized society,” said Henry George, a political economist and journalist whose funeral was attended by thousands, whether in mourning or to make sure he was really dead is unclear.

And yet there has been many an attempt to rescue the poor from the odium of the well-off. “It is life near the bone, where it is sweetest,” Thoreau opined. George Herbert cut to the chase: “Poverty is no sin.” But perhaps the most memorable is simply, “The poor you will always have with you.” Remember: context is everything. I mean, with a piece of work like Judas Iscariot in charge of the poor box—sure, the poor you will always have with you.

Speaking of which, google “Did we win the war on poverty?” You remember that war, the one Lyndon Johnson actually got around to declaring. The answer to the question will depend on the politics of the respondent, of course. Many on the left will say yes, that the rate of poverty has fallen dramatically since 1964, adjusting for all the factors you have to adjust for to have the rate fall dramatically. Those on the right will probably argue that the cost, in the tens of trillions, has certainly succeeded in creating a massive welfare state that may have prevented absolute destitution (no small thing) but that failed spectacularly in offering the poor and their children (and grandchildren) anything resembling hope and prosperity.

There is a cheery Italian proverb that translates roughly to “Poverty has no relatives.” Yet it *is* a relative thing. The poor in New York City and the poor in Burundi lead very different lives with very different prospects for becoming less poor. Nevertheless, complacency is the enemy of action, and the Acton Institute, publisher of this magazine, has been taking action—from its award-winning documentary *Poverty Inc.* to its new poverty center to the PovertyCure Summits, where scholars, clergy, and community leaders from around the world come together to confront critical issues faced in alleviating poverty and to brainstorm solutions beyond the bureaucratic tried-and-failed.

This special issue of *Religion & Liberty* is dedicated to thinking through the issue of poverty, too—all the ways we define and approach it, starting with foundational principles of what it means to be human and to pursue human flourishing, to the role of the state, to the role of the church, to street-level person-to-person activism.

All three Abrahamic religions place a high premium on helping our less-well-off neighbors. There are many ways to do this, as we will see. May this issue of *R&L* offer a little added motivation.

Religion & Liberty

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OUR MISSION

Religion & Liberty celebrates human flourishing in all its spiritual, economic, cultural, and familial dimensions. It decries the merely mechanistic, the nihilistic and hopeless, while highlighting all of God's good gifts and humankind's ingenuity and creativity.

We seek liberty to pursue our vocations in the highest interest of our families, communities, and nation, as well as freedom from state coercion and centralization.

Our goal is nothing less than the promotion of a free and virtuous society.

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CONTENTS

Features

- 6** The Legacy of Compassionate Conservatism MARVIN OLASKY
- 18** Saving St. Louis One Block at a Time RACHEL FERGUSON
- 28** The Prosperity Pyramid Scheme MICHAEL MATHESON MILLER
- 40** Creating an Economy of Inclusion PHILIP BOOTH
- 50** Adam Smith and the Poor DANIEL B. KLEIN
- 58** C. S. Lewis and the Apocalypse of Gender J. C. SCHARL

In the Liberal Tradition

- 70** Lord Jonathan Sacks: The West's Rabbi JONATHAN SILVER

Reviews

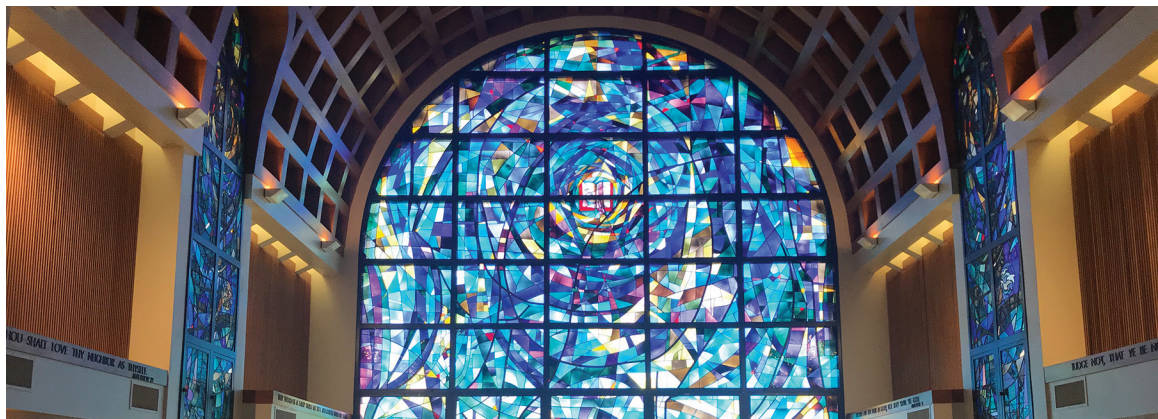
- 73** **Mistaken About Poverty** SAMUEL GREGG
Poverty, by America
By Matthew Desmond
- 77** **Spurgeon and the Poverty-Fighting Church** CHRISTOPHER PARR
Spurgeon and the Poor: How the Gospel Compels Christian Social Concern
By Alex DiPrima

Reviews

- 81** **Jesus and Class Warfare**..... DANIEL N. GULLOTTA
Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict
By James Crossley and Robert J. Myles
- 84** **To Be Deep in History Is to Be Protestant**..... WILFRED M. McCLAY
The Old Faith in a New Nation: American Protestants and the Christian Past
By Paul J. Gutacker
- 88** **Reawakening the Evangelical Imagination** MICHAEL F. BIRD
The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images & Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis
By Karen Swallow Prior
- 92** **Up from the Liberal Founding** JAMES PATTERSON
The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding
By Kody W. Cooper and Justin Buckley Dyer
- 97** **How Dispensationalism Got Left Behind** MICHAEL J. LYNCH
The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation
By Daniel G. Hummel

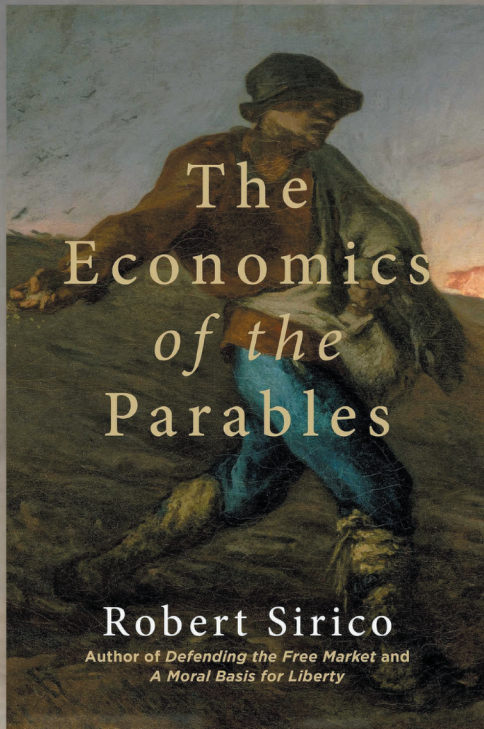
Conversation Starters With...

- 102** Anne Bradley



NEW FROM REV. ROBERT A. SIRICO

"The wisdom evident in this book will reward every reader, as it has rewarded me." - Robert G. Kennedy



Libraries are filled with books on the parables of Christ, and rightly so. Two millennia later, the New Testament parables remain ubiquitous, and yet few have stopped to glean wisdom from one of Christ's most frequently addressed subjects: money.

In "The Economics of the Parables," Rev. Robert Sirico reveals the modern preconceptions that obscure the timeless economic insights. Thirteen central stories—including "The Laborers in the Vineyard," "The Rich Fool," "The Five Talents," and "The Faithful Steward"—serve as his guide.

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"The Economics of the Parables" is an excellent contribution to a burgeoning literature in which scholars take both their faith and economics seriously.

Clara Piano, Law & Liberty

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REGNERY GATEWAY



THE LEGACY OF COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM

by MARVIN OLASKY

Thirty-plus years ago a book landed like a bombshell in the nation's capital: *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. It ignited a movement that put helping the poor front and center of all citizens' lives. How compassionate was it? How conservative was it? What happened to it?

Composite image with photos by Oleg Rebrik / iStock and Richard Stephen / iStock

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FOR THIS SPECIAL “POVERTY” ISSUE of *Religion & Liberty*, I was asked to revisit two of my books, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (written in 1990) and *Compassionate Conservatism* (1999). My brief was to (1) address what I had originally hoped to accomplish with those works; (2) discuss whether a “compassionate conservatism” ever resonated with the American public; (3) summarize what has transpired in terms of poverty intervention and amelioration on the federal, state, and local levels; (4) show where we are now; (5) answer the question, “Is the road ahead now different in some ways from what you outlined in your two books?”



A poor mother and her children living in a shanty in Oklahoma (1936)

I’ve been given 5,000 words for what could easily take a million. Nevertheless, here we go.

WHAT HAD I HOPED TO ACCOMPLISH?

Initially, not much.

I had just gained tenure at the University of Texas at Austin when an official at the Heritage Foundation in 1989 said he would welcome an application from me to spend a year in Washington researching a book. That seemed like fun for me and my family. I had to write a one-page proposal explaining my intentions. *Hmm*: What did I want to write about?

I knew how frequently the Bible treated the subject of poverty. I knew Americans in the 19th century read the Bible regularly. So, wouldn’t some of them have tried to apply the Bible to poverty issues? Standard histories of poverty-fighting suggested that Americans became involved in fighting poverty only once the federal government in the 20th century had begun to take action. My suspicion was that couldn’t be right. There must be more to the story. My proposal to Heritage: I’ll seek the rest of the story.

In 1989–90, I researched and wrote a draft, thinking in terms of an academic publisher. Then a major publisher became interested in it, and I spent the summer of 1990 furiously reorganizing and rewriting to make it more readable. That publisher eventually turned it down, saying it was “too religious.” In fact, it really wasn’t very religious at all, except that I reported positively about what many Christian charities (and some Jewish ones) did.

The book, titled *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, came out two years later from what was then a small conservative publisher, Regnery. (It’s now a large and *very* conservative publisher.) Regnery didn’t do much marketing. By the end of 1992, it seemed like the book was stranded at first base. But one huge event moved it to second base. The United States after 45 years had won the Cold War. The Soviet Union had disintegrated. The U.S. during the 1990s had no major foreign enemies, or so we thought, so full attention could turn to domestic problems.

Another event moved the book to third base: in November 1994, Republicans gained a majority in

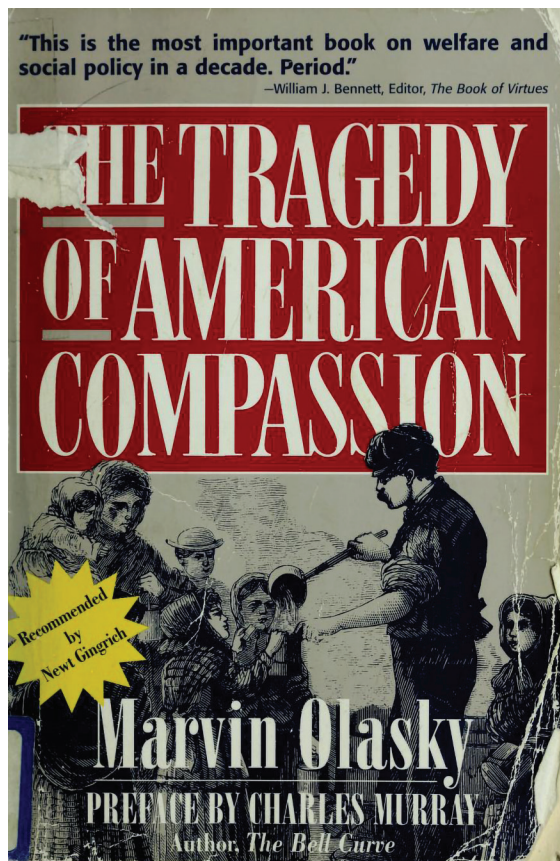
the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. Newt Gingrich became speaker of the House. Former secretary of education William Bennett had read *The Tragedy of American Compassion* and passed it on to Gingrich just as Newt was preparing his first speech to Congress upon becoming speaker. Networks planned to televise it on January 4, 1995.

That day my wife and I turned on the TV in our Austin living room, largely as background noise while I wrote syllabi for the spring term University of Texas courses I planned to teach. Suddenly, Gingrich was saying, “I commend to all of you Marvin Olasky’s *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. Olasky goes back for 300 years and looks at what has worked in America: how we have helped people rise beyond poverty, how we have reached out to save people.”

That announcement was a total surprise for me. (It turns out that a Gingrich staffer was supposed to give me a heads-up but forgot.) For a professor, this was a lightning strike. As soon as Tom Brokaw asked on the NBC Nightly News, “Who is this mystery man?” and an *Atlanta Constitution* columnist asked, “Is it Olasky or Mellaski or Alaska or Molasses?,” the phone started ringing.

Why, according to *Weekly Standard* editor Bill Kristol, did my central message “hit the conservative movement like a thunderbolt”? My message was simple: Conservatives had lost out to the left on poverty issues because they kept saying welfare was too expensive. But it’s not for a society as rich as ours. It’s stingy, however, when we refuse to offer personal help that recognizes how we are all made in God’s image and that we should not treat others as I treat my dog: *Put some food in his bowl, walk him twice a day, don’t expect much from him except entertainment*. We can do better than mere welfare handouts, assuming some of us are willing to truly love our neighbors as ourselves.

Gingrich’s favorite foundation, Progress and Freedom, offered to pick up my University of Texas salary so I’d be free from teaching and able to make multiple trips to Washington. From January 1995 through August 1996, I became a Platinum Medallion member on Delta by taking more than 100 flights per year, some from Austin to Washington, others around the country. In Washington I served as a salesman, sometimes trying to convince Republican budget hawks that the goal of welfare reform shouldn’t be primarily about saving money, sometimes trying to convince Democrats not to measure programs by how much money Congress allocates.



DID COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM RESONATE WITH THE AMERICAN PEOPLE?

That’s hard to say scientifically. In June 2023 I reviewed public opinion polls from the late 1990s and early 2000s and found none that asked clearly about compassionate conservatism as a political philosophy. The term did not become ubiquitous until George W. Bush used it as the central expression of his 1999–2000 campaign to become president. Polling about it thereafter seemed tied to his waxing and waning political fortunes. For example, just before Bush became president in 2001, a Gallup Poll of 1,055 adults showed that “58 percent of Americans believe Bush will govern in a way that is ‘truly compassionate,’ while 39 percent do not”—but what that meant was undefined.

As I met with Washington journalists early in 1995, some seemed receptive to deeper structural changes that could make compassionate conservatism more than a pretty phrase. The *Washington Post*’s William Raspberry understood that “private charity—whether foster care, self-help centers, or gospel-oriented soup kitchens—manages at least some of the time to turn lives around.” Others—David Broder, Charles Krauthammer, Mort Kondracke—seemed



AS I MET WITH WASHINGTON JOURNALISTS EARLY IN 1995, SOME SEEMED RECEPTIVE TO DEEPER STRUCTURAL CHANGES THAT COULD MAKE COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM MORE THAN A PRETTY PHRASE.



sympathetic to my goals but skeptical about whether anything could beat a Washington-centric approach to welfare. *New York Times* columnist Peter Steinfels said it the clearest: “Olasky and his allies see ... a vast outpouring, from millions of Americans, of personal commitment....It is an inspiring vision, but is it realistic?”

Trying to answer that question, I flew around the country. Since the Count was my favorite *Sesame Street* character, I once counted 153 cities or towns where I visited organizations created to help the poor. Imitating Hank Snow’s or Johnny Cash’s “I’ve Been Everywhere,” I could sing: San Antonio, San Diego, San Francisco, St. Louis; Nashville, Jacksonville, Louisville, Asheville; Gainesville, Colleyville, Cedarville, Charlottesville; *I’ve seen compassion everywhere, man.* Virginia Beach, Long Beach, Glendale, Scottsdale; New York City, Kansas City, Grove City, Salt Lake City; Tampa, Columbia, Augusta, Atlanta; Buffalo, Chicago, Plano, Orlando; Jackson, Madison, Tucson, Houston; Washington, Charleston, Boston, Newton: *Good Samaritans everywhere.*

Compassionate conservatism registered with groups of people in all those cities. I also did some speechifying during those travels, and typically concluded my remarks with this audience-participation question: *If you had \$500 to give to any poverty-fighting organization, please raise your hand if you would send it to the federal Department of Health and Human Services or some other Washington agency?* Typically, no hands went up. *How about your state government? City hall?* Maybe one or two. *How many of you know of a community-based, nongovernmental group in your own area that would do a better job with that \$500?* A forest of arms.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Senators John Ashcroft and Dan Coats and Representatives J.C. Watts and Jim Talent introduced legislation to encourage the volunteering of time and money. Ashcroft’s bill, for example, specified that a person who volunteered at least 50 hours a year to an institution directly serving the needy could receive a \$500 tax credit—not just a deduction—for a contribution to that institution. I did not expect any legislation to fix the basic problem, but with all our current tendencies to maximize self and abandon others, I saw the value of a charity jump start.

Gingrich and other GOP leaders, however, did not back such proposals. Instead, they imposed work



Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich presides over the opening day of the 104th Congress in 1995

requirements and time limits on recipients of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and changed the name to TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). Those changes, with exceptions for mothers of small children and for those physically or mentally unable to work, were positive. AFDC, though, was only one among dozens of federal welfare programs. The others were left untouched.

When George W. Bush became president, he tried to inoculate his new faith-based office against charges that it promoted evangelical doctrines or partisan payoffs. That inoculation included the appointment of John DiIulio, a very eminent Catholic Democratic social scientist from Philadelphia. At that point I observed four main positions about funding groups that claimed to be helping the poor: two on the centralist side and two on the decentralist side.

Some of the centralists followed the traditional liberal approach of funding those organizations with the best lobbying and administration contacts. A second group, led by DiIulio, thought all funding could be done on a scientific basis. As he told the National Association of Evangelicals in March 2001: “We’re taking a deliberative approach and focusing first on conducting our audits, studying competing ideas, weighing competing perspectives, and looking forward to ... improving government-by-proxy programs through performance-based grant-making.”

On the decentralist side were two other groups: some followed the traditional Social Darwinist view of refusing to spend any money at all, while others agreed with my sense that there should be funding but that it should be decentralized, with taxpayers rather than number-crunching experts making the call as to how and where. I was initially naive enough to think that my approach and DiIulio’s could coexist.

“

**REIHAN SALAM
SUMMARIZED WELL IN
THE WASHINGTON POST
WHAT HAD HAPPENED:
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PROBLEM WAS THAT
COMPASSIONATE
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”

But following Bush’s eight years in the White House, Reihan Salam summarized well in the *Washington Post* what had happened: “The essential problem was that compassionate conservatism was an unstable amalgam of two very different ideas, one good and one very bad. The good idea, encouraging self-help and grass-roots entrepreneurship, was largely abandoned in favor of the bad idea, namely the embrace of central planning.”

Salam reviewed the initial thrill of the movement, which was followed by a big chill: “Compassionate conservatism won George W. Bush the White House in 2000, a year Democrats should have taken in a landslide. But over the next eight years...the GOP came to resemble a gaggle of earmark-chasing charlatans who veered from phony compassion to get-tough border-fence theatrics with dizzying speed.”

Prison Fellowship head Chuck Colson, with Washington experience dating back to the Nixon administration, saw more quickly than I did the warning signs of Bush’s “faith-based initiative” heading in the wrong direction. Colson sent me a long letter that described a “public meeting” to kick off a Philadelphia



Chuck Colson (1931–2012)

project involving groups devoted to fighting crime, drugs, and other negative aspects of gang life.

Colson said that, at the Philadelphia meeting, he spoke about “evangelizing the streets of Philadelphia, bringing people to Christ.” Right away project leaders objected to his emphasis on evangelism. They kicked Prison Fellowship off the leadership team. In his letter, Colson connected that experience with a conversation he had “with a very eminent social scientist.” Colson told the academic about a young man who became a Christian and now was “on the streets preaching and reading the Bible to members of gangs.” Colson pointed to this “transformed life” as an example of success. Not so, the academic said, unless social scientists “peer-review” the result.

Colson and I believed evangelism to be important, but we also saw the problem with any standard academic measuring device. Maybe a social scientist, if he asked the right questions, could track a program’s results a year after it ended, although participants scatter and are often hard to find. Just maybe it would be possible to contact a representative sample after three years, although that’s rare. But the deeper



An illustration of the parable of the sower from the 1881 *Pictorial Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* edited by Rev. Edwin W. Rice

question is what happens after 10 or 20 years, and only the rarest of studies lasts that long.

The New Testament parable of the sower describes seed tossed onto a path or amid thorns that proves unfruitful, as well as seed that falls on good soil and produces a great crop. But there’s also seed thrown on rocky ground without much soil that immediately springs up—yet, when the sun rises, such seed is scorched. Without roots, it withers away. Colson from experience knew that measuring what immediately grows often yields a false sense of satisfaction.

In March, DiIulio and I took our differences to the National Association of Evangelicals conference in Dallas. DiIulio said a program that urges “each beneficiary to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior” could not receive a government grant. Any program that said, “Your problem is X. To cure X, believe Y” would not qualify. DiIulio said his goal was to fund the most effective programs, but I asked: “What if to cure X, believe J is the most effective way to help people beat their addictions?” “Performance-based” grant-making that bans speaking about Jesus might not be performance-based after all.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Republicans boasted about changing AFDC to TANF. In August 1996 they declared victory: “Mission accomplished.” That was true, partly and temporarily. In 2000 the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reported changes in Ohio: “Many of the 111,000 families leaving welfare are doing so because family members have found work....A survey conducted for the state found that a year after leaving welfare, 66 percent of the people were employed, averaging 38 hours a week.”

But the mission, although announced in grand terms, was too small. Congress left dozens of welfare programs intact. Since 1996 the number of people on SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance) has almost doubled. SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is up 60%. SSI (Supplemental Security Income) is up 30%. Many welfare recipients just slid over to another program.

That’s exactly what happened in St. Paul, Minnesota, but it wasn’t the poor people who were the gamers. Some Ramsey County case managers did not like the idea of work requirements and a five-year time limit, so they helped TANF recipients fill out SSI applications. They accompanied potential SSI recipients to appointments. They “advocated for families” to receive cash payments. The county gave case managers the discretion to do “whatever it would take” to get money to individuals who did not qualify.

Ramsey County officials were proud of their work. As a 2006 document from the research firm Mathematica shows, officials “felt they were gathering important information about families nearing the time limit that would interest a broader audience. They therefore contacted Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) to work with them to document their findings.” Back in 1996, Congress thought five years would be enough for most welfare recipients to turn around their lives, but the 2006 document, “When Five Years Is Not Enough,” displays a different perspective.

So what? Welfare is a good thing for the poor, right? Sometimes yes, but it often doesn’t help people fare well. So many of these programs fail in three ways: by not emphasizing work, not emphasizing marriage, and not emphasizing what people *can* do—as opposed to what people *cannot* do. Programs that make such mistakes are recipes not for well-fare but for despair-fare (if we practice truth in labeling).

Let’s run through those three errors. First, whatever decreases attachment to work increases poverty. Bible readers know that work is good: Genesis 2:15 says God put man “in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” Since the Fall recorded in Genesis 3, work is harder, but it’s still our vocation as human beings. We are hardwired for work, and people with a “loose wire” fare poorly. Every president for the past hundred years has said that those who are physically and mentally able to work should do so.

A tent community in San Francisco



Photo by Christopher Michel / Wikipedia

For example, Franklin Roosevelt in 1935 argued, “We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution but also their self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination.” He added:

In this business of relief we are dealing with properly self-respecting Americans to whom a mere dole outrages every instinct of individual independence. Most Americans want to give something for what they get. That something, in this case honest work, is the saving barrier between them and moral disintegration. We propose to build that barrier high.

Work requirements still resonate with the American people. In April 2023, 80% of Wisconsin voters said yes to an advisory referendum question: “Shall able-bodied, childless adults be required to look for work in order to receive taxpayer-funded benefits?” Yes, the referendum was nonbinding, but 80%! When was the last time we saw 80% of the populace agreed on anything, except that rocky road ice cream is tasty?

Second, whatever hinders marriage increases poverty. The Bible tells us that “it is not good for man to be alone.” The growth of single-parent families paralleled the growth of welfare in the 1960s and thereafter. Middle-class people generally don’t suffer financial penalties for getting married. In the income tax code, tax bracket cutoffs generally double for childless married couples filing jointly. Most couples

pay the same amount they would if filing as single individuals. But in many programs for the poor—including SNAP, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and much of public housing—getting married can result in a loss of benefits.

A majority of state-level preschool programs also have marriage-discouraging penalties. Single moms can send children to preschool free of charge, but marriage often eliminates the entire benefit. In Texas, for example, a single mom earning \$20,000 to \$33,000 per year receives free preschool, but if she marries a man who makes another \$23,000, she loses all her benefits. That’s a marriage penalty of more than \$5,000.

Rules established at suite-level have street-level consequences. A 2016 American Enterprise Institute/*L.A. Times* survey asked men and women below the poverty line, “How often do you think unmarried adults choose not to get married to avoid losing welfare benefits?” About 24% of respondents answered, “Almost always,” and another 23% said, “Often.” In a 2015 American Family Survey, 31% of respondents said they knew someone who had chosen not to marry out of fear of losing “welfare benefits, Medicaid, food stamps, or other government benefits.”

Third, whatever emphasizes what we don’t have, rather than what we do, increases poverty. Question one should not be, “Do you have a physical, mental, or other health problem that limits the kind or amount

Men gather for a New Deal–era work-creation program (1933)



of work you can do?” It should be, “What capacities or skills do you have?” What’s called ABCD—Asset-Based Community Development—emphasizes spending less time bemoaning deficits and weaknesses and more time identifying and honoring gifts, skills, and strengths. More on this below.

IS THE ROAD AHEAD DIFFERENT FROM WHAT I OUTLINED IN MY 1990s BOOKS?

The 1990s was an optimistic decade, with the Cold War ended, drops in crime in many cities, and good economic news: low inflation, increased wages and productivity, a near doubling of international trade, surging investment in developing countries, and a rising stock market. China entered the world economy, and many assumed it would move toward democracy.

I showed my lack of prophetic ability in several ways, however. First, I did not expect a 9/11-type of attack and the subsequent war in Iraq, nor the Great Recession that began in 2007. I thought race relations would continue to improve and did not sufficiently take into account the deindustrialization of parts of America. I did not expect declining attendance at churches, a trend that accelerated during the COVID years, with a concomitant decline in hope and less giving of ourselves.

Moreover, we’re certainly a lot more wary than we used to be. That has its pluses and minuses. My books certainly showed the opportunity for volunteers to make a difference but also warned against rushing in without understanding. Since then, many valuable books have come out with titles like *When Helping Hurts*. The books are right to distinguish between helping and hurting, but the danger is that some people might see all the mistakes and decide that the task is too hard even to begin.

We also have well-intentioned programs that do a lot of good but that may also bring harm. SSI is one of them. It became a program in 1972 as Congress moved to protect people with severe physical disabilities. That’s worthwhile, but then psychologists asked, Why not us? They argued that depression can be as disabling as a bad physical ailment. True enough, but while medical exams reveal tumors or crippling arthritis you can see, psychological ones are often judgment calls—which means that some folks can more easily game the system.

SSI is certainly needed for children who are disabled, but critics have pointed out what the National



Sally Field and Michael Conner Humphreys in *Forrest Gump*

Bureau of Economic Research called the “perverse incentives for families to present their children as disabled, which could discourage the child’s human capital development.” Even the liberal *Boston Globe* reported that “the damage done to children who are misclassified as mentally ill is incalculable: Some linger in special ed classes when they are capable of accelerated work; others come to believe themselves to be impaired when no such impairment exists.”

A decade ago, reporter Patricia Wen, who now heads the *Globe*’s celebrated Spotlight team, interviewed a single mom who did not want to put her child on psychotropic drugs but realized, “To get the check...you’ve got to medicate the child.” Wen tracked down a mother whose 2-year-old was on SSI after being diagnosed with speech delay and potential signs of autism. This mom described the cost to her spirit: “SSI sucks you in.”

Wen also talked with a 15-year-old who said she wants to work, but if she does “they’ll take money away from my mom. She needs it. I don’t want my mom’s money to go down.” Another young man said he wanted to work, but he’s “afraid to lose the check. It’s attached to me.” Wen quoted a psychologist saying that “children who grow up on SSI often cannot see themselves ever living outside the system.... They develop an identity as being disabled.”

I haven’t found evidence that the SSI process has changed, and couldn’t find much newspaper coverage of it lately, so I emailed Wen and asked about new developments. She said she also hasn’t “seen much on the children’s SSI front.” This obviously needs more reporting. In the movie *Forrest Gump*, Forrest has below-average intelligence, but his mother always tells him, “You’re not stupid.” We have a problem if



Photo by Richard Levine / Alamy Stock Photo

A sign advertising the SNAP program in the Union Square Greenmarket in New York City (2017)

mothers tell children of average intelligence, “You are stupid,” to claim a check.

Another example of help mixed with harm is the biggest welfare program, SNAP: 41 million Americans—one out of eight of us—is on it. We don’t want to treat adults as children by telling them what they cannot buy. One result: the *Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* found that SNAP participants consumed 43% more sugar-sweetened beverages than people similar demographically and economically but not on SNAP. They also consumed much more highly processed food.

Many scholarly articles about this have titles like “The Relationship Between Obesity and SNAP” or “Ending SNAP Subsidies for Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Could Reduce Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes.” My favorite headline is “Thin Wallets, Thick Waistlines.” The academic research continues to remind me of the title of a book by the *Wall Street Journal’s* Jason Riley: *Please Stop Helping Us*.

Structural problems may contribute to this. Some people live in food deserts—neighborhoods without supermarkets. Some people work hard and feel too tired to cook, so they buy unhealthy microwavable stuff. Calories do represent energy, and some people with a limited budget try to get the most short-term energy bang for their buck, regardless of long-term consequences.

Nevertheless, shouldn’t we have truth in labeling? I went through the 50 state websites and saw most frequently an explanation like this one from Arkansas: “The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (SNAP) helps people with low income get the food they need for good health.” No, it doesn’t. The Illinois website says SNAP exists to “help low income households buy the food they need for good health.” Nope. New Hampshire: “The Food Stamp Program is about good nutrition and health.” No, it’s not.

All this means I’m not sure about the road ahead. My beliefs about what the road should look like have not changed: we should emphasize the literal meaning of *com*-passion, “suffering with,” and be willing to love our neighbors as ourselves. I don’t know how practical that is, but I can see a starting point: tell the truth. Beyond that, I could speculate that American compassionate conservatism picks up speed when

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**WE HAVE A PROBLEM
IF MOTHERS TELL
CHILDREN OF AVERAGE
INTELLIGENCE, ‘YOU
ARE STUPID,’ TO
CLAIM A CHECK.**

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the economy is strong, foreign enemies seem weak, and many people (usually for religious reasons) feel they should help others. The 1920s and the 1990s were decades that had those characteristics. Maybe such a time will come again.

In the meantime, we have to settle either for living in a very mean time or building alliances among groups on both the right and the left that emphasize decentralization. I used the term “compassionate conservative” in the 1990s to distinguish that movement from large-government liberalism, but “conservative” turned into a limiting device. If compassionate conservatism has a comeback, it will do so as part of a larger movement that won’t merely be conservative but will involve libertarians, localists, and some among the other L-word—liberals.

There are three organizations in particular that compassionate conservatives should get to know.

One is the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), a network of hundreds of urban groups. It’s not conservative but is committed to localism. The CCDA is based on the teaching of John Perkins, now 93, who survived beatings during the civil rights era and came out of that experience with an understanding that we are all “one blood.” When I interviewed him two years ago, John noted that the Christians described in the book of Acts “didn’t sit at home waiting for food to come by chariot. They went out to homes and started classes. They taught we are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

A second group, Strong Towns, is not a conservative organization, but it states, “We work to elevate local

government to be the highest level of collaboration for people working together in a place, not merely the lowest level in a hierarchy of governments.” Strong Towns emphasizes “incremental investments (‘little bets’) instead of large, transformative projects.” It emphasizes “bottom-up action (‘chaotic but smart’) and not top-down systems (‘orderly but dumb’).” It aspires to work at a human scale instead of building bureaucratic dinosaurs.

As for the third, one year after *The Tragedy of American Compassion* came out, John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight published *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets*. I missed it at the time, but I’m now convinced that Asset-Based Community Development is important and a way for the left and right to work together. In addition, McKnight’s 128-page book, *Associational Life: Democracy’s Power Source* (2022), is a quick introduction to his thinking: it features short essays on “the role of citizens when they come together in associations that nurture and amplify their power to be productive creators.”

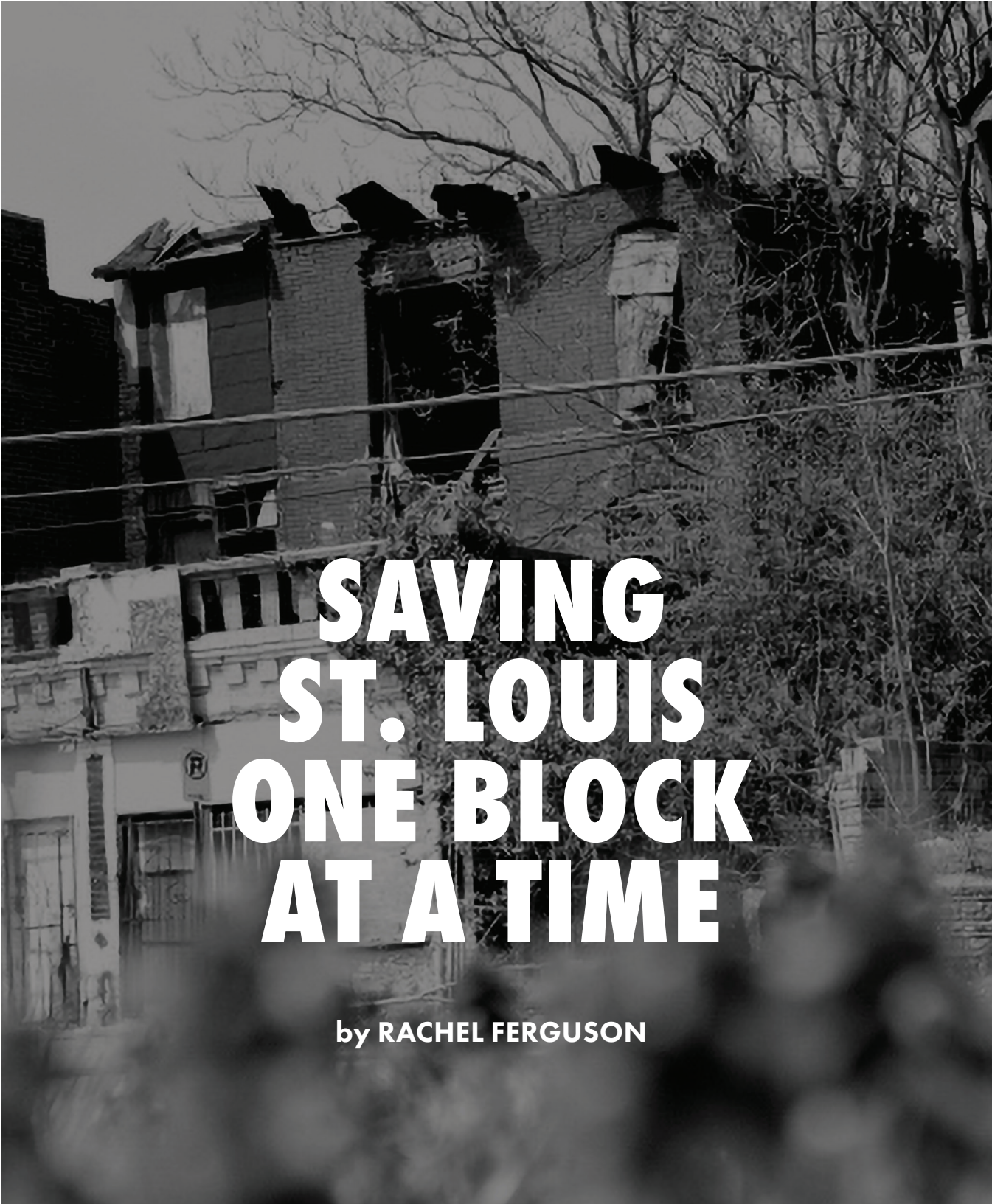
McKnight, who co-founded the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University, writes, “The anger we observe nationally grows significantly from the dissatisfaction millions of people feel because they are locally disconnected from each other.” That’s true, and I’ll end on a note of practical philosophy about the beginning of a reconnect. Deuteronomy 15:7, 8 tells us what to do “if among you, one of your brothers should become poor... You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him.”

I like the specific detail of the biblical command: do not harden your heart or shut your hand. “Welfare” and “poverty” are abstract terms, but compassion begins when we see the suffering of one of our brothers or sisters. Philosopher David Naugle has pointed out that the Hebrew mindset emphasizes the concrete, whereas the Hellenic veers toward abstraction. Naugle says we should see with Hebrew lenses and live with Hebrew hearts. Agreed: We should emphasize street-level reporting rather than suite-level opining, and then open our hands. **RL**

Marvin Olasky, an Acton affiliate scholar, is the author of 30 books on poverty-fighting, journalism, and historical topics, and coauthor of The Story of Abortion in America: A Street-Level History, 1652–2022.

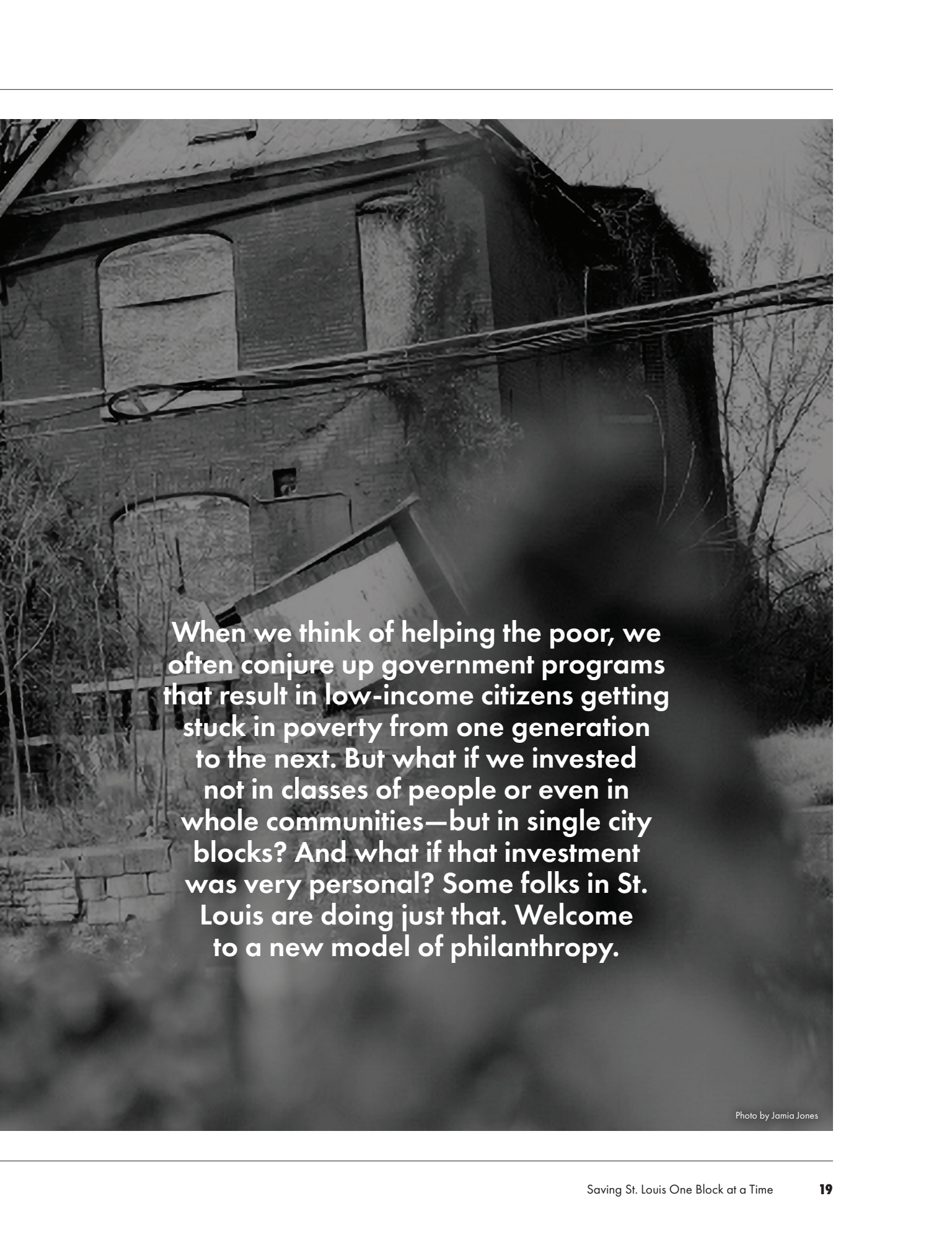
Civil rights activist John Perkins





SAVING ST. LOUIS ONE BLOCK AT A TIME

by RACHEL FERGUSON



When we think of helping the poor, we often conjure up government programs that result in low-income citizens getting stuck in poverty from one generation to the next. But what if we invested not in classes of people or even in whole communities—but in single city blocks? And what if that investment was very personal? Some folks in St. Louis are doing just that. Welcome to a new model of philanthropy.

Photo by Jamia Jones

these things because it's not a person—it's a system. The system can register you, send you a check, even create a jobs training mechanism. But it can't know you and it can't love you. It might even tell you to walk away from that promotion or from that relationship because, if you don't, you'll lose what it, the system, gives you. It can't gain your trust over the course of years until you're finally ready to tell it your own vision for your life and your neighborhood. And it won't be there to work with you through all the frustrating details of starting that business or building those community gardens. It won't because it can't. It's not in its nature.

On the other hand, as we learned from Marvin Olasky's classic *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, private, and often religious, poverty alleviation could do all these things well. And prior to a certain ide-

ological shift to a social gospel in the mid-19th century, it did.

One poor man might need prayer and a hot meal, another

was sent to chop wood for a

widow before he was fed, another

young man might need to move in

with a family and become part of

their daily life. Because of the reality of

deep personal presence, these sorts of

prayerful distinctions could be made by

those treating the poor person as an indi-

vidual and not a category. Olasky describes

how the rise of public assistance redefined

the way we help the poor. It turned the com-

plex project of face-to-face ministry into

the straightforward task of the soup kitchen.

It put the nameless poor into a line and handed

them what they needed merely to survive. Private

philanthropy began to adopt this strategy lest it be

accused of distinguishing between the “deserving”

and the “undeserving poor.” But an unwillingness

to treat alms like mere handouts need not be a condem-

nation of the person being refused. On the contrary,

our earlier way of doing philanthropy looked for ways

we could honor the dignity of a person by exchanging

with him. If recipients have something to offer in a

legitimate exchange, they are no longer mere “tak-

ers” but rather burgeoning businessmen or business-

women. Exchange honors the thing in us that knows

we have something to contribute and that resents

being treated like we're useless to our neighbors.

Lucas Rougely, founder of the neighborhood sta-

bilization ministry LOVEtheLOU in St. Louis, on

WWW

WHEN IT COMES TO poverty alleviation in our most struggling communities, both our public and our private efforts can let our suffering neighbors down. Public efforts are by their very nature faceless. They must assess the situation of an individual citizen entirely in terms of statistical facts like income or family size. Public assistance doesn't pray with you in the middle of the night when there's been a terrible crime on your street. Public assistance can't walk with you when you've finally landed a job but your manager is infuriating. Nor can public assistance say no to you if you're mired in addiction and need to be allowed to hit bottom. Public assistance can't do



A look through Kris' lens

whose board I sit, explains that nowadays we make it a full-time job to be poor. Food over here on this day, some clothes over there on that day, help with a utility bill somewhere else on another day. The system we've created is giving us the result we ought to expect: people whose days are filled with just getting by and who are becoming increasingly economically hopeless. They have a vision but no voice. Over time, the poverty mindset creeps in: "This is just the way things are. I'll never get out. There's no point in trying." Meanwhile, we middle- and upper-income people can feel pretty good about our efforts. We offered that personal finance class on that one Saturday. We cleaned up that empty lot. We held that coat drive at work. We did...something. But often what we did was to "help" our struggling neighbors without really seeing them. In contrast, my friend Ismael Hernandez, founder and executive director of the Freedom & Virtue Institute, says, "I don't care about your poverty—I care about *you*." When we pursue the neighborhood stabilization model in St. Louis that I am about to describe, this is what we say to our neighbors: You're not just some number to me. You're not just a name on a list. I'm not helping

you because a computer spat you out as a member of some statistically "relevant" group. As Dallas Willard would say, "You are a never-ceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God's great universe." You are made in the image of the living God. You have intellect and will! You have a little kingdom—your life—in which you get to choose.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION MODEL

The first component of this new way to do local philanthropy is **to look for opportunities to exchange and to use our gifts sparingly**. Robert Lupton, in his masterful book *Toxic Charity*, quotes the Oath for Compassionate Helpers that he and his team at Focused Community Strategies are committed to:

I will never do for others what they have the capacity to do for themselves.

I will limit one-way giving to crises and seek always to find ways for legitimate exchange.

I will seek ways to empower by hiring, lending, and investing and offer gifts as incentives to

celebrate achievements.

I will put the interests of those experiencing poverty above my own even when it means setting aside my own agenda or the agenda of my organization.

I will listen carefully, even to what is not being said, knowing that unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to healthy engagement.

And, above all, to the best of my ability,
I WILL DO NO HARM.

This commitment honors the dignity and personhood of our neighbors. It treats them as people who have something good to offer, with whom we can trade just as we do with our middle- and upper-income neighbors. By intentionally seeking out opportunities for legitimate exchange, we contribute to *shalom*—not just peace, but wholeness. As persons we are meant to realize our capacities, to share our gifts and abilities with others. While paid work is

one way in which we can use our gifts, we should not underplay the significance of other kinds of real participation in the economy, not just in terms of income but also of self-worth. The data is clear: one of the most stultifying experiences a person can suffer is long-term unemployment, and that's because God told us in Genesis 2 to care for the earth and to work it. Work is part of what it is to be human.

The second component of the neighborhood stabilization model is its **hyper-local, holistic focus and long-term commitment**. There are several reasons it matters deeply to focus on an area as small as a block for a period of at least 8–10 years. To return to that word *shalom*, we bring wholeness when we come to our neighbors rather than making them come to us. First, many of our most struggling neighborhoods are economically isolated as a result of disastrous federal policies that Marcus M. Witcher and I chronicled in *Black Liberation Through the Marketplace: Hope, Heartbreak, and the Promise of America*. Zoning laws separated homes from work and sent those in need of high-density housing far from their jobs. The red-lining policies of the Federal Housing Administration made it illegal for banks to sell mortgages in Black and interracial neighborhoods. Urban renewal, a slum-clearance program known to many as “Negro removal,” destroyed Black neighborhoods just as Black Americans were breaking out of poverty in huge numbers. As if all this weren't enough, the building of the Federal Highway System naturally targeted the poorest communities for demolition, even though many of these were home to upwardly mobile, working-class people.

To add insult to injury, the impulse to socially engineer kicked into high gear as municipal leaders, determined to kill two birds with one stone, both created their perfect, efficient highways and built a massive wall of concrete between whites and non-whites. While many immigrants and some Black Americans were able to escape, the least well-off in the community were left behind, trapped in a never-ending cycle of non-ownership behind a literal barrier to work and trade.

Finally, the deeply perverse incentives of the welfare state affected our most vulnerable population first: poor Black Americans. But it didn't stop there. The devolution of family structure has spread to almost all demographic groups in the U.S. As families broke down, general economic improvement simply couldn't keep up with the meteoric rise in single motherhood.

Jamaica Ray in Old North St. Louis



Photo by Chastity Cooper



Photo by Heather Rouggy

The market

DIFFERENT KINDS OF POVERTY—AND OPPORTUNITIES

The poverty of our inner-city neighbors is not always about a lack of cash; it's also about a lack of safety and the networks so many of us take for granted. Dad will show me how to open that bank account. Uncle Bob will hire me at his dealership. I'll ask Cathy's mom about my career-path ideas. But what if Dad isn't around, Uncle Bob is unemployed, and I'm so uncertain that I'll even make it to 21 that I have no plans for a career? Tragically, the one-two-three-four-five punch of federal intervention into the lives of the poor serves as a perfect example of what happens when we dishonor freedom of contract, property rights, and equal protection under the rule of law. We take away the infrastructure of justice that allows for the flourishing of creative exchange. We fill the empty holes left behind with Soviet-style projects and are then baffled as to why they devolve into chaos. The inhumanity of the progressive, scientific, central-planning mindset breeds more inhumanity still.

Extreme isolation translates into deep mistrust. For the most dedicated, it can easily take the first six

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**THE DEEPLY PERVERSE
INCENTIVES OF THE
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AMERICANS.**

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years to gain the trust of the neighbors. Neighbors must see that I am not going to leave them when the ministry van gets stolen, or when a terrible crime occurs, or when the van gets stolen again. They must see that I am genuinely interested in them and their ideas for their own block. I show that I am there for them when they are processing the pain of yet another young man gunned down on the street.

In the case of inner-city poverty, there is often a strong territorialism between neighborhoods. This means that a 4-to-6-block area may, for a young person especially, feel like the whole world. Telling him that there are job opportunities five miles away is like telling him there's an opportunity in Japan. It could take him an hour and a half bus ride just to get there, and outside the neighborhood, he won't know if he's protected.

Alternatively, if some of the neighbors clear an abandoned lot and turn it into a community garden that neighbors are paid to run, then the job opportunity has been brought to the seeker. Just walking down the street on a Saturday morning, a neighbor can see the activity, stop and ask about the opportunity, and realistically embrace it. And when something good is happening on my block, it means it's probably not just a one-off. A bunch of the kids are in the student program or several of the adults have started businesses or gotten their home refurbished. Even if I begin to slip into hopelessness again, I only need to wait until Saturday morning to hear the buzzing of the lawnmowers from the group of teens the city pays to clean up empty lots. Or I can



Block party

see the cars pulling into the farmers market at the community gardens. There are beautiful pictures of the places and people *I know* taken by people *I know* on display at the farmer's market. There are carpenters from a local church on the front lawn turning the spindles for Ms. Tawana's historic staircase. The possibility of change, the opportunity for something good, isn't far away where I can't see or hear it—*it's right here on my own block*. Now when I'm discouraged I can go to Ms. Tawana's or Lucas' or Miss Sharon's house, and they will feed me and pray with me and laugh with me. Maybe I won't sink under the weight of my trauma if I can actively envision a way forward and know who can help me get there. By the time one block is stabilized, there are neighbors involved from nearby blocks—and now the hope is spreading.

Don't think that 10 years per block is too long! Think of how many decades we've spent on failed policies and ham-fisted charity that tried to impress donors and government grantors with big numbers! You can feed 1,000 people every week for a year, and 30 years from now you'll be feeding their grandchildren. But focus in on 40 kids and their parents and friends on one block and before you know it they'll

be the ones going to the next block and the next one to bring *shalom* to their own neighborhood. The poor don't need to be rescued—they need to be heard and empowered.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD PRACTITIONER

The third component of the neighborhood stabilization model comes from the great John Perkins. Perkins brings his faith directly into his concept of **the neighborhood practitioner**. The practitioner is someone who has such a strong sense of personal brokenness and need for God that there is no sense of superiority in him. He is well aware that given the same circumstances he would be in the same place as those around him. He knows that while he may have the education and the networks of a middle- or upper-income person, he may not have the hard-won spiritual insight of some of his neighbors. He knows that while he may be sacrificing something from a worldly perspective to move into what some would call a "bad" neighborhood, only he can truly understand what he has gained from the deep relationships he's formed. The practitioner is also realistic about

the distrust, the trauma, and the anger that papers over hurt. He doesn't take it personally when it flares up. Most importantly, the true practitioner has no agenda of his own for the neighborhood besides the flourishing of the people in it. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert's book *When Helping Hurts* reminds us that the practitioner simply wants to help without hurting.

That last point is essential, because the social engineering mindset that has damaged our communities so deeply says, "I know what's best for you. I'll rescue you. You must be poor because you're incapable of doing anything to help yourself, so I won't even bother asking for your input." I was struck by something in Lucas Rougely's *When the Sirens Stop: A True Story of Restoration in North St. Louis*, a moving memoir about Lucas' neighbors on Enright Boulevard. A younger, very sincere, but perhaps less wise Lucas organized a block party. He insisted that everything be provided for free so that no one had to buy or contribute food. But he was stopped in his tracks by the neighborhood matriarch, Miss Sharon, who rebuked him: "Don't you dare take away their chance to help own the block." Lucas observed that Miss Sharon "knew the hearts of her neighbors, and she knew that they had something to offer." He changed gears, recruiting various neighbors to bring side dishes and drinks, direct traffic, and set up a basketball hoop. A few neighbors formed a blues band and provided the entertainment! Others discreetly handed Lucas a little cash to cover hot dog costs and, having listened to Miss Sharon's wisdom, he happily took it.

On another occasion, Lucas began to get requests from suburban church groups to come down to the

block and help out. He started with a simple trash clean-up, but once again, Miss Sharon was offended. "We can clean up our own trash!" Instead, she told the group that they were going to dismantle the porch of the drug house so that there'd no good place for the dealers to hang out anymore. Miss Sharon didn't mind accepting some help from the volunteer group, but she needed them to do something very specific, based on her local knowledge. In fact, this was a turning point for Enright Boulevard. The volunteers helped tear down the porch, but it was Miss Sharon who called a neighborhood meeting to set up the new crime watch. And when Miss Sharon calls a neighborhood meeting, *everyone shows up*.

BRING ON THE JOSEPHS

This brings us to the fourth component of the neighborhood stabilization model. This one is called by many names: **persons of peace**, "**Josephs**," and **social entrepreneurs**. Just because somebody lives in a tough neighborhood doesn't mean they've given up on it. In most neighborhoods, there are a few anchors on the block, neighbors who've been scrambling to help as much as they possibly can but have lacked support. These persons of peace are the beating heart of the neighborhood stabilization model, because the mission of the neighborhood practitioner is to tap into their vision for the neighborhood and simply support it. As the best nonprofit leaders say, we're trying to put ourselves out of business. The ultimate goal is always to cultivate leaders from the block. The great Bob Woodson calls these men and women "Josephs" because they are healing agents in the neighborhood. They are assets for future flourishing and growth. Like the biblical Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers but whom God used to save Egypt, these Josephs are resilient people, often of deep faith, and they have not allowed their trials to make them bitter. The neighborhood stabilization model helps us recognize these neighbors and see their gifts because we come into the neighborhood looking for them. We've stopped assuming that because a neighborhood is destabilized it has no assets, nothing to offer to us or exchange with us, and no one to lead.

Lucas met Frank immediately upon moving into his Enright Boulevard neighborhood, and Frank took it upon himself to keep Lucas abreast of dangerous situations and help him understand how to navigate them and keep his family safe. Miss Sharon lived

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**THE NEIGHBORHOOD
PRACTITIONER HAS SUCH
A STRONG SENSE OF
PERSONAL BROKENNESS
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SUPERIORITY IN HIM.**
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right across the street and became an important mentor to Lucas. Miss Tawana is an incredibly generous and forgiving person who busied herself caring for children—her own and those of others. When an opportunity to rent-to-own a refurbished home came up, everyone knew that Tawana not only would benefit from owning and having something to pass on but also use her beautiful home to bless others. And this is exactly what she did when she arranged for grocery distribution to the elderly and homebound during COVID—she turned her beautiful, newly refurbished home into a food pantry and recruited neighbors to help.

As Bob Woodson puts it, for our most destabilized neighbors, a far more pressing problem than racism limits their ability to break out of poverty. That problem is elitism. In our ignorant pride, we infantilize our neighbors and exalt ourselves. Lucas tells many stories of the epiphanies he underwent as a white dude from a small town in southern Missouri. There was so much he didn't understand: about the system, about the mindset, about the particulars of this neighborhood. What hubris to assume we have the answers! The problems of our destabilized inner-city neighborhoods are legion and have been long in the making. Their solutions will be complex, too, as well as specific from locale to locale. Poor people are not a monolith. This is yet another reason that our Josephs, our persons of peace, are so essential to any vision for change. They're the ones who really and truly know the neighborhood.

NOT ONLY POLITICS AND MARKETS, BUT THE CHURCH

Keen readers might have noticed something. My prophets of neighborhood stabilization—Marvin Olasky, John Perkins, Bob Woodson, Robert Lupton, and Brian Fikkert—are not necessarily aligned with one another politically. Olasky is associated with the welfare reforms of the 1990s, led by Newt Gingrich and the Republicans. John Perkins is a former civil rights activist who's been using the phrase "social justice" since the 1970s. His watchwords are "Relocation, Reconciliation, and Redistribution." To be fair, Perkins is also critical of government programs and challenges the Church to redistribute the time, talent, and treasure of its more well-resourced members to create economic flourishing in the inner cities. But he definitely affirms the reality of institutional as well as individual injustice and sees the

Church's redistribution as an answer to our history of systemic injustice.

In contrast, Bob Woodson is incensed by what he sees as the cultivation of a destructive victim mentality. He boldly appears on Fox News regularly to rail against the left and its obsession with race, and he led a group of Black scholars to create the 1776 Project in response to the *New York Times'* 1619 Project. (Woodson's project precedes and is separate from Trump's commission of the same name.) Interestingly, Woodson is also a former civil rights activist but veered away from the movement's racial focus to one emphasizing economic intervention. I know nothing of Bob Lupton's politics, but I can tell you that when pressed about the failures of the welfare state, he responds that the Church should focus on fixing its own efforts first. And while Brian Fikkert's criticism of helping that hurts has sent church mission boards across the nation into a tailspin of reevaluation, Fikkert ascribes some of our failures to our uniquely American individualism and materialism. He asks whether our vision for our poor neighbors is simply to invite them into the "unhappy growth" that we experience in the middle and upper classes.

The great lesson in this hodge-podge of thinkers and practitioners is that when we do on-the-ground work with the poor, we don't have to be ideologically pure. At LOVEtheLOU, a survey of our staff and board would turn up no particular political agenda whatsoever. My guess is that the convinced leftist starts to get less and less excited about government programs when she sees the way they trap neighbors and compete with the healthier paths on offer. A left-leaning friend shared with me recently how he

Beckett Park View



Photo by Jamia Jones



Photo by Jamia Jones

The Intersection

met with the heads of a major teachers' union and the group seemed offended that he was helping to start a private Christian school in one of the worst neighborhoods in the country. He could only think, "But who else is going to teach our babies how to read?" At the same time, the staunch right-winger will certainly not be able to avoid talk about race, police brutality, and historical injustice, and she might want to leave out who she voted for when chatting with neighbors. The upshot here is that this is practical work, with real people in a real place, not a set of abstract ideas to debate about. John Perkins can call it social justice and Bob Woodson can call it social entrepreneurship, but they'll do very similar things.

I even have to ask myself, an unapologetic member of the liberty movement, about the role of markets. Neighborhood stabilization isn't a matter of free markets at work; it's a matter of civil society at work. Markets can solve lots of problems, but they can't solve the most fundamental ones—those involving family and community. In fact, healthy markets rely on these institutions far more than we often admit. One important goal, however, is to get people included in market exchange who have lost their "in." As John Perkins puts it, our neighbors need "Jesus and a job!"

To emphasize the role of civil society is not to downplay the trenchant critique of the state coming from classical-liberal free marketeers. The point isn't just that the state got in the way of market exchange,



Photo by Kori Woodcock

The Skills Center

but that by doing so the state destroyed decades of social capital, devastating communities in every major city in America. It's not so much that the market solves everything as that the state causes lots of problems that it then cannot solve. So in the end, it's civil society for the win. And since I've shared several of Lucas' rebukes from his neighbors, I'll share his rebuke of me. When I announced excitedly to him that I was getting a chance to speak about the neighborhood stabilization model all over the country, he looked me dead in the eye and said, "Remember, Rachel—this is Jesus' work." Neighborhood stabilization isn't a "microwave" solution, fast and easy. That's why we so often choose toxic charity instead. Those who enter in must not only have a radical love for their neighbors but also a deep store of grace upon which to draw. I know a few of these wonderful Jesus people. But we need many, many more to answer the call. **RI.**

Rachel Ferguson, Ph.D., is a professor of business ethics, assistant dean of the College of Business, and director of the Free Enterprise Center at Concordia University Chicago. She is also a board member for LOVEtheLOU, a neighborhood stabilization ministry in North St. Louis; the Freedom Center of Missouri; and ReThink315. Her new book, co-written with historian Marcus M. Witcher, is Black Liberation Through the Marketplace: Hope, Heartbreak, and the Promise of America.





THE PROSPERITY PYRAMID SCHEME

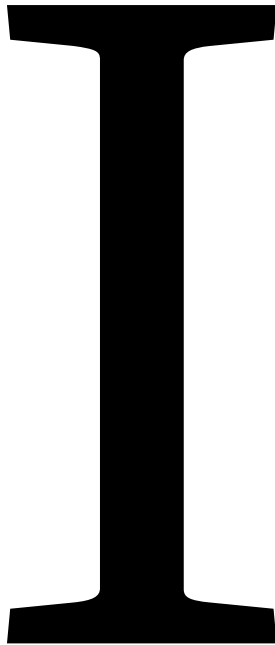
by MICHAEL MATHESON MILLER

Free markets and technological innovation didn't magically appear in the West. Imagine a pyramid in which entrepreneurship and major developments in science and economics sit at the top resting upon broader foundations of the dignity of the human person, the goodness of creation, even the concept of linear time. We forget this at our peril.

Photo by PaulPaladin / iStock



Vintage 1963 Western Union stock certificate



IN THE WEST, WE LIVE in prosperity but are often unaware of the sources of that prosperity. We even think we have some special insight into the causes of prosperity because we're wealthy. At the extreme it's like my offering to wire your house because my lights turn on. Ask a random sample of business leaders and development experts about what causes poverty and wealth, and most assuredly they will talk about geography or infrastructure, electricity, education, healthcare. No doubt these are important. Sickness and disease are real obstacles to economic development and human flourishing. Poor roads and unreliable electricity make it difficult to operate

businesses and transport goods to market. And lack of education keeps people in low-productivity jobs and prevents people from reaching their full potential. But starting with these things distract us from core institutions of justice that ultimately underlie their development. One way to think about this is to ask yourself this question: If you have a highly educated, healthy person with access to healthcare and good roads and bridges, but who cannot get clear title to his land, cannot get access to justice to get his court case heard, cannot register his business in the formal economy, and cannot get access to capital and credit, what do you think he will do? I suggest there are four options: despair, join the political class, join the criminal class, or migrate.

Throughout the developing world, poor people are poor not simply because they lack material goods. The primary reason is that millions of poor people are excluded from the institutions of justice we take for granted and without which we would be poor as well. They lack the invisible layers of society that make entrepreneurship and wealth creation possible. Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto describes the developing world as "teeming with entrepreneurs," but we don't hear about them because they remain micro-entrepreneurs forced to focus on short-term gains instead of long-term growth. Those of us who live in wealthy nations can easily forget about these institutions of justice. They've become so much a part of the tapestry of our lives that we take them for granted and include everything from the rule of law to the freedom to participate in private voluntary organizations, mutual aid societies, educational institutions, scientific organizations, churches—what Alexis de Tocqueville called "intermediary institutions."

In stressing the importance of institutions, I am not saying anything radical or new. Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Adam Smith all recognized



Construction cranes in downtown Bellevue, Washington (2022)

this. In the past few decades, there has been a renewed interest in the importance of institutions, including by Nobel Prize-winning economists Douglass North and Edmund Phelps and the New Institutional Economics, and the work of Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson in their book *Why Nations Fail*. Yet, in the dominant approaches to economics and poverty, institutions have been neglected. North summarized many of the problems with the current model of development and the poverty industry in his Nobel acceptance speech:

There is no mystery why the field of development has failed to develop during the five decades since the end of the second world war. Neoclassical theory is simply an inappropriate tool to analyze prescribed policies that will induce development. It is concerned with operations of markets, and not with how markets develop. How can one prescribe policies when one doesn't understand how economies develop? The very methods employed by neoclassical economists have dictated the subject matter and militated against such a development.

North argued that the dominant theories had a “mathematical precision and elegance” but did not reflect the reality of the developing world. The overly mathematical nature led development economists to

focus on “technological development” and “human capital investment but ignored the incentive structure embodied in institutions that determined the extent of society investment in those factors.” North argued that the neoclassical model of economic performance made two “erroneous assumptions: one that institutions do not matter, and two that time does not matter.” Yet North maintains that “institutions form the incentive structure of a society and the political and economic institutions in consequence are the underlying determinant of economic performance.”

A PYRAMID SCHEME

In some ways these institutions are simple to understand but hard to implement and develop. If they were easy, everyone would have them, but they take time. They also require certain anthropological and cultural assumptions and conditions to be sustained. Acemoglu and Robinson, for example, also stressed the importance of what they called “inclusive” institutions rather than “extractive” institutions, but they did not really address the cultural underpinnings. But these institutions are in fact cultural artifacts, products of deeply held beliefs about justice and the human person. One way to think about the institutions of justice is through the image of a pyramid in



A 1909 photo of some of the first FDA inspectors, authorized by the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906

which entrepreneurship and major developments in science and innovation sit at the top and rest upon broader foundations that make this long-term thinking possible. These foundations include things like healthcare, education, and infrastructure, but there are other layers below. They include private property and rule of law, and at the bottom foundational cultural ideas about justice, life, time, family, work, progress, religion, and what it means to be a human person.

Taking a moment to think through a simple commercial exchange sheds light on the levels of complexity. We talk about a “free market” or “free exchange,” but as Harry Ballan has noted, an apparently simple transaction requires layers of complex support. Let’s start with a buyer and a seller who freely decide to make an exchange. They require a stable currency, a price system, private ownership, rule of law, and enforcement of contracts so people will be willing to exchange money for goods. The exchange also requires legal structures of reciprocity and government regulations that prevent buyers from being taken advantage of, market information, market price signals, and so on. The exchange often includes other boundaries to ensure commutative justice, such as activist groups paying attention to issues of labor exploitation, consumer welfare and safety; government organizations and regulatory

bodies like the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Food and Drug Administration, which approves certain chemicals or medicines for use, and so on. This is not to say that all these things are perfect and that these organizations and advocacy groups do not sometimes distort transactions. But the point is that when we engage in even a simple exchange, we are doing this in the midst of embedded, complex social, political, economic, and cultural structures. And the more complex the product and the exchange, the more factors are involved.

As Mariana Mazzucato notes in *The Entrepreneurial State*, many of the things that go into the iPhone to make it “smart” were not simply the result of one entrepreneurial company but were developed by various forms of government investment in military research or other private–public partnerships. Mazzucato’s critique is important, but it doesn’t go far enough. We also have to ask why the U.S. government had the capacity to develop these technologies and make these investments in the first place. U.S. military power is not disconnected from the tax base created by entrepreneurial activity and wealth creation of private citizens. And this ability to create wealth required, among other things, a constitutional republic and a commercial society based on the rule of law, private property, and free association—elements that in turn rest upon the

development of banking and commercial revolutions in the medieval period, which in turn rested on specific views of justice, impartiality, the value of labor, the goodness of beings, and even ideas about linear time. The point here is that entrepreneurs in the West don't emerge simply because of raw talent, nor do state militaries invent smart technologies out of thin air. The ability to accomplish these feats rest on complex and deeply embedded historical, political, economic, and most important cultural and religious foundations.

For example, where did we get the ideas that clear title to land, impartial justice, and freedom of exchange are good things to begin with? Where do we get the practice of modern banking? These are not universal. Where did they come from, and specifically why did they emerge first in the West? As Max Weber wrote in a letter before his death: "Why solely in the Occident has a rational capitalism based upon profitability developed?...Somebody has to explore this question."

There is no single answer, but it is worth taking some time to think through the Jewish and Christian influences on the rise of capitalism. This is important

not only as a matter of historical interest but because understanding its origin can help us appreciate complexity and avoid the temptation to think we can solve poverty with policy and technology alone. The institutions of market economies are *cultural artifacts* that arise from a combination of multiple ideas and practices. Yet we often think about economic development, innovation, and entrepreneurship as distinct or even unrelated to the traditions and cultural sources that make it possible.

OVERCOMING THE ORIGIN MYTHS

There are several persistent myths that distort the history of economic development. The most common is that the world lived in darkness until the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. Part of this is understandable. When we look at the history of economic growth, we see a profound change take place around 1800 with major shifts in wealth and life expectancy. This graph of the growth of GDP per capita in England from Our World in Data is astounding.

The Industrial Revolution, the American Revolution, the influence of Adam Smith's work on

Gross domestic product (GDP) in England

This data is expressed in British pounds, adjusted for inflation.



Source: Broadberry, Campbell, Klein, Overton, & Van Leeuwen (2015)

OurWorldInData.org/economic-growth • CC BY

Note: This data is expressed in constant 2013 British pounds. Data refers to England until 1700 and the UK from then onwards.

economics, and medical and other scientific innovations helped lift millions of people out of poverty and enabled them to live longer and healthier lives. Nobel Prize-winning economist Angus Deaton calls this story the “Great Escape.” People got wealthier, mortality rates dropped, and the world population grew from around 1 billion to 7 billion in 200 years. David Landes documents this incredible transformation in his wide-ranging book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*.

While this change was profound, contrary to the standard narrative taught in textbooks many of the foundations for this “great escape” did not originate in the 17th and 18th centuries. As scholars like Robert Lopez, Harold Berman, Richard Goldthwaite, Robert Nisbet, Alejandro Chafuen, Henri Pirenne, Christopher Dawson, Rodney Stark, and Raymond de Roover have shown, the seeds of this development began in the medieval period. These include the commercial revolution starting in the ninth century, the development of modern banking, double-entry accounting, representative government, parliaments, social contract, and a host of technological and scientific discoveries. Because the textbooks don’t teach it, many contemporary scholars are simply unaware of ancient or medieval commentary on economic and political matters.

A WINDING ROAD

The evolution of the institutions of justice and corresponding economic development was not a straight path. Western civilization has many influences—from Greek and Roman to Jewish and Christian, Germanic, Islamic, and more that came through travel and global interaction. Banking in some form or another is ancient, but even our *modern* banking and capitalist economies began to develop around the ninth century. The technology now is more advanced, obviously, with transactions taking milliseconds rather than days, but the basic elements are similar.

Another example is social contract. Many people think that the origin of “social contract” and democratic intuitions can be found in the writings of John Locke, especially his *Second Treatise of Civil Government*. No doubt Locke influenced the American Founders and other modern proponents of limited government, but he did not invent the idea of the social contract. Social contract was in wide practice throughout the medieval period. If this seems implausible, perhaps one example may help. In 1620, 70 years before Locke wrote his *Second Treatise*, pilgrims to the New World that would become the United States created an agreement on how they would live together, and they called it the Mayflower

The Mayflower Compact by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (1620)



Compact. It was a social contract in the New World and Locke wasn't even born yet. The Pilgrims didn't invent it either. It was in the air they breathed back in Europe. I'm not saying everything was perfect there (or they wouldn't have left). But that doesn't change the reality that social contract, as well as the roots of modern banking, finance, capital markets, business management and practices, was part of the social structure of medieval Europe in theory and in practice.

A third example is private property, which developed over centuries with trial and error and amid intense debates about the role of inheritance, primogeniture, family, agriculture, industry, social hierarchy, and more. These ideas developed during the medieval period influenced by a confluence of Roman law, Greek philosophy, the Hebrew Bible, canon law, and of course political compromise and struggles for power.

THE ROLE OF JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

It would take a series of books and scholars from dozens of fields to even begin to explain the story of economic development in the West. Yet one of most neglected aspects of this origin story is the role of the Jewish and Christian traditions. Yet without the specific vision of reason and the goodness and intelligibility of creation; without an understanding of impartiality and justice for rich and poor alike that comes from the Hebrew Bible and the books of the New Testament; without the Christian vision of the human person as a unique, unrepeatable individual with dignity and at the same time a social being born into a family and a community; without a Jewish view of the call to complete creation and the dignity of labor, including servile labor, which was generally thought of as something fit only for slaves or the lowest classes, we would never have seen the development of the institutions of justice that have led to unparalleled political liberty, cultural and aesthetic accomplishments, technological and scientific innovations, and the creation and widespread distribution of wealth and prosperity that have enabled hundreds of millions of people to live out their freedom and responsibilities. We moderns have reaped the fruit of these ideas, but the cultural and intellectual foundations of these ideas *did not* originate in modernity or magically appear in the Renaissance.

To affirm the important role of medieval and



**CHRISTOPHER DAWSON
ARGUED CONSISTENTLY
THAT THE DRIVING
FORCE OF CULTURE IS
NOT THE ECONOMY OR
POLITICS BUT IN FACT
CULTUS—RELIGION.**



Jewish and Christian sources on the role of development, I am not denying the positive contributions of the Industrial Revolution or the French and Scottish Enlightenment. But even the Enlightenment were inheritors of the medieval Christendom they sought to throw off. As Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, argued, while the Enlightenment had serious intellectual errors, they also played a corrective role in regard to Christianity. Ratzinger argued in a lecture delivered in 2005 that “Christianity, against its nature and unfortunately, had become tradition and religion of the state. ... It was and is the merit of the Enlightenment to have again proposed these original values of Christianity and of having given back to reason its own voice.”

In his book, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change*, Douglass North presents a schema of how humans create institutions to deal with uncertainty:

Perceived Reality → Beliefs → Institutions

North wasn't writing about theology or faith when he wrote about belief. But the importance of religious belief and the deeper views about the order and structure of the world had profound effect on the institutions that developed in the West, including tremendous impact on economic life and the creation of prosperity. The development of the West cannot be explained by the Industrial Revolution alone or “guns, germs, and steel.” As sociologist Rodney Stark has argued—it is precisely the guns, germs, and steel that we are trying to account for!



Apollo, Diana, and Time with the Cyclic Vicissitudes of Human Life by Maarten de Vos (c. 1561)

As the famous economic historian Joseph Schumpeter has written, there is very little in Adam Smith that did not already exist in the economic writings of medieval Scholastic theologians who were heavily influenced by the philosophical works and biblical commentaries of St. Thomas Aquinas, who was in turn influenced not only by the Church Fathers but also by medieval rabbinic commentators such as Maimonides and Rashi. The same goes for political liberty and the scientific research. Simply put, these ideas did not pop out of nowhere in 1800. Historian and sociologist Christopher Dawson argued consistently that the driving force of culture is not the economy or politics but in fact *cultus*—religion. Dawson did not deny that law, politics, and economics also have an impact on religion and culture, but they are ultimately downstream from more foundational cultural and religious ideas, and we cannot come to any serious understanding of a culture and the institutions that emerge from it if we do not take religion seriously. This is not to say we cannot live for a time under and benefit from institutions and economic arrangements without understanding their source, but cultural capital lasts only so long. If we are to understand the institutions that have brought

about unparalleled wealth creation, it means we need to pay attention to the Jewish and Christian sources that produced them. To ignore them is to miss an essential if not the most important part of the puzzle. To explicate further, here are several key ideas that undergird some of the things we take for granted.

TIME AND PROGRESS

A profound influence on Western economic development, innovation, and the idea of progress is the concept of linear time. Time, and creation, has a beginning and is going somewhere. This may seem obvious, and you may wonder why I would even bring it up, but the idea of time as linear is unique. Most cultures viewed time as cyclical. This was as common among the Chinese as it was among the Mesopotamians and the Greeks. The idea of linear time derives from Judaism and was spread through Christianity to Europe and the Western world. Even Nietzsche, who was no friend of the Jewish or Christian God, admitted this. Linear time and the resultant idea of progress falls between pagan cyclical fatalism and the secular utopian promise of heaven on earth. Part of this comes from an understanding of the world as

created by God. As Ismar Schorsch explains in his essay “Judaism and Linear History”:

Judaism replaces nature with history as its basic category of religious experience....The consequences of this shift from nature to history reinforce the idea of ethical monotheism. Judaism develops a linear concept of time as opposed to a cyclical one and sanctifies events rather than places....Time becomes for Judaism the realm in which humanity and God join to complete together the work of creation.

In contrast to Greek, Chinese, and Hindu civilizations, Judaism teaches that the world is not eternal. It has a beginning. It is also moving toward an end, not just a finality, but a purpose: the coming of the Messiah and the new heavens and earth. This idea has profound implications for the Western understanding of progress and development. The contemporary secular concept of progress is a *derivative* of the Jewish-Christian understanding of time. Linear time encourages innovation and optimism, but when detached from its religious context, it can become a utopian view of progress, either technological or political. This can tend toward something like the optimistic English Whig theory of history where the world is on an inevitable trajectory toward liberty and material progress, or to darker authoritarian and materialist schemes as the 20th century demonstrated. Twentieth-century utopianism was an example of what the late political philosopher

Eric Voegelin called the “immanentization of the eschaton.” It takes the Christian idea of the second coming of Christ but secularizes the End Times, replacing the New Jerusalem coming from Heaven with the idea that man can create heaven on earth by technical means. Examples of this include the Nazi thousand-year Reich, the communist idea of perfect equality and the withering away of the state, and contemporary transhumanism, which sees a technical solution to the problem of death.

In contrast, as Benedict XVI notes in *Spe Salvi*, while progress is good, it is not an end in itself. It must be tempered by morality, and by hope, which is the confident expectation that God will deliver us. He explains that we do not put our faith in progress or technology or the state. Only God can bring about perfect justice, and any attempt to create the perfect society results in enslavement and death. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his essay “Jewish Time,” echoes this point: the Jewish sense of time is not simply linear but “covenantal.” “Tragedy gives rise to pessimism. Cyclical time leads to acceptance. Linear time begets optimism. Covenantal time gives birth to hope. These are not just different emotions. They are radically different ways of relating to life and the universe.”

This concept of a universe with a purpose and meaning shaped the Western idea of progress and impacted science, technology, innovation, and economic development. We cannot understand it—nor its distorted utopian derivative—without understanding its religious sources.

Sir Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of the U.K.

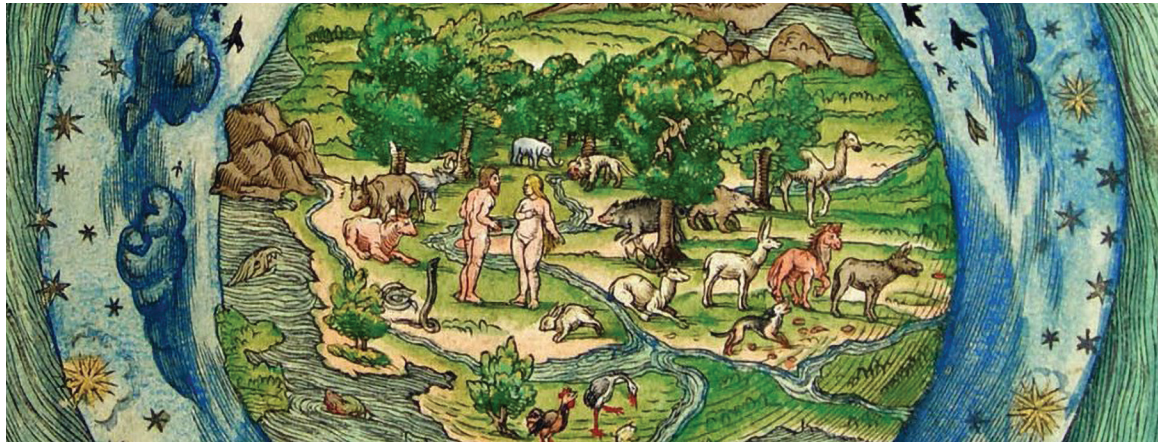


Photo by cooperniall / Wikipedia

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**THE CONTEMPORARY
SECULAR CONCEPT
OF PROGRESS IS A
DERIVATIVE OF THE
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN
UNDERSTANDING
OF TIME.**

”



Colorized illustration of *The Creation* by Lucas Cranach from Martin Luther's 1534 translation of the Bible

THE GOODNESS AND INTELLIGIBILITY OF NATURE

Another fundamental idea that shapes the West is the idea that being is good, that the material world is good, and that nature is intelligible, not simply random. We see this vision set out in the creation narrative in the book of Genesis, which, perhaps surprisingly, provides several foundational ideas that undergird Western science, politics, and progress.

First, the world is created by God. Nature is not divine. As Joseph Ratzinger notes, this is a radical proposition for the time: the sun and the moon have no divine or sacred character. They are just “lamps in the sky to measure time.” Nature is not to be worshipped and is no longer a mystery shrouded with divine characteristics. It can be analyzed and understood. As Ratzinger writes in *In the Beginning*: “This creation account may be seen as the decisive ‘enlightenment’ of history out of the fears that had oppressed humankind. It placed the world in the context of reason and recognized the world’s reasonableness and freedom.”

Second, creation and the natural world are affirmed as good. This, too, is distinct from most other religious and cultural traditions, which see matter as negative or bad, made from a dragon’s body, created by a demon, or forged by an evil demiurge. This positive view of nature as good and intelligible is a precursor to the development of science.

Third, within the order of creation men and women are called to “fill the earth and subdue it” and are given dominion over all of nature. We are called to complete creation and by using our intellects to transform it. Nature is not a mysterious force to be

worshipped but rather to be understood and utilized for good. This dominion does not mean the right to abuse or destroy creation at will. It does not mean that the natural world or the animals can be used and discarded in any way we please. Radical abuse of the environment is a modern, utilitarian view, not a Jewish or Christian idea. It was after all Francis Bacon who said that “knowledge is power” and that “nature is a whore.” In contrast, examples abound from Jewish law about animal welfare and the care of creation. Further, the command is not only to subdue but to “fill the earth” or “replenish the earth.” The Jewish and Christian view of nature and the natural world is a positive one. This idea in Genesis becomes philosophically articulated in the idea of the goodness of being—as St. Augustine explains, all things are good insofar as they have existence.

The Hebrew Bible, along with later Greek philosophy, begins the process of de-mythologization and de-divinization, which leads to the idea that nature is not simply the will of the gods but is intelligible. Echoing Genesis, the prologue of the Gospel of John begins with “In the beginning was the Word.” The original Greek is *Logos*—meaning “word” but also reason and intelligibility. The world is complex, but it is not completely erratic and unpredictable, moved by fate or the whim of the gods. The fact that nature is created and needs human action to achieve its fullness provides a unique framework for engaging and understanding the world. The human mind can apprehend meaning and patterns about the universe. We can discover and improve things. When this realization is combined with the linear idea of time mentioned above, it opens up the potential for thinking about progress.

These original ideas became part of European civilization and had a profound impact on science, innovation, and economic development, forming the foundation of the scientific method in Christian Europe. From medieval monks like St. Albert the Great, to Enlightenment scientists like Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle, to the Augustinian priest Gregor Mendel, who founded modern genetics, many famous scientists saw the connection between faith and science and the goodness and intelligibility of the universe. We see this reflected in Einstein's famous quote that "God does not play dice with the universe."

THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON AND OF WORK

At the core of Western ideas, the Jewish and Christian idea of what it means to be human is the most important contribution to the sources of justice and economic development. The idea that human beings are made in the image of God, are free and rational, unique and unrepeatable individuals with an inherent dignity, and moral agents capable of heroic virtue and profound evil—this vision of the person had a profound impact on how the West developed and on the institutions of private property, rule of law, and the limited role of the state, all of which had to function in the service of human flourishing.

In Genesis we also read that man is commanded to use his intellect and strength to improve and complete creation. Many people have the idea that work is a punishment for sin, but the text of Genesis is very clear that work comes before the Fall. Genesis 2:15 states that God commanded Adam to cultivate and care for the garden. Work itself is not a punishment; rather it is one of the ways in which man lives out his vocation. Again, human beings are called to "complete creation."

Innovation and creativity are part of the reflection of the divine image. Work is not something from which we need to escape. Fully automated luxury communism is not the goal of man. We are called rather to sanctify the world with our work. The toil, difficulty, and burden of work, "the sweat of our brow," may have come about as a result of the Fall, but work itself is a good. The tradition is also clear that work should be seen in the context of the nature of man, his higher calling to worship, and the priority of *being over having*. Work is not our end or final purpose. Work is always seen in light of the Sabbath rest, which puts work and material gain in their proper place.

The Babylonian Talmud states: "A person should love work and not hate it; for just as the Torah was given with a covenant, so too was work given with a covenant." And that "if a person has no work to do, what should he do? If he has a dilapidated yard or field, he should go and occupy himself with it."

This respect for manual labor continues in the Christian tradition, though there were times in Christian Europe when aristocrats appropriated a pagan disdain for labor and commerce. But as we see in the rule of St. Benedict: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the monks should be occupied at certain times in manual labor, and at other fixed hours in holy reading."

Monasteries living under the Benedictine motto of *ora et labora* were often centers of commercial activity wherein we saw the origin of a number of modern agricultural and management techniques, from operations and logistics to double-entry accounting.

IDEAS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

In summary, while I have obviously left out many key factors, we cannot understand the development of Western political and economic institutions apart from the metaphysical and moral ideas that are at the heart of Judaism and Christianity. This does not require one to assent to the theological claims of Judaism or Christianity, but I am asserting that without these fundamental ideas of linear time, the goodness and intelligibility of the natural world, and the dignity of man and labor, we would not have seen the scientific or economic developments that have characterized the West, and that frankly have become models for progress in non-Western contexts. **RL**

This essay is an edited excerpt from the forthcoming EXCLUDED: How the Poverty Industry Excludes Poor People from Prosperity and Justice.

Michael Matheson Miller is chief of strategic initiatives and senior research fellow at the Acton Institute. He is also the director and producer of the award-winning documentary *Poverty, Inc.*, the *PovertyCure* DVD series, and *The Good Society* series, and was the founding director of *PovertyCure*, which promotes entrepreneurial solutions to poverty in the developing world. Host of *The Moral Imagination* podcast, Miller writes and speaks extensively on the intersection between moral philosophy and theology and economics, poverty, entrepreneurship, and culture.

CREATING AN ECONOMY OF INCLUSION

by PHILIP BOOTH

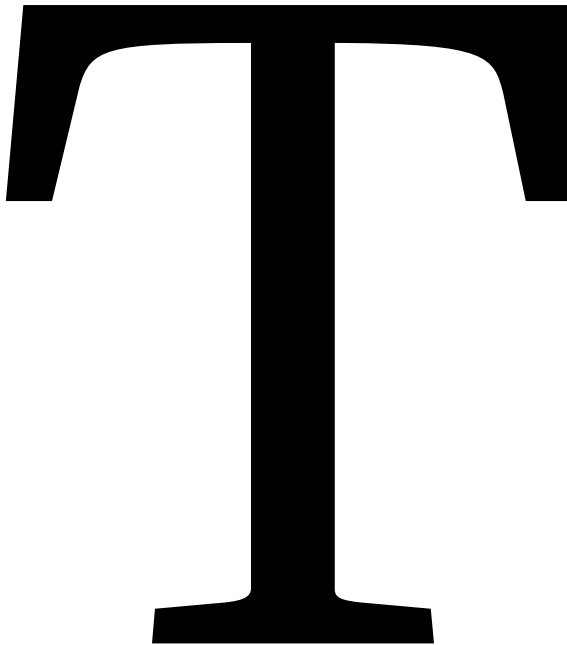
Catholic Social Teaching has for decades provided both guidelines and cautions for market economies that exclude marginalized populations. The question is, are those populations excluded *by* markets or *from* markets?



Photo by robypany / iStock

In *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI describes how he had seen firsthand the poverty he was addressing:

Before We became pope, We travelled to Latin America (1960) and Africa (1962). There We saw the perplexing problems that vex and besiege these continents, which are otherwise full of life and promise. On being elected pope, We became the father of all men. We made trips to Palestine and India, gaining first-hand knowledge of the difficulties that these age-old civilizations must face in their struggle for further development. Before the close of the Second Vatican Council, providential circumstances allowed Us to address the United Nations and to plead the case of the impoverished nations before that distinguished assembly.



THE POOR HAVE BEEN the main subject of concern in the whole tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. The Catholic Church talks often about a “preferential option for the poor.” In recent years, many of the Church’s social teaching documents have been particularly focused on the needs of the poorest people in the world’s poorest countries. The first major analysis of this topic could be said to have been in the papal encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, published in 1967 by Pope Paul VI. Since then, every major Catholic Social Teaching document has reflected on the position of the poorest of the poor.

The encyclical was subtitled “On the Development of Peoples.” It covered a number of questions, and not just material poverty. Indeed, the Catholic Church uses the phrase “integral human development” to describe the range of conditions that must be present if the development of a people is to be truly and authentically Christian. Nevertheless, material poverty was a significant concern of the pope—and of all his successors.

Unsurprisingly, Pope Francis, who has a deep concern for the poor, continues the theme of considering the plight of the world’s poorest in his latest social encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. Indeed, consideration of the problems faced by the poorest countries is woven throughout the encyclical as if to remind the reader of the main theme: there is no geographical limit when answering the question “Who is my neighbor?”

When discussing underdeveloped countries, Pope Francis has focused, in a sustained way, on factors such as corruption, rent-seeking, and violence, which have both an economic and moral character. These problems can be seen as “structures of sin” in the sense that, if one lives in a society beset by corruption, rent-seeking, and violence, it can become very difficult to extract oneself from its effects, and our culpability can be diminished because participation in society becomes impossible unless we sometimes partake in these deeply embedded evils. How, for example, do we behave if we have a truckload of perishable food destined for a poor town that we cannot take through customs without paying a bribe?

In an apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis wrote: “Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to

safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion.” From what followed, Pope Francis appeared to be criticizing markets for excluding people and, thus, promoting poverty. In a letter to popular movements in 2016, Pope Francis wrote, “Market solutions do not reach the peripheries.” As a statement of fact, this may be true. However, neither this problem nor the “economy of exclusion” is intrinsic to markets. People are not excluded *by* markets; they are excluded *from* markets.

THE SCORE SO FAR

While Pope Francis and his predecessors have been right to focus on the dire poverty that remains in the world, it is important to examine the progress made between the publication of *Populorum Progressio* and 2023. Doing so helps us to understand better the conditions necessary for further progress. Despite the impression sometimes given in Church documents, as an empirical matter we can observe that the past 50 years have seen the largest reduction in poverty the world has ever known. Not only that, we have also seen the first substantial and meaningful reduction in inequality at a global level in the economic history of the world. This is important. Something has

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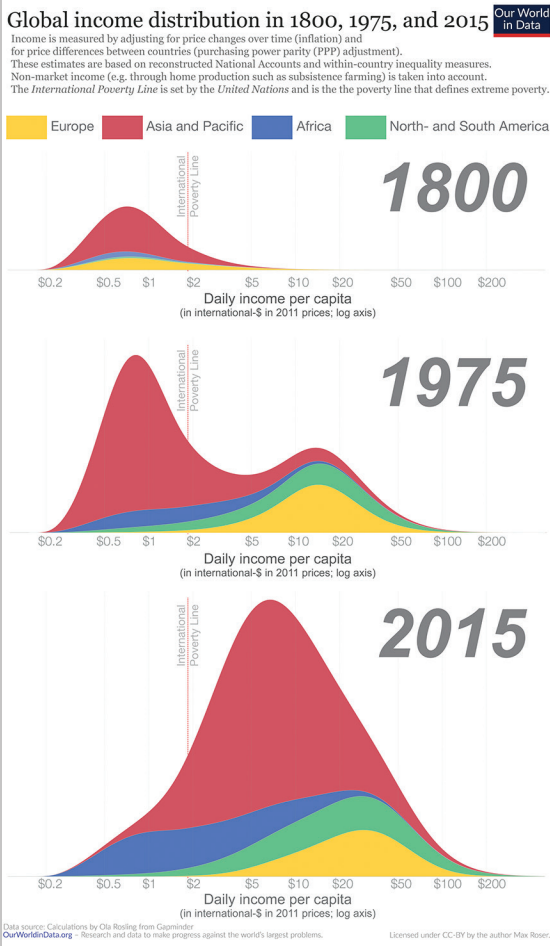
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gone right in the past 50 years, and we should learn from that.

In 1967, 45% of the world’s population lived in extreme poverty—that is, without enough money to buy the basics of food, shelter, clothing, etc. By 2018 that proportion had fallen to 10%. As much progress was made in reducing dire poverty between 1967

Riverside town in Lagos, Nigeria





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health outcomes. Perhaps more surprisingly, we are also experiencing the first meaningful reduction in inequality the world has ever known.

If we look at the distribution of world incomes in 1800, we see that virtually the whole of the world's population lived in absolute poverty. (*See chart.*) The world was relatively equal—there was an equality of misery. Living standards across the world were dire. If we fast-forward to 1975, just after the publication of *Populorum Progressio*, and examine the distribution of world incomes, the world's population is clearly divided into two. It's as if we lived on two separate planets—hence the phrases “First World” and “Third World” in vogue at the time. The rich world had pulled away from the poor world. Much of the world's population, though, was still desperately poor. By 2015 the shape of the distribution of world incomes is similar to that in 1800, but the world is no longer divided into two. What used to be described as the “Third World” has now become much richer. The poor have, at least partially, caught up with the rich. Although the distribution of world incomes is a similar shape to that in 1800, it has moved dramatically in the right direction. This is an extraordinary achievement and one that could surely not have been envisaged by the drafters of the 1967 encyclical.

Nevertheless, 10% of the world's population still live in dire poverty. And many more are stuck just above the absolute poverty line unable to progress. Also of great concern is the fact that the proportion of people living in absolute poverty seems to have started to increase in the past two or three years. If we are to make progress again, we need to

and 2018 as in the whole of the rest of the world's economic history. This success is even more stunning when we consider the increase in the world's population. The number of people in absolute poverty halved, while the number of people living above the poverty line increased from fewer than 2 billion to nearly 7 billion. Clearly something has gone right.

There has been enormous progress in relation to other measures of well-being, too. In 1970 around one-third of the world's population was illiterate. By 2016 this had fallen to 14%. The ratio of the average years of schooling for girls to that of boys rose from 57% in Sub-Saharan Africa to 82% in roughly the same period. In the past 20 years alone, the proportion of women who die from pregnancy-related causes has fallen by more than a third.

There is little doubt that we have been experiencing the most incredible period we have ever known in terms of improving how we are meeting basic material needs and achieving better education and



Mao Tse-Tung's likeness featured on renminbi banknotes, the official Chinese currency of the People's Republic of China

understand how the immense progress of the past 40 years came about.

HOW HAVE WE MADE THIS PROGRESS?

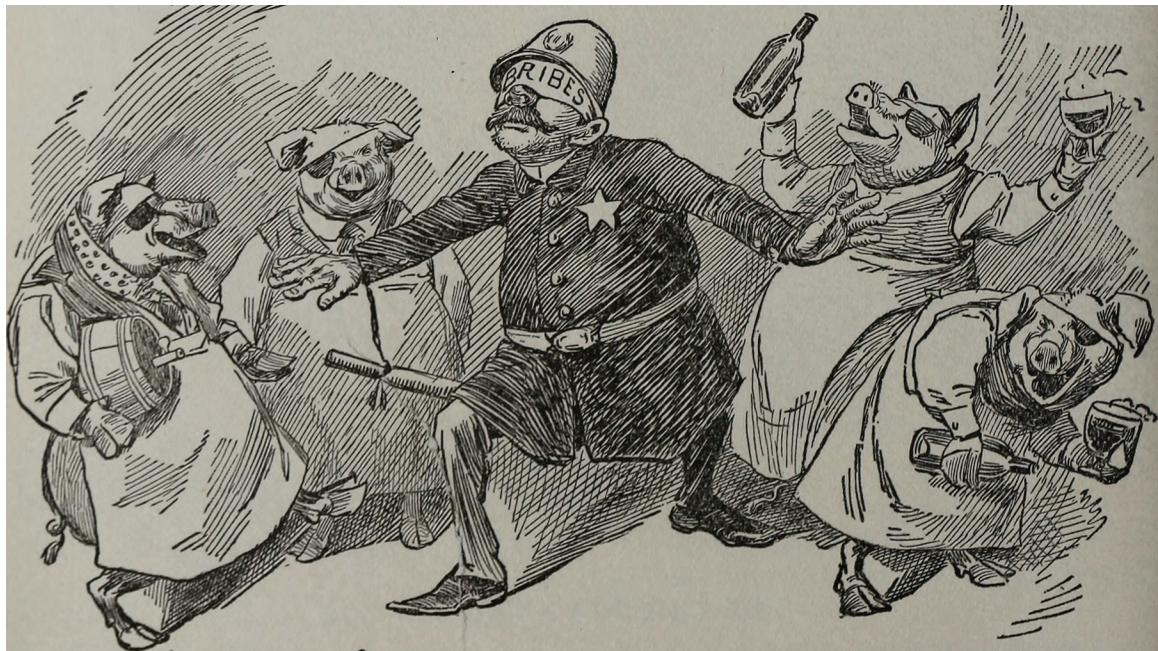
It is clear that reductions in the extent of civil conflict, improvement in conditions for developing business, increase in trade and globalization, the expansion of democracy, and the development of the institutional conditions necessary for the reduction of poverty were key to development. Indeed, China demonstrates that relatively little progress has to be made in these respects for countries to make substantial inroads into poverty. China could hardly be described as a “free country,” and yet liberalization from its Maoist inheritance was key to one of the most rapid transformations of an economy in history.

Indeed, examining the progress of individual countries further is instructive.

In 1990, Vietnam was, perhaps, the poorest country in the world. It began to institute market-oriented reforms. Like China, it did not allow a capitalist economy to evolve of the type that exists in most Western countries, but there was a considerable extension of economic freedoms, especially in relation to trade. The absolute poverty rate in Vietnam fell from about 90% to about 5% in just 30 years.

In 1989, Poland was one of the poorest countries in Europe, with average incomes of around one-tenth the level of Germany. (After allowing for differences in purchasing power, however, the standard of living was, perhaps, somewhat less than one-third the level of that in Germany.) Polish incomes lagged behind those of some African countries. Then came the market reforms of 1989 onward, which led to the highest growth rate in Europe. Lives were transformed from drabness (at least in material terms) in which, as a visiting lecturer, I would have to take my own chalk and toilet paper. Average incomes in Poland are now drawing close to those in the rest of Europe.

We can debate whether tax systems, welfare policies, and so on are better in Holland than in the U.K., better in Denmark or in the U.S., or better in Australia or in Germany. However, all these countries are prosperous and have capitalist economies in which freedom of contract, the rule of law, free trade, and freedom to establish businesses reign, even if these freedoms are manifested and constrained in different ways in the different countries. These countries also have legal and political systems that largely support these free-market institutions. All these countries contrast with, for example, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. As countries around the world have, to a greater degree, adopted the basic institutions necessary for a market economy, they have prospered. And this prospering



“Blasts’ from the Ram’s Horn,” a 1902 political cartoon depicting bribery

has been the driving force of reduced poverty and the reduced inequality of a kind we have never seen before.

Pope John Paul II both recognized and anticipated these developments when he wrote in his encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* (1991):

Even in recent years it was thought that the poorest countries would develop by isolating themselves from the world market and by depending only on their own resources. Recent experience has shown that countries which did this have suffered stagnation and recession, while the countries which experienced development were those which succeeded in taking part in the general interrelated economic activities at the international level.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EXCLUSION

But, as noted above, the Catholic Church regularly, and quite rightly, draws attention to the dire poverty that remains or, as Pope Francis has put it, to “the economy of exclusion.” Perhaps it would be better described, however, as the “political economy of exclusion.” People suffer from the failure of political institutions within their countries and, as a result,

are excluded from normal economic life. Civil conflict, corruption, rent-seeking, and cronyism are at the root of the dire poverty of perhaps 1 billion people today. These problems are also responsible for trapping many more in a state that is far from one of economic flourishing. Again, people are not excluded by markets; they are excluded from markets by structures of political economy that prevent market exchange and sustainable investment reaching the peripheries.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is very clear about the responsibilities of the state:

Economic activity, especially the activity of a market economy, cannot be conducted in an institutional, juridical, or political vacuum. On the contrary, it presupposes sure guarantees of individual freedom and private property, as well as a stable currency and efficient public services. Hence the principal task of the state is to guarantee this security, so that those who work and produce can enjoy the fruits of their labors and thus feel encouraged to work efficiently and honestly.

Corruption is one of the reasons why states do not perform adequately their proper functions. Indeed, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*

specifically cites corruption as a major impediment to the promotion of the common good:

Among the deformities of the democratic system, political corruption is one of the most serious because it betrays at one and the same time both moral principles and the norms of social justice....Corruption radically distorts the role of representative institutions, because they become an arena for political bartering between clients' requests and governmental services. In this way political choices favour the narrow objectives of those who possess the means to influence these choices and are an obstacle to bringing about the common good of all citizens. [emphasis in original]

As noted above, structures can be created whereby it is impossible for those who do not wish to embrace corruption to partake fully in economic and political life.

We can illustrate this problem with a simple example. Consider a situation where a group of firms are bidding for a government contract. One of the firms might be a paragon of ethical behavior in every respect. It may also produce an excellent product. If the other companies are offering bribes to win the contract, how does the “ethical” company behave? If it offers the bribe, it is participating in the sinful structures. If it does not, a company offering an inferior product and that behaves unethically in every respect may win the contract.

Pope Francis has discussed the subject of corruption at greater length than his predecessors, perhaps reflecting his Latin American experience. In his 2020 social encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, for example, Pope Francis states: “For many people today, politics is a distasteful word, often due to the mistakes, corruption and inefficiency of some politicians” and “the misuse of power, corruption, disregard for law and inefficiency must clearly be rejected.” In his 2015 encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Sí*, corruption is mentioned several times. It is pointed out that “when the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided.” Countries are then exhorted to combat corruption. Linking political corruption with business, he suggests that the culture of corruption can lead business groups to “come forward in the guise of benefactors, wield real power, and consider themselves exempt from certain rules, to the point of

tolerating different forms of organized crime, human trafficking, the drug trade and violence, all of which become very difficult to eradicate.”

THE PRACTICAL REALITY OF CORRUPTION

Nigeria is ranked 150th out of 180 countries for corruption, and examples from that country illustrate these above points well. Diezani Alison-Madueke, the former minister for petroleum resources in Nigeria, is said to have embezzled \$1.6 billion by awarding contracts to shell companies owned by business associates. The proceeds are alleged to have been laundered through companies and banks in the U.K., U.S., Switzerland, and the British Virgin Islands (including to buy an \$80 million yacht built in Holland). It was expected that the money would be used to further the reelection of the former president, but it is clear that much has been used to enrich her personally.

Sadly, corruption is part of everyday life in that country: 30% of Nigerian citizens who had contact with public officials in 2019 were asked to pay a bribe. Those who paid a bribe, on average, paid six bribes a year. Roughly half of those who refused to pay a bribe reported negative consequences. The way in which

Diezani Alison-Madueke at the Ending Energy Poverty Session of the World Economic Forum on Africa in 2021



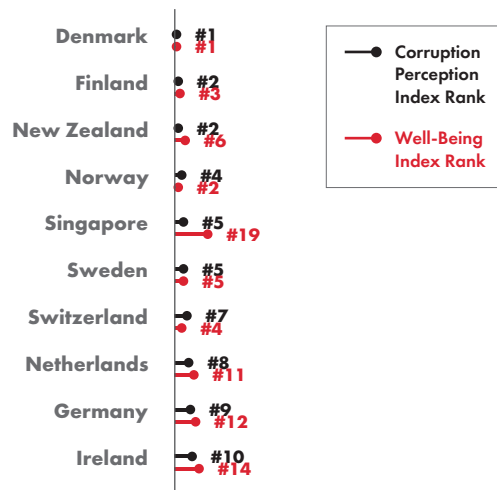
this becomes ingrained in culture, and structures of sin, is obvious. If bribery is widespread and a bribe is not paid, one may receive a fine for an offense that has not been committed, somebody who needs urgent hospital treatment may not receive it, or a company wishing to export produce may not be able to obtain a license.

Other aspects of poor governance also contribute to the political economy of exclusion. If the government does not respect private property, and if it is not possible for people to establish businesses with reasonable ease, it will be impossible for the great majority of individuals to prosper. People will not work if they're not able to keep the fruits of their labor, there will be little investment, and families will not be able to invest in the upkeep of their homes and in the necessary infrastructure (garbage disposal, sanitary waste treatment, the provision of water and electricity, and so on) if there is no guarantee that their rights of ownership over the property in which they live will be enforced. This leads to many people living in slum conditions or "informal" settlements—23% of the world's population, according to the United Nations.

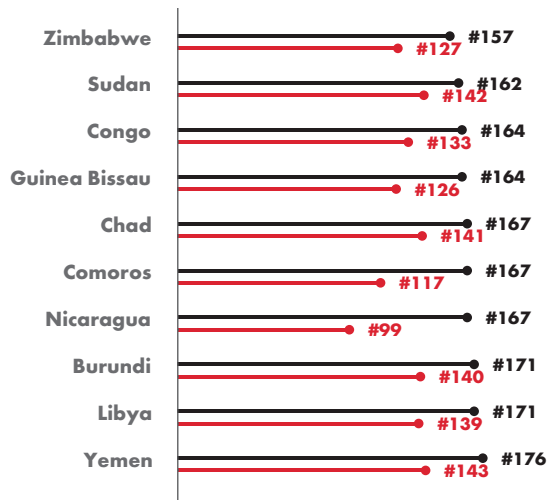
Also, if people cannot establish legally registered businesses easily because the processes are so complex or subject to corruption, then economic resources will be concentrated in the hands of incumbents or those able to navigate the political system effectively. In addition, many businesses will be unregistered and will remain small, will not advertise, and will not offer proper contracts of employment to their employees because they will not be enforceable. In short, businesses will endeavor not to come to the attention of the authorities and, if they do, may have to pay bribes in order not to be fined or closed. According to World Bank data, it takes one day of person-time to register a business in New Zealand, four days in the United States, 33 days in the Philippines, and 230 days in Venezuela. In addition, if court systems are inefficient or corrupt, crime is likely to thrive, and violent means will be used to enforce contracts. Furthermore, civil conflict, as well as unleashing terror on peoples and wasting economic resources directly, undermines the ability of people to partake in economic activity.

These problems are all related. In times of civil conflict, judicial systems are less likely to function properly, and corruption may become common. If court systems are beset by corruption, property rights and contractual rights become insecure because legal

TOP-RANKING COUNTRIES



BOTTOM-RANKING COUNTRIES



decisions will not depend on justice but on who has successfully abused the corrupt system. If this happens, business activity and investment can collapse because those involved can never know whether they will obtain the fruits of their economic activity.

The following table shows the top 10 and 10 of the bottom 20 nations in the world ranked by the level of corruption according to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. In the third column, the countries are ranked by one of the many indices of global well-being. Global well-being indicators are not available for all countries, so 10 countries have been chosen from the bottom 20 of

the corruption index for which there is also a ranking in the well-being index. The relationship between corruption and well-being is very clear. It should be noted that there is not widespread agreement about the factors that should enter an index of well-being and how they should be weighted. However, if the countries were ranked by almost any metric related to human development—such as national income per head, average years of education, maternal mortality, or life expectancy—a very similar relationship would be found.

DO WE NEED A NEW CONSENSUS?

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of countries enacted reforms that followed the “Washington Consensus.” This was a series of economic and political policies that involved promoting free markets and better governance. Inflation and government borrowing were to be reduced, privatization undertaken, and so on.

The Washington Consensus has been strongly criticized by some economists, such as Joseph Stiglitz and Mariana Mazzucato, and by campaigners such as Naomi Klein. Its tenets have been ignored in an increasing number of countries such as Venezuela and, for much of the past 20 years, Argentina. Certainly, there is no longer a consensus behind the Washington Consensus. It is true that the recommendations of the Washington Consensus cannot just be implemented unthinkingly as a blueprint. There can be problems, for example, if countries conduct privatization programs while beset with corruption;

this can lead to the concentration of economic power in the hands of oligarchs and bring the whole idea of a free economy into disrepute. But there is much that is valuable about the program, nevertheless.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist Kenneth Arrow once wrote: “Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust. ... It can be plausibly argued that much of the economic backwardness in the world can be explained by the lack of mutual confidence.” In a similar way, Pope Benedict noted, “*Without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfil its proper economic function*” (emphasis in original).

The building of the virtue of trust in economic and political life, the elimination of civil conflict, and a reduction in corruption are all necessary if those who are excluded from markets are to prosper. Other Washington Consensus policies, such as sound money, responsible fiscal policy, and appropriate privatization, are surely still appropriate and consistent with Catholic Social Teaching.

The sequencing of policies may be important. As noted above, privatization in the context of a corrupt political system can be the parent of the economy of exclusion. On the other hand, the deregulation of trade and business can remove opportunities for corrupt officials to enrich themselves at the expense of small businesses. The elimination of corruption can provide a more solid foundation for other sensible reforms.

For Christians, however, the most important message is that economic and political activities do not take place in a moral vacuum. Not only do political and economic conditions have to be right, but the moral culture has to be right, too, so that economic freedom is put at the service of humanity and the political structures support rather than work against this objective. As John Paul II put it, economic freedom is an aspect of human freedom, the core of which must be ethical and religious. If we have both the right economic policies and a culture that nurtures the virtues in economic and political life, we can make further inroads into eliminating the economy of exclusion. But we must do this by promoting both a free and a virtuous society and not by pursuing one of these objectives without any consideration of the need for the other. **RI.**

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FOR CHRISTIANS, THE MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGE IS THAT ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY DOES NOT TAKE PLACE IN A MORAL VACUUM.
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Philip Booth is professor of finance, public policy, and ethics at St. Mary's University, Twickenham.

ADAM SMITH AND THE POOR

by DANIEL B. KLEIN



Photo by Adrienne / Adobe Stock



The famed “father of capitalism” had a lot to say about the poor, such that even the left has tried to claim him. Let’s just say he was anything but fatalistic.

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‘WHAT CAN BE ADDED TO THE HAPPINESS OF THE MAN WHO IS IN HEALTH, WHO IS OUT OF DEBT, AND HAS A CLEAR CONSCIENCE?’ SMITH ASKED.

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ADAM SMITH DID NOT seem to think that riches were requisite to happiness: “The beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for” (*Theory of Moral Sentiments*). But he did not recommend beggary. The beggar here is not any beggar, but Diogenes the Cynic, who asked of Alexander the Great only to step back so as not to cast a shadow upon Diogenes as he reclined alongside the highway.

That Diogenes possessed a security Alexander was fighting for is a fitting finish to Smith’s parable of the poor man’s son, “whom heaven in its anger visited with ambition.” In old age and “splenetic” humor,

the now-rich poor man’s son possesses “enormous and operose machines, which must be kept in order with the most anxious attention, and which in spite of all our care are ready every moment to burst into pieces, and to crush in their ruins their unfortunate possessor.” Business, career, and estate are projects that require “the labour of a life to raise,” yet leave us “as much and sometimes more exposed than before to anxiety, to fear, and to sorrow; to diseases, to danger, and to death.”

Smith taught that a man in a “permanent situation,” whatever it be, settles, psychically, into “the natural and ordinary state of mankind.” Once one has settled into that psychic state, there is little scope for movement upward. Never are we long or much happier than we are in “the natural and ordinary state of mankind”—and when someone pretends otherwise, others do not believe him. But downward the fall may be, “immense and prodigious.” Smith emphasized great asymmetry about “the natural and ordinary state of mankind.”

Why work to build and maintain operose machines if a cushier or chicer “permanent situation” only returns us to the natural and ordinary state? “What can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience?” Smith asked. Good health depends somewhat on wealth, as does staying out of financial debt, yet those are attainable with modesty and frugality.

What about a clear conscience? Is it conscionable to shrug off the business of accumulating wealth? After describing the now-rich poor man’s son’s

splenetic regrets about his lifelong ambitions, Smith looked “in better humour” at the good achieved by pursuing honest income, and that good is substantial. It included enlarged support for “a greater multitude of inhabitants,” “the multiplication of the species.”

We read Smith’s words and we know that others may read them as well. We may imagine that the poor man’s son has a child—a daughter, say. She learns from Smith the virtue in pursuing honest income. She sees in Smith’s words what J.G.A. Pocock in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* called commercial humanism. She knows Dad’s bouts of splenetic regret. We may imagine that, with eyes wide open, she sets about to build oporose machines, cognizant of the good she thereby does, and of how ambition can grow splenetic. With a different attitude, a wiser, more virtuous one, she embraces oporose responsibilities. Call it the invisible parable of the poor man’s son’s daughter.

One thing to say, then, about Smith on poverty is that, beyond material basics, happiness depends principally on moral condition, and that material condition matters principally only through moral condition. Spiritual poverty is the fundamental problem, not material privation. At one point in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith represents the inner substance of the wealth of nations as “the good cheer of private families”—though he himself never married.

GOVERNMENT POLICY FOR UNIVERSAL OPULENCE

Smith may have doubted that a man would make himself much happier by accumulating greater wealth, yet he wrote of “the uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition.” From the first page of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith teaches that the drive for betterment would, under liberal arrangements, produce a rising opulence, lifting all boats. A few pages later he says the division of labor, the extension of markets, “occasions, in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people.”

However, Smith does see a force that, even under liberal arrangements, has a tendency to push down wages. That force is competition among laborers, which comes about notably from population growth. Smith suggests that the downward pressure on wages from population growth could lead to a “stationary” economy, and he references China in that regard, saying it has “acquired that full complement of riches



Alexander the Great visits Diogenes in Corinth (1696)

which the nature of its laws and institutions permits it to acquire.”

But China’s laws and institutions were not liberal, and Smith expressed considerable optimism about escaping any Malthusian trap, provided that laws and institutions sufficiently “allow every man to pursue his own interest his own way, upon the liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice.” Smith expounded economies of scale explicitly in the first chapter and, less conspicuously, indicated technical improvement and ongoing discovery, factors that would continually shift cost curves downward and prompt people to think of improvements previously unthought of. Like Julian Simon two centuries later, Smith wrote of the ultimate resource:

What takes place among the labourers in a particular workhouse, takes place, for the same reason,

among those of a great society. The greater their number, the more they naturally divide themselves into different classes and subdivisions of employment. *More heads* are occupied in inventing the most proper machinery for executing the work of each, and it is, therefore, *more likely to be invented*. [italics added]

The effects of all such dynamic forces are to ease production, increase supply, multiply products, and reduce prices. Smith was pro-human and optimistic about the feasibility of ever-growing numbers of human beings. Yes, all else equal, population growth reduced wages, but, in Smith's dynamic vision of the free economy, all else does not remain equal; possibilities are continually pushed outward. The countervailing economic dynamics could more than make up for population's downward pressure on wages.

In short, Smith's recommendation for poverty reduction would be freedom. The first object of political economy is "to provide a plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or *more properly* to

enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence *for themselves*" (italics added).

POVERTY AND PARTICULAR POLICY ISSUES

What about particular policies? Does Smith reference the poor when discussing certain policies?

Yes, he does. In advocating specific liberalizations, Smith sometimes references the plight of the "poor," of "labourers," "workmen," "artificers," "inferior ranks," or the "great body of the people." I will remark on some of those topics. Afterward, I will remark on two other particular areas of public policy—namely, redistribution (the Poor Law and progressive taxation, in particular) and schooling.

Standing up for the poor and labor

In traditional Christian society—say, in 1400—all souls may have been understood, equally, in terms of *imago Dei*, but people also understood that each soul was affixed to a distinct person, and in this world persons were situated differently, and always would be. Poor persons seemed fated to their station. Some doubted whether it was proper that poor people should rise in material condition, or hope to. Some suggested that poverty was useful, for it impelled poor people to overcome the indolence natural to man—the so-called utility of poverty doctrine. Latter-day economists call it the backward-bending supply curve of labor. The poor were to inherit the earth but not anytime soon.

Smith was an outspoken and striking opponent of any fatalistic view of poverty and of the class supremacism that sometimes accompanied it. Not only souls

Portrait of Adam Smith by John Kay (1790)



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SMITH WAS PRO-HUMAN AND OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FEASIBILITY OF EVER-GROWING NUMBERS OF HUMAN BEINGS.

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in the eyes of God but persons in this world count equally, ethically. The equality of “the liberal plan of *equality*, liberty and justice” is equal standing in the supreme spectacle. More importantly, the right to pursue one’s own interest in one’s own way goes equally for the poor.

And equality of freedom usually serves—as in this case—the supreme spectacle: “It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath [*sic*] and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged.” After all, “no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.” Smith taught aristocrats to take pride, not in the flourishing of their estate, but in that of their society. Smith taught aristocrats to embrace the liberal plan.

The rubber hits the road, for example, on guild restrictions—analogueous to occupational licensing restrictions today. Consider these excerpts from *The Wealth of Nations*:

The property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable. The patrimony of a poor man lies in the strength and dexterity of his hands; and to hinder him from employing this strength and dexterity in what manner he thinks proper without injury to his neighbour is a plain violation of this most sacred property.

The consumer-protection rationale is a sham:

To judge whether he is fit to be employed, may surely be trusted to the discretion of the employers [or customers] whose interest it so much concerns. The affected anxiety of the law-giver lest they should employ an improper person is evidently as impertinent as it is oppressive.

Smith rarely called loudly in his policy espousal, but when he did, it was in objecting to encroachments on liberty. Another such moment was Smith’s condemnation of restrictions on settling in a town or parish—restrictions that were rationalized as preventives against poor people moving in to take advantage of local poor relief. Smith writes:

To remove a man who has committed no misdemeanour from the parish where he chuses [*sic*] to reside is an evident violation of natural liberty and

justice.... There is scarce a poor man in England of forty years of age, I will venture to say, who has not in some part of his life felt himself most cruelly oppressed by this ill-contrived law of settlements.

In labor markets today, governments impose many violations of liberty, supposedly for the benefit of laborers, especially those earning low wages. What about Smith? Is there no labor-market issue for which he makes an exception to the liberty principle?

There is but one judgment on a labor-market issue that might qualify as an exception. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith references a law without citing the law he meant: “the law which obliges the masters in several different trades to pay their workmen in money and not in goods is quite just and equitable.” He adds: “It imposes no real hardship upon the masters. It only obliges them to pay that value in money, which they pretended to pay, but did not always really pay, in goods.” I have not looked deeply into the matter, but the law Smith alludes to sounds like one that reinforces contracts rather than restricts liberty. Furthermore, if the law restricts in-kind payment contracting, in the event that such contracts are, quietly, nonetheless made, *and kept*, would anyone squawk? My point is that the *only* possible exception that Smith makes to liberty on labor-market issues seems insignificant.

Redistribution (the Poor Law and progressive taxation)

Although Smith discussed and objected to the restrictions on local settlement, which came about because of the poor relief administered and financed locally under what was known as the Poor Law, Smith never weighed in on the Poor Law directly. That silence is curious, given Smith’s striking regard for the condition of the poor and the comprehensiveness of *The Wealth of Nations*. What should we make of the silence?

Some scholars claim Smith for the political left. To claim Smith for the left, they naturally have to say that Smith favored—or would favor today—progressive taxation and welfare-state redistribution directed especially to the less well-off. These scholars have sometimes noted Smith’s silence on the Poor Law and suggested: *See, he wasn’t against it, since he didn’t attack it.*

But one could likewise say that he wasn’t in favor of it, since he didn’t endorse it. A couple of points support that side of the matter.



A 1799 caricature of William Pitt the Younger collecting a newly introduced income tax from John Bull, published by S. W. Fores

First, since Smith makes clear that the settlement restrictions ramified from the Poor Law, his condemnation of those restrictions would seem to militate against the root from which they stem. Smith never says how parishes should cope with the problem of attracting relief-seeking settlers. It is natural for the reader to wonder whether the problem ought to be dealt with at the root. Smith, after all, was an economist, and an economist might figure that one way to reduce poverty is to stop paying people to be poor.

More importantly, Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* announces that he shall, in Book 5, “show... what are the necessary expences [sic] of the sovereign, or commonwealth.” He says this at the very start of the book and repeats it at the end of Book 4 as he describes what lies ahead. Smith’s presentation of the necessary expenses of the sovereign or commonwealth makes no mention of poor relief. It is absent. Should we not conclude, then, that poor relief is not a necessary expense of the sovereign or commonwealth?

As for progressivity in taxation, left Smithians have often claimed that Smith supports it. But the two taxes they usually cite from *Wealth of Nations*, though

attractive in other respects, fall disproportionately on the wealthy: one that suggests that the turnpike trusts charge higher tolls on luxury carriages and one that acknowledges “house-rent” taxation (like a property tax).

Smith commences his lengthy discussion of taxation by expounding four central maxims of taxation, maxims of “evident justice and utility.” The first is proportionality, that is, subjects’ overall tax burden should be “in proportion to the revenue which they respectively enjoy under the protection of the state.” Income taxes did not exist in Smith’s day, and he is not proposing an income tax. But he is saying that the incidence of taxes, however implemented, should work out to proportionality with income (“revenue”). In other words, Smith thought along the lines of a flat or proportional distribution of the tax load—not a progressive one.

Starting with proportionality as a maxim, we understand that, regarding the house-rent tax, Smith is noting that its disproportional burden on the rich is not a feature but rather a bug. Smith is saying that, *despite* that bug, house-rent taxation remains

worthwhile: “It is not very unreasonable that the rich should contribute to the public expence, not only in proportion to their revenue, but something more than in that proportion.” Smith does not welcome the disproportionality, but he can live with it, all things considered. For criticism of left Smithianism, see the excellent piece in *Reason* magazine by David Friedman, “Adam Smith Wasn’t a Progressive.”

Smith on the government’s role in education

In discussing the “necessary expences” of the sovereign or commonwealth, Smith considers at length what role, if any, government should play in “the Institutions for the Education of Youth.” Smith’s treatment has been a matter of ongoing interpretation and contention.

I read the flow of Smith’s article on the topic in *The Wealth of Nations* as follows: during the first 75% of the article, Smith develops a series of points and historical matters that, in terms of our framing here, militate against government involvement in education. At that 75 % point, Smith then poses questions prompted by his preceding 24 pages:

Ought the publick, therefore, to give no attention, it may be asked to the education of the people? Or if it ought to give any, what are the different parts of education which it ought to attend to in the different orders of the people? and in what manner ought it to attend to them?

Smith motivates the questions by describing how someone who knows only the routine of narrow factory work “becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become” and the social hazards arising from that stupidity and ignorance. Smith goes on to consider some ways that government policy might mitigate such tendency toward stupidity by either stimulating a demand for education or subsidizing access to education. He considers a number of ideas. He reflects on the menu of options (a menu, by the way, that does *not* include compulsory school attendance). What he does not do is come out with a definite recommendation. Yes, it is significant that Smith considers some government interventions and partial school financing without definitely rejecting those options. But many scholars have jumped to interventionist conclusions about what Smith recommends. In a word, Smith is *equivocal* on the topic.

Smith’s final words on the topic of the funding of schools for youth come in the conclusion of the chapter in which the article resides. Those final words return to the drift of the first 75% of the article, against government involvement:

This expence [of schooling of youth], however, might perhaps with equal propriety, and even with some advantage, be defrayed altogether by those who receive the immediate benefit of such education and instruction, or by the voluntary contribution of those who think they have occasion for either the one or the other.

Here Smith is suggesting that there might be advantage in leaving the financing of schooling entirely to voluntary participation, of the families of the youngsters educated but also properly beneficent fellow citizens who might pledge subscription to any of the charity schools of Smith’s time.

During the critical 75% of the article, Smith describes how awry educational institutions can go. If Smith were to see today’s school systems, and the results for children of low-income families, he would surely support reform in the direction of school choice and deregulation.

POVERTY AND THE GOOD OF THE WHOLE

In conclusion, Smith’s views on poverty are part and parcel of his views on the common good. He is concerned about the whole—the whole of the community, of the country, of humankind—and most especially the moral character of the people, of the public culture and the body politic. For him poverty is not a special problem calling for special projects or programs. Beyond the material basics, ensured best by the rising tide of the liberal plan, well-being is principally a matter of moral condition, not material condition. If magistrates concern themselves with improving the moral condition of the governed, let them remember that moral condition rises with moral responsibility. One’s wealth, one’s poverty, is, first and foremost, one’s own business. **RL**

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Special 125th Birthday Feature

C.S. LEWIS AND THE APOCALYPSE OF GENDER

by J. C. SCHARL

November marks the 125th birthday of famed Christian apologist, novelist, and scholar C. S. Lewis. Among the many subjects he addressed was, perhaps surprisingly, gender. His imaginative conception of gender as a revelation of God holds promise for clarifying the many confusions of our day.



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FROM VERY NEARLY THE BEGINNING, Christianity has wrestled with the question of the body. Heretics from gnostics to docetists devalued physical reality and the body, while orthodox Christianity insisted that the physical world offers us true signs pointing to God. This quarrel persists today, and one form it takes is the general confusion among Christians and non-Christians alike about gender. Is gender an abstracted idea? Is it reducible to biological characteristics? Is it a set of behaviors determined by society? Or is it something more?

It may come as a surprise to hear that C.S. Lewis had many thoughts on these questions. In fact,



C. S. Lewis in 1947

woven throughout his works, Lewis offers us a coherent, orthodox, and imaginatively satisfying vision of gender, one in which gender is a unique revelation of God—an apocalypse—and a powerful sign of reality itself.

Lewis, a master of Renaissance literature (and through it, of the late medieval period and antiquity), allowed his imagination to be formed not by the convulsions of his era but by the slow developments of millennia. He writes from deep within a realm many of us struggle even to enter, let alone explore: that of the Christian imagination, in which every single element of reality is at once itself and also a profound sign of God's nature.

I have hesitated for a long time before writing about gender from a Lewisian perspective. It is perilous to bring a past thinker into discussion of a contemporary issue. As Lewis himself knew, these topics are best approached *through* the imagination. Rather than this essay, it would be more effective to write a poem or a song or a story about gender and the Christian imagination. That, after all, is what Lewis did.

But elucidating an imaginative vision, as Michael Ward does for Lewis' thought in *Planet Narnia*, can be helpful. For many of us, the landscape of the Christian imaginations so far away that we need guides to point even to the trailhead. I hope here to point the way to that trailhead, where Lewis himself is waiting to lead

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GENDER IS A UNIQUE REVELATION OF GOD— AN APOCALYPSE— AND A POWERFUL SIGN OF REALITY ITSELF.

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us into the foothills of a realm in which physical realities, like our bodies, are signs revealing the nature of God.

IDEAS ARE NOT ENOUGH

In Lewis' imagination, there is no such thing as an "abstract idea." In *Planet Narnia*, Michael Ward writes that Lewis believed that "to prefer abstractions is not to be more rational; it is simply to be less fully human." An idea must have an associated "sign," a body or a word or a relation, something we apprehend through our senses. We know reality through these signs, which come through our senses into our imaginations and shape how we live.

Lewis wrote about this in *The Abolition of Man*: "In battle it is not syllogisms that will keep the reluctant nerves and muscles to their post in the third hour of the bombardment. The crudest sentimentalism ... about a flag or a country or a regiment will be of more use." The idea—here, of loyalty—is meaningless and cannot move us to action unless it captures the imagination through a tangible sign.

But imagination is shaped through the most subtle of movements. A deft stroke here, an obscure tale there—a nudge, a smile—thus a soul is shaped, a soul that either welcomes with joy the fullness of reality (material and spiritual) or shies away from it. That, Lewis reminds us, is what being alive is all about: it is our chance to learn to exist in a happy, correct relation to reality. The physical world is an array of signs, indicating how we are to live.

This is not to say that the physical world is "merely" a sign. Just as Lucy's wardrobe was both a properly functioning piece of furniture—pleasing to the eye and useful for containing clothes—and a way



Imagination by Olin Levi Warner (1896), on the bronze door entrance of the Library of Congress Thomas Jefferson building

into another world, created things are simultaneously themselves and more than themselves.

The reigning notion of Lewis' work is that the inside is bigger than the outside. The signs that make up the created world point to realities much greater than themselves. The wardrobe is a best-known instance, but we see the motif repeated over and over, from the valley of Psyche in *Till We Have Faces*

that holds a god bigger than the world to the barn in *The Last Battle* that opens into paradise.

That is how imagination works: it allows us to house great things inside small ones, just as God has housed eternal souls in physical bodies and Himself in a crumb of bread. The great truth revealed by Christianity is that both physical reality and spiritual reality are eternally significant. All God's works are doors to Him: meaningful in themselves but also portals to spaces bigger than the world itself. Everything from the patterns of the stars to the shape of our bodies points us "further up and further in" to the heart of God.

The catch, though, is that we can misread—or even misuse and destroy—these signs. That includes the great sign of gender.

WHAT GENDER ISN'T

So, in Lewis' imaginative landscape where physical realities are indications of spiritual realities, what *is* gender?

On the outset, there are two things it most certainly is not.

First, it is not interchangeable with sex. By "sex," I mean "biological sexuality." I mean it in the sense that we all have sex, even virgins, even the impotent and disfigured. Sex, for each of us, is an outward sign—for ourselves and for the world—of a deeper reality we participate in. Simultaneously, body parts like genitalia matter but they are not ultimate. Genitalia indicates, reveals, something Realer about a person; but changing the sign does not change the Reality. We are not limited to our biological sexuality, but neither can we separate from it.

To illustrate how distinct gender is from sex in

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Illustration of the Great Chain of Being, published by Diego Valdes in *Rhetorica Christiana* (1579)

the imaginative world Lewis writes from, consider this: in thousands of lines of poetry written over his lifetime, John Milton, a poet Lewis studied deeply, uses the genderless pronoun "its" only three times. Almost without exception, Milton uses either "his" or "her." He views everything—mountains, air, mind, fruit, joy, everything—as either masculine or feminine. But obviously, not everything is sexed.

Lewis explores this distinction in *Perelandra*, when the hero, Ransom, encounters the angelic beings that govern Mars (Malacandra) and Venus (Perelandra). He says, "The two creatures were sexless. But he of Malacandra was masculine (not male); she of Perelandra was feminine (not female)." Lewis believes that gender—masculinity and femininity—can exist separate from sex (sexless beings have gender); but sex cannot exist separate from gender, for gender is behind ("at back of," George MacDonald might say) sex. The physical body is the sign that reveals the thing beyond it: gender. And in its turn, gender too is a sign, revealing...well, we'll get to that later.

It may seem, with this distinction, that Lewis is giving ground to those who assert that it is possible for a person to exist in the wrong body. He is not. Biological sex and gender are not interchangeable, yet they are impossible to separate. To use a Lewisian image, biological sex is the door, and gender is the house and grounds beyond. You cannot separate the door from the house; you cannot claim that the door opens somehow into the “wrong” house. The door is part of the house. Damaging or blocking up the door does not alter the house. It only makes it more difficult to get to.

So sex is part of gender, but not the only part. No one would reduce a house to its door. A door is practically two-dimensional; it is significant yet fleeting, a plane to be crossed as we enter the three-dimensional house, in which there is music and laughter and feasting and fire.

Sex is like this. It is a temporal sign of gender. In the passage in *Perelandra*, Lewis goes on: “Gender is a reality, and a more fundamental reality than sex. Sex is, in fact, merely the adaptation to organic love of a fundamental polarity that divides all created beings” (emphasis added). Biological sexuality is only one sign pointing us toward the reality of gender; the distinction between the sexes is one manifestation of a greater distinction that runs all the way up the Great Chain of Being.

This is the first corrective. Gender is not sex. The second is this: gender is not reducible to social “gender norms.” High heels for ladies, beer and sports for men—this is the extent of many peoples’ grasp of gender, and it is (literally) damnably misleading.

These norms come to us not from the deep well of tradition but from the relatively recent Victorian period. In Victorian England, social expectations for the sexes became more sharply divided than ever before. It was then that the notions of women as demure and withdrawn from society and men as taciturn world-builders took hold. The older, more nuanced imaginative principles of masculine and feminine, which went far deeper than these social signals, faded until now we can access them only as psychological archetypes—never as the real principles manifested in our physical biological sex. As Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man*, “Another little portion of the human heritage has been quietly taken from [us] before [we] were old enough to understand.”

These Victorian notions have a vice grip on our imaginations; even as our society seeks to rebel against them, it takes all its terms from Victorian

norms. Look, for example, at the behavior of drag queens, men who posture as women; drag queens “signal” so-called femininity by adopting a few social signals: high heels, large breasts, puffy hair, big eyes. Even as they attempt to transgress “gender norms,” they submit to those norms by assuming, however cheekily, that the essence of femininity is to be found there, and that by adopting those norms, they have somehow adopted femininity itself. But true femininity, as Lewis writes, is far greater than how we wear our hair; it is a principle of reality itself—of God, in fact—and we cannot participate in it just by changing our shoes, or even our body parts. Participating in the Feminine is much more difficult.

Our contemporary idea of “gender norms” has done more than almost anything else to inoculate us against a profound imaginative encounter with real gender.

MARS AND VENUS

That said, Lewis would find a surprising amount of truth in the saying, “Men are from Mars and women are from Venus.” Within a Lewisian conception of gender, these are the rough outlines. But “gender” is not a restriction; rather, it provides the boundaries within which to flourish. The way Lewis (following Christian thinkers from the past) reads these signs of Mars and Venus reveals a richer, more expansive encounter with the two genders than our contemporary notions.

Victorian gender norms illustrated in an 1854 cartoon



“IF WE LIFT OUR SKIRTS, THEY LEVEL THEIR EYE-GLASSES AT OUR ANKLES.”

In medieval and Renaissance literature (and for Lewis), Mars is the great sign of masculinity. In the Mars section of his long poem “The Planets,” Lewis describes this god as “cold and strong,/Necessity’s son.” He writes, “Like handiwork/He offers to all—earns his wages/And whistles the while.” This is masculinity: fierce, hard, strong, a maker, a warrior, “hired gladiator/Of evil and good.” In *Perelandra*, Ransom says that Mars, called here Malacandra,

seemed to him to have the look of one standing armed, at the ramparts of his own remote archaic world, in ceaseless vigilance, his eyes ever roaming the earth-ward horizon whence his danger came long ago. “A sailor’s look,” Ransom once said to me; “you know... eyes that are impregnated with distance.”

Speaking of Venus, the feminine, in “The Planets,” Lewis writes that “her breath’s sweetness/Bewitches

the world.” The “reign of her secret sceptre” shows in all the world’s beauty, “In grass growing, and grain bursting,/Flower unfolding, and flesh longing,/and shower falling sharp in April.” Ransom, meeting this goddess as Perelandra, contrasts her with Malacandra:

But the eyes of Perelandra opened, as it were, inward, as if they were the curtained gateway to a world of waves and murmurings and wandering airs, of life that rocked in winds and splashed on mossy stones and descended as the dew and arose sunward in thin-spun delicacy of mist.

Ransom struggles to articulate how he knows that these Malacandra and Perelandra are masculine and feminine when they have no sexual characteristics. Here, in this passage describing Malacandra and Perelandra, Lewis summarizes his idea of gender:

Venus of Arles, at the Musée du Louvre (c. 1st century BC), unearthed in 1651 at the Roman Theatre of Arles



Statue of Mars at the Giuseppe Verdi Opera House in Trieste, Italy



Whence came this curious difference between them? He found that he could point to no single feature where the difference resided, yet it was impossible to ignore....[Ransom] has said that Malacandra was like rhythm and Perelandra like melody. He has said that Malacandra affected him like a quantitative, Perelandra like an accentual, metre. He thinks that the first held in his hand something like a spear, but the hands of the other were open, with the palms towards him....At all events what Ransom saw at that moment was the real meaning of gender.

Here we have the elements of an imaginative grasp of gender: the masculine as rhythm, quantity, weaponed (as Lewis describes it in *Till We Have Faces*), defending; and the feminine as melody, accent, openness, offering. The “spear” in Malacandra’s hand is connected, of course, to phallic symbols, but it is in reverse of our usual ways of thinking about such symbols. The spear is not a phallic sign (for that would make sex the mystery behind gender); rather, the phallus is a spear sign. It is a physical symbol that points us to masculinity’s “something like a spear,” that innate guardian movement that is masculinity. This inversion—seeing sexual characteristics as signs of gender, rather than the other way around—is the Lewisian imagination at work.

This is where an imaginative grasp of gender is quite liberating to minds accustomed to gender as Victorian social behavior. Here is one example: as Michael Ward explains in the Mars chapter in *Planet Narnia*, Mars, the archetype of war and the masculine, originated as a god of farming. He was the god of the springtime. *March* is named after him not only because it was the season when martial campaigns could begin but also because it was the season to start preparing the ground for sowing. Masculinity has a guardian element, but also a gardener element. By understanding the symbol in all its richness, men who delight in nurturing and cultivating can see these as deeply masculine impulses, too.

The same is true of Venus: she is stereotyped as the goddess of sex, love, and desire, a passive goddess who simply emerges from seafoam and does little besides sow chaos. But her nature is more complex than that. The pagan Venus is utterly generative; as Lewis says, she is self-fertilizing. She needs no male to make her productive. In the Christian imagination, as Lewis writes in *Spenser’s Images of Life*, some medieval philosophers used “Venus” as a name for God. Femininity, in this conception, is far from the passive



Garden (from *Regia Carmina di Conveveneole da Prato*) by Pacino di Buonaguida (c. 1302–1343)

thing we find in the Victorians or even the primal chaos described by some contemporary psychology (which, we hear, must be subdued and shaped by masculine order). The Christian symbol of Venus transcends all this, situating ultimate order—the Order of Creation—in the Feminine, which does not merely receive life but self-generates it.

These Lewisian conceptions of gender are imaginative, not diagnostic. The clear-cut distinctions we try to establish between male and female *activities* are less important than trying to grasp masculine and feminine *essences*, these principles that govern the created world. Men can be caretakers and be deeply masculine; women can be bold, inventive creators and be deeply feminine. Gender is not strictly about *what* we do, *per se*, but *how* we do it.

This is where our contemporary culture gets tripped up, for we can only act *through our bodies*—which carry with them a biological sex. Anyone in a female body must come to terms with her fundamental association with the Feminine; anyone in a male body must come to terms with his fundamental association with the Masculine. The ways of doing that are manifold, but it must be done.

Our bodies, with their biological sex, are the sign of how we, as individuals, will relate to reality. Even

by changing those signs, we cannot change what they tell us about reality. We can only seek to read them rightly.

READING THE SIGNS

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis reminds us,

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.

In other words, some emotional responses to the signs we see in this physical world are right, and some are wrong. There are correct ways to read the signs and incorrect ways.

So how do we read the signs of gender? Lewis offers some wisdom on this, though most of it is given through literature, rather than instruction. His books are full of examples of masculinity and femininity, both true and distorted, and throughout we gain a sense of what it really means to fully inhabit one's gender.

Here are just a few examples.

That Hideous Strength

“Have no more dreams. Have children instead,” Lewis has a character say in *That Hideous Strength*, speaking to Jane Tudor Studdock, an aspiring academic whose marriage has proved disappointing (and who has been plagued by prophetic dreams). This line might lead a reader to believe that Lewis was condemning women for having ambitions. The correct reading leads to a quite different conclusion.

Lewis made no sweeping condemnation of women's ambitions to public life. Rather, throughout his career he encouraged female scholars who showed promise, including philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe, whose critiques of Lewis' *Miracles* pushed Lewis to rewrite large portions of the book. The line commending Jane Studdock to motherhood is unique to Jane; Lewis recognizes that each woman's life, just as each man's, will look different. For her own good, Jane is not to seek the literal nightmares that plagued her, but neither is she to follow the specious “dreams” of academic life—dreams for which she was simply

not suited. Jane does not truly love academia; her thesis topic, described at the beginning of the book, is unoriginal. She pursued academic life because in it she found friendship and joy; now she's using it as an escape from her marriage and call to motherhood.

Jane is not alone in being asked to abandon her false dreams. Mark, her husband, is even more in thrall to dreams; nearly until the end of the book, he lives in a fantasy about himself and his own qualities. He is desperate to assert himself as dominant, powerful, untouchable. His idea of masculinity is entirely out of balance; he has abandoned his masculine roles of guardian and gardener. As a result, he is emasculated and miserable. Jane and Mark are only able to find peace and joy when they both begin to act in accordance with their genders. Jane must truly welcome Mark into her life, while Mark must learn that he is not entitled to her love but must guard and cultivate it every day.

These actions—these turnings of the soul toward each other—are not reducible to Victorian gender roles; Jane is free to make a life that matches her temperament and talents, but she must really welcome and honor Mark in that life. She cannot keep him at arms' length. She must allow him to enter and change her. Mark, in his turn, need not become a strong silent masterly type, but he must find ways to actively guard and grow the richness of their shared life.

British philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe (1919–2001)





The Searcher by Ross Wilson, depicting Narnia's Professor Digory Kirke at the wardrobe from *The Magician's Nephew*, in Northern Ireland

That Hideous Strength also underscores the reality that gender goes beyond marriage and family activities by depicting characters who are single (the Director) or barren (the Dimbles) as fully inhabiting their gender. Mother Dimble cannot bear children, yet she embraces her feminine nature and becomes a mother to everyone she meets. The Director is celibate, yet the other characters encounter him as profoundly masculine. It is clear that Lewis, in agreement with the Christian tradition, recognizes that being married or being a parent is neither a requirement nor a guarantee of a real embrace of one's God-given gender.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

"Battles are ugly when women fight." This line from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* could come off as denigrating women's abilities. But the rest of the Narnia books disprove this.

First of all, both Lucy and Susan receive weapons from Father Christmas, implying that there are appropriate times for women to bear arms. Lewis underscores this in the other Narnia books: in *The Horse and His Boy*, Queen Lucy fights with the archers in a battle against the Calormenes, and Aravis is a noted swordswoman, confident atop her warhorse. In *The Last Battle*, Jill is the best archer, which garners praise, not condemnation. Battles certainly are ugly when women fight, but they are ugly when women do not. Father Christmas' words seem to be an absolute prohibition, but in fact they're a protection; after all, these are little girls.

Interestingly, Peter and Edmund are not given the same protection, but they are given another. Remember what happens to Lucy and Susan instead of the battle. Far from being tucked away and shielded, the girls become witnesses to a scene even more brutal than the battlefield: the murder of Aslan. The girls are protected from witnessing the horror of war; Peter and Edmund, equally, are protected from witnessing the death of Aslan.

All four of the children, male and female alike, come face to face with evil, ugliness, fear, and death. None is spared. But they confront these things in different ways, ways suited to their temperaments and natures, which include their gender.

The Last Battle

"[Susan] is no longer a friend of Narnia." In *The Last Battle*, Susan, unlike the rest of her family, does not return to Narnia or continue on into Aslan's Country, because she has become "only interested in lipstick, nylons, and party invitations." This moment has troubled many readers, including Phillip Pullman, who created *His Dark Materials* as an anti-Narnia, and J.K. Rowling, who became disenchanted with the whole world of Narnia by Susan's fate. Pullman and Rowling read this passage as saying that Susan is banned from Narnia because she has grown up and learned about sex, which they find deeply unfair.

They both misread the passage. Susan is not excluded from Narnia because she grows up and becomes interested in feminine things. *The Last Battle* names two causes for her fate: first, she convinces herself that Narnia is not real, and second, she refuses to grow up. These reasons are really one and the same. Susan stops believing that the physical world is a true sign of another world. She disbelieves the very evidence of her senses, which tell her that



Gustave Doré's illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*

her experiences in Narnia were real and which also ought to tell her that there are more important things than nylons and party invitations. Growing up is essentially the process of reading the signs of the world ever more deeply and truly, and Susan refuses to do this.

Susan lives in a netherworld between a feminine childhood and a feminine adulthood. She adopts the lowest outward indications of femininity but refuses to become a mature manifestation of the feminine. She reduces femininity to the shoddy external signs of young womanhood. Her body has ceased to be a true sign of the feminine: generative, sacrificial, mothering even in childlessness. For that, she is barred from Narnia. (As a note, Lewis indicated in a letter to a concerned young reader that Susan's story does not necessarily end in damnation, adding that that, however, was not his story to tell.)

Till We Have Faces

In his last novel, Lewis gives his most finely grained treatment of gender, and the feminine specifically. Orual, the ugly sister of Psyche, spends the book trying to suppress her feminine nature. She participates in many activities perceived as masculine—ruling, fighting, negotiating—and eschews more “feminine” activities, like marriage and childbearing.

But, as she discovers at the end of her life, her feminine nature is inescapable. All her efforts to abandon her femininity only lead her deeper into femininity. Whether she veils her face or shows it, whether she fights or does not fight, whether she rules or submits, she is feminine. Both her sins and her virtues spring from her nature as feminine; she risks damnation by feminine means but is eventually saved by accepting her femininity—and God's masculine relationship

with His creation, which we'll discuss in a moment toward her—as a gift. After her death, this childless virgin is remembered as a beloved mother of her people.

THE APOCALYPSE OF GENDER

In this Lewisian world where physical realities are true signs of spiritual reality, where the inside is bigger than the outside, and where we are always being pushed further up and further into the ever-expanding reality that is God, what is gender?

Here as an attempt at an answer: gender is a distinctive way of manifesting one of God's various relationships with His creation. Each gender is a revelation—an apocalypse—of some side of God's love.

The masculine is a revelation of God's great hunter and warrior love, vigilant and protective, which existed before the Beloved and knows what existence without the Beloved is like. This is the love that gave creation the freedom to fall, and the love that dared redeem it. This is the love that fixed a tree on the borders of all the worlds and hung Himself upon it.

But there is another love: the feminine love, "world-mothering" (as G.M. Hopkins calls it), which saw a void, encompassed it, and brought order and beauty and abundance from nothing. This is the love that bears the world, that longs to gather everything under its wings, the love that tore itself open, abandoned itself utterly, in the labor of bringing forth new Life.

You will notice, of course, that both these loves are fully manifested on the Cross. In Christ, who is fully God, the apocalypse of both genders is present.

Some readers may draw back from this, but they need not. Throughout sacred Scripture, God

primarily interacts with us through masculine signs. But there are hints of another way, a feminine way. Christ speaks of Himself as a mother hen; in Hosea, God speaks of Himself as a mother bear, and in Deuteronomy, a mother eagle. The mothering nature is as much a part of God as the fathering nature.

However, as Lewis wrote in an article called "Priestesses in the Church?" (which all Christians should read in full), "Christians think that God Himself has taught us how to speak of Him." Through revelation history, God predominately shows Himself as masculine. For Lewis, this is not allegorical; these masculine pronouns and images are true signs. Through language, God reveals Himself to us—to all of us, male and female—as a bridegroom, a father, a guardian gardener. God is not limited to the masculine, certainly, but His revelation as masculine teaches us truths about how we are to live in relation to Him. Lewis says that to ignore the way God speaks to us requires us to ignore the signs, to follow the sin of Susan, to believe "that sex is something superficial," and that our bodies tell us nothing about reality itself.

If we are going to begin to grasp the mysteries of gender, we must follow Lewis' faith in signs. We cannot pick and choose; we cannot accept the meaning of the sign but reject the sign itself. What I mean by this is that we cannot embrace gender as a revelation of God's love if we reject the signs by which that revelation occurs, of which the physical body and the language of Scripture are the most significant.

Christianity offers us a gift: the belief that both the physical world and the spiritual world are vitally important. The spiritual world is the realm in which God can be experienced directly. For that reason, it is ultimate. Yet the physical world is where we determine how that experience of God will be realized. Christianity teaches that no one can be saved after death; even Purgatory is open only to those whose souls are already saved. Our lives on earth, our habits of thinking and acting, our openness or closedness to God in all His revelations—including the revelation of gender—these things decide how we will experience God in the apocalypse that is death and eternity: as fearful and incomprehensible, or as an unfolding infinity of Love. **RI**.

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HIMSELF AS MASCULINE.
FOR LEWIS, THIS IS
NOT ALLEGORICAL.**
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*J.C. Scharl is a poet and playwright. Her work has appeared on the BBC and in many poetry journals on both sides of the Atlantic. Her verse play, *Sonnez Les Matines*, opened in New York City in February 2023 and is available through *Wiseblood Books*.*

IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

Lord Jonathan Sacks: The West's Rabbi

by JONATHAN SILVER

IN OCTOBER 1798, the president of the United States wrote to officers of the Massachusetts militia, acknowledging a limitation of federal rule. “We have no government,” John Adams wrote, “armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, and revenge or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net.” The nation that Adams had helped to found would require the parts of the body politic to be held in equipoise, with the liberation of popular will and the democratic exercise of political power exerting forces in one direction, and a people made fit for self-government by the sacred strictures of biblical religion exerting a countervailing force. American politics would summon up the natural human drives for self-interest, and widely shared forms of biblical faith would chasten them. “Our Constitution” Adams explained, “was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Freedom, the capacity for self-rule at the heart of the American ideal, thus expresses itself ambiguously. At times, liberty seemed a natural right, endowed to all men by their Creator. But other voices, not least Adams', suggested that liberty was not a right but a precious and hard-won achievement, the result of moral formation, a learned discipline that draws on classical and biblical resources considerably older than the American constitutional order. Two centuries after Adams' letter to the officers of the Massachusetts militia, at the dawn of a new geopolitical and technological age, no

one would convey that older and more capacious understanding of human freedom more eloquently than the British lord and chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, the late Jonathan Sacks.

Born in 1948 in London to a striving, merchant family, Sacks would distinguish himself in school and eventually begin his higher education in moral philosophy at Cambridge University. During his college days, in June 1967, Israel repelled attacks from the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and, over the course of six days, won a decisive military victory. But throughout that brief, dramatic war, global Jewry was gripped by the prospect of another genocidal catastrophe not yet two decades removed from the Shoah. In battle reports and news bulletins from the Middle East, Sacks heard whispers of destiny. Stimulated to search out deeper Jewish purposes, he would, the following summer, take a two-month trip to the United States that would change the trajectory of his life.

In America, he met two of the most consequential rabbinic leaders of the postwar era: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the brilliant intellectual leader of modern Orthodox Judaism, whose writing and teaching focused on the relations of Jewish law to the modern philosophical condition, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the spiritual leader of the Hasidic Lubavitch dynasty, whose emissaries carried the infrastructure of religious life to Jewish communities all over the world. It was the Lubavitcher Rebbe, as Schneerson is known, who inspired Sacks to pursue his rabbinic ordination and dedicate himself to the Jewish people. These encounters would influence Sacks' intellectual sensibility and approach to Jewish institutional leadership for the rest of his career.

Returning from America to England, Sacks continued to pursue his study of moral philosophy under some of the great men of the time, including Roger Scruton at Oxford

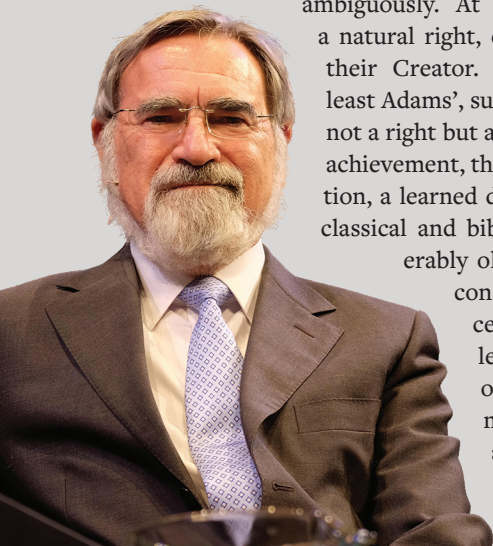


Photo by Steven May / Alamy Stock Photo

and Bernard Williams at Cambridge. The late 1970s were also the years in which his rabbinic career began in earnest. Following his ordination in 1976, he received his first pulpit two years later. In the 1980s he held a number of rabbinic and academic appointments, culminating in his elevation, in 1991, to the chief rabbinate.

Since the United States does not have a chief rabbi, the office and its significance are unfamiliar to many American readers. The historical origins of the role can be traced to the Middle Ages, when Jewish communities required not only a legal decisor and religious authority for internal matters but also a representative who could mediate between the community and political rulers. America never developed a parallel structure; its tradition of disestablished religion and culture of free competition among religions made such a quasi-governmental appointment inapt.

When named Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Sacks was the 10th such rabbi since the office was established in Britain in 1704, and the sixth since it was formalized in 1845. In his installation address, Sacks called for “A Decade of Jewish Renewal” and set about reversing the trend of religious recession with a relentless focus on improving education for rabbis and their congregants. As the first chief rabbi born after the Shoah and the establishment of Israel, Sacks was therefore also the first chief rabbi shaped by a marked change in Jewish history. Before the 1940s, Europe was the home not only of most Jewish communities but also of Jewish scholarship and cultural achievement. After the catastrophe that befell European Jewry in the early and mid-1940s, and the astounding achievement of Zionism in the late 1940s, the center of Jewish gravity had migrated away from Europe and by the 1990s could be found in the United States and Israel. One consequence of that shift was that Jewish communal attitudes were less doleful, more confident, and Sacks’ early years in the chief rabbinate captured some of the reflected gleams of vitality from New York and Jerusalem to inspire the Jewish communities of Britain. Sacks’ most succinct presentation of Jewish religious life can be found in his 2001 *A Letter in the Scroll*.

An example of Sacks’ channeling and accelerating late-20th-century Jewish confidence could be seen in his efforts to speak beyond the Jewish community to the British nation. A decade into his chief rabbinate, Sacks had established himself as a public voice—in

radio broadcast and print journalism—who spoke with conviction about the moral dimension of big public questions, including marriage and the family, and who offered a high-minded defense of religious pluralism (a strain of his thought for which Jewish communities to his theological right sometimes criticized him). The trust he was building during these years with the British public would make him one of the most influential respondents to the 9/11 attacks. In his 2002 *The Dignity of Difference*, Sacks would frame the threat of Islamism in religious terms and propose on behalf of Judaism and Christianity a religious response, insisting thereby that the West’s return to history involved the strengthening of its own spiritual and religious foundations.

Sacks’ 2007 *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* turned his angle of vision away from the clash of civilizations and toward instead the fraying fabric of American and European societies. Diagnosing the roots of social fragmentation and the defects of multiculturalism, Sacks proposed a political theory inspired by the Hebrew Bible and the sociology of Alexis de Tocqueville that promised to preserve the identities of cultural distinctiveness while also strengthening the communal and civic bonds that build society up.

Sacks would publish over 40 books throughout his life, with posthumous collections still appearing. Many of the ideas in these books first saw the light of day in Sacks’ innumerable public speeches. He was an exceptional orator, and two speeches he delivered in 2013 and 2014—as it happens, each of them to non-Jewish audiences—may in time emerge as his most consequential. Six weeks after stepping down from the chief rabbinate, Sacks delivered the Erasmus Lecture, hosted by *First Things* magazine in New York. “On Creative Minorities” is a Jewish message to Christian America, and it begins from the fact that Christian culture is no longer the prevailing norm in the United States. The influence of the Christian moral vision on America is fading, he argued, and the arbiters and elite figures in American culture often dismiss or despise it. Christian principles no longer define America’s cultural conventions, and so traditionalist Christians find themselves to be unconventional minorities. They find themselves to be, in other words, like Jews. And the cultural resources Jews have developed can now be offered up to our Christian cousins in friendship and solidarity. Rather than turn inward and retreat into Benedictine communities of isolation and withdrawal, Sacks

conveyed the approach of Jeremiah. Christians can “preserve their identity ... while at the same time pursue the common good whose culture and religious beliefs are entirely opposed to their own; and they could achieve this twin, very difficult task of integration without assimilation.”

The next year, under the auspices of Pope Francis, Sacks delivered the keynote address at the Vatican’s International Colloquium on “The Complementarity of Man and Woman.” It is, in my view, the best articulation of and apology for the traditional view of sex and gender that has been given since the cultural onslaught of that traditional view began in earnest. The speech is entirely affirmative, and without criticizing unorthodox views of gender, it nevertheless celebrates what makes the traditional family “a work of high religious art.” It is the miraculous institution that, in Sacks’ words, brings together:

sexual drive, physical desire, friendship, companionship, emotional kinship and love, the begetting of children and their protection and care, their

early education and induction into an identity and a history. Seldom has any institution woven together so many different drives and desires, roles and responsibilities. It made sense of the world and gave it a human face, the face of love.

Taken together, these two speeches suggest precisely what is needed for freedom in America to rebound: we must recover the arts of family formation, which not only bring love and life into society but also impress upon parents the sort of generational perspective they need to take responsible civic action. And we must be willing to do this in opposition to a culture that has mistaken liberty for license and that encourages us either to indulge shallow pleasures or at least to dull our pains. Sacks can help us recover the biblical truth that it is possible to erect structures of inner freedom even on the shores of Babylon. **RL**

Jonathan Silver is the editor of Mosaic and the Warren R. Stern Senior Fellow of Jewish Civilization at the Tikvah Fund.

“Absolutely fantastic. I leave with a fuller mind and deeper roots.” *an intern from the Acton Institute, July 2023*



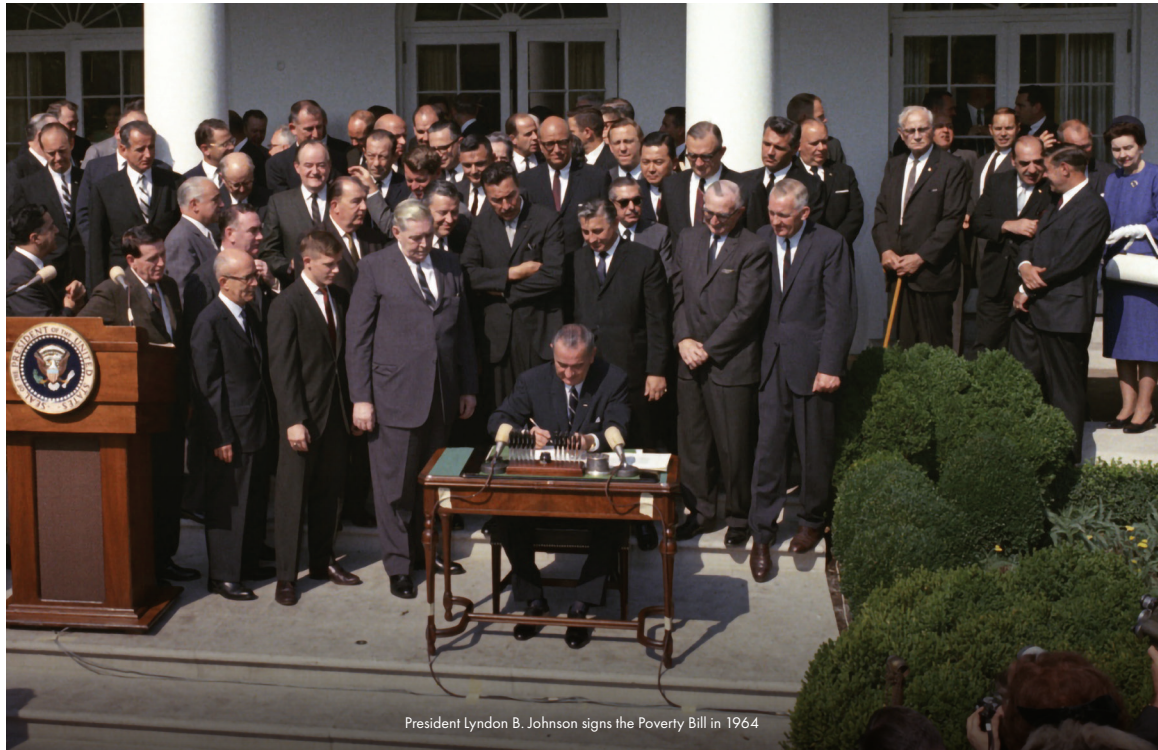
Acton Institute interns joined historian Wilfred McClay, author of *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*, and George Nash, author of *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, at the Kirk Center for a lively discussion on the state of conservatism today.



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Mistaken About Poverty

Is it true that America suffers more poverty than any other advanced democracy in the world? And that higher minimum wages and bigger labor unions are key solutions? You'd think so after reading a popular sociologist. But the numbers tell a different story.

by **SAMUEL GREGG**

PERHAPS IT IS BECAUSE America is the land of liberty and opportunity that debates about poverty are especially intense in the United States. Americans and would-be Americans have long been told that if they work hard enough and persevere they can achieve their dreams. For many people, the mere existence of poverty—absolute or relative—raises doubts about that promise and the American experiment more generally.

To the best of my knowledge, no other country has embarked on a “War on Poverty,” to use the unofficial title given to the legislation foreshadowed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in his 1964 State of the Union address. In Johnson’s words, “Our aim is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.”

In retrospect, these sentiments appear rather naive. For one thing, they make no distinction between absolute poverty and relative poverty. In all societies, some people are always relatively poorer than others, but that does not necessarily mean that they are starving or destitute. Rather, it means that some people are less wealthy than others. Relative poverty in America is very different from relative poverty in Chad.

If there is anything we have learned over the past 62 years since President Johnson declared war on poverty, it is that the law of unintended consequences applies just as much to poverty-relief programs as it does to everything else. Over the past half century, government spending on welfare has increased by

600%. That has helped facilitate the growth of welfare bureaucracies at the federal, state, and even local levels with a vested interest in their own institutional preservation.

Despite these problems, there remains a tremendous political desire primarily on the part of American progressives to use state power to try and purge poverty from the American body politic. The latest expression of this aspiration is a book by the Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond, *Poverty, by America*. Despite all the government programs put in place since the 1960s, Desmond maintains that approximately 30 million Americans live in poverty, with another 30 million living on the edge of poverty or what's called "near-poverty." Taken together, that would be just over 18% of Americans.

It's not unusual for progressives to invoke big, dramatic numbers when discussing poverty. The point of the exercise is, after all, to create a sense of urgency and the subsequent need for government to act dramatically. In Desmond's case, the desired urgency is further underscored by his invocation of particular stories designed to put a human face on the poverty that, he argues, afflicts almost 20% of the American population.

Such stories, though distressing to read, form part of an overall narrative that relies at particular points on sheer emotivism. That same narrative, however, is also unsustainable by important facts.

Let's begin with Desmond's core claims about extreme poverty. According to Desmond, America is characterized by "a kind of extreme poverty" of the "bare feet and swollen bellies" variety. This claim flies in the face of extensive evidence that the real poverty upon which his book focuses attention has—far from growing—been radically diminished.

Take, for instance, a recently released 2023 *Journal of Political Economy* study. Employing what the authors call "an absolute Full-income Poverty Measure (FPM)," which "uses a fuller income measure" rather than the official poverty rate, "and updates thresholds only for inflation," this paper showed that since the beginning of President Johnson's War on Poverty, the "absolute FPM rate fell from 19.5 to 1.6 percent."

That is an amazing achievement. It indicates that, statistically speaking, the war against serious poverty has effectively been won. Moreover, when we add to this mix the fact that the poor in America generally have cellphones, air conditioning, cars, are

not even close to starving, etc., we see that, in terms of consumption patterns, the realities about poverty in America simply do not match Desmond's very bleak portrayal.

In fairness, it should be pointed out that the authors of the *JPE* study note that, unfortunately, "relative poverty reductions have been modest." That is certainly something to be concerned about. But they also stress another trend: that "government dependence increased over this time, with the share of working-age adults receiving under half their income from market sources more than doubling." The economic and social implications of this unfolding development, which appear to be disproportionately affecting working-age males, are just as much a cause for worry.

What's curious about this particular trend is that the FPM fell in the 1990s along with a fall in welfare dependency among black children, black working-age adults, and working-age adults in general. That period correlates to the welfare reforms passed by a Republican Congress and a Democratic president in the middle of the decade. This suggests, as the *JPE* authors observe, that "a rise in dependence is not a necessary condition for a reduction in poverty." That is very good news insofar as it indicates, at a minimum, that you can reduce poverty and diminish welfare dependency at the same time. Poverty alleviation, in other words, need not facilitate soft despotism.

One can also question Desmond's claims about poverty in America compared to other wealthy nations. America, Desmond states, is "the richest

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First printing of food stamps in Washington, D.C. (1939)

country in earth, with more poverty than any other advanced democracy.” Again, the numbers don’t indicate this.

In 2019, for instance, the National Academy of Sciences published *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Among other things, it included an analysis of child poverty rates across major Anglophone countries. According to its absolute measure of deprivation, the child poverty rate in Canada (10.3) and Ireland (11.3) is only slightly lower than that of the United States (12.5), while Britain’s (13.5) is slightly higher than America’s. The Anglophone country that does the best in this category is Australia (8.1).

Desmond might counter that the measurement he is using identifies the poverty level at half of the median income of the advanced democracies. But it is precisely because America has some of the *highest* median incomes in the world that relative poverty measurements make it seem poorer. That’s why an absolute measure of deprivation is a far more meaningful point of comparison between American and other advanced economies.

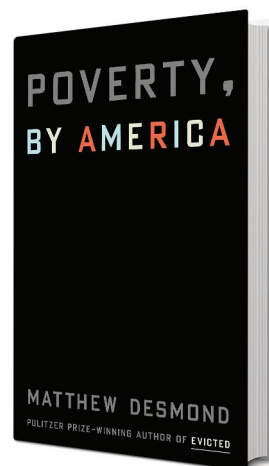
Putting aside the questionable statistical foundations for his claims, another dimension of Desmond’s argument merits considerable scrutiny. This concerns his contention that the wealthy actually benefit from the poverty endured by their fellow Americans. Put another way, the poor are poor because not-poor Americans and policy-makers will it to be so. That is quite an assertion, but

it turns out to be as doubtful as Desmond’s use of poverty measurements.

An example of this concerns the minimum wage. “Corporate profits rise,” Desmond says, “when labor costs fall.” According to Desmond, it benefits American businesses to keep the minimum wage as low as possible because it boosts their profits. That, he believes, translates into effectively locking particular categories of people into subsistence wages. It follows that the minimum wage must be raised.

Increasing minimum wage rates, however, will not likely pull significant numbers of Americans out of poverty. Moreover, Desmond himself acknowledges that going down that path will probably cost jobs. Many employers will respond to minimum wage increases by reducing their number of employees either by consolidating positions or turning to automation to replace people. Minimum wage increases also tend to price entire categories of people out of, say, entry level jobs. (Think unskilled workers, young people less interested in an income than they are in acquiring basic work skills, etc.) In any case, Desmond doesn’t account for the fact that, in developed nations like the United States, a higher degree of average labor productivity generally translates into higher average wages, and minimum wages have little to do with productivity.

A similar observation may be made about Desmond’s belief that America needs bigger and stronger trade unions (a claim, incidentally, also being made by interventionists on the conservative side of American politics today). That, Desmond believes, is one way to reverse what he believes to be the anemic growth in wages that helps account for considerable poverty in the United States.



Poverty, by America

Matthew Desmond

(Crown Publishing Group, 2023)

That claim, too, runs into a basic objection: wages and incomes for average workers have *not* been more or less stuck for 30 years. As the economist Michael R. Strain observes in a *Project Syndicate* article entitled “The Myth of Income Stagnation”:

According to the CBO, median household income from market activities—labor, business, and capital income, as well as retirement income from past services—was not stagnant from 1990 to 2019. Instead, after adjusting for inflation, it grew by 26%. This is in line with wage growth. By my calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, inflation-adjusted average wages for nonsupervisory workers grew by around one-third over this period.

Moreover, a more comprehensive measure of the flow of financial resources available to households for consumption and savings helps to account for the non-market income they received and for the taxes they paid. After factoring in social insurance benefits (from Social Security and unemployment insurance, for example), government safety-net benefits (such as food stamps), and federal taxes, the CBO finds that median household income increased by 55% from 1990 to 2019, which is significantly faster than wage growth and certainly not stagnate. The bottom 20% of households enjoyed even greater gains, with market income growth of 51% and after-tax-and-transfer income growth of 74%.

None of this is to suggest that everything stated by Desmond in this book is wrong. In fact, there are some important points that he makes that should be highlighted. Desmond notes, for example, that a good deal of welfare spending goes to people who are not its intended recipients. That includes lawyers who make money out of suing the government, as well as middle-class families with bright accountants skilled at extracting considerable amounts of largesse from the government.

Another instance where Desmond is correct concerns his attention to the ways in which regulations and ordinances severely limit opportunities for housing construction in many parts of the country. The effect is to put home ownership—and the many positive cultural, social, and economic effects of owning property—out of reach of a considerable

number of Americans. This also makes it difficult and more expensive for people to leave their suburbs, towns, or even states to pursue work opportunities. Those who consequently find themselves least able to make such major changes in their lives are those on the lower end of the income scale. The solution is to reduce the scope of regulations applying to housing construction: in other words, to liberalize some of the conditions surrounding the housing market. It is not clear to me, however, that Desmond would be willing to accept this.

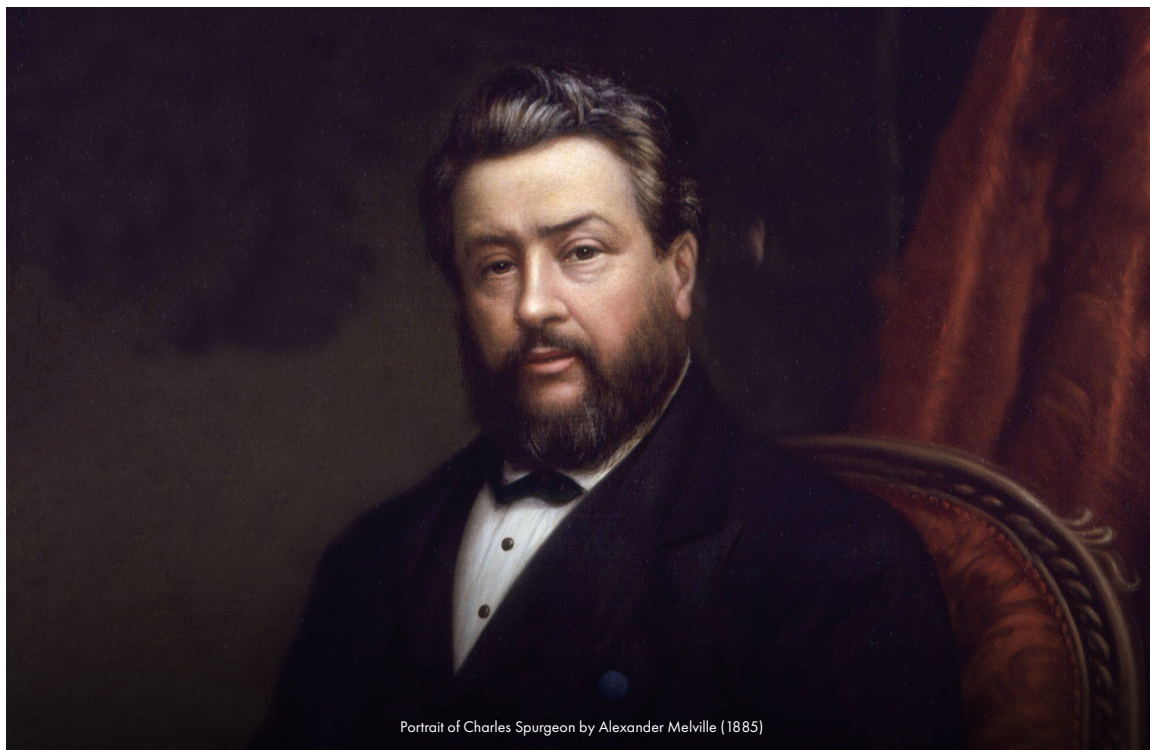
In the end, curiously enough, Desmond’s primary preferred approach for addressing poverty is less about policies than it is about changes in attitude. Economically well-off Americans, he argues, need to take off their blinders about those in need around them and alter their choices and actions accordingly.

That means rethinking things ranging from where we shop and how we invest our capital to whom we employ and where we choose to live. “We must ask ourselves,” Desmond writes, “and then ask our community organizations, our employers, our places of worship, our schools, our political parties, our courts, our towns, our families: What are we doing to divest from poverty?” It is more than a whole-of-government approach to poverty that Desmond is calling for; he wants a whole-of-society approach to “finally put an end to it.”

The difficulty with all this is that America has already put an end to the type of poverty that certainly should seriously bother Americans. But the broader problem with his concluding recommendation is that the key to poverty reduction is long-term economic growth. And economic growth is delivered when people are allowed to pursue their self-interest peacefully in a context of rule of law, constitutionally limited government, private property rights, and dynamic entrepreneurship.

The fact that these conditions have been the exception rather than the norm for most of human history is why poverty was, until relatively recently, the everyday economic reality experienced by most humans. Understanding this and then acting accordingly is the attitudinal and behavioral shift that will give us an America that lives up to its promise. **RL**

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Portrait of Charles Spurgeon by Alexander Melville (1885)

Spurgeon and the Poverty-Fighting Church

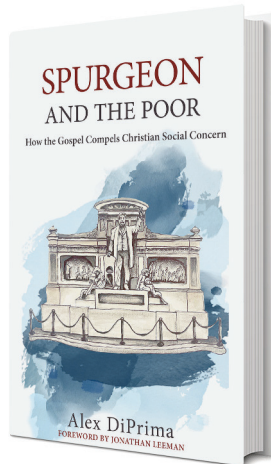
Baptist minister C. H. Spurgeon was not merely the “prince of preachers,” sometimes addressing crowds of 10,000 or more—he also had a heart for the poor and oppressed. But his work in the city was no social gospel. It was the fruit of the saving gospel.

by CHRISTOPHER PARR

CHARLES SPURGEON WAS a young, zealous 15-year-old boy when he came to faith in Christ. A letter to his mother at the time captures the enthusiasm of his newfound Christian faith: “Oh, how I wish that I could do something for Christ.” God granted that wish, as Spurgeon would become “the prince of preachers,” the most influential clergyman in 19th-century London. Many books have and will be written about all that Charles Spurgeon did for Christ through his decades of preaching at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Alex DiPrima has given us both an excellent historical survey of a lesser-known

aspect of Spurgeon’s ministry—his care for Britain’s poor and needy—and a call to action for today’s congregations to follow his example.

Having written his doctoral dissertation on Spurgeon’s “evangelical activism,” DiPrima, a Southern Baptist pastor in North Carolina, is an ideal author for *Spurgeon and the Poor: How the Gospel Compels Christian Social Concern*. This book deftly combines the academic and the pastoral. It introduces readers to Spurgeon’s numerous ministries and draws out ways in which pastors and church members can notice and serve their community’s needs.



Spurgeon and the Poor: How the Gospel Compels Christian Social Concern

By Alex DiPrima
(Reformation Heritage Books, 2023)

“
SPURGEON BELIEVED THAT COMPASSION FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY IS THE FRUIT OF TRUE CHRISTIAN CONVERSION.
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DiPrima structures the book in two parts, demonstrating (1) the theological foundations of Spurgeon’s charity and (2) his institutions and methods for going about this task. Part 1 is the heart of *Spurgeon and the Poor*’s thesis and a resounding theme throughout the book. Spurgeon did not hold competing commitments: evangelical Baptist theology on the one hand and the importance of charity to the disadvantaged on the other. Instead, he believed that the latter is directly derivative of the former.

Spurgeon believed that compassion for the poor and needy is the fruit of true Christian conversion. Evangelicals then and now hold fast to the Bible’s teaching that God saves his people through a “new birth.” The Holy Spirit works in the heart of a sinner to convict him of his own sin and need for a savior and give him new desires to worship and serve God. Consequently, while Spurgeon did not believe that good works merit salvation, he affirmed them as evidence of it.

Born-again Christians will understand the great mercy God has shown them and share that mercy with others. Consequently, Spurgeon’s sermons and other writings assert that it is the task of all Christians to do works of compassion for the needy in their own community. He said on one occasion, “Sympathy is especially a Christian duty. Consider what the Christian is, and you will say that if every other man were selfish he should be disinterested; if there were nowhere else a heart that had sympathy for the needy there should be one found in every Christian breast.” This is not to imply that every Christian must become a career

philanthropist, but it does mean that all Christians must do what they can.

When Christians care for the poor, they also imitate the example of their Savior. The incarnate *Logos* understood human needs and sought to meet them while also pointing them to their greater spiritual need for salvation. The immediate context of Spurgeon’s congregation at the Metropolitan Tabernacle was London, the state of which was described by Spurgeon as “abject misery.” Spurgeon did not allow his listeners to avert their eyes from the poor around them. As he said on another occasion, “I want you to help this heathen world, but I want you to begin with caring for this heathen world of London.”

Sensitive to accusations that Spurgeon’s emphasis on works of charity links him to the social gospel, DiPrima takes pains to demonstrate that his theology was instead consistent with evangelical convictions. If the social gospel holds that “the church’s primary aim is to improve society as a whole, especially the material conditions of the poor, rather than saving souls,” it is a far cry from Spurgeon’s philosophy of ministry. Charity commends and illustrates the gospel but is not identical with it. Spurgeon consistently kept evangelism as a central goal of his social ministry because of his convictions about the main mission of the church—“the preaching of the truth unto the salvation of sinners and the edification of the saints,” as DiPrima describes it. All of the philanthropic outreaches of the Metropolitan Tabernacle operated with the assumption that care for physical needs is an important but secondary concern to caring for spiritual needs. The one could, in fact *should*, lead to the other.

Part 2 of *Spurgeon and the Poor* describes Spurgeon’s many charitable ministries and societies. According to one list, Spurgeon was instrumental in the founding and management of 66 such organizations. The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, a friend of Spurgeon’s and one of the leading English social reformers (and an evangelical Anglican), once commented on this list: “What a tale of [Spurgeon’s] agencies...How it showed what a powerful administrative mind our friend has. That list of associations, instituted by his genius, and superintended by his care, were more than enough to occupy the minds and hearts of fifty ordinary men.”

Spurgeon’s efforts to start missions, schools, and other societies were shared by many evangelical Victorians. Numerous such organizations were founded in England at this time, often initiated by members of the upper class, to combat widespread poverty. Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote on the Victorian “social ethos” of benevolence and charity in *The Roads to Modernity*. It originated in both the virtue formation of the British Enlightenment and the charitable commitments of evangelicals like Shaftesbury and Spurgeon.

Spurgeon’s distinction among this group is a conviction that DiPrima highlights throughout *Spurgeon and the Poor*: his organization of these societies within his local church. Even more impressive than the number of his organizations (66) is the fact that they were all sponsored by the Metropolitan Tabernacle, with oversight by Spurgeon himself. Spurgeon aspired to lead a “working church.” Its facilities were used every day of the week, and he called every member to participate in them or some other gospel work.

Spurgeon’s ideal of a “working church” is very consistent with the Baptist distinctive of church covenants. Works and institutions of mercy like those founded by Spurgeon well exhibit the Metropolitan Tabernacle’s collective promise to “walk in all holiness, godliness, humility, and brotherly love, as much as in us lieth to render our communion delightful to God, comfortable to ourselves, and lovely to the rest of the Lord’s people.” The task of Christ-reflecting charity is one for all church members, not just clergy or the upper classes.

Because these ministries were based in the local church, the church’s mission became their mission as well. Spurgeon’s support of the Stockwell Orphanage, ragged schools (free schools for poor children), religious publication societies, and almshouses reflect widely held evangelical practices in his

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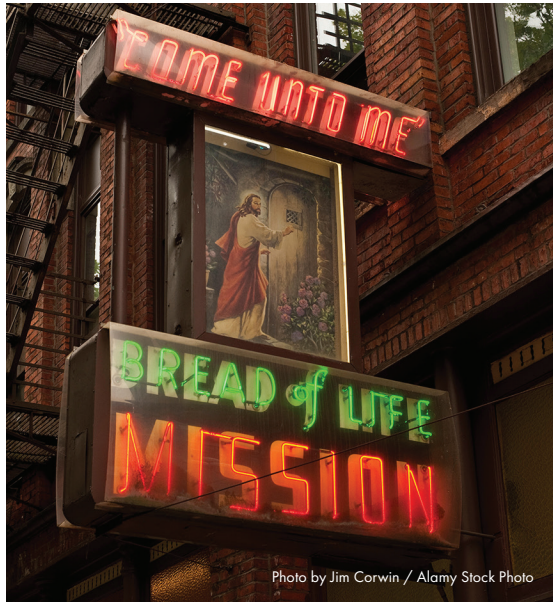
day. Yet their aim under Spurgeon’s leadership was particularly oriented toward the final end of evangelism and Christian discipleship. DiPrima makes this admonition to his readers based on Spurgeon’s life: social ministries are best situated within the context of a local church. Charity and philanthropy exist not merely for their own sake but also to point the impoverished to their need for a Savior, a good beyond this world. DiPrima’s affirmation of this argument throughout his book is almost repetitious, but it is well demonstrated from Spurgeon’s ministry and wise advice for churches committed to caring for their communities in our own day.

DiPrima’s two chapters on Spurgeon’s relationship with British politics prove to be the most nuanced chapters of *Spurgeon and the Poor*. Although a friend of Shaftesbury, a Tory, Spurgeon was an unapologetic Liberal who regularly supported Liberal Party candidates and policies, including disestablishment, anti-imperialism, anti-slavery, and nonsectarian public education. His

The Stockwell Orphanage, London (1884)



Photo by Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo



Union Gospel Mission sign

statements on the matter draw a fine line. Spurgeon argued in 1873 that “for a Christian minister to be an active partisan of Whigs or Tories, busy in canvassing, and eloquent at public meetings for rival factions, would be of ill repute.” In 1880 he published a pamphlet arguing that the Tories’ commitment to imperialism and bloodshed meant that they must be defeated in the upcoming election. In fact, DiPrima recounts that he was described in a newspaper as “the greatest single influence in South London in favour of Liberalism.”

DiPrima considers the argument that Spurgeon was a “political preacher” but soundly rejects it, leaning on his overall thesis as evidence for the preacher’s careful restraint regarding political activism. Spurgeon only engaged political arguments where he saw clear religious implications, and he typically reserved political comments for articles, not sermons. The practical wisdom of DiPrima’s book shines here. Without giving a full endorsement to Spurgeon’s sometimes partisan comments, he concludes that pastors can learn from Spurgeon to keep the pulpit sacred for biblical preaching and to limit political statements to textual implications. The work of the church is the salvation of souls and the recovery of spiritual health; cultural and political renewal flow out of and point toward it.

An aspect of Spurgeon’s political arguments that will especially interest readers of *Religion &*

Liberty is his opposition to centralized reforms and socialism. While he supported the party of reform, Spurgeon was under no illusions that government action could solve Britain’s struggles with poverty. Christian socialism was rising as Spurgeon rose, and he soundly condemned it. He gave both the problem and the solution in 1891: “Great schemes of socialism have been tried and found wanting; let us look to regeneration by the Son of God, and we shall not look in vain.” To the question of how to cultivate a free and virtuous society, Spurgeon would answer: trust in Christ, recognize the needs of others, and as a local congregation form institutions to help them. Let your care for the physical needs point them to their greater spiritual needs.

Today almost every American town of any significant size seems to have a church that dubs itself “a church for the city.” DiPrima applies this label to Spurgeon’s Tabernacle but with a different definition than is typical. Victorian London was in many ways a dark place; along with many other Christians, Spurgeon and his congregants cared for the sick, impoverished, widows, and orphans. Metropolitan Tabernacle was not a church for the city because it saw it as a gleaming shimmer of hope; rather, it saw the city as a place that needed spiritual and physical renewal. Christians can only meet those needs because of the work of Christ. As Jonathan Leeman says in the foreword, transformation is not something that humans accomplish; it’s the purview of the Holy Spirit.

To Christians considering a solution to poverty in the 21st century, *Spurgeon and the Poor* is an orienting and strengthening reminder of the motivation and power behind that goal and the best institutional practices by which it can be achieved. Christians engage in social ministry because of the mercy shown to them by Christ “who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). It is because of that gospel and through the local churches into which Christ has called us that those suffering from poverty can find both material and spiritual healing. **RL**

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Christ and the Rich Young Ruler by Heinrich Hofmann (1889)

Jesus and Class Warfare

Was Jesus a proto-Marxist? Some say yes. Others are convinced he did not fit into any neat category, ancient or modern. What's certain is that of the making of many "historical" biographies there is no end.

by DANIEL N. GULLOTTA

PLENTY OF MARXISTS HAVE turned to the New Testament and the origins of Christianity. Memorable examples include the works of F.D. Maurice and Zhu Weizhi's *Jesus the Proletarian*. After criticizing how so many translations of the New Testament soften Jesus' teachings regarding material possessions, greed, and wealth, Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has gone so far as to ask, "Are Christians supposed to be Communists?" In the *Huffington Post*, Dan Arel has even claimed that "Jesus was clearly a Marxist, not by name, but by ideology." With a title like *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict*, one might assume that this volume, produced by Bible scholars James Crossley and Robert J. Myles, is another disposable piece of popular nonfiction, wedging Jesus into the authors' political mold. Thankfully, this is not that kind of book.

Knowing they will be accused of turning Jesus into a proto-Marxist or forerunner of socialism, Crossley and Myles are quick to say that is not their goal. Their concern is methodological and pragmatic. The purpose of the book is not to read a socialist Jesus into the early Jesus tradition, preserved in the Gospels and the letters of Paul, but rather to examine the social, material, and class conditions that shaped the life of Jesus and his earliest followers. Put another way, what Crossley and Myles have produced is a Marxist reading of the Gospels, not a Marxist gospel.

For too long, claim Crossley and Myles, Bible scholars of various political commitments and confessional creeds have crafted a Jesus in their image—or at least their idealized image. Little wonder that readers can find all sorts of Jesuses to fit their

preferences, whether it be a Jesus for evangelical Americans, a Jesus for the nonreligious, or a Jesus for third wave feminists. The authors' solution to this methodological doom spiral? An approach that emphasizes historical materialism when studying the historical Jesus and the birth of Christianity.

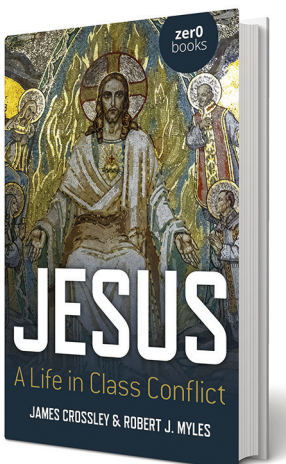
Crossley and Myles begin their history by arguing that Jesus was most likely the eldest son of Mary and Joseph and born in the unremarkable town of Nazareth (not Bethlehem), and at some point in adulthood he felt called by God. From peasant artisan to apocalyptic preacher and millenarian hopeful, Jesus garnered a humble following based on his ability to cast out demons and perform healing miracles. His parabolic message was full of not-so-subtle warnings, criticisms, and invitations to men and women across the Judean political, religious, and class spectrum. As this message garnered followers, he inevitably brought attention to and endangered himself, so much so that he ended up on a Roman cross. Much of the portrait painted by Crossley and Myles will be all too familiar to any with a passing knowledge of the quest for the historical Jesus. Where these authors shine, however, is in illustrating the socio-economic world of Jesus and his first followers.

Unlike the peaceful and prosperous image painted by Howard Clark Kee, Crossley and Myles argue that the Galilee at the time of Jesus was dangerous, dislocated, and distressed. Given that Jesus was a craftsman, the authors assert that the rebuilding of Sepphoris and the building of Tiberias would have dramatically displaced people like Jesus. The ancient historian Josephus provides evidence for this economic unrest with numerous references to banditry

as well as various tax revolts. With remarkable ease, Crossley and Myles situate readers in the economically desperate, brutally violent, and apocalyptically expectant time and place that produced Jesus and his movement. The hopes, the stakes, and the vulnerability of that movement are made tangible and real.

What follows is a rather standard telling of the life of the historical Jesus, at least standard for anyone with a passing familiarity with the works of N.T. Wright, Bart D. Ehrman, and Paula Fredriksen, all of whom present Jesus as a millennial prophet, with Wright standing out as the sole believing Christian of the trio. Crossley and Myles' overall profile of Jesus may not be that original, but their insights into the Jesus movement are quite compelling and the best elements of this book. Pointing to Jesus' inner circle of fishermen and the agricultural basis of so many of Jesus' parables, the authors emphasize the connections between Jesus' followers and the Galilean peasantry. Furthermore, the often referenced "crowds" throughout the Gospels in Greco-Roman literature were understood to reference the lower classes. But while most scholarship has focused on Jesus' ability to heal the sick, cast out demons, and forgive sinners, more important for Crossley and Myles is the disciples' ability to partake in and utilize this same divine power. Not only will Jesus sit on a throne—so will his closest followers as they join him in judging their pagan overlords (Matt. 19:27–28) and even angels (1 Cor. 6:1–3). All this suggests to Crossley and Myles that the Jesus movement had a far more diversified regime of latent power than other historians have credited.

But in its "mission to the rich," Jesus and his followers could be equally prophetic and pragmatic. While Jesus' dining with "sinners and tax collectors" is well known in the Christian tradition, Crossley and Myles argue that these "sinners" included the rich and economic exploiters (or Law breakers) and therefore were able to offer space and means for Jesus and his followers to dine. This reading is consistent with that found in other ancient Jewish literature—for example, 1 Enoch 102:9, "Now I tell you, sinners, you have satiated yourselves with food and drink, robbing and sin, impoverishing people and gaining property." Of course, given the stories of those reluctant to give up their wealth, such as the rich young man in Matthew 19:16–30, it is more than likely that the Jesus movement's success in these elite



Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict

By James Crossley and Robert J. Myles
(Zero Books, 2023)

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JESUS OPERATED IN A STYLE MORE AKIN TO THE PROPHETS OF DESTRUCTION LIKE JEREMIAH.

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circles was limited. In addition, as suggested by E.P. Sanders, if Jesus had won over more of the economic elite, it is unlikely he would have been executed in the manner he was. Even so, the point stands that Jesus' kingdom message appealed to a broad spectrum and summoned people from across the ancient world's harsh class divide.

They also believe that Jesus' advocacy of non-violence was primarily pragmatic, given the Roman occupation and history of horrific retaliation against any who challenged Roman rule. But rather than being what we conceive of as a nonviolent resister, a Martin Luther King Jr. or a Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus operated in a style more akin to the prophets of destruction like Jeremiah. He may have instructed his followers to “turn the other cheek,” but such advice was designed to help grow and foster the movement, not to be a set of ethics. In the messianic age to come, divine violence would be dealt out on behalf of Jesus' followers. Caesar's violence would be replaced by the God of Israel's violence, a human empire swapped out for a divine empire—but an empire nonetheless.

But God's empire did not come, and the messianic age never arrived. Jesus' kingdom movement *should* have ended with his crucifixion at the hands of the Romans, yet Crossley and Myles do think that the postmortem visions of Jesus were genuine—or at least that they contain a sincere though problematic historical memory from his closest disciples. These visionary experiences, coupled with their messianic expectations, helped launch the Christian faith. Once again, grounding their reading in class analysis, Crossley and Myles take stock of the Jesus movement's transformation from one originally grounded in rural subjects of the Roman Empire to one

centered on the urban elites of that empire. One is reminded of Marx's often quoted line that “all great world-historic facts and personages appear... the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”

Crossley and Myles' style is approachable and academic-jargon free, yet it still gets bogged down in Marxist shibboleths such as “organizer,” “central committee,” and “politburo.” Another strange translation choice is “Dictatorship of Peasantry” for “the Kingdom of God.” While such terminology might tickle the sort of reader Zero Books primarily appeals to, it's distracting at best and cringe-worthy at worst. There are also some curiosities. Early on, Crossley and Myles push back against efforts by Christian apologists to present the historical Jesus as “countercultural” to his Jewish world, and they bristle at the term “subversive.” The reason for this is twofold: to avoid “great man of history” tropes and because of the anti-Semitism such efforts have engendered, fostering images of the “Satanic” Pharisees and Christ killers. Nevertheless, Crossley and Myles highlight instances where the Jesus movement does, in fact, challenge the dominate cultural patterns of the ancient Mediterranean world. Jesus, they argue, was offering an alternative way to live. If that's the case, why is this not countercultural and subversive? Because it challenges more than just traditional Jewish life in Judea? The distinction made by Crossley and Myles doesn't quite offer a difference when put under scrutiny.

Even so, there is an old-fashioned quality to *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict* that many readers will appreciate. Despite being written from a perspective that questions many of the traditions of the Christian faith, it is respectful in its approach, reasonable in most of its assessments, and simply enjoyable to read. Given its accessibility to the non-scholar and price point, Crossley and Myles' work might make an excellent companion to N. T. Wright's *The Challenge of Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan's *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, or Paula Fredriksen's *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, so long as you approach each with eyes wide open to the authors' presuppositions. And we all have them. **RL**

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Stauffer Chapel at Pepperdine University. Photo by Swper / Wikipedia

To Be Deep in History Is to Be Protestant

Protestants, especially those of the low-church variety, are often viewed as dismissive of church history and tradition, preferring a “Bible-only” approach to theology and ecclesiology. But is it true?

by WILFRED M. McCLAY

IT HAS LONG BEEN virtually an article of faith among the most respected students of American Protestantism—not to mention those who are not students per se but who nevertheless feel comfortable generalizing about it—that American Protestantism (and evangelical Protestantism in particular) largely rejected the authority of tradition and the accumulated lessons of history in favor of a theology reliant upon the immediate authority of the Bible, which the common man exercising his common sense could encounter and interpret for himself. Such distinguished historians as Mark Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and E. Brooks Holifield have been proponents of this

view of American church history. Not that they have admired American Protestantism’s alleged rejection of the past; on the contrary: they have seen it as one of the chief weaknesses in that history. Noll in particular has suggested that the Church’s inability to deploy its moral authority to solve the sectional crisis over slavery was due to precisely this inability to move beyond “the plain meaning of Scripture” and incorporate Scripture into a larger understanding of the entire sweep of the Church’s moral teaching over two millennia.

But now along comes a rising young scholar, Paul J. Gutacker, to say that it ain’t necessarily so. The fact

that his book comes with an unqualified endorsement on its cover from Mark Noll himself speaks volumes not only about the generous character of Mark Noll the scholar and man but also the persuasiveness of the arguments Gutacker has mounted in this fascinating and mind-opening study. His work, remarks Noll, “has demonstrated what other historians (including myself) have ignored or misconstrued: ‘religious memory’ in fact meant a very great deal to antebellum American Protestants.”

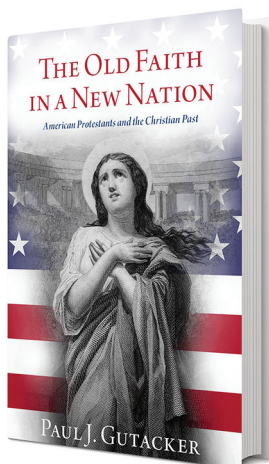
Before looking at Gutacker’s arguments, though, permit me the indulgence of an anecdote to support my sense of his book’s importance. Reading *The Old Faith in a New Nation* caused me to cast my mind back a number of years to a promising graduate student I worked with when I was on the history faculty of Tulane University. He was an evangelical, a member of the Churches of Christ, whose historical origins trace back to the Stone-Campbell movement of the 19th century. In fact, he was a product of one of the Church of Christ colleges, Lipscomb in Nashville, where he had received an excellent, old-fashioned liberal arts education. Fresh out of a Navy enlistment, this bright and delightful young man came to me with a thesis topic I found irresistible.

The topic took the form of a question, or a series of them. Why did the Churches of Christ have colleges in the first place, not to mention build the third-largest religious-college network in the country, behind the Roman Catholics and Lutherans? Was that not a logical fallacy, since the Restorationist theology of the Stone-Campbell movement was founded on the belief (reinforced by their use of the Scottish commonsense philosophers and the work of Francis Bacon) that the Bible should be understood

as a scientific text full of unproblematic statements of truth that are accessible to all? The Churches of Christ in which this young man had grown up did not see the need of a learned clergy to interpret the Scriptures, since the meaning of those texts was presumed to be plain to every honest inquirer, so long as no obfuscation by learned men was allowed to muddy the waters. Nor did they admit the need to consult the historical record or the path of tradition, especially not during the first millennium of the Church’s existence. The voice of Scripture speaking in clear and unmediated tones overrode anything that tradition might have to offer.

So, asked my student, why do the Churches of Christ have colleges? Or, more pointedly, should they have them? How is it not a violation of their most fundamental avowed principles for them to have such institutions? What need was there for institutions of higher learning at all in a religious culture whose biblicism was so intense and comprehensive?

Such good questions, and yet so emotionally fraught for this splendid young man. He cherished the loving community of his denomination but did not find a logical intellectual connection between the ideas upon which it grounded its theological distinctiveness and the actual facts of its existence and practices. It was an impossible conundrum he had wandered into, a circle that could not be squared, and so it was not a surprise to me that he drifted away from Tulane and never completed his thesis. Too bad. Because I believe that if he’d had Paul Gutacker’s book in hand, he might have found a better way to formulate his questions.



The Old Faith in a New Nation: American Protestants and the Christian Past

By Paul J. Gutacker
(Oxford University Press, 2023)

GUTACKER INSISTS THAT 19TH-CENTURY EVANGELICALS DID NOT ESCHEW HISTORY AND TRADITION NEARLY AS MUCH AS WE THINK THEY DID.

For Gutacker insists that 19th-century evangelicals did not eschew history and tradition nearly as much as we think they did. And he makes his case through extensive research into a variety of printed sources, ranging from sermons and books to political and legal writings, to show that “evangelical Protestants, while claiming to rely on scripture alone, looked to the Christian past when faced with difficult questions.... They studied religious historiography, wrote about the Christian past, and argued over its implications for the present.”

Gutacker makes his case by relying, not on the academic study of church history or of scholarly innovations in biblical criticism, but on more widespread notions of the historical past, of memory as a collective activity, and of the past “as it is remembered,” the past as it became shaped and fostered in the imaginations of “ordinary educated Protestants.” Note the word “educated”; he is not talking about a bottom-up history of memory here but history that has been applied by many people to the task of living in the world. It turns out to be fairly undeniable that American evangelicals were deeply interested in the past and tradition and driven to seek guidance from them both.

That is not to say, of course, that the understandings of the past that motivated them would invariably pass muster with students of history today. Few popular understandings of history, past or present, ever clear that bar. But then again, few scholarly understandings of history speak directly to the felt needs of the larger populace. And in talking about memory, we are talking about the ways in which the past becomes appropriated into the consciousness of large numbers of individuals and groups—not the theologians but the men and women in the pews and the larger currents of society.

Gutacker marks out a surprisingly clear path toward historical consciousness, originating with certain 18th-century historians such as the Lutheran Johann von Mosheim and the Anglican Joseph Milner, whose multivolume works became widely read and influential for their emphasis on the lives and thought of “authentic” Christians, as well as for their disdain for sectarian theological or doctrinal interpretations imposed upon the past. It was “largely” from the resources of these writers that “literate Americans derived their understanding of the Christian past.” These early writers laid down a template for the creation of popular memory.



Photo by Chris Light / Wikipedia

Cane Ridge Meetinghouse, Kentucky, led by Barton W. Stone

What were some of the chief features of that template? First of all, they captured a sweeping meta-history of decline and renewal. The Christian past was understood as a fall from the purity and simplicity of the apostolic era into the establishmentarian errors of the post-Constantinian Church, the thickening corruption of the medieval years, and then the ongoing effort at apostolic recovery that was at the heart of the Reformation. The American emphasis on disestablishment was one such effort to counter that colossal error, with a view toward the possible eventual return of apostolic purity. Immigrant Joseph Priestley’s *General History of the Christian Church* (1802), which he dedicated to then-President Thomas Jefferson, contrasted American liberty with the “violent persecutions” that were a common feature of the intolerant Catholic past. When Congressman William Findley argued against state establishment of religion in 1811, he invoked not theology or political history but the history of Christianity, pointing to “the corruption and tyranny of councils and emperors.”

Even issues like infant baptism were discussed in terms of church history. When the Congregationalist minister Daniel Merrill decided to cast his lot with the Baptists on that issue, he declared that Baptists “have been the uninterrupted church of our Lord from the apostles’ day to our own.” In the name of justifying a present-day disruption, Merrill found and preached continuity between his actions and the longer, deeper history of the Church in its entirety.

In this connection, Gutacker takes gentle issue with historian Nathan O. Hatch and his important book on the democratization of American Christianity. The growth of the Stone-Campbell

movement, Hatch had written, was evidence of “the confidence that one could break the firm grip of custom and precedent,” and Methodists and Baptists flourished because “they embraced the American disregard for received authority.” And yet, as Gutacker argues, these changes did not make Christians less aware of the past. On the contrary, it made them more likely to couch their arguments in reference to developments in the history of the Church and not in Scripture alone. In Merrill’s case, among others, dissent from majority practice was presented in terms of obedience to the longer past, as they understood it.

These examples barely begin to convey the range and variety of examples that are provided in *The Old Faith in a New Nation*, many of them revolving around education, especially the education of ministers. I believe that my erstwhile graduate student would have found in them the beginnings of a persuasive account of how his denomination used history, even when it was not entirely conscious of doing so, to give an accounting of its “biblical” distinctives, and how the need to educate the laity about the *raison d’être* of the denomination’s distinctive stances, if only in order to preserve those distinctives, might require the creation of institutions of higher education.

Gutacker is also candid about the inadequacies of the historical perspectives that were so often employed in the past. To say that Protestants were more history-minded than we previously had thought is not the same thing as saying that their historical understanding was always praiseworthy in its effects. The author finds the tropes of anti-Catholicism to be thick on the ground everywhere in 19th-century America, which will be news to no one; but it is quite another thing to argue that such perspectives were lacking in a historical dimension. Bad history is still history.

Gutacker is especially wary of efforts to work past disagreements in the Church by employing a magisterial and ahistorical “biblicism.” In his conclusion, he makes that aversion clear and explicit. Perhaps every major debate roiling the Protestant world begins with a reference to the Bible but quickly turns to a search for corroboration or refutation through the passages of history: the study of interpretations and practices of Christians who have come before us. How else are we to arrive at conclusions that are well grounded if they decline to incorporate the counsel of the theologies, saints, councils, scholars, and other testimonies of the past?

And yet Gutacker concludes by sagely remarking that history alone will not save us, since it can be so easily misused, and needs a countervailing force to keep it honest. His work reminds one of Herbert Butterfield’s remarks near the end of *Christianity and History*:

So the purpose of life is not in the far future, nor, as we so often imagine, around the next corner, but the whole of it is here and now, as fully as ever it will be on this planet. It is always a “Now” that is in direct relation to eternity—not a far future; always immediate experience of life that matters in the last resort—not historical constructions based on abridged text-books or imagined visions of some posterity that is going to be the heir of all the ages....If there is a meaning in history, therefore, it lies not in the systems and organizations that are built over long periods, but in something more essentially human, something in each personality considered for mundane purposes as an end in himself.

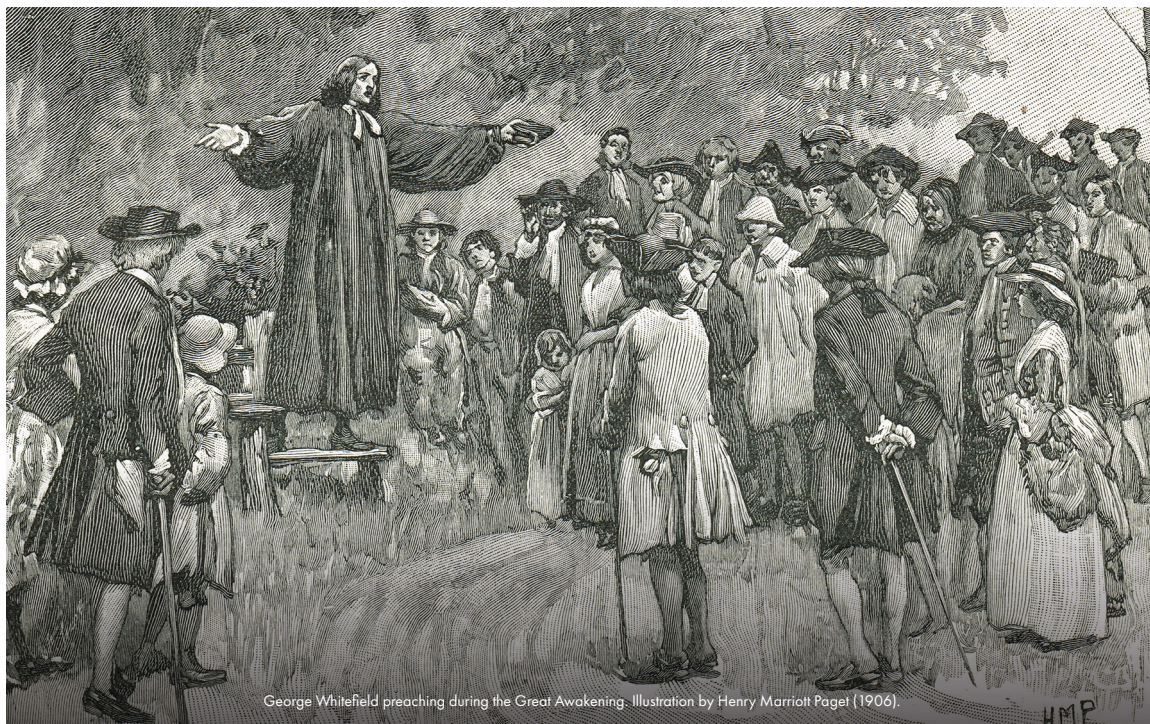
Even more powerful, but also perhaps more unsettling, are Butterfield’s concluding words:

I have nothing to say at the finish except that if one wants a permanent rock in life and goes deep enough for it, it is difficult for historical events to shake it. There are times when we can never meet the future with sufficient elasticity of mind, especially if we are locked in the contemporary systems of thought. We can do worse than remember a principle which both gives us a firm Rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds: the principle: Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.

In other words, in place of Progress with a capital P one should instead embrace the Rock with a capital R—Christ alone, and alone with Christ. Which is perhaps another way of saying that ultimate truth is, finally, outside the reach of historical inquiry.

Perhaps so. But it is unrealistic to believe that we, as historical creatures, can abstract ourselves entirely from history, even bad history, much as we might wish we could. The great virtue of Gutacker’s book is its effectiveness in underscoring that very point. ■

Wilfred M. McClay is Victor Davis Hanson Chair of Classical History and Western Civilization and professor of history at Hillsdale College.



George Whitefield preaching during the Great Awakening. Illustration by Henry Marriott Paget (1906).

Reawakening the Evangelical Imagination

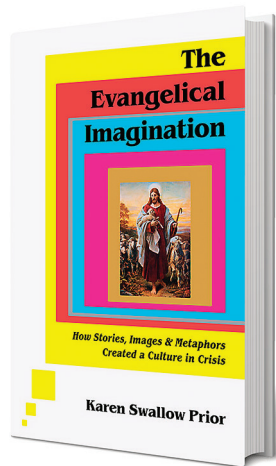
Too many evangelicals have been stunted by partisan politics, engrossed by end times fantasies, and immersed in megachurch mania. Yet they retain vast spiritual and cultural resources that, if cultivated, can result in a reformed and reinvigorated imagination equipped to face the challenges of the future.

by MICHAEL F. BIRD

ALL CULTURES ARE intertextual. Our media, music, art, and literature are shaped by, well, older media, music, art, and literature. Consider this: Indiana Jones is simply a rehash of H. Rider Haggard's character Allan Quatermain from *King Solomon's Mines*. The TV sitcom *The Simpsons* is a rehearsal of *The Flintstones*, which itself was a cartoon expression of the 1950s sitcom *The Honeymooners*. Today's Marvel superheroes are just secularized saints from the Middle Ages. Concerning religion, that too bears the imprint of older books, prints, and literary expressions. The many biographies about modern, popular

figures like Billy Graham, Dwight Moody, and Charles Spurgeon contain a similar mix of history and hagiography that one finds in Athanasius' *Life of Antony* from the fourth century. The extraordinarily popular self-help guide to Christian manhood, the bestselling *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge, is a cross between a Carolingian chivalry code and a monastic charter for cloistered monks.

In short: We're all walking in borrowed suits! We're all, for better or worse, shaped by the literary tropes and cultural milieu we've inherited and chosen to fill our minds. All people are shaped by the metaphors,



The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images & Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis

By Karen Swallow Prior

(Brazos, 2023)

stories, and language of imagination, and this is no less true of American evangelicals.

This brings us to a fascinating book by Karen Swallow Prior, Ph.D., called *The Evangelical Imagination*, which maps the interesting, sometimes strange, but never dull relationship between American evangelicals and their cultural worlds, as exemplified by the literature and art that evangelicals have either curated or created. Prior offers her own diagnosis of what has shaped American evangelicals for good and for bad. Prior, who has previously taught at both Liberty University and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, is no stranger to the strange ways of American evangelicals. Some might accuse her of painting American evangelicals with too broad a brush, though much of what she says could apply to the wider pan-Anglo evangelical world, and she is quite aware of the diversity and fluidity of the term “evangelical” itself. In any case, her stated aim in *The Evangelical Imagination* is to “tease out the elements of the evangelical social imaginary in such a way that those elements that are truly Christian can be better distinguished from those elements that are merely cultural.” Her concern is to make sure that “Christian culture” is shaped more by Christianity than by wider tropes and temptations of culture.

Prior begins by exploring the theme of “awakening” in literature, typified by epiphanic realizations of some metaphysical or moral truth that produces a transformation in the subject. In the spiritual sense, this can be connected to the American “Great Awakenings” as a journey into pious renewal. Similarly, in the moral sense, “wokeness” is the awareness of some grave moral injustice and “is simply another expression of the universal symbol of awakening that appears

across time and culture.” All of us, Prior says, are moving from dreams to awakenings.

In relation to conversion (an evangelical leitmotif if ever there was one), Prior describes the Puritan and Pietist emphasis on an inward turning to Jesus and how that finds expression, parody, and criticism in various pieces of literature. While I dispute her picture of Anglican clergy in the 18th and 19th centuries as perfunctory parsons of a stale state religion, her point is to be taken that conversion means nothing, it is shallow, without transformation and conformity to Christ.

Prior adds that conversion narratives, from Augustine’s to Jonathan Edwards’, have been an important facet of personal and corporate religious experience. Spiritual autobiography has always had a big influence on America and its churches. The telling of the conversion is a model of testimony, but it also requires an element of trust. Since the 1990s, it is common to ask, “Do we trust the person telling the story of their conversion?” The point I take away is that while there are many pilgrims who make progress, many people who find Christ on the road to Damascus, we might want to be suspicious of people who find Christ on the road to a GOP primary in Des Moines, Iowa!

Nothing indicates better the eclectic nature of evangelicalism than its obsession with self-improvement and better Christian living. Prior points to literature, art, and political analysis to show how the West came to see self-improvement of morals and abilities as a civic duty. While I think the idea of self-improvement has some traction in ancient Stoic philosophy, nonetheless Prior’s point holds: the evangelical self-help industrial complex is evidence of its indebtedness to the surrounding culture. To this day, I am still haunted, tormented in fact, by the knowledge that Rick Warren’s book *The Daniel Diet* has sold more copies than my 30 books on Christian theology, history, Bible commentaries, and religious liberty—combined.

Prior also notes how evangelicals have been basking in sentimentality for centuries, even though sentimentality is a double-edged sword, leaving us between sympathy and self-centeredness. Prior points out that art causes us to re-live emotions, while sentimental art causes us to re-live emotional experiences. In artistic representations of Christ, for example, one problem is that its aim is to comfort rather than to challenge. Christian imagination, argues Prior, cannot abandon its emotional register, but neither should it be ruled by it.

Prior adds that while religion often deals in intangibles, there is also an important matter of materiality to the Christian faith. The iconoclasm of evangelicalism can easily lend itself to platonic dualism or a docetic discipleship that divorces spirituality from our embodiment. The danger is that evangelicals trade aesthetics for pragmatics and divorce the word from the world. Her discussion about art leads to a salient observation that “the God of our faith is not just transcendent but is here with us—and, like us, not just spiritual but material too.” I concur with Prior that evangelicals need less cringey *kitsch* in their culture (e.g., pictures of a buff Jesus bench pressing the sin of the world) and more creation mandate (e.g., exercising their calling to make a material difference in matters of political gravity, creative ventures, and promotion of the gospel).

The chapter on “Domesticity” was my clear favorite, as it traces the origins of the concept of home as a mixture of castle and chapel, the rise of the “domestic goddess,” and the transition of marriage from a transaction between families to the search for a companion with whom one can share an inner life. Prior examines the transition of domesticity from dowries and drawing rooms to a home that houses a body and a body that houses a soul unto the Lord. The only thing I wish Prior had added is that the “cult of true womanhood,” while having Christianized versions that major on “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” can find secular equivalents with women who courageously, so it goes, abandon family for self-discovery, self-affirmation, and self-expression.

The most challenging and confrontational chapter, however, is the one on “Empire.” Prior notes how empire is weaved into our poetry, language, and culture. Americans, for all their love of political independence, are still a petulant colony of the British Empire.

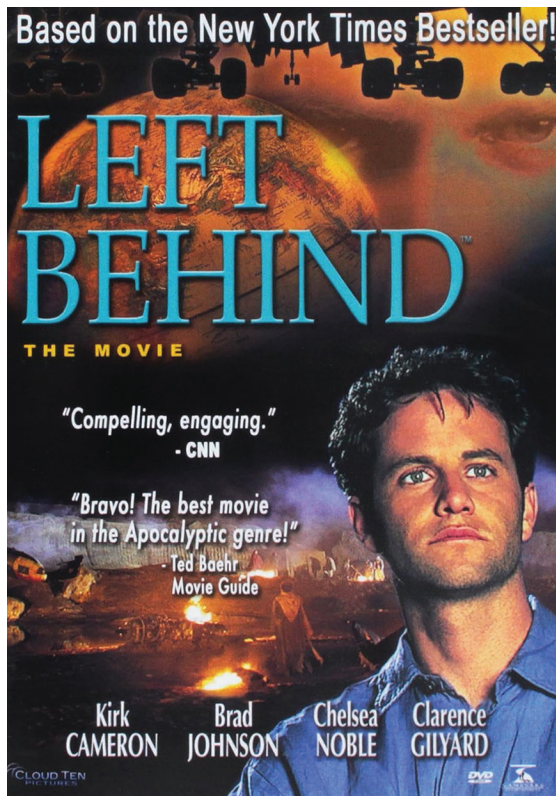
“
**THE ICONOCLASM OF
EVANGELICALISM CAN
EASILY LEND ITSELF TO
PLATONIC DUALISM OR A
DOCETIC DISCIPLESHIP.**
”

She uses the examples of Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe* and Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden” to show how easily westerners took to the subjugation, colonization, and suppression of foreign lands. Indeed, American evangelicals have been all too eager to build their own empires of media, religion, education, and political powerhouses that were, too often, self-serving. Instead, she applauds the Johnny Cash cover of “Hurt” to urge evangelicals to consider their empire building as erecting an “empire of dirt.” I resonated with this chapter as I have been reading William Dalrymple’s book *The Anarchy* about the brutality of the British East India company in its gradual takeover of India, and also Nigel Biggar’s fascinating book *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*, which attempts to nuance standard depictions of British expansion. It is important to remember that “empires” are never as one-dimensional as Star Wars villains and always a mix of good, bad, and ugly. But on the whole, I agree with Prior: one who wants to build an empire, or be the chaplain to an empire, is making a potentially Faustian pact with the Devil!

The American evangelical church today, glutted with its appetite for position, privilege, and power, is well due for a cathartic purge and a new and salutary reformation. The author insists that we need to imagine such a reformation of abuses and errors not as a long-ago history but as

An illustration of *Robinson Crusoe* published by Carrington Bowles (1783)





Left Behind: The Movie (2000)

a generation-to-generation *semper reformanda* in every respect. One wonders, though, given Prior's pessimistic diagnosis of American evangelicalism, whether reformation is enough, or whether it requires something as radical as a revolution, as revolutions tend to be more disruptive to the status quo. What such a revolution would look like is fodder for another book, perhaps.

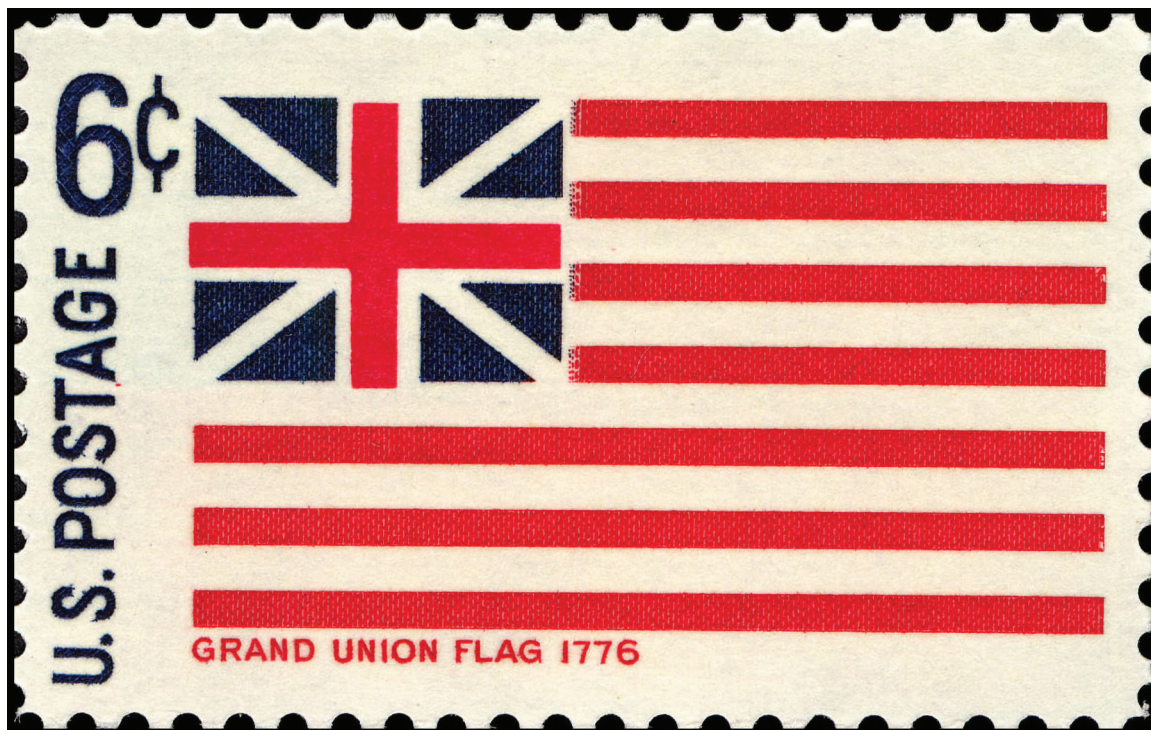
Prior closes the volume by engaging with pop evangelical eschatology related to the rapture and post-apocalyptic soap opera stories, typified by movies like *A Thief in the Night* and the *Left Behind* series of books. She speculates that such end-times literature is popular because of our need for symbols and signs of things beyond this world. But what we *truly* need is not a crass literalism in the service of deciphering biblical symbolism but an imagination reinscribed with a gospel hope. In sum, less rapture fluff and more enraptured-by-Christ. True enough, but I would also remind readers that Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* and the LaHaye/Jenkins *Left Behind* novels are not that much of an innovation but merely fictionalized accounts of the end times with many precursors, most obviously the third-century

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Christian author Hippolytus in his *On Christ and Antichrist*, which mixes exegesis and inventiveness to imagine how the Antichrist would arise and from whence he would come! Even the unbelievably terrible movie *Assassin 33 A.D.*, about Muslims who travel back in time to kill Jesus and to stop Christianity from beginning (weird because Muslims venerate Jesus as the virgin-born penultimate prophet, second only to Muhammad), rehashes a seventh-century *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, which also casts Muslims as the villains in a rewritten apocalyptic narrative. In other words, Prior has only skimmed the surface of the apocalyptic materials, from weird to wonderful, that have shaped Christian imaginations on the end times.

Despite my minor demurrals, this is a book that elegantly weds reflections on literature, art, and music to biblical meditations and cultural commentary on the state of the American evangelical church. Prior is at her best when making connections between classic literary culture and the contemporary religious landscape in the U.S. It's a book that will be eminently enjoyable to anyone with an interest in literature, religion, and culture—a fascinating read that is learned, clear, and challenging all at the same time. **RI.**

Michael F. Bird is academic dean and lecturer in New Testament at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia, and the author or editor of more than 30 books, including *What Christians Ought to Believe*, *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew about the Bible*, and *Evangelical Theology*.



Up from the Liberal Founding

Was the American founding a Lockean “liberal” one, which many postliberals see as flawed from the start, or a classical and Christian one? The decades-long debate may finally be settled.

by JAMES PATTERSON

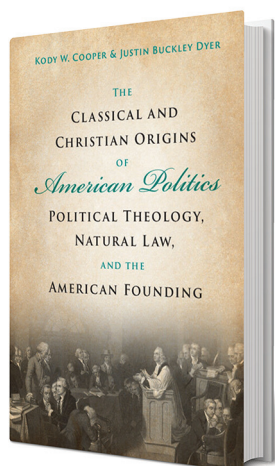
DURING THE 20TH CENTURY, scholars of the American founding generally believed that it was liberal. Specifically, they saw the founding as rooted in the political thought of 17th-century English philosopher John Locke. In addition, they saw Locke as a primarily secular thinker, one who sought to isolate the role of religion from political considerations except when necessary to prop up the various assumptions he made for natural rights. These included a divine creator responsible for a rational world for humans to discover. Such a god was hardly the God of the reigning Protestants predominant during the period when Locke or when our Founders lived. This view of Locke and the American founding was “bipartisan” in that both conservative and progressive scholars agreed on the central importance of the “liberal

tradition” in American politics. While Leo Strauss and Louis Hartz could not agree on much, they could at least agree on a Lockean America. The full expression of this view could be found in Bernard Bailyn’s classic *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, published in 1967, perhaps not coincidentally the last year the American “liberal consensus” remained intact.

In recent decades, however, scholars have reconsidered this view of the American founding. The ground was first laid by the 1984 landmark content analysis of Donald S. Lutz in his *American Political Science Review* article “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought.” Here Lutz compiled revolutionary and founding literature—while

intentionally excluding sermons for obvious reasons—from 1760 until 1805, and searched for references to authorities ancient and modern. He discovered that the so-called Lockean liberal founding was nothing of the sort. Rather, revolutionary literature contained more references to the Bible than to all other thinkers combined, and the most popular book was that of Deuteronomy. Locke appears somewhat often in the earliest years Lutz examined but rapidly tapers off in favor of appeals to Montesquieu, Blackstone, Hume, Pufendorf, Coke, and Cicero. Far from a Lockean liberal founding, Lutz concluded that “the debate surrounding the adoption of the U.S. Constitution reflected different patterns of influence than the debates surrounding the writing and adoption of the state constitutions, or the Revolutionary writing surrounding the Declaration of Independence.” In short, Lutz had proved that reducing the founding to liberalism badly oversimplified a complicated series of events with a wide array of influences and statesmen at work.

Lutz’s view remained something of a minority one; Michael Zuckert published *The Natural Rights Republic* in 1997 and Matthew Stewart *Nature’s God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* in 2015. By that year, however, the thesis of a “liberal founding” was already on shaky ground. A new generation of specialists in the field, like Daniel Dreisbach and Mark David Hall, had already labored to illustrate the significance of both Christian ideas and Christian interpretations of modern ideas during the founding era. Eric Nelson, David Bederman, Francis Oakley, Paul DeHart, and others have illustrated the significance of classical thought, medieval natural law theory, and “political Hebraism” as major intellectual



The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding

By Kody W. Cooper and Justin Buckley Dyer

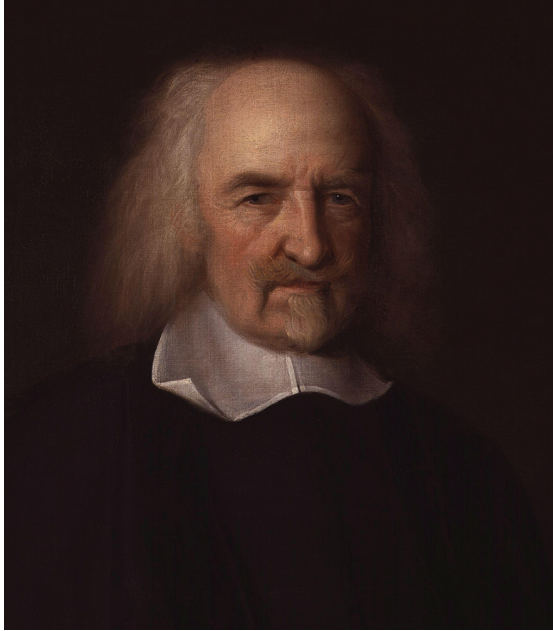
(Cambridge University Press, 2022)

“
DYER AND COOPER ARE NOT ARGUING THAT AMERICA IS A CHRISTIAN NATION BUT THAT IT HAD A CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN FOUNDING.
”

contributions on the founding. Historians of Protestant political thought, such as Glenn Moots, have charted its significance as well. Joining political Hebraism and Protestant political thought, as I have shown, was a now mostly forgotten tradition of the “American Nehemiah,” or interpreting pious but tough patriotism in terms of the Jewish governor of Palestine under the Persian Empire, the biblical Nehemiah. None of this is to say that Locke did not play a role in the American founding but rather that he did not play a central role. The Founders simply were not captured by the Lockean imaginary.

The *Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding* by Kody W. Cooper and Justin Buckley Dyer is both a summary statement of this literature and a critical step forward both in its comprehensiveness and in its innovation of methodology. It is, in my view, the best case one can make for centering the American founding on natural law, classical republicanism, and a broadly Christian tradition. Critical to this effort is to frame the question correctly. Dyer and Cooper are not arguing that America is a Christian nation but that it had a classical and Christian founding. The “Christian nation” hypothesis has largely been a project of older Protestant preachers and activists seeking to identify in the American founding the same faith practiced in their own churches, leading sometimes to the historiographical excesses like those of David Barton and his now discredited book on Thomas Jefferson.

The “classical and Christian founding” hypothesis is a more sensible subject, as it is one scholars can



Thomas Hobbes, portrait by John Michael Wright (c. 1669–70)

answer in a book-length project and is also sufficient for those challenging the centrality of liberalism. Simply put, Dyer and Cooper aim to unseat the centrality of liberalism to illustrate that it was merely one influence and that its later predominance was one ascribed to the founding by later historians wishing to use such an ascription to their own ideological ends. The first thought one might have is that Dyer and Cooper are doing the same; but if so, they have good reason. They have, as the kids say, “the receipts.”

Dyer and Cooper argue that the origins of American politics are classical and Christian, not modern. By “modern,” they mean “Hobbist,” a term they borrow from the Founders themselves. The term refers to Thomas Hobbes, a 17th-century political philosopher and author of *Leviathan*, one of the most important political philosophy texts ever written. While Cooper holds an idiosyncratic view of Hobbes as a natural law theorist, he leaves this interpretation to the side in favor of the predominate view that Hobbes sought to undermine natural law and pare it down to observable, effectual truths. They summarize these as “there is no standard of goodness outside of God’s will. God’s sovereignty is therefore absolute in the sense that it is unbounded by anything other than arbitrary will.” The Hobbist God has its imitation in the “mortal god” of the political sovereign, whose will governs those who consent

to it, and this has no moral limits. Contrary to this view is that of the Founders:

What [the Founders] specifically affirmed was that God created the world and imbued various aspects of his creation with discernible laws to direct creation to its proper end. For human beings, the moral laws of human nature, known by reason, point the way to happiness or flourishing in this life. God’s right of prescribing these laws, and our obligation to obey, is rooted in God’s power *and* goodness, and the natural law therefore is not merely an imposition of an arbitrary will. Similarly, human rulers are bounded by a real moral good when they make decrees to govern the human community. Good is not merely what is dictated by the sovereign.

One should add, as they do elsewhere, that such a God also takes an interest in His creation and ordains for His people a happy outcome, otherwise known as Providence. None of the above requires the Founders to be devout and dedicated Christians of the same denomination; rather, all that is required is a broadly classical, Christian conception of the world. Some Founders were devout, like John Jay and James Wilson, while others were more heterodox, like Thomas Jefferson and perhaps James Madison. The Founders certainly shared a “natural theology,” by which the authors mean a knowledge of things divine through rational inquiry only, but significant Christian ideas remain part of even heterodox thought, such as God’s interest in history and the problem of human fallenness.

Dyer and Cooper work through the publications that influenced the events of the Revolution and founding. In the chapter on the pamphlet wars between Patriots and Loyalists, they point to James Otis, John Dickinson, and James Wilson as classical and Christian in their perspectives. Otis, they observe, disapproves of modern political philosophers Samuel von Pufendorf and Hugo Grotius as “impure foundations,” while Otis interprets Locke as a realist rather than a nominalist. Such an interpretation is not true to Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding*, but Otis is less interested in getting Locke right than he is in putting him to use for the Patriot cause. Dickinson makes references to Americans as “Christian freemen,” grounds private property rights in Micah 4:4, and sees a benevolent

Creator ordaining events by Providence and forming a new grace-based covenant. Wilson, perhaps the most famous natural law thinker of the founding, they quote at length:

By his wisdom, [God] knows our nature, our faculties, and our interests: he cannot be mistaken in the designs, which he proposes, nor in the means, which he employs to accomplish them. By his goodness, he proposes our happiness: and to that end directs the operations of his power and wisdom.... The rule of his government we shall find to be reduced to this one paternal command—Let man pursue his own perfection and happiness.

The chapter on Jefferson is so careful that it resists summary here, but it represents, in my view, the best attempt to refute what the authors call the “subversive theology thesis.” In this they are taking on giants of 20th-century political philosophy: Leo Strauss and Thomas Pangle. This thesis is that Jefferson feigned a minimum religious faith for public respectability but wrote in a way that signaled to attentive readers his materialism and naturalism, a practice known as “esoteric writing.” Through a close reading of Jefferson’s letters to Adams, Dyer and Cooper demonstrate that Jefferson affirmed a created universe, an innate reason to apprehend God’s laws, and a theistic interpretation of humans as “divine property” immune to arbitrary power of a paternal king. In these efforts, Jefferson makes surprising references to Aquinas, Suárez, and Bellarmine. Moreover, because these letters were private and between close friends, Jefferson has no need for adopting esoteric writing. He is simply baring his own thoughts. None of this amounts to Jefferson’s being an orthodox Christian, and Dyer and Cooper stress this at the end of the chapter. It suffices to show, however, that Jefferson’s heterodoxy is not a subversive theology but rather an effort to harmonize classical, Christian, and modern political thought.

Later chapters work in much the same way: Dyer and Cooper provide a historical context for the debate of a certain period and review the arguments presented by the key actors and thinkers of the moment. Space does not permit me to cover all of them. Instead, I want to discuss the most innovative yet also the weakest chapter of the book—on counterespionage, “Providence and Natural Law in the War for Independence”—which features a most creative argument. As in the Jefferson chapter, Dyer and Cooper are concerned about the “subversive

theology thesis.” One important condition for the subversive theology thesis is that the statements are public, since esoteric writing is only necessary when one must hide one’s thoughts. To hide one’s thoughts from the less attentive reader requires an “exoteric message” that satisfies or even distracts them from the esoteric one. Not all writing is public; indeed, as with the letters between Jefferson and Adams, some are private. In this chapter, however, they are more than private. They are secret.

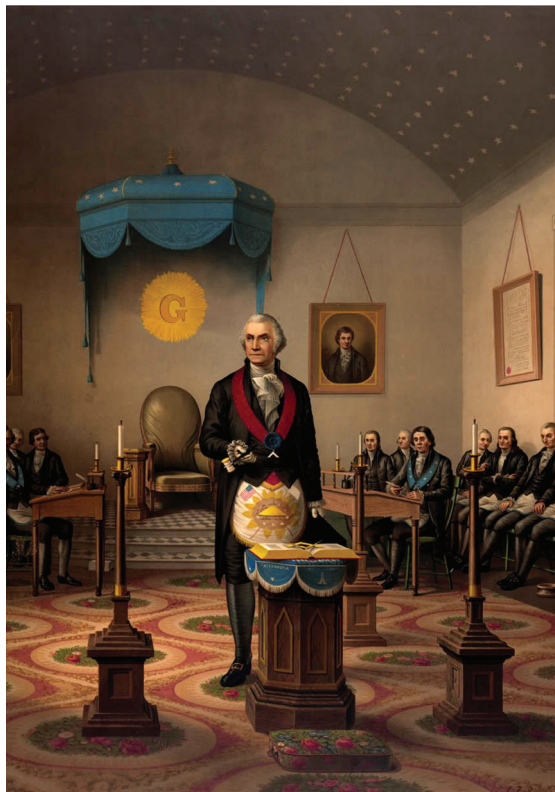
Secret messages do not require any exoteric writing, as they are intended for a very specific audience. These particular secret letters are those conducted by counterespionage agents among the Patriots and their allies in France. What the authors uncover are repeated examples in which agents appeal to Providence as guiding the war toward a favorable end and a trust in that Providence despite present hardships. The correspondences they examine come from John Jay, George Washington, John Honeyman, Nathaniel Sackett, Benjamin Tallmadge, Charles Hector (Comte d’Estaing), Abraham Woodhull (a.k.a. “Samuel Culper”), Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur (Comte de Rochambeau), Silas Deane, Roger Sherman, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, Chevalier d’Éon, Charles Gravier (Comte de Vergennes), Jonathan Trumbull, and Benjamin Franklin.

The trouble with highlighting the providential language shared among these figures is that it might not be part of a classical and Christian tradition but



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Washington As Master Mason.

Teaching over a meeting of the LODGE of ALEXANDRIA, VA. (of which he was a member) several propositions & copies of the Constitutions of the National Lodge by him on the 18th of September, 1793. The furniture of the Lodge with all "land and fixtures" used by WASHINGTON has been carefully preserved, & has remained as they appeared on that occasion. The apron was embroidered and presented to Washington by the Brethren of the Lodge.

From Public Sphere

Publicized

An 1870 print portraying George Washington as Master of the Masonic Lodge at Alexandria, Virginia, in 1793

an esoteric one—namely Freemasonry. Freemasonry was a common practice in England, France, and the colonies, and many of the figures in this chapter were practitioners, including Washington, Tallmadge, Deane, d’Éon, Franklin, and most likely Sherman. References to Providence among these correspondences are muddled by the Masonic conception of Providence that is more rationalistic and less directly Christian, meaning that those sharing these ideas with each other were using the term in one of two ways—the classical, Christian way or the Masonic way. For some, like perhaps Washington, there might be no difference between the two, but for others there might be, especially Franklin. This possibility does not seem to occur to Dyer and Cooper, who never mention it in their discussion of Franklin’s conception of Providence, which was certainly influenced by his participation in Masonic rites. Even

when non-Masons are writing to Masons, they may adjust their terminology to reflect a common belief in a Providence to demonstrate a continued trust in a high-stakes spy world where trust is hard to come by. By no means is this issue fatal to the argument of the chapter, especially its innovation; it only means that there might be a few “false positives” when they search for examples of a classical and Christian use of Providence in counterespionage.

Quibbles aside, *The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics* is a triumph of original research, close reading, and innovation both in method and textual interpretation. The book rewards careful and repeated reading. Indeed, I read the book twice for this review and learned more the second time than the first. To date, Dyer and Cooper have written the strongest refutation of the “Lockean founding” hypothesis and best “maximalist” reading of the American founding as classical and Christian. By “maximalist” I mean they all but deny that modern political thought played a role in the founding at all, except perhaps on the margins through figures like Jefferson. No doubt many readers will question this conclusion, but Dyer and Cooper have marshaled so much evidence that any doubts will require an equal amount of argumentation.

We have come a long way from Lutz’s 1984 breakthrough study, and now, as far as I am concerned, Dyer and Cooper have proved that the correct interpretation of the American founding is as a classical and Christian one. A major implication of this book’s conclusion is that the ongoing postliberal critique of America is simply wrong in its assessment of the founding as Lockean or liberal, as in the case of Patrick Deneen, something Dyer and Cooper address briefly in the conclusion of their book. Moreover, the classical and Christian origins they uncover are not like those Adrian Vermeule has attempted to expose in his own work. For that reason, not only is *The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics* an outstanding book; it is a timely one. **RL**

James Patterson is associate professor of politics and chair of the politics department at Ave Maria University. He is also research fellow at the Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy, fellow at the Institute of Human Ecology, and president of the Ciceroian Society.



Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Viktor Vasnetsov (1887)

How Dispensationalism Got Left Behind

One of the most popular and influential movements within evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity is on the decline. The end times aren't what they used to be.

by MICHAEL J. LYNCH

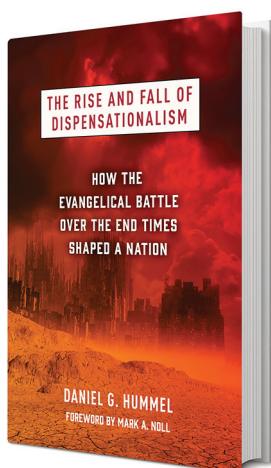
WHETHER WE LIKE it or not, Americans, in one way or another, have all been indelibly shaped by dispensationalism. Such is the subtext of Daniel Hummel's provocative telling of the rise and fall of dispensationalism in America. In a little less than 350 pages, Hummel traces how a relatively insignificant Irishman from the Plymouth Brethren, John Nelson Darby, prompted the proliferation of dispensational theology, especially its eschatology, or theology of the end times, among our ecclesiastical, cultural, and political institutions, even reaching to the American presidency. Indeed, hardly anyone living through the '90s and 2000s could have missed the dispensational

"rapture" doctrine—made popular in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series—whether or not they had ever heard the term "dispensationalism." The appellation, Hummel notes, was originally coined in 1927 by one of dispensationalism's early critics, Philip Mauro, who ironically, a couple decades earlier, had been a great champion of dispensationalism.

As the title of Hummel's book suggests, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation* recounts a tragedy of sorts. The rise of dispensationalism, according to Hummel, began during a time in America and Great Britain when the eschatological landscape was

decidedly postmillennial, an optimistic view of the church in its relation to society that posited a golden millennial age before Christ's second coming. Darby, not nearly as sanguine about the prospects of the world or church, advanced a decidedly pessimistic eschatology, embracing what Hummel calls "new premillennialism," or what ended up being called "dispensationalism." Hummel contrasts Darby's position with the old chiliastic position, wherein the former sharply distinguished between OT Israel and the NT church, divided the history of the world in accordance with the various ways God interacted with humanity (terming these divisional periods "dispensations"), and insisted on an imminent rapture—a catching up in the air of true Christians to meet with Christ before God's wrath befell those "left behind." At the end of *Rise and Fall*, there is a short glossary for those who have trouble following all of Hummel's taxonomical lingo.

Hummel argues that Darby's new premillennialism was both nurtured as well as substantially modified by the American context within which it was bred. Hummel points to commonsense realism, a philosophical position especially popular in America, as providing the soil in which dispensationalism could flourish. A biblical literalism that, for instance, insisted on the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God as denoting two different kingdoms fit a scientific age in which Darwinism was increasingly dominant, as both treated God's two books—nature and Scripture—as material to be scientifically analyzed. Dispensationalism's simple, biblical hermeneutic was coupled with a generally quietist approach to



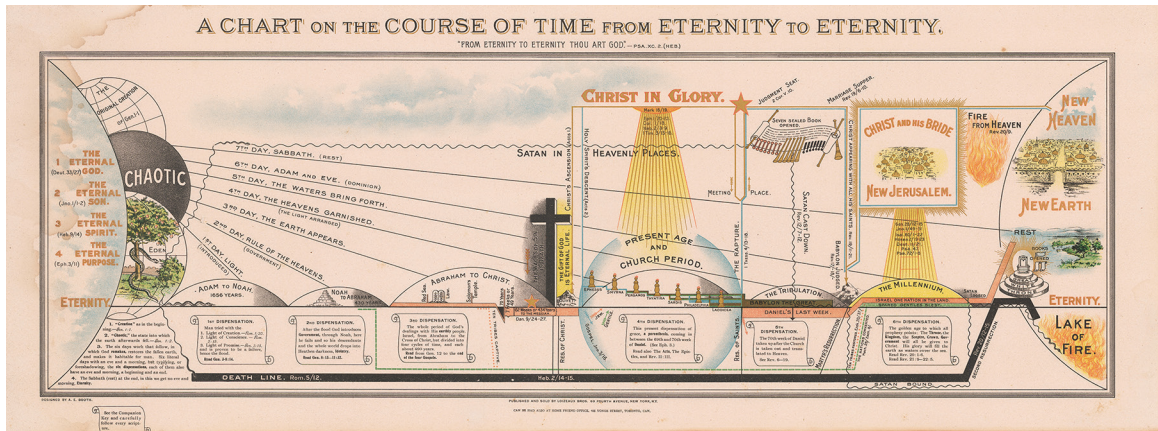
*The Rise and Fall of
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By Daniel G. Hummel
(Eerdmans, 2023)

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**NO DISPENSATIONAL
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PUBLISHED BY OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS.**
”

politics, particularly as dispensationalism moved into the postbellum South.

Hummel makes much of the Southern Presbyterian doctrine of the spirituality of the church—limiting the work of the church to spiritual matters such that political questions, like slavery, are relegated to politics—as a convenient doctrine whereby dispensational leaders like Dwight Moody could overlook racism for the sake of soul-winning. Hummel describes Moody's program as “premised on bracketing existing racism and discrimination, ignoring the rise of racial segregation regimes in the South, and rekindling fellowship and brotherhood with secessionists and advocates of Jim Crow.” Throughout the book, Hummel expresses dissatisfaction with the idea that gospel preaching and conversion to Christianity could be the antidote to such social ills, and this is presumably what folks like Moody had in mind when they prioritized evangelism over knotty political and social problems. Pat Robertson is quoted later in the book as insisting that the “principles of the Kingdom of God...are so revolutionary that they can change government, education, and social life.” For evangelicals like Moody (and perhaps less so with Robertson), social problems were not to be solved by top-down governmental intervention. Instead, the very nature of preaching the gospel, coupled with the subjectively appropriated new birth, was presumed to entail a new life of repentance and love, which would



Dispensationalist "Chart of the Ages," designed by A. E. Booth (1930)

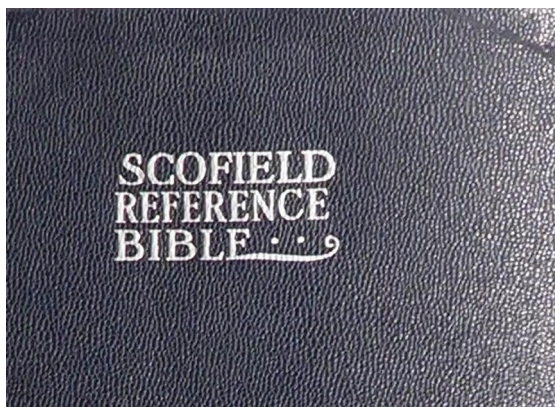
undoubtedly undermine social and political sins such as racism as the gospel advanced. In other words, governmental programs were not going to fix racial conflict; only a regenerate heart could be the ultimate cure. In fact, the government, as Hummel acknowledges in numerous places, was often deemed by dispensationalists as one of the contributing factors to America's spiritual malaise. Undoubtedly, there was a tension here among the more missions-oriented dispensationalists like Moody and the nationalist wing of dispensationalism led by pastors such as J. Frank Norris. Yet Hummel gives a rather unsympathetic interpretation of both of their approaches.

Hummel charts how dispensationalism arose in the latter 19th and early 20th century via parachurch organizations, various Bible and prophecy conferences, and especially by means of books and pamphlets that catered to laity and ministers rather

than academics. No dispensational publication had a greater effect on American Christianity than C.I. Scofield's *Scofield Reference Bible*, originally published by Oxford University Press. Such was its importance that as a student at the Moody Bible Institute, one of my dispensational professors expressed amusement at the fact that when he traveled in the South and visited various Presbyterian and Reformed congregations, many of the older parishioners still brought their Scofield Bible to Sunday worship. Scofield's Bible gave laity the sense that they could understand the Bible—even obscure apocalyptic literature—all in accordance with the dispensational categories laid out by Scofield.

After the publication of Scofield's Bible, dispensationalists became leaders in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, publishing *The Fundamentals*—short essays in defense of the various "fundamentals" of the Christian faith (e.g., the virgin birth and substitutionary atonement). Dispensationalism as a movement was always fundamentalist at its core, attempting, though not always successfully, to reach across Protestant denominational aisles with its unique eschatological perspective. Fittingly, the various Bible institutes and other parachurch organizations that arose in this period all emphasized inerrancy and the miraculous nature of biblical events, along with a strong disdain for evolution and liberal Christianity but coupled those with an insistence on the imminent return of Christ and premillennialism. Because of the lack of anything more confessionally sustainable than conservative Christianity plus an eschatological twist, it is no surprise that Hummel found it necessary to taxonomize all the different stripes of dispensationalists, whether they be pop dispensationalists, revivalist

Cover detail of the 1917 *Scofield Reference Bible*



dispensationalists, nationalist dispensationalists, or scholastic dispensationalists. Throughout Hummel's narrative, he weaves together the story of dispensationalism within the context of broader Christian movements, social questions, and even politics. In fact, the book is arguably the story of white (as he calls it) fundamentalism on through to the present. *Rise and Fall* even covers a whole host of various Reformed and neo-evangelical responses to dispensationalism.

Hummel argues that dispensationalism was at its height when scholastic dispensationalists such as Lewis Chafer, Charles Ryrie, and John Walvoord were writing theological works in exposition and defense of dispensational theology and founding various theological institutions. This was the period when Dallas Theological Seminary and the dispensational academic journal *Bibliotheca Sacra* were most influential in broader evangelicalism. Dispensationalism during the middle of the 20th century had to compete against not only continued threats of liberalism from within Protestantism but also a carved-out space among its neo-evangelical and Reformed critics. Hummel's *Rise and Fall* includes a few very helpful charts summarizing the various pockets of dispensationalism within fundamentalism or evangelicalism.

The scholastic influence of dispensationalism on broader evangelicalism, as Hummel chronicles, did not last, owing to what he calls pop dispensationalism. Pop dispensationalism, which began in earnest with Hal Lindsey's bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, initially sought to apply dispensational eschatology to current events, such as the Cold War. Hummel argues that this was the eschatology of dispensationalism untethered from the ecclesiological distinction between the church and Israel, along with a general disregard for dispensationalism's literal reading of Scripture. The rise of pop dispensationalism put dispensational eschatology into mainstream American thinking but gutted it of all its core foundations, leaving a hollowed-out variant doomed to die. This "reduced version of dispensationalism," as Hummel describes it, permeated the new religious right of the latter part of the 20th century but lacked any sort of staying power, as scholastic dispensationalism fractured from within. Such fractures were most evident in the rise of progressive dispensationalism, which moved closer toward the covenant theology of the Reformed tradition, while new battle lines formed as popular dispensational preachers like John MacArthur attacked his fellow scholastic peers for their perceived antinomian doctrine of saving

faith and joined forces with those more sympathetic to classic Reformed theology.

Hummel makes much of the way various changes in mass media—in the form of books, music, and video—contributed both to the rise of dispensationalism as well as its demise, but it is noteworthy that dispensationalism never moved beyond being a parachurch movement. Although, during the 20th century it did seep into nearly every major evangelical denomination—after all, Scofield himself was a part of the southern Presbyterian wing of the mainline—it never really gained confessional status. Apart from some relatively minor denominations, a full-orbed dispensationalism never took root. Pop dispensationalism could feed off, and still does, portrayals of the end times as providing the key to our current political problems, nationally or internationally, yet scholastic dispensationalism needed confessional and denominational backing. Ultimately, most dispensationalists treated their eschatological outlook like an appendage to a thicker theology, rather than a necessary distinctive. Because of this, it is no wonder that dispensationalism has not endured in theological institutions and evangelical denominations.

Dispensationalism is one of those theological movements that most Christians have heard of but cannot quite figure out. Hummel's *Rise and Fall* is certainly the definitive survey of dispensationalism as an evangelical and fundamentalist movement, not to mention a dizzying array of other closely associated factions of modern evangelicalism. Readers who wish to understand all of dispensationalism's theological nooks and crannies will be somewhat disappointed, but the bibliographical essay at the end of the book not only highlights Hummel's own knowledge of the relevant primary and secondary literature but also provides eager students of dispensationalism and American evangelicalism a wealth of reading material. Mark Noll's foreword gives the impression that the original title to Hummel's book was *Rightly Dividing Dispensationalism*, playing off the title of Scofield's pamphlet expounding an early version of dispensationalism and 2 Timothy 2:15. Hummel's *Rise and Fall* does an excellent job at that! **RL**

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CONVERSATION STARTERS WITH . . .

Anne Bradley

Q There’s much talk about “common good capitalism” these days, especially from the New Right. Is this long overdue, that a hyper-individualism be beaten back, or is it merely cover for increasing state control of the economy?

Let me begin by saying that I hate “capitalism with adjectives” in general. This allows people to use the word as an abusive epithet rather than as a description of how an economic system allocates scarce resources. The New Right and the left both disdain capitalism, which can best be described as an economic system

characterized by private property rights or private ownership of the means of production. Individuals and firms decide how best to use and invest those resources and are directed by prices, profits, and losses.

The New Right doesn’t like this system because some argue that we’ve traded virtue for growth and that we can use the administrative state to correct market failings and restore community. Another of their arguments is that we’ve become atomistic individuals—robotic automatons, or *homo economicus* if you will—and we are just walking spreadsheets doing cost-benefit analysis everywhere we go, without purpose and humanity. The left also uses some of those arguments; they reject

inequality and individuals who have “too much wealth” and want to level the playing field.

Both of these arguments miss the mark, and it’s a hard argument that they sell—“Let’s return to the 1950s when everything was simple and families could survive on one income.” Making that claim takes a great deal of privilege and gross economic error. The 1950s weren’t better for minorities or women, for starters. Living in 2023 is far better because we have more legal equality and are materially far better off; this is not despite capitalism but because of it.

I think some of this is human nature—we tend to have a romantic view of some aspects of the past, as it reminds us of our youth. Some of this is just gross misrepresentation of the data, which are easily available and understandable. For example, since 1979, for every three jobs destroyed, four were created. This means the economy is growing! In 1940, about 30% of Americans worked in agriculture; today, that’s under 5%, meaning everyone has higher-skilled and better-paying jobs. The time-cost of almost all goods and services has plummeted in the past 50 years. In 1950, it took about 50 minutes of labor to buy a 3-pound chicken; today it takes about 12 minutes.

Capitalism brings us the goods, and no one wants to give them up, but it’s not just about materialism. To get the “stuff,” we must cooperate, we require the rule of law, we must respect the dignity of other people, and we must only be paid for productive labor that serves others. Ask anyone in North Korea or Venezuela today if they would love to come to a

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capitalist country and give life a try. This is why America has always attracted immigrants and has been known as a melting pot—it has historically celebrated capitalism. We don’t need capitalism with adjectives, we need unconstrained markets—that is what best serves the common good, and we have 200 years of empirical data to prove that it works.

Q We have an aging population, so the sustainability of Social Security and Medicare are hot topics of debate. Given that most people don’t make the best financial decisions, especially when they’re young, and emergencies, especially health crises, can wipe out savings, many pushing 70 have little more than Social Security and Medicare to rely on. Is this system fixable? Should it be replaced by something else?

I was in the store yesterday and saw, for the first time, a “Happy 100th Birthday” card. It’s truly remarkable how far we’ve extended the boundaries of life expectancy, a trend that can continue. However, no one can work when they’re 100 years old; I’ll be lucky if I can feed myself at that age, right? So, we can’t just push the boundaries of life expectancy without rethinking the policies around elder care.

You’re right to point out that, when we’re young, we sometimes make reckless financial choices that can follow us for a while. If you don’t start saving until midlife, you’re in trouble. One of the issues is the incentives around household savings. Social security, to some extent, disincentivizes private savings because we’ve believed for a long time that as we pay into that system, the system will pay us as we get older. After all, Social Security is your money, not government charity or welfare. This is failing because the government doesn’t have the incentive, over the course of our working lives, to be a trusted steward of that money; quite the opposite—they have the incentive to spend the money.

Social Security is expected to become insolvent in 2034, and Medicare insolvency is expected in 2028—that’s in five years! Meanwhile, the federal government continues to recklessly spend beyond its means, indicating they have no money to support these systems in the future. What I find ironic is that people get very upset about this, rightly so, but then they vote for politicians who are big spenders both on the left and the right. We can’t fix these systems unless we dismantle them and start over or find massive cash infusions for them.

As Medicare becomes insolvent, benefits will immediately decrease by 10%; for Social Security, that decrease will be 20%. We also talk about the “sandwich generation”: people my age are both raising young kids and caring for elderly relatives, which adds to the financial pressure that working adults face. So what to do? I’d move to a privatized system wherein we grandfather in current beneficiaries. We can do this, but it means we have to alter our attitudes about these types of investments when we’re young. It also requires a revamping of the healthcare system, which is bloated and expensive. So if I were president for a day, I would almost entirely dismantle the FDA, which makes the drug-approval process lengthy and expensive, but worse—it withholds life-saving drugs and medical inventions from the market with over-testing and burdensome regulations. To do this, we need courageous politicians. But we cannot get those without first having the political will for big reforms within the citizenry.

Q You wrote a book that focused on a biblical answer to poverty. If you could correct one misunderstanding about free market economics, especially for Christians who have a dominical command to care for the poor, what would it be?

That market economies are the most essential part of the solution. They are more important than humanitarian aid. It’s not that we should not care for our brothers and sisters in poverty by supporting their immediate needs. If you’re going to die of starvation today, and I can help by giving you food and water, I should do so. But often our aid within churches, missions, and government organizations focuses only on short-term needs and not long-term solutions. The goal is to help such that your help is no longer needed after a while—and it can take a long time for that to happen. We want poor people to become prosperous, not to be dependent on our charity forever. If we do our job well, the humanitarian aid is temporary and goes away.

Think about poverty in America, which differs from poverty in Syria. The United States has an extensive public welfare system and a large private philanthropic sector. Americans are the most generous, giving about \$485 billion last year to various charities, much of which occurs through church giving. We are a very rich country, so there is a great deal of money and willingness to help the poor domestically and globally. So why do we see the persistence of poverty in American cities?

Today in Seattle, Portland, and L.A., we see cities deteriorating and increasing homelessness. We can’t simply slap a Band-Aid on this; we must get to the bottom of American poverty, which has varied causes, including mental health issues, bad residential zoning policies, and high minimum wages, which make finding work and shelter very difficult. Some of it is due to broken families and drug addiction. To help, we must get into relationships with people to understand how they got here. They may need medical attention, food, shelter, etc. We are good at that part; where we need to improve is to move away from destructive policies that generate more poverty. More economic freedom is the answer—in Los Angeles and Syria—but significant institutional differences exist in these places, so our approach must be different depending on where we are.

Q If you could blow up one public building, à la Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*, without endangering life or risking imprisonment, which one would it be?

I remember having these conversations in graduate school, but they went something like “If you were president for one day, what would you do?” And then we’d talk about what agencies we would eliminate. In some ways, not to overthink this, but no matter what I choose, it would be a temporary move, even though it would be satisfying. That’s because if you destroy a building, the government will quickly get to work building it back bigger and “better” and surely with a larger budget. I will say I’m torn between the IRS and the Department of Homeland Security. In my perfect hypothetical world, we could blow up the IRS and then move right to a flat tax requiring far fewer employees; it would make the tax code transparent and eliminate the need for armies of CPAs. It also fundamentally alters what the government can do—in other words, it would restrict government spending—but they always find a way. So something far worse would come in its stead.

So maybe I’ll go with the DHS. Born in the wake of 9/11, it’s a disaster. It has a budget of \$178 billion, and as far as I can tell, it does not affect terrorism other than to make it worse across the globe. It makes air travel for non-terrorists, which is over 99% of the global population, insufferable, and they have vast powers to restrict civil liberties, which they freely use. I’d happily take that \$178 billion and give it to the bottom 10% of Americans in cash. At least we could say we were making people better off with that money.

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