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FALL 2024

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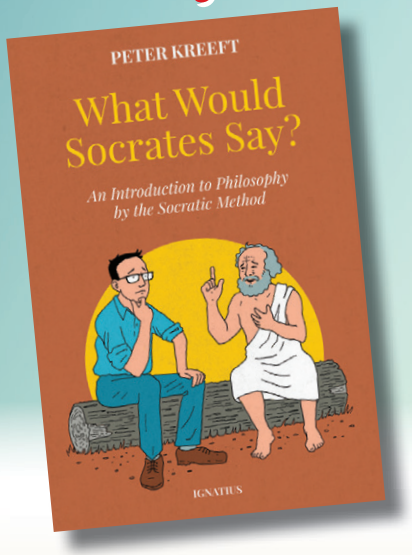

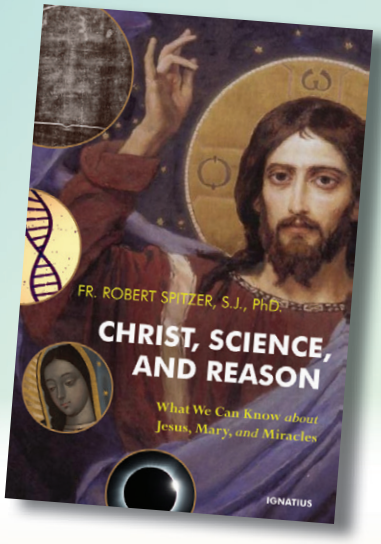

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THE ISSUE THIS TIME BY ANTHONY SACRAMONE

This is an election year, in case you were unaware. Millions of Americans will exercise their right to vote for their choice of POTUS. Given the scandalous divisions among us, many voters are convinced (or have been persuaded) that we're experiencing an existential crisis, the last chance to save our democracy, a battle between good and evil. Yet millions more will stay home because the election is but a choice between two evils, which is no choice at all.

The "good us" vs. "bad them" vibe would have us believe that there is no real tension between the ideal and the real and that even our highest aspirations couldn't possibly be tainted with hubris and wishful thinking. But nothing is simple or pure. Politics being the art of the possible means it's also the practice of compromise. You don't always get what you want. *Maybe*, every now and again, you get what you need. But there's always a trade-off.

Did I mention we live in scandalously divided times? If only it were between left and right. Discord also infects each of the political binaries. Whether the sitting president made a selfless country-over-ambition decision to step down in favor of his VP or suffered a serious case of vertigo as he was about to be defenestrated, I'll leave to the thoughtful reader to decide. As for the other party, well, it's complicated. Michael Matheson Miller helpfully reminds us that what we've referred to as "conservatism" for the past 50 or so years has always contained worlds within worlds, factions and encampments with diverse emphases and tensions, held together in a compact dedicated to defeating a common enemy. Then the enemy went *poof*, and those tensions exploded into an often-uncivil war. Who speaks for conservatism today?

> *Against the Revolution, the Gospel!* This was the memorable slogan of not only a political party but also a broader social and spiritual movement that swept through the Netherlands in the second half of the 19th century, helping transform Christian engagement in Dutch society and politics. While this phenomenon was arguably the product of a unique set of political circumstances and personages, the Anti-Revolutionary Party still has much to teach us today about what faithful discipleship looks like.

So begins Jordan J. Ballor's exploration of the political career, and ideals, of Abraham Kuyper. Since we're hearing again of the need for a Christian political party to confront the grotesqueries of our time, even an explicitly Christian nation, it behooves us to revisit one such attempt a long time ago in a country far, far away.

One question to consider when thinking through any great political enterprise, domestic or foreign, is: How realistic is it? "In both socio-politics and international affairs, part of the attraction of realism is that it's so simple: an easy way to see events and decide how to interact with them. The lure of idealism is much the same. A terrible simplifying defines them both." So Joseph Bottum reminds us in his exposition of the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr.

In case you were wondering, we're not here to tell you who to vote for. Our mission is to emphasize foundational principles rooted in "the permanent things" that pursue long-view human flourishing as opposed to short-term victories over even repugnant ideologies. When you see unabashed communists marching under hammer-and-sickle banners in the City of Brotherly Love, home of Independence Hall, and would-be theocrats issuing bullet lists that would terrify Torquemada, it's easy to panic. Better to call to mind the adage "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." But first we need to review what such liberty looks like.

Religion&Liberty

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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 the promotion of a free and virtuous society.

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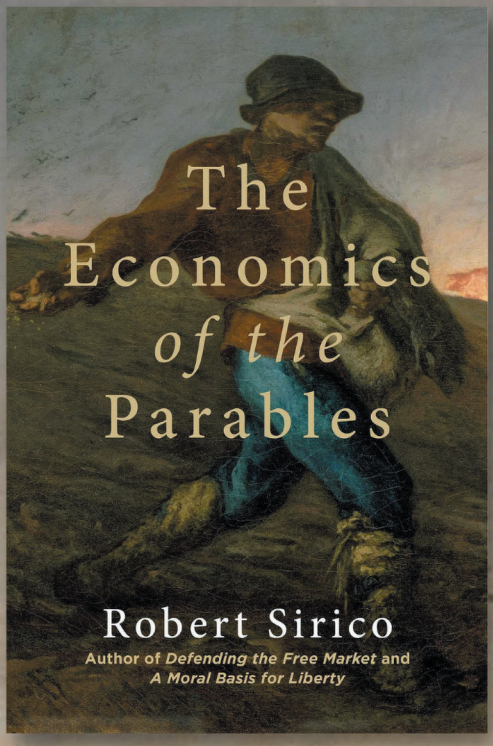
"The wisdom evident in this book will reward every reader, as it has rewarded me." – Robert G. Kennedy



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.

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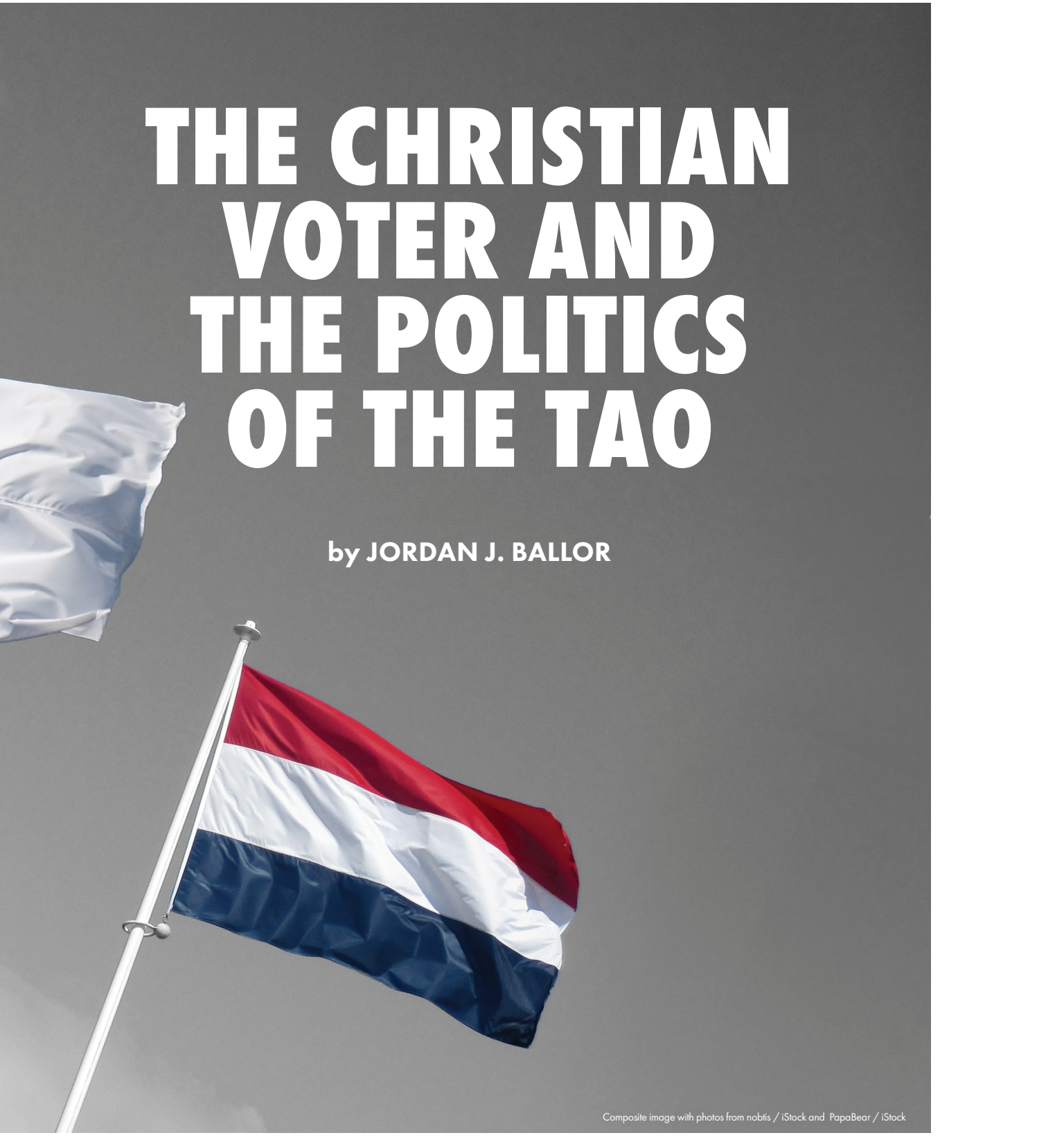
What the old Dutch party "for religion & liberty" can teach us today.

THE CHRISTIAN VOTER AND THE POLITICS OF THE TAO

by JORDAN J. BALLOR



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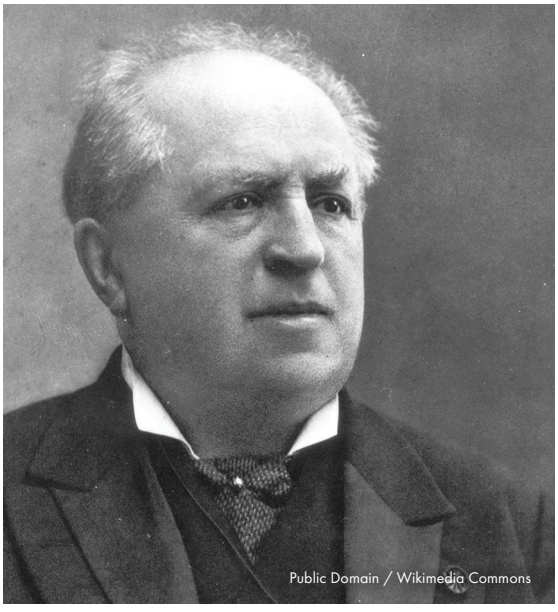


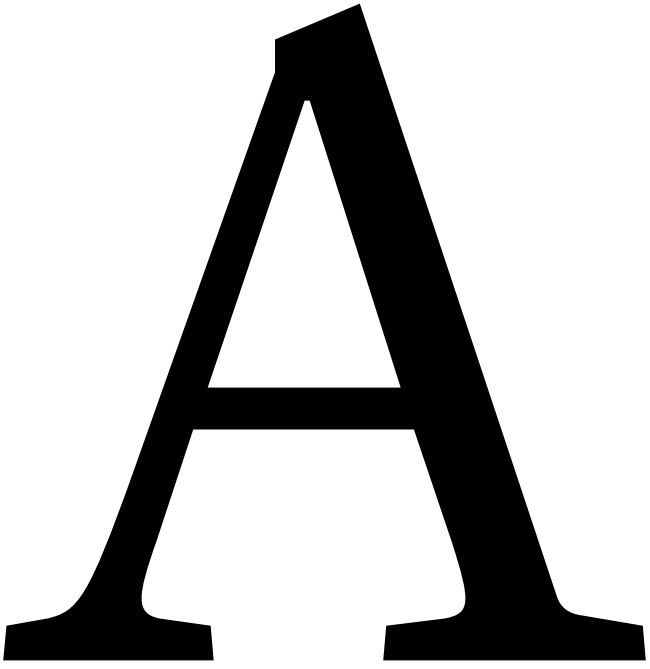
Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920)

FROM MOVEMENT TO PARTY

The most famous Anti-Revolutionary leader in the Netherlands was the polymath Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), who trained as a theologian and churchman but quickly engaged in both civil and ecclesial politics, founding and forming a wide variety of social institutions—in education, journalism, political life, and more. In describing his own intellectual and spiritual development, however, Kuyper saw himself as the inheritor of a longer tradition of religious and moral commitment.

Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876) was in many ways Kuyper's mentor, an inspiration to the younger theologian to engage in the great contests of the day. An aristocrat, Prinsterer was committed to the Christian faith and its faithful expression in public life. Prinsterer diagnosed the problems facing the Netherlands as fundamentally spiritual. The spirit of the French Revolution had possessed the hearts and minds of younger generations and corrupted civic and social institutions. The fundamental error of the revolutionary worldview was to set the human being in the place of God.

The answer to this revolutionary idolatry was to set things right again, to place reverence for God in its proper and primary place, and to order rightly the human soul and human society in relation to that divine, transcendent reality. Prinsterer's most famous work was a series of lectures, published under



AGAINST THE REVOLUTION, THE GOSPEL! This was the memorable slogan of not only a political party but also a broader social and spiritual movement that swept through the Netherlands in the second half of the 19th century, helping transform Christian engagement in Dutch society and politics. While this phenomenon was arguably the product of a unique set of political circumstances and personages, the Anti-Revolutionary Party still has much to teach us today about what faithful discipleship looks like.

the title *Revolution and Unbelief*, in which he explored the thesis that "the Revolution, with its variety of schools of thought and its successive historical manifestations, is the consequence, the application, the unfolding of unbelief." Prinsterer followed a Burkean mode of analysis of the French Revolution and agreed with the French Catholic priest and political philosopher Félicité Robert de La Mennais (1782–1854) that an error in political theory was the consequence of a prior, more fundamental error in anthropology and ultimately in theology. For this reason, a proper understanding of politics required a corrective ultimately grounded in religion.

At the same time and related to Prinsterer's call for a renewal of Calvinist identity, a revival movement was taking shape in the Netherlands, an expression of a broader spiritual awakening sweeping the continent. Kuyper himself was the product of the Dutch Reformed mainline and modernist theological tradition. But after his notable accomplishments in academic theology, it was his encounter with the piety and severity of the common Calvinism among the farmers in the village of his first pastoral call that helped spark a conversion to orthodox belief, spiritual rebirth, and a concurrent commitment to Christian discipleship. For Kuyper, these could be distinguished but yet were inseparable for his vision of the Christian faith.

In this way, the anti-revolutionary spirit was foremost a spiritual and social movement before it ever came to explicit political expression or manifested itself in any kind of organized political party. The piety of this Dutch Reformed community was increasingly out of step with the broader cultural and political trends of the Dutch elites. Its distinctiveness was so principled and comprehensive, in fact, that it was unavoidable that it would come to expression in characteristic institutions across all areas of life. The catalyst for a renewed and self-conscious Calvinist engagement in political life was the so-called schools question, debates over the legality of and parity of funding for distinctively Christian primary education.

A PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICS REQUIRED A CORRECTIVE ULTIMATELY GROUNDED IN RELIGION.

Following liberation from the Napoleonic era of dominion over the Netherlands, a new constitutional structure was enacted in 1815. Over the following generation, the impact of this novel scheme continued to be debated and developed. One characteristic of this constitutional system was the adoption of public, governmental provision for day schools very early relative to other European countries. The efficacy of this system was remarkable; the Dutch population of the 19th century was notable for its broad literacy, for example.

But as the modern Netherlands grew increasingly pluralistic and diverse, there were also serious debates about the educational content in these schools. A hallmark of anti-revolutionary political engagement was a fundamental commitment to the freedom and equality of treatment for parochial schools that were committed to a particular confessional identity. For the Reformed, this meant not only the legal liberty to form schools but also the right to equal treatment with government schools in terms of funding, public support, and formal recognition.

Private religious schools were technically illegal until 1857. Although they were allowed to exist, they were not treated with parity in terms of access to government funding. Under Kuyper's leadership, the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) was formed, publishing a party platform in 1879, which was also developed and commented on by Kuyper in great detail. And while the ARP promoted a comprehensive platform, the education question remained the first and fundamental purpose of its political engagement.

Reformed political engagement under Kuyper's leadership was intended to express faithfully the lordship of Christ over all of life: school and government, church and home. But Christ's lordship was understood to take different forms in different institutions. In this way, the ARP was acknowledged to be one expression among many other legitimate manifestations of conviction in public life.

For Kuyper, of course, the Reformed faith and confession represented the truest and most genuine form of Christianity. But that superiority did not mean that other worldviews and religions had to be suppressed.

Instead, the Reformed were called to share their faith and their convictions in public and to take part in the larger democratic and pluralistic society.

While opposition to the atheism and materialism of the French Revolution was characteristic of this Kuyperian political perspective, the Anti-Revolutionary Party was also formed by a positive vision of "Christian historical engagement." The vision of the human person as created in God's image, fallen into sin, and the recipient of grace proclaimed and promised in the gospel was determinative of a particular anthropology. This Christian anthropology offered a corrective to the reductive, truncated, and erroneous models on offer from socialists, liberal individualists, anarchists, and other worldly ideologues.

THE ARP'S RISE AND DEMISE

With the publication of the ARP platform in 1879, the party became a political force and in many ways the first modern, national party in the Netherlands. Kuyper was the undisputed leader and spokesman for the movement, but there were a number of other important figures, both more conservative and more progressive than Kuyper.

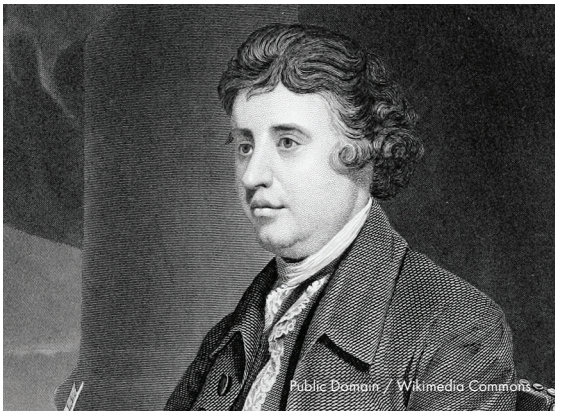
While the family and education rights remained significant policy concerns, the "social question" was also a hallmark of anti-revolutionary social thought. Beginning in 1870, Kuyper addressed rising inequality, poverty, economic justice, and the importance of work and stewardship from a theological as well as a political perspective. The 1891 Dutch Social Congress marked an important inflection point in the larger conversation, as earlier that year Pope Leo XIII had promulgated the first modern Roman Catholic social encyclical letter, *Rerum Novarum*. Kuyper praised Leo's letter and used it as an example to spur Reformed Christians on to a greater attention to the social question. Kuyper recommended *Rerum Novarum*, noting that it "deals solely with those principles that all Christians hold in common and that we too share with our Roman Catholic fellow countrymen."

One of Kuyper's key doctrines of social life was the concept of "sphere sovereignty," in which he argued that God has given direct authorization to various social institutions, or "spheres," which operate according to their own logic and laws and ultimately are accountable to God. "There are in life," writes Kuyper, "all kinds of spheres as numerous as constellations in the heavens, and that the circumference of each sphere is drawn with a fixed radius from a unique principle as its center or focal point."

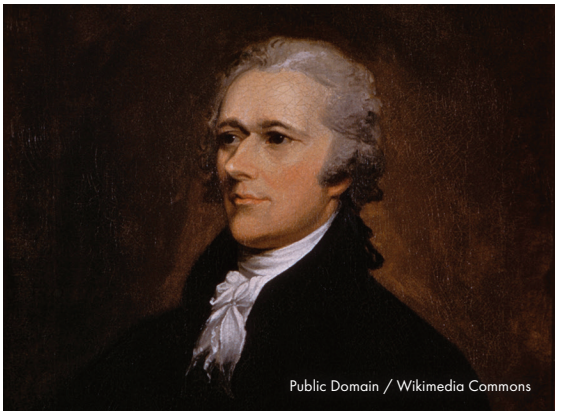
While authority and legitimacy were not delegated by the state or through the government to the various spheres, the state did have a unique responsibility to be the forum of last resort for public justice. When conflict arises between the spheres, or there is corruption within an institution such that it needs aid to restore its proper functioning, the state can act in a remedial capacity. The purpose of state intervention, however, is always to restore spheres and institutions to health and self-sufficiency.

A corollary of sphere sovereignty is an explicit emphasis on decentrism in ARP political thought. The idea here is that decision-making and responsibility should be understood as residing with the most proximate authorities. Only when closer institutions and levels of organization have failed to address a problem, or are unequipped or unfit to solve a larger issue, should a more complex or distant institution become involved. Politically this requires a kind of federalist system where the balance of power and responsibility is shifted toward more local levels of government. But this also is a principle that holds more broadly for social thought, such that government involvement—whether more local or more distant—is not the first resort but the last. One of the planks in the ARP platform is "decentralization," which Kuyper says comes to expression in marking out the role of the state as a caretaker or temporary curator. "A *temporary* curator has the right to carry out what is absolutely necessary," says Kuyper, "but his duty is to withdraw again as soon as the energy for self-rule is sufficiently aroused. Thus he is to fulfill the role of caretaker in such a way that this energy does not weaken but rather gains in

Official portrait of Pope Leo XIII in 1878



Edmund Burke (1729–1797)



Alexander Hamilton, portrait by John Trumbull in 1806

strength." The twin principles of sphere sovereignty and decentrism function together as a version of the doctrine of subsidiarity.

Kuyper himself served in government, first in the second chamber and eventually as prime minister, from 1901 to 1905. His was not the first anti-revolutionary cabinet, but it was the first with a modern, distinct prime ministership. This was in many ways the apex of Kuyper's civil political career. The ARP won a significant portion of their seats by cooperating with the Roman Catholic bloc, with the agreement that each group would vote for the other's candidates on second and subsequent ballots in districts where the other was particularly strong. This coalition government represented a kind of broad, practical ecumenism between Reformed and Roman Catholics, a noteworthy achievement given the ongoing doctrinal and ecclesiological disagreements. The Roman Catholic Church had only reestablished the hierarchy in the Netherlands in the 1848 constitutional reforms, a controversial move in Dutch society. Half a century later, Roman Catholics were actively cooperating with the ARP to govern the nation.

Kuyper's term came to an end with an unexpected defeat in 1905, one Kuyper did not take well. In a breach of protocol but with royal permission, he left Amsterdam early, going on a nine-month journey through eastern Europe, the Holy Land, and northern Africa. Kuyper returned having experienced and learned a great deal as he lectured in Islamic universities and was received by various dignitaries. He returned to political engagement but was never to exercise the level of influence he had previously.

The two world wars, especially the devastation wrought by the second, transformed Dutch society and politics. The ARP became increasingly enamored with a more active and interventionist government, including in the economic sphere. There were sharp debates about centralization and *dirigisme*, the planned economy, even as ARP policy developed in a more mainstream way. By the third quarter of the century, the distinctive influence and vigor of the party had declined, such that in 1974 it joined with other Christian political movements to form the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). Anti-revolutionary principles remained salient within this larger group, but an independent ARP was no more, and a distinctive Reformed tradition of social thought and political activity was subsumed under the larger umbrella of Christian Democracy.

PRUDENTIAL LESSONS— FOR AND AGAINST

What can we learn from this first modern Dutch Christian political party, whose motto became *pro religione et libertate*, "for religion & liberty"?

The anti-revolutionary success was borne not primarily from a political motivation to seize coercive power or exercise domination. Instead, it was the fruit of a religious revival and conviction about the call to faithful Christian discipleship in public, including but not limited to political activism. This anti-revolutionary movement was distinctively Dutch in its expression in the Netherlands, but it was also part of a longer historical and larger international tradition. Kuyper connected the Dutch anti-revolutionary tradition to Edmund Burke (1729–1797) in the U.K. and Alexander Hamilton (1757–1804) in the U.S., even as he noted contemporary anti-revolutionary thinkers

in Germany, France, and across Europe, such as Julius Stahl (1802–1861) and François Guizot (1787–1874).

A distinctive feature of Kuyper's emphasis was on the importance and dignity of the *kleine luyden*, the "little people." In this way the ARP was fiercely and deeply democratic, grounding its principles in the dignity of all human beings, each with a vocation before God and a service to provide for others. "Everything can be a spiritual calling," wrote Kuyper, and everyone should be respected and represented in the political order. This meant a focus on expanding the franchise more broadly (although not universally in a revolutionary fashion), even as it also meant focusing on the family as the basic unit of society.

There was a kind of populist streak in Kuyper, even though it would be better understood as a principled populism rather than anything resembling demagoguery. Kuyper was quite capable of critiquing the flaws and vices of the working classes and the poor even as he reserved his strongest rhetoric for emphasizing the responsibilities of the wealthy. Business owners, managers, and the aristocracy had the means to protect themselves, while the poor often only had recourse to the courts and moral suasion.

The social question remained a priority for Kuyper from the beginning of his career to the end. In a landmark speech in 1918, Kuyper pondered "What Next?" for the future ARP agenda. The answer, said Kuyper, was a continued and renewed examination of the right relationship between classes, the proper posture between labor and capital, and the need for legal and economic justice. "Our antirevolutionary movement must be reunited," argued Kuyper. "Social action and political calling must be tightly knit together. Our politics must impart momentum to the social question, and conversely, the social struggle must connect with our nation's historical development."

After Kuyper, however, and especially after World War II, distinctive Reformed Christian witness on these matters was less salient. As Christians seek greater political influence, there is an ever-present temptation to compromise distinctiveness, to de-emphasize unpopular or unfashionable things, and to accommodate more popular views.

Dutch people celebrating the liberation of the Netherlands at the end of World War II

Nationaal Archief Beschrijving

Undoubtedly the greatest legacy of the ARP, one that still has great influence today, is the achievement of legal parity for religious educational institutions with government schools. This was finally achieved in 1917, and to this day Article 23 of the Dutch constitution guarantees funding as well as wide freedoms for religious educational institutions. As the United States still struggles with achieving educational justice, the ARP's commitment to principle and parity stands as a salutary model.

There are other dangers, however, that must be acknowledged even as we recognize the differences in context and the demands of today. C.S. Lewis warned about the wisdom of organizing political parties along religious lines. There is a real threat of idolatry and hubris as a political party claims to be Christian, even as it necessarily renders particular prudential judgments that are not entailments of a commitment to the gospel. There are infinite varieties of detail as well as framing about which Christians in good conscience might and indeed will certainly disagree. To arrogate the name of "Christian" to a subset of these seems unwise.

And in a diverse context like the United States, for instance, especially one with a foundational commitment to the institutional separation of church and state, the efficacy of distinctively Christian or particular denominational activism, especially as manifested in political parties, is questionable.

FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN POLITICS TODAY

What does all this mean for faithful Christian politics today? Here we must limit our concluding analysis to the American context, which is the only one in which I have any semblance of standing to comment. Most significant for the American political landscape in this regard is the dominance of the two-party system and the winner-takes-all nature of political races. While there have been notable third-party campaigns at the national level for president, the lasting effects of these kinds of efforts are typically to move some element of one of the two parties in one direction or another, rather than to create a long-lasting political organ.

So undoubtedly, attempting to manifest an anti-revolutionary political movement in the United States will look different than in other countries, where there are more parties and the opportunity to exercise influence in a parliamentary system is more feasible. Many have called for a distinctively anti-revolutionary politics in the 21st century,

American Solidarity Party logo

whether in the form of encouragement to "Join the Anti-Revolutionary Party" (*Comment* magazine) or in similar efforts to create an American analog to a Christian Democratic Party.

The American Solidarity Party (ASP), for instance, has received greater attention among a certain class of Christian intellectuals as the two dominant parties become more polarized, secular, and unfriendly to a traditional Christian ordering of faith and politics. The problems with this kind of attempt are numerous, not least of which is the difficulty of retaining distinctiveness while having anything approaching effectiveness. All too often there seems to be a zero-sum dynamic for Christians as the more particularized their political positions are the less influential they seem to be. It may be that Christians are called to faithfulness rather than effectiveness, and that faithful witness—and especially witness that is distinctive in some area—will ultimately prove more effective than bargaining according to typical political calculus.

But it is also true that piety is no substitute for technique, and part of Christian faithfulness in

> "IT MAY BE THAT CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO FAITHFULNESS RATHER THAN EFFECTIVENESS."

politics is actually reckoning with what might be practically effective. In this way Christian political action must be clear-eyed about the cultural and political moment we inhabit. Rising secularism and trends in religious adherence do not bode well for the democratic popularity of distinctively Christian political efforts, at least as might be expressed in a Christian political party. America is simply too diverse and pluralistic demographically and too constrained by a partisan duopoly to leave space for an effective confessionally religious party, even one that is merely or ecumenically Christian.

But this is where the electoral effectiveness of the ARP in the Netherlands in its own context might be adapted positively in the United States in a way tailored to the needs and demands of today. In the Netherlands, Roman Catholics and Reformed Christians joined together to have political success. Such an alliance is necessary today on a variety of fronts, but to win politically in America the coalition must be much broader. What we need is an ecumenical movement that is not simply Christian but grounded in common convictions about reality and the moral order. This means welcoming not only all kinds of Christians but religious adherents from other faiths as well. It also might mean welcoming nonbelievers who nevertheless acknowledge some core aspects of reality and the created order, especially as it relates to natural law and morality.

What we might pursue then is not the formation of a Christian party as such but an ecumenical anti-revolutionary movement, one that welcomes anyone from any walk of life or faith tradition able to affirm some basic truths about the human person and the moral order. What we need is a social and political movement of adherents to what C.S. Lewis called "the Tao," the undeniable natural moral order. We might debate and discuss how one arrives at knowledge of the Tao, what specific principles and commitments the Tao requires, and so on. This would be a lively coalition in that regard. But it is one that is sorely needed for a world that has lost so much connection with reality, physically as well as morally and spiritually. The successful advocacy of Somali moms in Minnesota regarding the content of sexual education materials in their public schools is instructive.

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The Chinese character representing the Tao

> **"WHAT WE NEED IS AN ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT THAT IS NOT SIMPLY CHRISTIAN BUT GROUNDED IN COMMON CONVICTIONS ABOUT REALITY AND THE MORAL ORDER."**

In this way, faithful Christian political activism and an anti-revolutionary political philosophy might well come to expression in something that might be called a politics of the Tao, following Jonah Goldberg, Hunter Baker, and Andrew Walker, which moves beyond Peter Kreeft's vigorous challenge in *Ecumenical Jihad*. This doesn't mean that Reformed Christians are not committed to confessional distinctives or a robustly Christian vision of the human person. It simply means that Christians must use their commitments to that understanding of the human person, created in God's image, to find principled and pragmatic points of connection to restore sanity to our politics.

We should also interrogate the possibility that effective and faithful Christian political action does not need to focus on the national level. Here the ARP's commitment to decentrism and sphere sovereignty can also be instructive. While we need healthier

Man speaks at Kalamazoo, Michigan, Board of Education meeting on mask mandates in 2021

political parties in America, and Christian activism might help achieve that, our politics is made up of much more than what happens in national elections.

Abraham Kuyper's younger colleague and fellow anti-revolutionary Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) perfectly captured the important dynamic at the core of prudential judgments concerning political action. While not denying the importance of national political action and organization, Bavinck wisely observed the need to retain a primary emphasis on proximate realities:

> All good, enduring reformation begins with ourselves and takes its starting point in one's own heart and life. If family life is indeed being threatened from all sides today, then there is nothing better for each person to be doing than immediately to begin reforming within one's own circle and begin to rebuff with the facts themselves the sharp criticisms that are being registered nowadays against marriage and family. Such a reformation immediately has this in its favor, that it would lose no time and would not need to wait for anything. Anyone seeking deliverance from the state must travel the lengthy route of forming a political party, having meetings, referendums, parliamentary debates, and civil legislation, and it is still unknown whether with all that activity he will achieve any success. But reforming from within can be undertaken by each person at every moment, and be advanced without impediment.

It is, as Yuval Levin puts it, a time to build, perhaps not a distinctively Christian national political party, but a movement at the local level all over the country to re-engage school boards, library committees, city councils, and county commissions even as we seek to be faithful at all levels of politics and in all social institutions—in our churches and businesses as well as our homes and little leagues.

Faithful Christian political action today must seek reform of our politics from the local to the national and the international arenas. Even as we need good laws and policies at all levels, the necessary lasting change will come—if it comes at all—from the bottom up and from the inside out. In this way we can see the limits of any merely political program, even one broadly inclusive of all people of good will. If true lasting reform comes from the inside out, then it must result from a transformation of our loves and our conversion to reality and ultimately to the Real. As Prinsterer put it: "A *social* revolution requires a *social* restoration. And this will be unthinkable unless it begins by acknowledging the sovereignty of God." RL

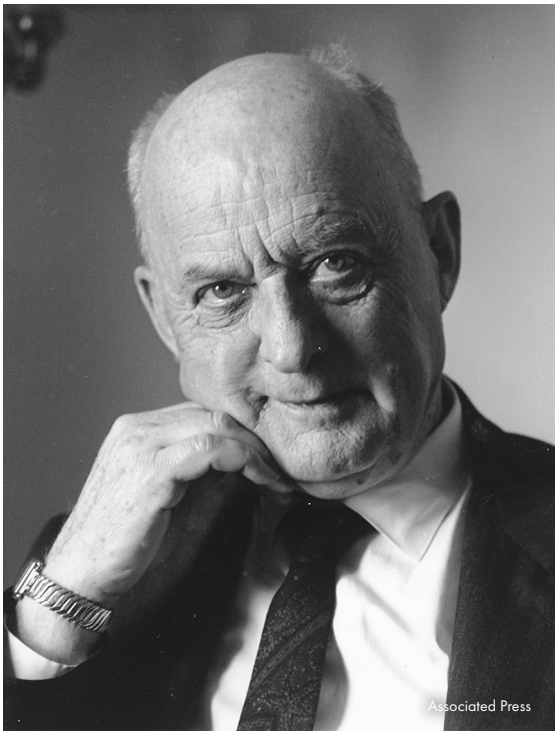
***Jordan J. Ballor** is director of research at the Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy at First Liberty Institute.*

REINHOLD NIEBUHR: THE IDEAL CHRISTIAN REALIST

by JOSEPH BOTTUM

The legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism is difficult to assess because it was never prescriptive, only descriptive of a fallen state that should humble us without preventing us from taking action on the world stage.

Bettmann / Getty



Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)

THE TROUBLE WITH REALISM is that it's so unrealistic. Certainly that's true of realism as a low-rent metaphysics or epistemology, but it's true even of the word's most common usages, as a description of a certain kind of foreign policy and a certain kind of political governance. A dark mirror of idealism, realism would have us ignore half of history, half of human motivation, and half of politics. Half of theology, for that matter.

What realism can't see is the truth that idealism holds—that a good portion of history is driven by visions of easing the human condition and belief in progress (especially in the technological applications of science: a motor of the modern age that too many political theorists ignore in their determination to explain the birth of modernity entirely out of the spirit of liberalism). And so, too, any thoughtful account of psychology will note that people are sometimes capable of great altruistic acts. And a theology that declares that humans are nothing but sinks of the vile and the selfish ignores that we are sometimes called to something better.

Of course, the same critique bears on idealism. History shows what the immoral can achieve. An honest philosophical anthropology will inevitably reveal our drive toward aggrandizement and our measuring of success by the failure of others. No good political theory assumes people act solely for good motives. And a theology that assumes we are all good down to the soles of our boots, as we march toward perfection, quickly stumbles.

It cannot be, it should not be, that our understanding is limited to the choice between realism and idealism—as though in foreign affairs we must elect either Klemens von Metternich or Woodrow Wilson. And in domestic matters, choose between the cold iron of Niccolò Machiavelli or the warm goo of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's sentimental socialism. And in the

> **PURE REALISTS HAVE MISSED THE GENUINE CALL TO THE GOOD, AND PURE IDEALISTS HAVE MISSED THE GENUINE DEPRAVITY OF HUMAN BEINGS.**

political arena, vote for either the cynicism of the power-hungry or the violent idealism of the Woke.

As it happens, between the hammer of realism and the Jello bowl of idealism, between the too hard-edged and the too soft-minded, there was an alternative. And its name, from the 1920s through the 1960s, was Reinhold Niebuhr.

There does exist a general definition of his Christian realism. It's a political theory based on three Christian ideas: that we are basically sinful, that we are free because made in the image of God, and that we are called to love God and our neighbor. From the difficult combination of these truths comes an interest in the balance of power and a demand for humility in policy goals—along with a sense that pure realists have missed the genuine call to the good, and pure idealists have missed the genuine depravity of human beings.

With that general definition in hand, one could trace a line in Christian thought from St. Augustine on. But the general definition misses the singularity of Reinhold Niebuhr. He was a public theologian of a kind we really haven't had since his death in 1971. A public figure who saw ineradicable sin, shocking his own generation, which had been brought up on the Social Gospel movement in church and socialist utopianism in intellectual circles. A thinker without an overarching theory the public could memorize and squirrel away, the file-card version of his thought. Niebuhr has had plenty of readers, from Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to Barack Obama, but they are more self-proclaimed admirers of his thought than actual believers in it. Christian realism was a mighty band that streamed across the American scene and proved to have only Niebuhr in it—like a cavalry charge that, when the dust settles, is revealed to have been just a single rider.

This is the fate of anyone whose system is not actually a system but an attempt to balance conflicting elements—the fate of anyone whose theory is that we need to be sensible and sane. When you're smart and serious, when you're someone like Reinhold Niebuhr, it proves judicious, practical, and wise. But the mass of humanity needs rules for thought, requires systems to reason by, rather than a shining example of one man's intellectual virtue.

LOOKING FOR BALANCE

Niebuhr was often—sometimes annoyingly—self-critical, in a wry and self-deprecating way. He often worried, for example, that his own demands for limiting power were unconsciously attempts to gain power. "I always thought I was a fairly brutal

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1917–2007)

President Obama in the Oval Office in 2012

Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1910

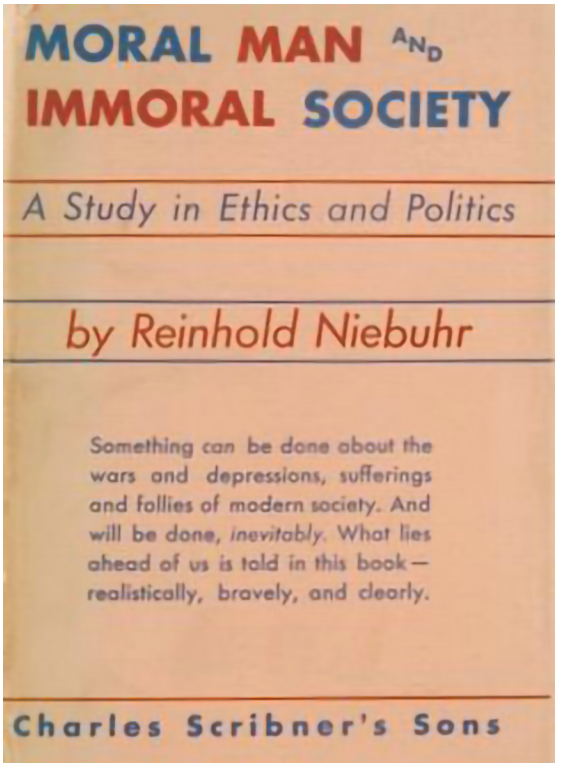
realist," he wrote in 1928, "but I am beginning to suspect that the whole thing is a pose to hide the sentimental preacher."

In this case, however, his thinking in the early 1920s (when he himself, born in 1892, had not yet come to his full powers) did need revision. Compared to such previous American theologians as Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), the young Niebuhr may have thought himself a realist, holding to a stern Calvinism. But he was, in truth, a Wilsonian optimist in international affairs (insofar as he understood them) and a pacifist. After his ordination as a pastor in 1915, the German Evangelical Synod of North America's mission board sent him to Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, where he adopted and practiced a Social Gospel sense of his mission until he left in 1928 to become professor of practical theology at New York's Union Theological Seminary.

As was typical of intellectuals of his time, Niebuhr began with Marxist sympathies and found them strengthened in New York as he looked back at the factory laborers he had known in Detroit. A kind of native contrariness soon set in, however, and he started to turn against both Wilson and the Social Gospel. He couldn't see in the real world the effect of dreamy idealism, however much he felt its pull. A visit to Europe—during France's occupation of the Ruhr, to force Germany to pay reparations for World War I—made him skeptical of grand declarations of human progress: "This, then, is the glorious issue for which the war was fought!"

What emerged from his new views, however, was not pure realism but a sense that balance was needed, rejecting efforts to perfect humanity while accepting that the call to progress was a real presence in the human spirit. He would describe himself as a "tamed cynic," sane in both his skepticism and his wish for moral improvement. The cynicism of pure realism denied human freedom—but then so did progressive interpretations of history, which gave us Marx's historical determinism. The tamed cynic insisted both that Original Sin ruled mankind and that individuals, with human freedom, could move toward the good, obeying the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor.

This was an end to his acceptance of the Social Gospel movement, which buried human freedom under the malevolence of inchoate social forces,



Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932

but Niebuhr did not fully realize it until the Great Depression—which is why he registered as a Socialist and helped found the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, of which his writing and public lectures made him the most prominent member.

Then, in 1932, Niebuhr published *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, his most famous statement of his Christian realism. As the Carnegie Endowment's scholar of international relations, Christopher S. Chivvis, smartly observed, the key is to recognize the central role that egotism plays in the actions of both individuals and nation-states. Although the metaphysical gift of freedom may allow individuals to resist some of their burden of selfishness, nations have a much harder time. In part that's because there is little incentive for nations to act selflessly, while local ties of family and community aid the individual. And in part, nations rarely act altruistically because of democratically elected politicians' reasonable understanding of the limits of their authority, representing the best interests of the nation. In largest part, however, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* insists that nations fail to be selfless because of a very Niebuhrian point: "ethical action," he writes, cannot exist "without self-criticism," and there can be "no self-criticism without the rational capacity of self-transcendence" that belongs to individuals, not to human aggregates.

The logic is harsh. If humans are inherently egotistical, intrinsically prideful—if sin is real in the individual, not just in the social forces that the Social Gospel movement saw—then the human city can never be the city of God. Individual interests must conflict by the very fact of their being individual—and by the fallen state of human beings, oppressing others for individual gain. (Niebuhr's understanding of economics was never strong; he took Adam Smith's point of individuals' making of individual decisions, but he had in the early 1930s the socialist sense of limited economic resources: individuals gain only by taking away from others.) Human relations on any large scale must be "predominantly political rather than ethical."

The clash of individual egotists means that society requires the police power of the government. But in international affairs, there is nothing superior to the nation-state (and Niebuhr had doubts about attempts at world government, fearing that, in an effort to transcend politics, world government would simply create a new and unanswerable level of politics). The nation-state thus exists in a state of fear, which demands that it increase its military and economic power—which increases fear in other states, demanding that they increase their own power. This pattern, Niebuhr thinks, will necessarily appear where power accumulates, a logical feature of human groups, and thus not curable by some greater instrument of power. "The human spirit" manifest in nation-states, he wrote, has a "curious mixture of fear of extinction and love of power."

CONSTRUCTING A SOCIAL ETHIC

A good place to observe the balance—the sheer sanity—of Reinhold Niebuhr may be an exchange he had in the pages of *Christian Century* in 1932, the same year that *Moral Man and Immoral Society* appeared. The occasion was a plan for the United States to sell scrap steel (from World War I naval ships) to Imperial Japan, which was invading China and claiming Manchuria.

His interlocutor was his younger brother, H. Richard Niebuhr—another Protestant theologian, and later the author of the influential 1951 book *Christ and Culture*. What the younger Niebuhr shared

with his brother was a sense of tragedy in the human condition: we are not what we were made to be in the Garden of Eden. Our motives are so corrupt that, even when we do good, we are unable to know and will the good precisely as good.

The initial piece (not intended as part of a debate) was a perfectly named March 23 article called "The Grace of Doing Nothing," with H. Richard Niebuhr meaning the word *grace*. There may be vicious or confused reasons for not acting against Japan, which both brothers agree is doing evil in Manchuria. But the true pacifism of inactivity is different—particularly when it is unclear what form action might take. We might bully ahead and undertake some ineffective action for the sake of self-congratulation and what, these days, we'd call "virtue signaling," inviting applause for our rectitude, even though it achieves nothing concrete. A sense of tragedy, however, allows us to understand the "moral problems" that "arise when there is nothing to be done."

And a Christian faith helps us see that, even when we are helpless, God is helpful: working providentially for justice, in ways beyond our ken. Even though a Christian socialist at the time, H. Richard Niebuhr had little trust in the power of human beings to influence history for good. We cannot be certain, for example, that our intervention would not be sinful simply by attempting to work against the tribulation that God has willed in judgment of humanity.

Christians must "unite in a higher loyalty" that "transcends national and class lines of division"—very much a Social Gospel idea, akin to what Rauschenbusch called the "ganglion chain of redeemed personalities" that would form to eradicate social sin. "The inactivity of radical Christianity is not the inactivity of those who call evil good," he concluded, "it is the inaction of those who do not judge their neighbors because they cannot fool themselves into a sense of superior righteousness. It is not the inactivity of a resigned patience, but of a patience that is full of hope" and "based on faith."

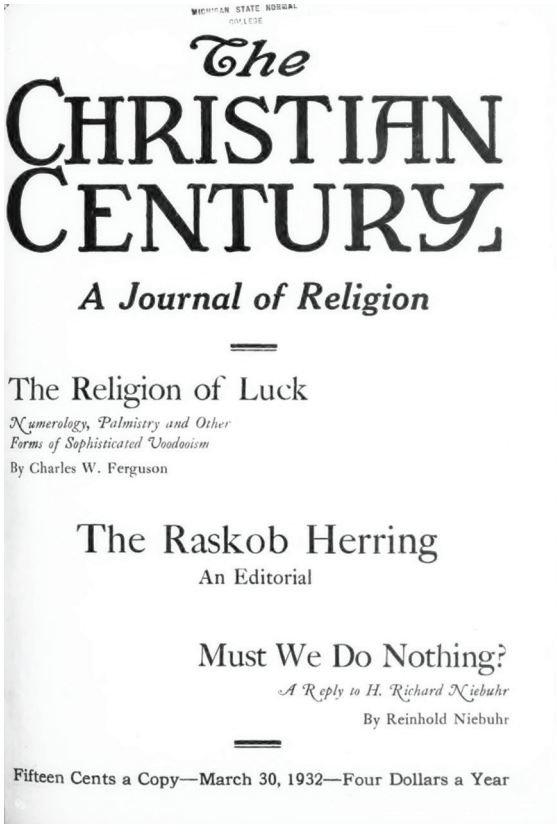
The best response for believers would be repentance, since we cannot convince any other nation of its misdeeds unless we understand our own errors

An 1854 Japanese woodblock print depicting Commodore Matthew Perry (center) and other American seamen.

and stand as a clear example of the confessed sinner who acknowledges the depths of prior sin. The United States and Europe created the modern system of imperialism, and thereby taught Japan—which had Westernized itself astonishingly quickly in the 80 years after the 1853 opening of Japan by Commodore Matthew Perry and the U.S. Navy. Judged as one imperial power admonishing another, American intervention in the Manchurian war would seem hypocritical to the Japanese, who would interpret action as protecting American interests in China while wearing a mask of supposed virtue. Only genuine repentance could offer the true morality that might convince the Japanese to halt their evil militaristic campaign.

The *Christian Century* editors, knowing the new directions of his thought, asked Reinhold Niebuhr to reply, which he did on March 30 with "Must We Do Nothing?" It remains a classic statement of the need to contemplate justice, rather than love, in the interactions of nation states. Where H. Richard Niebuhr had argued for the grace of doing nothing when we cannot be sure our motives are not corrupted by our own interests, Reinhold Niebuhr points out that the actions of nations always have complicated motives. Nations would never be able to act if we demand the purity of an ethics of love before they act.

March 30, 1932, cover of *The Christian Century*


MICHIGAN STATE NORMAL COLLEGE

The CHRISTIAN CENTURY

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By Charles W. Ferguson

The Raskob Herring

An Editorial

Must We Do Nothing?

A Reply to H. Richard Niebuhr

By Reinhold Niebuhr

Fifteen Cents a Copy—March 30, 1932—Four Dollars a Year

"JUSTICE NEEDS AT LEAST PARTIALLY A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS, SEEKING THE BEST AVAILABLE SOLUTION."

The mistake his younger brother was making is what would later be called a category error: the group is not an individual, as the elder brother noted in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. It's in the nature of human beings (corrupted into pride and egotism by the Fall) that the aggregate entity cannot have the unified motive that would allow us to render the same moral judgment we would use for an individual's action. "I find it impossible to envisage a society of pure love as long as man remains man," Reinhold Niebuhr concludes.

That means we need a different standard for nations. Love is the closest to an altruistic motive that an individual could have, but the necessarily impure actions of a group cannot be evaluated by their quotient of love. They must be evaluated by their quotient of justice, the virtue of politics: what the group possesses when it interacts well with individuals and other groups, what the group lacks when it interacts poorly. Justice requires acknowledgment of rights, for example, which are extraneous to the actions of love. Justice seeks balance, while love is by its nature disproportionate. Justice needs at least partially a pragmatic analysis, seeking the best available solution and refusing to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

"I realize quite well that my brother's position both in its ethical perfectionism and in its apocalyptic note is closer to the gospel than mine," Reinhold Niebuhr writes in an extraordinary passage. "In confessing that, I am forced to admit that I am unable to construct an adequate social ethic out of a pure love

Japanese troops entering Tsitsihar, China, in 1931

ethic. I cannot abandon the pure love ideal because anything which falls short of it is less than the ideal. But I cannot use it fully if I want to assume a responsible attitude towards the problems of society."

The word *responsible* may be the most weighted, and his criticism of H. Richard Niebuhr takes a sharp turn: "What makes my brother's eschatology impossible for me is that he identifies everything that is occurring in history (the drift toward disaster, another world war and possibly a revolution) with the counsels of God," he writes—"and then suddenly, by a leap of faith, comes to the conclusion that the same God who uses brutalities and forces, against which man must maintain conscientious scruples, will finally establish an ideal society in which pure love will reign."

We achieve nothing—falling into the passivism of either "asceticism or apocalypticism"—when we make this irresponsible turn. "I should think that it would be better to come to ethical terms with the forces of nature in history, and try to use ethically directed coercion in order that violence may be avoided." The hope that "a kingdom of pure love will emerge out of the catastrophes of history" is astonishingly implausible. "I have more than one difficulty with such a faith. I do not see how a revolution in which the disinterested express their anger and resentment, and assert their interests, can be an instrument of God, and yet at the same time an instrument which religious scruples forbid a man to use."

In practical terms, that means the United States should "try to dissuade Japan from her military venture, but must use coercion to frustrate her designs if necessary." Yes, the "constant self-analysis" that includes repentance would help "reduce the moral conceit of Japan's critics," but we must not "sacrifice the possibility of achieving an ethical goal because we are afraid to use any but purely ethical means."

The root of this Christian realist analysis is close to what John Keats called "negative capability"—the ability to think conflicting ideas simultaneously, the capacity to hold them in balance. In this case, the first idea is that people are sinful, and the second is that they are called to love God and neighbor. The former is brutal realism. The latter is literal idealism. And the connection between them is the political-theory claim that people are free by design, which originates in the belief that human beings are created in the image of God.

The interaction of nations rests on the fact that freedom means there must be a division between the morality of individuals and the ethics of a state. "To say all this is really to confess that the history of mankind is a perennial tragedy," Reinhold Niebuhr concludes, "for the highest ideals which the individual may project are ideals which he can never realize in social and collective terms." We live under the shadow of tragedy because "man cannot live without a sense of the absolute, but neither can he achieve the absolute."

H. Richard Niebuhr responded with "The Only Way into the Kingdom of God" in the April 6, 1932, issue of *Christian Century*, the final entry in the "fraternal war between my brother and me." He admits the tragedy of history for individuals, in his brother's terms, but rejects the conclusion for believers in

God's providence: in history, "tragedy is only a prelude to fulfillment."

His brother's Christian realism makes "Christian love" nothing more than "an ambulance driver in the wars of interested and clashing parties." If a society can contain Christians, then repentance has a meaning for a society, just as it has for individuals, which means love can act even at the level of nation-states in history.

What H. Richard Niebuhr sees as naïve in his brother's views is his lack of awareness of the limitations of power—particularly the limitations of militarily projected power in international situations. There's probably some irony in the fact that the brother with the view closest to Christian idealism argues *against* action, and the Christian realist brother argues *for* action. But H. Richard Niebuhr urges us to resist the impulse to do *something* just because a situation seems intolerable. Anything the United States might do about Japan in Manchuria would not achieve much. The nation's power is limited and finite, while God is infinite: "the rock against which we beat in vain, that which bruises and overwhelms us when we wish to impose our wishes, contrary to his, upon him."

A HUMBLE ACCEPTANCE OF THE IMPERFECT

In his 1943 book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr explains the egotism of the individual as born in the sin of pride, which he takes as Adam's deep fault—where *pride* means the attempt to substitute the self for God. This formulation grants Niebuhr the key conclusion of his thought: the need for humility.

> "IF WE ARE NOT CALLED TO PASSIVISM, THEN WE CANNOT REJECT MORAL ETHICAL GOALS ACHIEVED WITH LESS ETHICAL MEANS AND IMPERFECT MOTIVES."

If we are not called to passivism—if evil in the world must be faced—then we cannot reject the possibility of moral ethical goals achieved with imperfect means and mixed motives. Certainly we cannot refuse action because, lacking the omniscience of God, we cannot see the ultimate consequences of what we do. Not a fool, Niebuhr saw that the United States had economic incentives to oppose Japan's invasion of China. But he also understood that this did not prohibit action. What the Japanese were doing was an injustice, to which must be added the evil of their behavior as they performed that injustice. The fact that the United States had had its own imperialistic adventures need not ruin the need to oppose injustice and evil.

This may look like a license to go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy" (in John Adams' phrase), but Niebuhr's pragmatism intervenes with his sense of humility as the proper response to the individual pride that causes nation-states to act the way they do—and his sense of tragedy in the gap between the Great Commandment's call of individuals to love and the limitations on the authority of political leaders to force nations to act as though they were individuals.

What are we to do with all this? What are we to make of Reinhold Niebuhr now, more than 50 years after his death? We might take seriously the fact than Niebuhr has always had more admirers than disciples. We can measure our inability to get more from the man by the difficulty we have re-creating his kind of analysis in new situations. His thought gives us more a method of thinking than a system for deriving a conclusion.

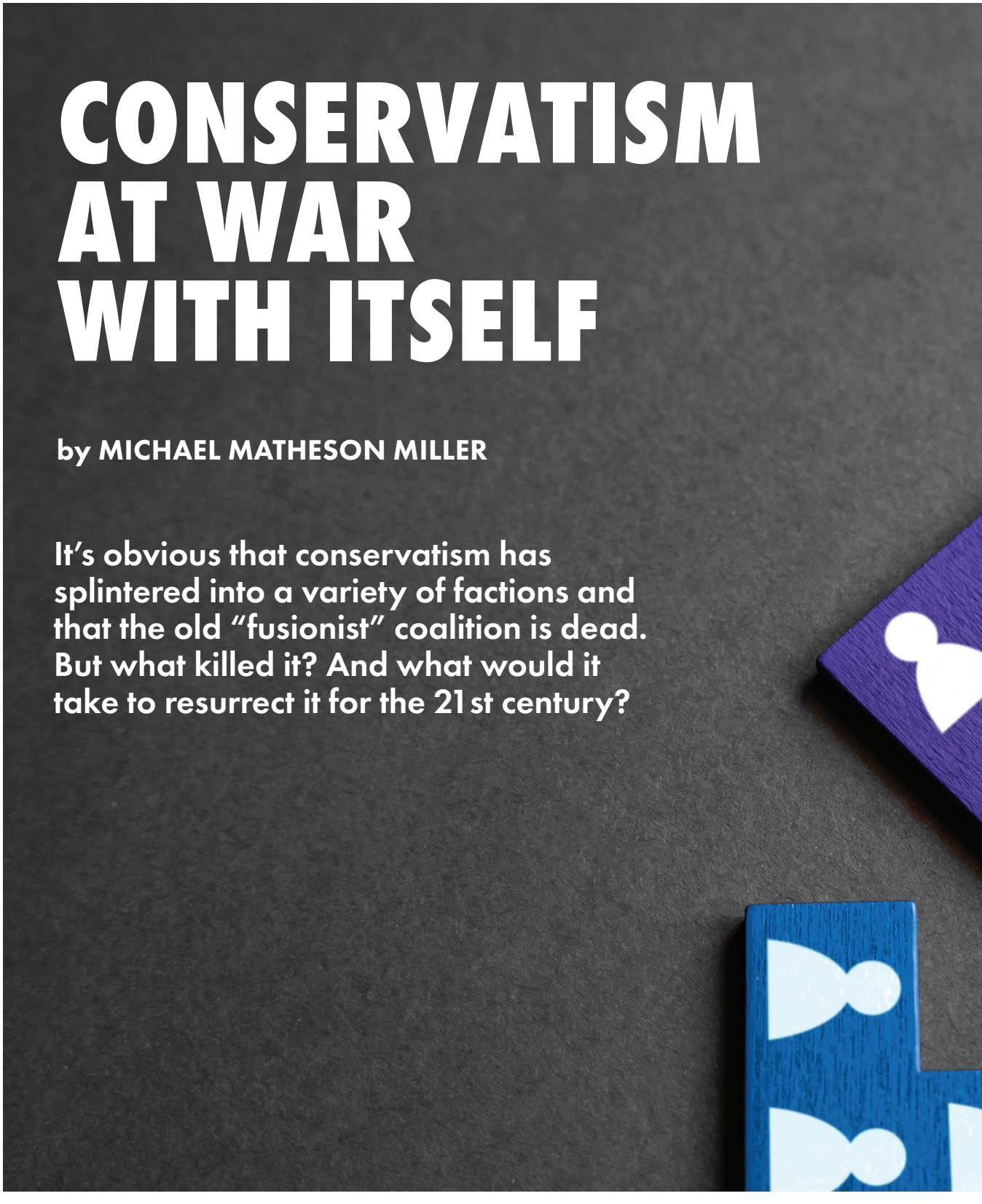
In both socio-politics and international affairs, part of the attraction of realism is that it's so simple: an easy way to see events and decide how to interact with them. The lure of idealism is much the same. A terrible simplifying defines them both. Whatever else he was, Reinhold Niebuhr was not a simple man. He could be wrong about the events he analyzed, but he rarely took the easy, ideological path to deciding about them. Really, Christian realism was the bow that could release only the one arrow that was Niebuhr. And we are left to watch its arc, trying to learn the man's sanity and good sense. RL

Joseph Bottum *is co-founder of the* Poems Ancient and Modern *newsletter.*

CONSERVATISM AT WAR WITH ITSELF

by MICHAEL MATHESON MILLER

It's obvious that conservatism has splintered into a variety of factions and that the old "fusionist" coalition is dead. But what killed it? And what would it take to resurrect it for the 21st century?



Andrii Yalanskyi / iStock

There is deep division not only among left and right and so-called liberals and conservatives. Many liberals are now progressive and reject liberal positions on religion and speech; mainline conservatives are now derided as liberals who are missing the signs of the times. Since the early 2000s and the breakdown of fusionism, the conservative project has been fragmenting into multiple camps. Today there are varieties of post-liberals, Catholic integralists, pro-Trumpers, anti-Trumpers, free traders, protectionists, and National Conservatives who, while railing against the dead consensus of fusionism, appear to be building a new fusionist coalition themselves.

The division in the conservative movement is complex. It reflects both political and social changes, geo-political alignments, and cultural, philosophical, theological, and generational shifts. How we got here is…complicated.

WHAT WOULD THE essayist Lionel Trilling make of today's American conservative movement? While Trilling would certainly be critical of what he called "irritable mental gestures," it would be hard to maintain that there are "no conservative ideas in circulation" or that liberalism is the "sole intellectual tradition" in America. He was wrong back then and even more so today. We are awash in debate about the meaning of conservatism, who is conservative, whether conservatism has a future, and Trilling may be surprised at the number of people who think liberalism itself is dead.

THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT WAS ALWAYS DIVIDED

Critics of fusionism speak about the "dead consensus." Others want to get the band back together, but perhaps the band was always an illusion. More precisely, the conservative movement was predominantly a political coalition more than an intellectual one. Rather than seeing the breakdown of a shared vision, we must admit it has always been a varied one.

The standard shortcut way to describe this old fusionist coalition was as a combination of traditionalists (religious and otherwise); anti-communists; socially conservative, limited-government free marketers; and libertarians. Here were lots of people with irreconcilable differences but who rallied against a common opponent. George Nash documents much of the diversity in his excellent book *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*.

Within and in addition to the main groupings listed above, the conservative movement included evangelicals and fundamentalists, classical liberals, Southern Agrarians, East and West Coast Straussians, Catholics, conservative and Orthodox Jews, paleoconservatives, Chamber of Commerce pro-business people, corporate skeptics, small farmers, large farmers, anti-environmentalists, pro-GMO mono-culture industrial farming people, anti-GMO

Whittaker Chambers (1901–1961)

> **“THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT WAS PREDOMINANTLY A POLITICAL COALITION MORE THAN AN INTELLECTUAL ONE.”**

technology- suspicious conservatives, hunters, natural law Thomists, Buchanan protectionists, free-traders, Second Amendment activists, distributists, Kirkian conservatives, anarcho-capitalists, pro-life activists, Texans, Latin Mass activists, and of course neoconservatives (neocons). But even here, it is important to make distinctions; there were different types of neocons. Michael Novak, for example, was not the same kind of neocon as Bill Kristol. Neocons were first associated with Irving Kristol and leftists “mugged by reality” before they were seen as war hawks. Divisions among this group also played a role in the breakdown of fusionism.

More than a coherent vision of the world, fusionism was an amalgamation of various groups in an electoral compact that shared common foes, including the USSR and the global threat of communism and, domestically, the dominant status quo liberalism that reigned from FDR through LBJ and beyond, the legacy of the New Deal and the Great Society, the sexual and cultural revolutions, democratic socialism, and statism. But once the opposition changed, so did the alliance.

I think it is important to note, however, that there did exist a type of fusionism that was not simply a blending of different views for pragmatic reasons. Among the many camps and groupings, there did develop a “fusionist” philosophy that combined traditionalism, limited government, free markets, and natural law thinking. Here I partially agree with Stephanie Slade of *Reason* magazine that a fusionist philosophy did exist, but I would argue that it was still just one view among others. What made it stand out and feel dominant was that this fusionist vision was held by some of the most prominent and vocal figures in the movement, including Frank Meyer, who is credited with coining the term (but didn’t like it), and Buckley and Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, the editors of influential conservative magazines. Yet even for many of their followers, this was still a weak grouping of what felt like irreconcilable or least conflicting ideas. For example, support for free markets seemed to contradict the promotion of moral and cultural restraint as well as patriotic adherence to America against growing globalism. But for others, like Buckley, Neuhaus, M. Stanton Evans, and Novak, the fusionist integration was grounded in more than a shaky combination of Hayek’s free market ideas, Whittaker Chamber’s anticommunism, and Russell Kirk’s traditionalism. It also developed out of experience and deeper religious, theological, and philosophical sources like Thomas Aquinas and Catholic social teaching. This is not to say there were no inconsistencies, but it had an internal coherence and mutually reinforcing vision that went deeper than a merely pragmatic alliance against a common opponent. The important point here is that fusionism was both a coherent idea held by a small but vocal group of people *as well as* a collection of diverse views united against perceived common threats.

VICTIMS OF THEIR OWN SUCCESS?

But let’s double-back to the beginning. The modern American conservative movement began in the wilderness in the 1950s and ’60s with, among other events, the publication of Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, Robert Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community*, Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale*, and the founding of

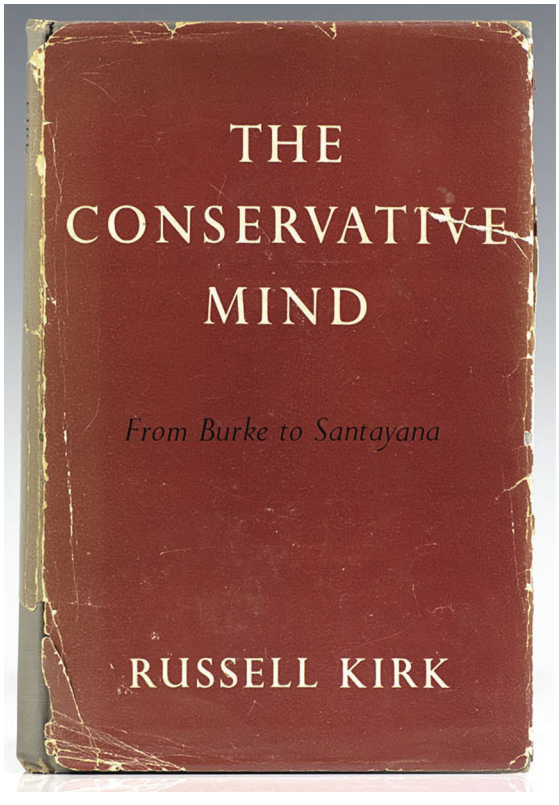
the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in 1953, *National Review* in 1955, the Philadelphia Society in 1964—not to mention the Barry Goldwater campaign for president. The movement's crescendo was the victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and continued to resound through President George H.W. Bush's administration and into the '90s with Republican control over the House after 40 years of Democrat domination. These successes also created some changes in the movement. Conservatives were no longer in opposition, and despite small-government rhetoric, the size of government increased under both Reagan and Bush. This, too, revealed division and created disaffected groups that would later seek to break away from the old fusionist coalition.

Along with the electoral victories, there was the momentous collapse of the Soviet Union and the failure of communism. Ronald Reagan's much maligned speeches about the "evil empire" and his call to "tear down this wall," along with decades of conservative critiques, were vindicated. Contrary to liberal ideas that the Soviet economy would ultimately win out, that communists and socialists were simply misguided liberals, or that appeasement was the only way forward, the fall of the Soviet Union finally revealed the intellectually bankrupt and murderous reality of communism. Conservative ideas, anticommunism, and the free market won out. This victory also meant the opposition crumbled. The conservative alliance lost some of its rationale.

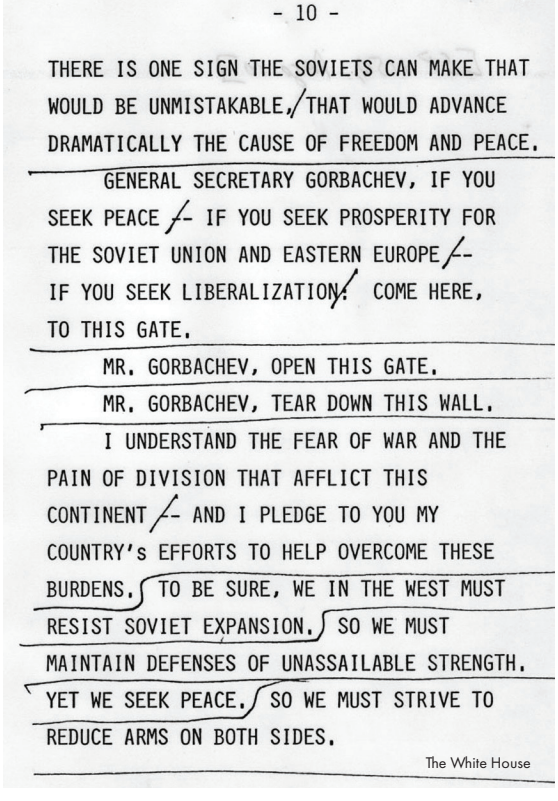
In addition to the fall of the Soviet Union, enthusiasm waned for collectivist polices that had been in vogue in England and the United States for decades. Keynesian economic policy was put on the back burner. There was general support for privatization, liberalization, and globalization. Both Bill Clinton and Tony Blair called themselves New Democrats and New Labor. They spoke positively of free markets, entrepreneurship, business. "The era of big government is over," claimed Clinton. Globalization and Davos capitalism were now cool. Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history.

All this fractured the fusionist coalition. Conservatives were unsure how to react. Socially liberal pro-business conservatives were happy to join New Democrats and adopt culturally fashionable and

First edition of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953)



President Reagan's cue card from his famous 1987 speech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THERE IS ONE SIGN THE SOVIETS CAN MAKE THAT WOULD BE UNMISTAKABLE, THAT WOULD ADVANCE DRAMATICALLY THE CAUSE OF FREEDOM AND PEACE.

GENERAL SECRETARY GORBACHEV, IF YOU SEEK PEACE -- IF YOU SEEK PROSPERITY FOR THE SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE -- IF YOU SEEK LIBERALIZATION: COME HERE, TO THIS GATE.

MR. GORBACHEV, OPEN THIS GATE.

MR. GORBACHEV, TEAR DOWN THIS WALL.

I UNDERSTAND THE FEAR OF WAR AND THE PAIN OF DIVISION THAT AFFLICT THIS CONTINENT -- AND I PLEDGE TO YOU MY COUNTRY's EFFORTS TO HELP OVERCOME THESE BURDENS. TO BE SURE, WE IN THE WEST MUST RESIST SOVIET EXPANSION. SO WE MUST MAINTAIN DEFENSES OF UNASSAILABLE STRENGTH. YET WE SEEK PEACE. SO WE MUST STRIVE TO REDUCE ARMS ON BOTH SIDES.

The White House

> SOCIALLY LIBERAL PRO-BUSINESS CONSERVATIVES WERE HAPPY TO JOIN NEW DEMOCRATS.

even progressive ideas. We see the results of this alliance in corporate social responsibility, DEI, ESG, and what is called "woke capitalism." Other conservatives following such thinkers as Adam Smith, F.A. Hayek, Nisbet, and Kirk were critical or suspicious of big business, regardless of how "responsible" they claimed to be for various reasons; cronyism, centralizing tendencies, willingness to work hand in hand with big government, etc., were still problems. Then there were those wary of globalization and its impact on American workers, while still others saw free markets as a force for consumerism and moral breakdown. One of the main divisions in the conservative movement today is precisely how to think about business and its role in society.

There was also an error in the conservative movement's response to the death of socialism. Many erroneously identified socialism solely with its economic dimension instead of recognizing the ideology as a broader social and anthropological vision. As Joseph Ratzinger argued, Marxism was only the radical execution of the spirit that dominated the West, and that after the fall of the Soviet Union, relativism did not die. Instead, he insisted, it combined with the desire for gratification to form a potent mix. Ratzinger, along with Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce, warned about this morphing of socialism as early as the '80s. As the world changed and new political, economic, and social problems emerged, many conservatives missed these shifts until it was quite late and continued in a Pyrrhic triumphalism.

When the Soviet Union fell, there was general euphoria that liberal democracy and capitalism had proved victorious. (And to be clear, the euphoria was appropriate. The USSR and other communist nations killed millions of innocents and enslaved several generations of their people.) But something else occurred that is playing out today: the left made temporary peace with markets—and realized they could be used to further their cultural objectives. It was not just in America with the Clintons. José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, prime minister of Spain from 2004 to 2011, was a prime example: a socialist politician promoting policies attacking the traditional family while lowering corporate tax rates to encourage economic growth.

As the opposition adapted and was recast, conservative blocs continued to unravel, coming to a head during the presidency of George W. Bush with divided views on the Iraq War. Fusionism was on life support by the early 2000s, but the Iraq War killed it for good, and by 2016, with Trump and the resurgence of Buchanan conservatives, alliances had rearranged.

How this will play out in the conservative movement is yet to be seen. Unless a very clear problem akin to something like the Soviet threat arises, the conservative movement will remain fractured for the near future. Deep divisions include: Trumpers vs. Never-Trumpers; conservative debates about abortion and marriage, nationalism, and immigration; increasing worries and critiques about globalization and the free market and its effects on urban and rural communities; and perhaps most unpredicted, criticism of the American founding that until recently most conservatives tended to defend against leftist critique.

Again, we are living in a time of great division. Yet I would argue that this division is needed to work through complex problems and may be more representative of conservatism than the muted electoral alliance of the 20th century. In sum, there was indeed a conservative movement, but while the conservative band was an electoral reality, it was an intellectual illusion.

REACTION IS THE NEW THINKING

Another element that has proved a dividing force of the contemporary conservative movement is the challenge of anti-leftist reactionary thinking that has widened an incoherence within conservatism. Consider, for example, early progressivism. It promoted social engineering, eugenics, the rational planning of those whom Thomas Leonard called "Illiberal Reformers," and the attendant mechanistic vision that influenced the New Deal, the Great Society, the War on Poverty, and Keynesian, technocratic

Michael Barera, CC BY-SA 4.0 / Wikimedia Commons

A farmers market in Grand Prairie, Texas

big-government liberalism. Against all this the conservative movement rallied in an echo of Edmund Burke's critique of the hyper-rationalism, anti-tradition, anti-organic views of the French revolutionaries and Enlightenment rationalists.

But something happened that created an incoherence in the conservative movement. The '68 student and hippie movements protested both traditionalism and religion, technocracy and the military industrial complex. As Del Noce and Carlo Lancellotti have argued, when the Age of Aquarius and hippie hopes for a new eschaton failed to materialize in the 1960s and '70s, the hippies became yuppies. They retained their disdain of family, tradition, religion, and transcendence but embraced technology, technocracy, and material acquisition as a means to happiness. Fred Turner further explored the embrace of techno-utopianism in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. Del Noce explained how everything became an object of trade or manipulation. He called it a shift from the Christian bourgeois with commerce grounded in morality and justice to the "pure bourgeois," for whom everything is commodified: persons, relationships, sperm, eggs, children—everything is for sale.

Del Noce's insights are valuable on their own terms for helping understand our current situation. But his analysis also sheds light on the incoherence that existed within the conservative movement and that is now being revealed in some of the divisions today. The student protests and hippie movement led conservatives to support not only tradition but many technocratic, hyper-rationalist solutions, social engineering, Taylorite management techniques, industrial farming, GMOs, and big corporations. Many of these developments became part of a new conservative ethos. But these would have been met with deep skepticism by the likes of Edmund Burke and early conservatives like Nisbet, Kirk, and Christopher Dawson. Whatever happened to the conservative emphasis on free exchange, commutive justice, localism, and subsidiarity?

A simple example I often use to illustrate this is to consider the early conservative reaction to localism, farmers markets, raw milk, and organic movements. Farmers markets are generally unregulated, free, competitive markets filled with small- and medium-size farmers and businesses. But there was, especially 20 years ago, when fusionism was breaking down, a sense among many conservatives that these were just left-wing hippie enterprises. This of course has changed. Many conservatives are now leading voices in skepticism of the industrial medical/pharma complex, but that is part of the point. Changes in society, the rise of "pure bourgeois," the alliance of government and the medical establishment, and the breakdown of the fusionist compact all contributed to deepening inconsistencies that become more visible and caused further fragmentation among conservatives that persists to this day.

OWNING THE LIBS

Another influence on the current conservative division was the rise of talk radio and conservative cable news, which changed the ethos of the conservative movement—more soundbites, fewer long-form essays and arguments. There was also an emphasis on simplistic narratives that were often just *less false* than the leftist narratives they were intended to combat. Voices like Rush Limbaugh began as a breath of fresh air and a welcome alternative to establishment and liberal-controlled media and culture. There had been long frustration over monolithic left/liberal dominated universities, media that favored the Democrats and gave short shrift to Republicans, and so on. Some surveys showed that over 90% of professors and journalists identified as liberal. Other voices like Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and Bill O'Reilly also attempted to counter the imbalance with popular critiques and conservative perspectives.

But as time went on, there was the temptation to deliver bombastic and incendiary arguments to "own the libs." Yes, a substantial audience of listeners and viewers liked this (we all like clear, simple cause-and-effect explanations), but this undermined the conservative ethos of dialogue and wrestling with complexity and trade-offs. A partisan echo chamber developed on the right as well as an increasing anti-intellectual rejection of nuance. And this was true not only of radio hosts and popular TV commentators—all of us were affected, including academics and scholars.

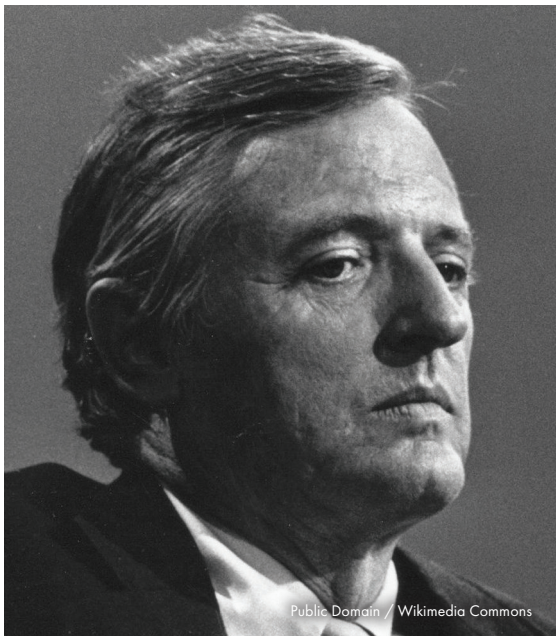
Rush Limbaugh receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the 2020 State of the Union

Everything now has to be simple. Trade-offs are ignored. Free marketers argue that globalization would benefit everyone without seriously considering that some people would be worse off. National Conservatives propose industrial policy and protectionism without wrestling with the dangers of regulatory capture, cronyism, and the negative impacts of protection and a mono-economy on the very people they purport to help. Also unexamined are the erroneous ideas that free trade and capitalism would necessarily make China free or that private entrepreneurs alone invented the smartphone while negating the role of government and military technology—or its corollary, that the government invented the smartphone and national industrial policy could accomplish innovation without the messiness of entrepreneurs.

The world is complex, but we don't like to hear that. Tough debate is often forsaken, and bickering camps hurl epithets like "free market fundamentalism" and "right-wing socialism." National Conservatives versus free marketers versus integralists versus libertarians versus strict Constitutionalists versus "the American founding is fundamentally flawed," and on and on. The coveting of huge numbers of followers on social media has clearly played a role in the dumbing down of complex socio-economic, religious, and cultural issues. Marshall McLuhan's point about the "medium is the message" and the shaping forces of technology has clearly been proved true. I've even heard of leaders of respected publications encouraging people to start fights to get things going. Good argument is one thing, but disingenuous provocation and creating strawmen is another.

TECHNOLOGY MATTERS

While technological change is by no means the determining factor or most important in understanding the current fractious situation, nevertheless, one of the reasons that conservatism is so divided is that it is incredibly easy to start a magazine, online journal, or even your own blog. In the past, there were only a handful of outlets like *National Review*, *The Freeman*, *Human Events*, the *New Criterion*, *First Things*, and one or two others where one could publish conservative ideas. And these magazines had gatekeepers who influenced who and what got published. It is well



William F. Buckley Jr. (1925–2008)

known that the editor of *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr., made sure to exclude from publication members of the John Birch Society and other groups he thought were fringe, immoderate, anti-Semitic, or overly incendiary. But even beyond extreme groups, it was often difficult for many on the right to get published. Now a couple of us could get together, write some essays, record some podcasts and videos, and build a professional-looking website in less than a week—all at a low cost. In short, it's the Wild West, and there is no one with the authority or influence of Buckley to decide who is part of the "movement."

There are many benefits to this. Online publishing creates avenues for new ideas and debates. Young and different voices add new perspectives. You don't have to know anyone to get published anymore—you just have to write decent prose with a compelling argument. This has opened up serious debate about complex topics. It's no longer necessary to hold to some party line. The ease of publishing creates much more diversity. It also reveals the diversity of thought that was always there.

But there are downsides. Online publishing, combined with social media platforms, doesn't just encourage and reward good argument; it also rewards bombast and passion without regard to prudence or complexity. I remember as a younger man reading Michael Novak's Templeton Address, "Awakening from Nihilism," in *First Things* or articles by Theodore Dalrymple in *New Criterion* and hoping someday, in my 50s, after much study and life experience, to write a serious essay like Novak, Russell Hittinger, Peter Berger, or Robert P. George and get published in places of such stature. Today, the need for daily content has watered down the arguments to opinions and hot takes. This requirement for constant content creates a need for lots of writers, many of whom are young and, though often skilled as writers, they are rarely serious thinkers. Partially because they spend so much time generating content, they don't have time to read and think. And the lack (or failure) of gatekeepers to guide them makes it worse. We have 20- and 30-year-olds opining on how to solve complex global economic issues or resolve geopolitical conflicts.

In some ways, it's understandable. More worrying is how it impacts older, seasoned writers. The desire to go viral can overcome a desire for nuance or accuracy. It encourages caricatures of other thinkers and positions. It rewards novelty (or at least apparent novelty) and simplistic albeit attractive intellectual histories that create followers among young readers who do not know better. The lack of gatekeepers has been a boon to letting ideas flow, but now self-described conservative writers can make audacious, silly claims without an editor pulling them back—either because there is none or because the siren song of virality is too alluring to be nuanced. After all, nuance in the "Wild West" just means you're weak or a squish.

Again, I am not suggesting technological determinism, but it has enabled previously muted voices in the conservative movement to get a hearing they couldn't get until now, and this has been a major factor in fragmenting "conservatism" for good and bad.

FAILURE TO DELIVER

Finally, an undeniable factor in this fragmentation was warranted frustration: after 70 years of electoral victories at the national, state, local, and presidential levels, plus conservative judicial appointments, lots of think tanks, journals, and policy networks, there grew a strong and understandable sense that the conservative movement had nevertheless *failed*. Despite political victories and even dominance since the 1980s, conservatives lost the culture in almost every area, from family, marriage, public schooling, and university education to the environment,

transgenderism, technology, and free speech. Indeed, with the rise of woke capitalism, Pride month, and all the progressive-activist lobbying, Republicans struggle to influence what used to be their greatest source of support: big business!

But we must ask ourselves a hard question: Are we really different from anyone else? How differently do conservatives act from the rest of culture? What are our marriage rates, childbirth rates, religious attendance, entertainment choices, and so on? As a character asks in the film *Katyn*, about the Polish resistance to Soviet brutality, what is the big deal that you think differently if you act like everyone else?

Yes, it's possible to overstate this. There are many wonderful things going on: charter schools, universities, and organizations including the Philadelphia Society that play important roles in creating space for serious conservative debate. And yet, in many ways, we are all still imbibers of big government, big culture, big tech, big education, big medicine, and big entertainment. As Del Noce wrote in 1989, just before his death, Marxism failed in the East as it realized itself in the West. When conservatives, and especially younger conservatives, look at the situation we are in today, they see truth in Chris Arnade's critique of corrupt elites of the right and left, Tim Carney's worries about *Alienated America*, and Michael Anton's appraisal of Conservative Inc. as the Washington generals that get paid to lose but are happy as long as they keep power.

The failure of the conservative movement to deliver on culture, politics, and even many areas of economic policy created division and understandable animosity. I share it. While some of the critiques of the "dead consensus" are mistaken and the diagnoses of our contemporary situation are wrong, these debates are nevertheless positive. Conservatives need to own up to the fact that it's no longer the '70s, '80s, or '90s. The rote "conservative" answers and approaches from those times are irrelevant at best and harmful at worst. In this sense, division and debate are a positive development. We all cling to incoherent and perhaps irreconcilable positions that we need to wrestle with or let go. Serious debate can revitalize the conservative movement—it can also attract people to it. Conservatism can be principled and rooted in the permanent things and at the same time engage in serious dialogue about our changing world, because dialogue is an affirmation of the *logos*, of reason and philosophy over ideology.

The crises of our time and the progressive opposition we face make it clear that we must provide more than a compelling *political* vision. We are in a struggle over not only politics but also civilizational questions: the defense of reason; what it means to be an embodied, embedded person; whether truth can be known; and the meaning and purpose of a society. This means we have to take anthropology seriously, and the complexity of economics, politics, and truth seriously. Our narratives cannot simply be *less false*. We need to think politically, socially, culturally, and morally. We cannot use Machiavellian means to achieve supposedly Christian ends.

A PARALLEL POLIS

With all that said, I think there is still a pressing need for the two variants of fusionism—both political and philosophical. We need a coalition of diverse views and groups that is still substantive and principled and that can rally against the progressive, transhumanist, and statist left. We need to participate in public life, win elections, while also building what Vaclav Benda called a "parallel polis" and what Nisbet called "a new laissez faire" of associations. We can think and act differently by opting out of big government, big education, big healthcare, big tech, and big culture, and renew American civilization by renewing functional communities. Here we can find common ground and overlap among lots of conservatives, post-liberals, libertarians, traditionalists, free-marketers, agrarians, and followers of Tocqueville and American associational-ism.

We also need to rearticulate and develop a more philosophically coherent "fusionist" vision of limited government, rule of law, support for free competitive markets (with a proper understanding of freedom)—one that also values truth, tradition, the principle of subsidiarity, and our embodied and social nature. This must come from the American experience, but most importantly it must also be rooted in the Jewish and Christian vision of the goodness of being and creation, the dignity of the human person, and the core roles of the family, justice, and the common good that made America possible in the first place. RL

This essay was adapted from an address given to the Philadelphia Society on March 27, 2021, in Fort Worth, Texas.

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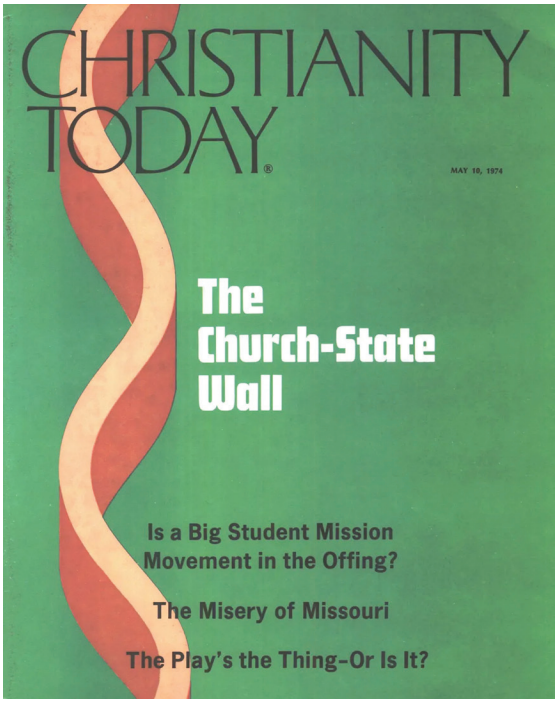
DISCORDIA: A LUTHERAN SEMINARY WRECKED AND REBORN

by KOREY D. MAAS

Revisiting the Concordia Seminary controversy 50 years later is to realize that sometimes neither politics nor theology is key to preserving orthodoxy.

Luther Tower at Concordia Seminary, photo by 100cellsman, CC0/ Wikimedia Commons



May 10, 1974, issue of Christianity Today

TOWARD THE END OF the 20th century, historian Mark Noll dilated on the "unobtrusiveness of Lutherans in America." There was, in what Noll called a "superficial view from the outside," little in American Lutheranism that seemed "newsworthy." To those in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), such an assessment would probably not have constituted news. Although the longstanding and sometimes self-perpetuated stereotype of the LCMS as a midwestern church overwhelmingly composed of head-down, mind-their-own-business immigrant farmers was of course never entirely accurate, neither was it wholly mistaken. Reared on Martin Luther's warning against a "theology of glory"—the belief that worldly prestige or success is confirmation of standing in God's favor—the clergy and laity of the LCMS would likely have accepted "unobtrusive" as a fair, even complimentary, evaluation of their place in American society.

Which made it all the more shocking when, between 1969 and 1974, such an un-newsworthy church was very much in the news. It featured regularly in religious periodicals like *Christianity Today*, consistently made headlines in the *New York Times*, and was being discussed by Walter Cronkite on the CBS Evening News. When the controversy that courted such attention reached its peak a half-century ago this year—when 85% of the 700 students at its chief seminary withdrew and 90% of the same seminary's faculty were fired—media referred to it as the "climax to the top religious news story of the past few years."

What exactly was that controversy, and what made it so embarrassingly newsworthy? The answers to those questions have remained in dispute over the intervening five decades. For many in the church, the conflict was nothing other than a "Battle for the Bible," the early 20th-century fundamentalist-modernist controversy restaged in Lutheran vestments—but rewritten with a happy ending. The

Concordia Seminary in 2008

march through the institutions that had transformed the mainline Protestant churches was halted and reversed; liberalism was routed and conservatives maintained control of the institutions. In this telling, the conflict was always and only theological.

Yet others have denied that doctrine was the true engine of conflict. There was no theological division in the Missouri Synod, they argue, or at least none significant enough to warrant charges of heterodoxy, threats of discipline, and eventual schism. Rather, the controversy was primarily political. In this narrative, not only were many of the divisive issues political in nature, but so too were the tactics and goals. Far from maintaining the status quo, conservatives introduced novelty with their unchurchmanlike adoption of secular political maneuvers—campaigning for church offices, packing committees with partisan allies, and exploiting media to organize the base. Expressed doctrinal concerns were merely pretext for a seizure of power. The whole affair is therefore best described as a "takeover" that issued in a "purge."

Whether substantive theological differences or cynical political machinations—or both—drove the controversy of the early 1970s, what has always remained beyond dispute is that its point of focus was Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.

CLOUDS ON THE SEMINARY'S HORIZON

In the course of walking a freshly hired professor around Concordia Seminary in 1958, LCMS president John Behnken cautioned him that not all was as idyllic as the Gothic buildings and shaded lawns might suggest. The institution faced "serious problems," he warned; there were "dark clouds on the horizon." It is perhaps no coincidence that, though the seminary had been founded more than a century previously, these remarks were offered by the first American-born president of the church body that owned and operated it. Behnken himself was a symbol of the Americanization that was one source of his concerns.

Established in the 19th century by refugees from wayward and oppressive European state churches, the LCMS had largely retained its Germanic language and culture—insulating itself from many trends influencing American churches—until nativist hostilities attendant on two World Wars made a degree of assimilation seem only prudent. A generation later, that begrudgingly made decision might have appeared (if one were tempted by a theology of glory) divinely approved. Between 1935 and 1962, the years of Behnken's presidency, the church had nearly

tripled in size and was the largest Lutheran body in America, oversaw the largest Protestant school system in the nation, and governed 10 undergraduate colleges. Its flagship seminary regularly sent graduates to doctoral programs at the Ivies and abroad, and counted Martin Marty, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Richard John Neuhaus among recent alumni.

But—as the eventual exodus of those esteemed alumni from the LCMS might suggest—Behnken was not wrong to fear that such rosy anecdotes obscured real, and growing, fault lines. Indeed, two further events of the same year would send the first tremors through the broader church.

In February of 1958, New Testament professor Martin Scharlemann presented a short paper for faculty discussion in which he bluntly stated, "The book of God's truth contains errors." Pressing the point, he made clear that he was taking direct issue with the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* formally adopted at the Synod's 1932 National Convention and regularly reaffirmed thereafter. According to that document, "Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions." Although originally presented behind closed doors, the sentiments of Scharlemann and other seminary faculty were not exactly a closely held secret, as evidenced by the second significant event of 1958.

In that year, Herman Otten, a bright but pugnacious student, brought accusations directly to President Behnken that faculty were teaching contrary to LCMS doctrine. The faculty was incensed by the charges but, rather than rebut them, took Otten to task on procedural grounds. They complained that classroom teaching was private and so students had no right to publicize its content; more persuasively, they argued that Otten erred in not bringing his concerns directly to the faculty before "telling it to the church" (cf. Matt. 18:15–17). He conceded the second point and apologized for the manner in which he made the accusations; he would not, however, retract their substance. The faculty therefore informed him that he would not be certified for ordination upon graduation.

Jaroslav Pelikan (1923–2006)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Denied pastoral status in the LCMS, and so largely beyond the reach of ecclesiastical oversight, Otten devoted his considerable energy to the creation of *Lutheran News* (soon renamed *Christian News*), a confrontational weekly newspaper that immediately became the most widely circulated—and consistently denounced—source of news, polemic, and innuendo regarding the perceived infiltration of liberalism within the LCMS, not least at Concordia Seminary.

But Otten could also operate in less confrontational ways; he was reportedly the means by which Scharlemann's unpublished paper eventually landed on the desk of President Behnken, confirming rumors that had swirled since its original presentation. Because it was clearly at odds with the position articulated by the LCMS, delegates to the 1962 National Convention were presented with a resolution to strip Scharlemann of his professorship. Before action was taken, however, Scharlemann addressed the convention. Walking back his previous comments, he confessed the Scriptures to be "utterly truthful, infallible and completely without error." He apologized for being a cause of unrest and asked the forgiveness of Synod. Delegates granted it by an overwhelming vote of 650 to 17, and Scharlemann continued at Concordia for another 20 years.

Despite the joy expressed at the prodigal's return, though, there remained lingering doubts that Scharlemann had been a single bad apple. Through the next decade, Herman Otten did his best to encourage those doubts; the seminary faculty, on the other hand, did less than their best to discourage them. So too did Oliver Harms, voted in as Behnken's successor at the same 1962 convention.

Unlike Behnken, Harms was unconvinced of "serious problems" at the seminary. At the 1965 convention, he lamented the "public accusations"

and "negative criticisms" leveled at the faculty and waved away calls for an inquiry into their teaching. Assuming clearer communication would assuage concerns, though, Harms did encourage the faculty to publicly rebut rumors that some of them, for example, denied the factuality of certain biblical miracles. The faculty responded instead by questioning the usefulness of terms like "factuality," and the seminary's president, Alfred Feuerbringer, could only weakly assure Harms that "no member of the faculty holds that the Bible contains error in the moral sense of the term." Satisfied, Harms again at the 1967 convention decried "accusation and slander," along with "divisiveness and dissension…over matters that are not part of the Gospel."

A TRADITIONAL VS. AN ALIEN THEOLOGY

Through the second half of the 1960s, it therefore became increasingly clear to both traditional and progressive factions that Harms was the seminary's most effective defender. If the Synod were to get a frank review of faculty teaching, believed the former, Harms would have to be replaced as LCMS president. If Harms were indeed ousted, the latter believed, the seminary must acquire an even more amenable and assertive head.

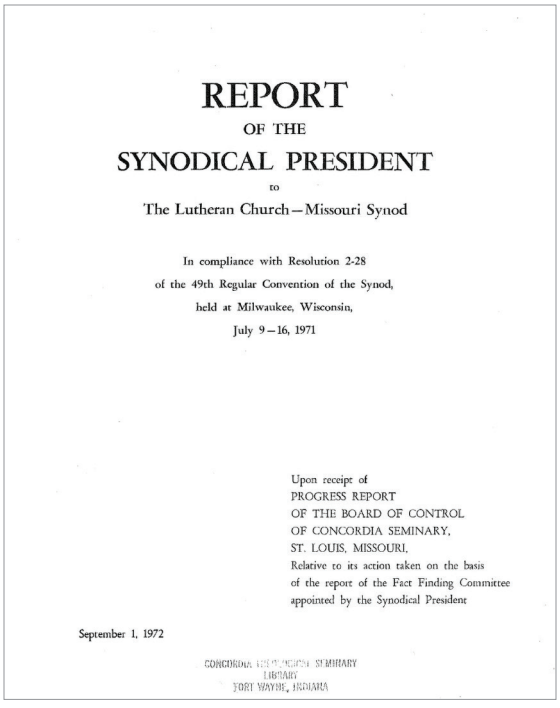
Statue of Martin Luther at Concordia Seminary

Gary Todd, CC0 / Wikimedia Commons

> "TIETJEN INSISTED THAT A SEMINARY REQUIRES 'A DIVERSITY OF VIEWPOINTS, EVEN CONFLICTS OF VIEWPOINTS.'"

Both changes came to pass two years later. Rallied in no small part by the drumbeat of *Christian News*, delegates to the 1969 National Convention did what had long been considered unimaginable: they voted a sitting president out of office. The replacement of Harms by Otten-backed J.A.O. (Jack) Preus II seemed to sanction a more vigorous approach to perceived problems at Concordia. Anticipating the possibility of synodical leadership change, though, Feuerbringer had already announced his retirement as seminary president, allowing his replacement to be elected prior to the convention (ensuring that, were a more conservative synodical president there elected, he would have no say in determining the seminary's leadership). His successor, John Tietjen, came into the office from the public relations office of the interdenominational Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. If, as Harms professed to believe, a lack of clear communication was the root cause of recent turmoil, Tietjen's expertise would surely be pacifying.

It was not to be. Indeed, Tietjen quickly created further confusion with apparently mixed messages. He insisted that a seminary requires "a diversity of viewpoints, even conflicts of viewpoints," while also insisting that "rumors of division" among faculty "are not true." But in February 1970, only a month after making the latter assertion, he participated in a faculty meeting to discuss a multipage list of



REPORT
OF THE
SYNODICAL PRESIDENT
to
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

In compliance with Resolution 2-28
of the 49th Regular Convention of the Synod,
held at Milwaukee, Wisconsin,
July 9—16, 1971

Upon receipt of
PROGRESS REPORT
OF THE BOARD OF CONTROL
OF CONCORDIA SEMINARY,
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI,
Relative to its action taken on the basis
of the report of the Fact Finding Committee
appointed by the Synodical President

September 1, 1972

Title page of the "Blue Book"

theological points on which professors were at odds, admitting that public awareness of such division would be "disastrous."

The suspicions of many had already been confirmed a month earlier, however, when three professors signed on to a publicly distributed *Call to Openness and Trust*. Despite the title, its blunt denial that "the question of factual error in the Bible" should have any bearing on LCMS membership inspired little trust in the seminary. Finally, in early April, none other than the prodigal professor Martin Scharlemann wrote to Preus that students were complaining of a "theological schizophrenia" evident in classroom teaching, and encouraged an official review of the doctrines held by the faculty. Less than two weeks later, Preus announced he would do just that.

His appointed "Fact Finding Committee" interviewed all Concordia professors and reviewed their publications and presentations. Professors were allowed the opportunity to review, amend, and supplement transcribed interviews. Tietjen himself attended all interviews and, with a single exception, raised no objections to the procedures. Indeed, despite expressing his "regret that Dr. Preus had chosen to dignify the accusations of the seminary by conducting an investigation," Tietjen professed to welcome it as an opportunity to "demonstrate how truly Lutheran we are." It was of course inevitable, though, that some would characterize the committee's work as an "inquisition" and the work of "frustrated dictators." As interviews took place between December 1970 and March 1971, seminary faculty increasingly voiced the same opinion. In January, Tietjen publicly criticized the committee's work as "unscriptural, unethical, [and] divisive," announcing that the faculty would continue to cooperate "only under protest."

None were surprised, then, that the committee's activity became a heated topic of debate at the 1971 National Convention. But if the election of Preus two years earlier had been read as a mandate to investigate the seminary, the 1971 convention made this explicit. Delegates affirmed the committee's constitutionality and commended Preus for his "pastoral concern for doctrinal unity and purity" in creating it. He read the signs and acted accordingly, requesting fellow conservative Ralph Bohlmann to draft a *Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*. The document's intended purpose, he explained, was to provide basic criteria by which the seminary board might evaluate the summary report of the Fact Finding Committee. In addition to forwarding the *Statement* to the board, however, in March of 1972, Preus released its text to all congregations of the LCMS.

The faculty's reaction was immediate, condemning the *Statement* as "unscriptural," "unethical," and having "a spirit alien to Lutheran confessional theology"—an unintentionally revealing assessment, since the *Statement* itself largely relied on previously adopted doctrinal resolutions of the LCMS. Indeed, even an outside observer critical of its theological content would concede that it contained "nothing even slightly innovative," but was entirely "traditional, and never retracted solid Missourianism."

But before the next National Convention could render judgment on whether the *Statement*'s theology was "traditional" or "alien" to the LCMS, Preus would make one more move to influence its outcome. The Fact Finding Committee had presented its report to both him and the seminary board in June of 1971, but its content had never been made public. Throughout the following year, Concordia faculty loudly complained that the report misrepresented their teaching. Whether such complaints were warranted, though, was impossible for the wider church to determine without knowledge of its content. Moreover, since the report merely summarized the committee's findings, even if publicized, how would Synod members judge the accuracy of those summaries? In September, Preus solved both problems by distributing his own *Report of the Synodical President*. Rather than merely including the committee's original summations, however, it provided lengthy excerpts from the faculty interviews and writings that had informed them.

This "Blue Book," so called for the color of its cover, landed like a bomb. As Tietjen would later admit, "We realized full well that for us the BB was a disaster." He thus retreated to allegations that the investigation had been prejudicial and unfair. Most significantly, he doubled down more explicitly on his remark about a spirit "alien" to Lutheranism. In a document distributed to all LCMS clergy, he asserted that "the theology which lies behind the inquiry and the report, by whose standard the theology of the faculty was measured, is unLutheran."

Almost certainly Tietjen—who regularly portrayed critics as "more fundamentalistic than Lutheran"—believed this to be true. Just as certainly, saying so out loud was an unforced error. For more than a decade, the faculty's contention was, in effect, "We're Lutheran *too*." In their responses to both the *Statement* and the Blue Book, Tietjen and the faculty now appeared to be saying, "We're Lutheran, and you're not." The unstated implication was that both camps within the LCMS now agreed that the Synod was afflicted by real theological differences, and that only one party could be deemed faithfully Lutheran. It would fall to delegates at the next convention to determine which party that was.

OUSTING THE SEM'S PRESIDENT

The 1973 reelection of Jack Preus by a 2-to-1 margin was an early indication of the way voting would go. By a similar margin the convention reaffirmed Synod's right to adopt doctrinal statements "in accord with the Scriptures and the pattern of doctrine set forth in the Lutheran Symbols," and to make such statements "binding upon all its members." The *Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* was itself deemed to be "Scriptural and in accord with the Lutheran Confessions," and to express "the Synod's position on current doctrinal issues"; it was thus formally adopted as a binding doctrinal statement.

Having approved the *Statement*, it was a foregone conclusion that the alternate theology embraced by the Concordia faculty would be judged "false doctrine running counter to the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the synodical stance." Such doctrine, the adopted resolution concluded with a quotation from the Lutheran Confessions, "cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less excused and defended." The seminary board, with a newly elected conservative majority, was directed to take appropriate action.

Lack of time prevented the convention's consideration of a more specific resolution to remove John Tietjen from the seminary presidency. Shortly thereafter, though, two congregational pastors brought formal charges against him for having "allowed and fostered the teaching and dissemination of doctrine contrary to the Scripture and the Synod's historical confessional stance." The board accordingly announced on January 21, 1974, that Tietjen would be suspended (with full pay and benefits continuing) until the case brought against him could be resolved.

Tietjen addressed seminary students the following morning, denouncing the "moral bankruptcy" of Preus and the seminary board, and what he called "collusion" between them and his accusers. The student body immediately declared a moratorium on class attendance; the same day, the faculty majority announce a similar moratorium on classroom

Luther Tower at Concordia Seminary

teaching. As the headline in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* explained, "Majority at Concordia Suspend Themselves."

The ensuing stalemate dragged on for a month, until the long drama finally climaxed on February 19. On that date, the board had already announced, any faculty who had not resumed teaching duties would be dismissed for breach of contract. Rather than return to classrooms on that day, faculty and students staged a theatrical "funeral" for Concordia. While news cameras rolled, bells were tolled and white crosses were planted in the campus quadrangle. After reading the biblical account of Israel's exodus from Egypt, professors and students processed off campus to establish their own "Seminary in Exile" (Seminex).

The student walkout and simultaneous firing of most faculty brought to a crescendo 15 years of conflict concerning the seminary, now reduced from 50 faculty members to five, and from 700 students to fewer than 100. The repercussions of the controversy would of course continue for years. One immediate consequence, though, merits brief mention because it brings the affair nearly full circle. Declaring that Seminex was the "real" Concordia existing in exile, faculty had also convinced students that certification for ordination in the LCMS would be unproblematic. But as they well knew from their own treatment of Herman Otten at the controversy's beginning, such certification was the prerogative of Synod's recognized seminaries. Otten no doubt relished seeing his old antagonists hoisted on their own petard.

CHAIRMAN JAO?

But what had it all been about, this civil war over a seminary? These skeletal outline of events clearly emphasizes the theological nature of the controversy. But there is no question that it was deeply enmeshed with politics throughout, evident not least in the tawdry tactics employed by partisans across the divide. Extra-synodical interest groups proliferated, clandestine meetings were held, lists of approved candidates for office were distributed, language was manipulated, media were exploited.

Criticism of the conservative faction has, with warrant, made much of Otten's incredibly effective but ethically dubious journalism—printing, for example, the content of private correspondence or secretly recorded conversations. Much has likewise been made of Preus' political maneuvering, often, though never overtly, in concert with Otten. The preludes

to the 1971 and 1973 National Conventions provide particularly egregious examples. To prevent undue partisan pressure upon delegates, Preus insisted that their names not be released prior to the conventions, "except upon authorization of President Preus." He then promptly, but privately, authorized their release to Otten.

Even without the cloak-and-dagger, though, Preus, as Synod president, wielded immense control over church appointments and proceedings, especially those of the Synod's regular conventions. Speaking of the committee that brought forward the conclusive 1973 resolutions on seminary matters, he later recalled, "that was an absolute 100% conservative committee." Of course it was; he'd had the prerogative of appointing its members. The possession of such power led *Newsweek* to describe Preus as a "Lutheran Pope." Syndicated columnist Lester Kinsolving upped the ante, employing Preus' initials to dub him "Chairman Jao."

Whatever one makes of Preus' political devices, though, two things deserve note. The first is that a great deal of the power he wielded had been given him by the very faction complaining most loudly about its use. Feeling increasingly thwarted by the lay-populism made possible by the LCMS's congregational polity and exploited by Otten's muckraking, progressives in the mid-1960s had moved to reduce the influence of laity and congregations and to increase that of the bureaucracy. Resolutions adopted shortly before Preus' election, for example, stripped laity of the right to submit overtures to conventions and gave Synod presidents absolute power of deciding which overtures would come to delegates as resolutions. If the Synod, urged on by its liberal elements, wanted its presidents to wield such unchecked power, well, who was Preus to disappoint them?

Also, however poorly politicking reflected on Jack Preus and his allies, it reflected equally poorly on John Tietjen and his. Faculty retaliation against Otten's whistle-blowing and the irregular election of Tietjen have already been mentioned. Tietjen's own power plays were especially evident in his treatment of those faculty in the traditional minority. To note only one example, within hours of Martin Scharlemann's having recommended that Preus investigate the seminary (in a letter he copied also to Tietjen), Tietjen announced a special faculty meeting for the following week—while Scharlemann was away on duty as a military chaplain. Though no agenda was advertised, the only item of business was a vote to censure Scharlemann, who then received a follow-up letter with threats of discipline and accusations of insubordination for not being present at the meeting.

> "FACULTY COMPLAINED THAT *INERRANCY* HAD BECOME A SHIBBOLETH AND THAT IT WAS NOT FOUND IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS."

In sum, neither camp was above bare-knuckle politics. However much both parties denounced the other's stooping to such tactics, each convinced itself that theological ends justified political means. In other words, though the conflict was unquestionably political, it was never *about* politics. Tietjen was no less clear about this than was Preus. He openly expressed what he called "grave misgivings about the doctrinal position of our adversaries," which he insisted was "something different from what was in the Lutheran Confessions."

Not only did both parties agree that the conflict was fundamentally theological; they agreed even on the specific point of theological dispute. At a May 1972 meeting of Preus with Concordia faculty, all agreed that "the basic issue is the relationship between the Scriptures and the Gospel," and more specifically, "whether the Scriptures are the norm of our faith and life or whether the Gospel alone is that norm." This being the case, it was rather strange that Tietjen and the faculty majority insisted it was their opponents who were "unLutheran." The Lutheran Confessions are quite explicit that the Scriptures are "the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged." The seminary president and faculty, on the other hand, declared that "the Gospel gives the Scriptures their normative character, not vice versa."

Equally strange in this light is Tietjen's open acknowledgment that it was indeed his party's position that had changed over time. He would later write, for example, "I did not appreciate what I thought was

Transgender bishop Megan Rohrer in 2017

less than candor in the seminary's repeated claims that nothing had really changed in the CS [Concordia Seminary] teaching. I resented the efforts to demonstrate that what was happening at CS was really the 'old' Missouri Synod after all."

The earlier remarks of Alfred Feuerbringer—implicitly conceding that faculty members believed the Bible contained errors in some non-moral sense—and Oliver Harms—declaring this to be fine so long as the point at issue was "not part of the Gospel"—offer clear, if subtle, indications of the changes that were taking place with respect to the traditional confession of Scripture's inerrancy. Faculty complained that the term had become a shibboleth and that it was not found in the Lutheran Confessions (a bit of pedantry that willfully ignored those Confessions' insistence that the Scriptures are God's "pure, infallible, and unalterable word" and that "God's word cannot err"). As Feuerbringer and Harms clearly understood, the concept of inerrancy was only acceptable, at least to some faculty, in a strictly qualified sense, with reference only to those portions of Scripture deemed "part of the Gospel."

Faculty statements, however, made evident just how expansive that qualification could be. Some cast doubt on the virgin birth of Jesus, for instance, while more than one raised questions even about Christ's resurrection. Dr. Walter Bartling, for instance, told students that "it made no difference to his faith whether or not Jesus' body physically rose from the dead"; speaking on another occasion to fellow pastors, he declared, "I have problems with the virgin birth, real presence [of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar], bodily resurrection.…I can't bear the burden of Scriptural infallibility."

To be sure, such extremes were not embraced by

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

most faculty members. Indeed, some in the majority could concede even to Tietjen that "the other side does have a point. How much gospel do you have left if you don't have a historical event on which you ground it? Can we proclaim Jesus as the divine physician if the miracles of healing didn't happen?" Nonetheless, the faculty majority was adamant that even the most radical views were not disqualifying for a Lutheran, a Lutheran pastor, or even a teacher of the next generation of Lutheran clergy. The broader church disagreed. Even while Richard John Neuhaus allied with the progressives and eventually departed the Synod with them, the majority of LCMS members intuitively anticipated his later formulated "law": "Where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be proscribed." Nor did subsequent events give them cause to reconsider.

When it became evident that Seminex would not be recognized as a seminary of the LCMS, faculty and sympathizers in 1976 organized an independent denomination, the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC). A decade later, their merger with two other Lutheran bodies created the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a denomination perhaps most familiar to outsiders for its

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vulgar superstar "pastrix" Nadia Bolz-Weber and her "vagina project" (in which donated purity rings were melted down to form a sculpted vagina). Or perhaps it is best known for the 2023 headlines made by one of its congregations liturgically reciting the "Sparkle Creed," in which was confessed belief in a "non-binary God whose pronouns are plural" and a Jesus who "had two dads" and "wore a fabulous cloak." Then again, maybe it's for the intersectional dust-up involving transgender bishop Megan Rohrer, recently removed from office following accusations of "racist words and actions" but who also sued the denomination for alleged gender discrimination.

Would such have been the fate of the LCMS if Concordia's faculty majority and student acolytes had remained? Offering confident answers to counter-factual questions is a fool's errand, but two things might at least be noted about the Seminex trajectory. The first is that many of the former LCMS pastors and professors who entered the ELCA were not simply passive observers of that denomination's moral and theological radicalization. More often they spearheaded it. As their new colleagues observed already in the 1980s, "they became advocates of progressive agendas in their new ecclesial setting," and "when the umbilical cord was cut those dissidents tended to run amok." Also, as such remarks suggest, here again one might note ironic similarities between the progressives and their original nemesis Herman Otten. Once free of LCMS oversight and the attendant necessity of prudence and circumspection, all bets were off.

Whether the ELCA's trajectory would have been the LCMS's if the faculty majority had gotten its way, it can at least be said that their departure made possible the maintenance of—or return to—traditional Missouri Synod orthodoxy. When the formation of the AELC provided congregations the opportunity to vote with their feet, 96% remained with the LCMS. A similar vote of confidence for Concordia itself proved the seminary's mock funeral premature. Accreditation was maintained, the faculty was quickly rebuilt, and already by the 1980–81 academic year, enrollment was back up to more than 700 students.

WHEN YOUR OPPONENTS WALK AWAY

Given the typical pattern of American church schisms, in which the liberal party gains control of denominational institutions and conservatives split off to form new ones, one might assume there are some practical lessons that might be learned from the contrary LCMS experience. Frankly, though, it's not at all clear what these might be. Though a theology of glory might still tempt some to speak proudly of routing the forces of liberalization and saving orthodoxy, LCMS traditionalists did not in the final analysis maintain control of Concordia because they had the better arguments, because their messaging was more effective, or even because their politics were more Machiavellian. They "won" because their opponents simply walked away.

For all their disagreements, this at least was a point on which John Tietjen and Jack Preus would come to consensus. Tietjen later admitted that the walkout was a tactical blunder, that the faculty should have stayed and forced the administration to bring formal charges against each professor individually: "It would have been much more difficult for them to bring off." By Preus' own admission, it would likely have been impossible. The collective will to prosecute dozens of high-publicity heresy trials simply didn't exist. Had the faculty and students only returned to their classrooms, he remarked, "They could have broken the back of the Synod."

The conclusion is sobering but almost certainly correct. Perhaps, then, there are no practical lessons to be learned, only eternal truths to be remembered. Not least that "the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:8, 10). Thanks be to God. RL

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A WONDERFUL PROSPERITY WITH THE IDEAL OF CHRIST

by DAN HUGGER

What does a Hindu spiritual leader have to teach American Christians today? Perhaps the best of their own faith.

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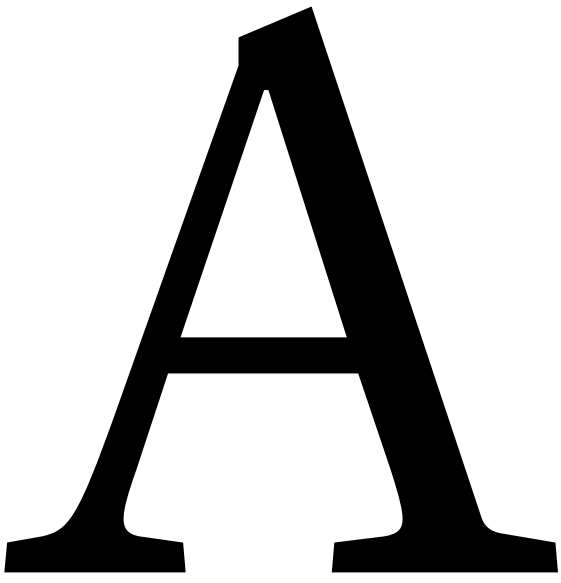

AT THE WORLD'S PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS on September 11, 1893, a 30-year-old monk named Swami Vivekananda stood confidently on the platform. In part from inner spiritual conviction, but also out of deep historical awareness, he spoke to the rapt Chicago audience a bold, simple greeting: "Sisters and Brothers of America!" The crowd resounded with thunderous applause—an acclamation fit not for a stranger from a strange land but rather a brother returned home after a journey of many years.

No one man introduced Hinduism to America. Iconic Americans such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman steeped themselves in the Upanishads as soon as they appeared in English. The ancient spiritual heritage of India was freely adapted in works of philosophy and art that shaped the early republic. India and America have likewise never been truly strangers. For the bulk of the 18th century, the 13 colonies along America's Atlantic coast and growing slices of the Indian subcontinent were subject to the British crown. Their colonial administrations differed wildly, each capable of tyranny, but India's was more uniformly brutal and capricious. India and America also shared a heritage of English common law, which was leveraged by the founders of both nations in freedom struggles separated more by time than by spirit.

What was rare in America were encounters between ordinary Western Christians and Hindu teachers. Hinduism directly reached only a sliver of the American elite until the close of the 19th century through the works of careful Indologists and reckless occultists. Encounters between American and Indian patriots, however, were entirely new. American national consciousness was mature by the 19th century, while the Indian national consciousness was just being born. Swami Vivekananda was an outstanding example of both: a Hindu monk and an Indian patriot who successfully captivated America and transformed India through the mutual enrichment of both.

Vivekananda would address the World's Parliament of Religions six times over the course of six days. The longest of these addresses, a paper on Hinduism, was delivered in half an hour. His shortest, a plea for Christian missionaries to provide not merely preaching but material aid to impoverished Indians, under two minutes. His total speaking time on the platform that September was scarcely over an hour. It was all he needed. His message was one of holiness, purity, and charity that rejected sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism. Swami Nikhilananda, in his brilliant *Vivekananda: A Biography*, notes what set Vivekananda apart: "Whereas every one of the other delegates had spoken for his own ideal or sect, the Swami had spoken about God, who, as the ultimate goal of all faiths, is their innermost essence."

RELIGIOUS INDIFFERENTISM?

Vivekananda's hope for religious unity was grounded not on belligerent triumphalism nor a patronizing dismissal of religious differences. From an address given in September of 1893:

Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions in 1893

> The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth; or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant, it develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant.
>
> Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

The wild success of Vivekananda and his message at the World's Parliament of Religions did not sit well with the parliament's theologically liberal organizers nor with its religiously conservative critics. Some of the parliament's most enthusiastic promoters were theologically liberal Protestants who saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of a modernist and progressive Christianity over the superstitious and backward religions of the non-Western world. And a convincing case can be made that Pope Leo XIII was the most prominent, albeit belated, conservative critic of the parliament.

Thousands of Catholics, clergy and laity, attended the parliament in 1893. Archbishop Feehan of Chicago and Bishop Kean, rector of the Catholic University, attended. Cardinal Gibbons opened the first session of the parliament by praying the Our Father. Two years later, however, in an apostolic letter to the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, Pope Leo XIII addressed this participation. Fr. Francis J. Connell, C.Ss.R., in an article titled "Pope Leo XIII's Message to America" published in the *American Ecclesiastical Review* in 1943, provides an excellent summary: "Though couched in the form of a suggestion and pervaded with benignity and kindness, the message of Leo XIII unquestionably manifested disapproval of the part which Catholics had taken in the Chicago Parliament of Religions and forbade future activities of a similar nature."

Pope Leo XIII's concern with Catholic participation in the parliament was that it could be construed as a religious indifferentism, a conviction that differences in religious belief are of no importance. Subsequent church teaching, such as *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions), which was promulgated at the Second Vatican Council, and ecumenical interfaith gatherings such as the World Day of Prayer for Peace (1986)

Statue of Arjuna in Bali

organized by Pope St. John Paul II in Assisi, Italy, would facilitate greater understanding of the relationship between Christian and non-Christian religions.

Vivekananda saw religious differences as both real and consequential. What he did not see was that those differences should necessitate hostility or preclude mutual understanding and enrichment.

A CURIOUS AND ADVENTUROUS BOY

Religions differ on matters of both historical fact and metaphysical truth. Islamic tradition claims that Christ's crucifixion was not real but only apparent, while St. Paul proclaims that "we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23). St. Paul also preaches that God has become incarnate once: "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4–5). Krisha tells Arjuna that God incarnates periodically: "For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of dharma (religion), I am born in every age" (Bhagavad Gita 4.8).

What then is the ground on which Vivekananda builds a case for the harmony of religions? The answer is found in the story of his life. A boyhood of devotion, an adolescent crisis of faith, and an answer to that crisis in the form of a beloved guru.

Narendranath Datta, not yet having taken the name Swami Vivekananda, was born January 12, 1863. His father was an attorney at the High Court of Calcutta. He was a cosmopolitan agnostic, loved both English and Persian literature, and possessed an indiscriminate appreciation of the high culture of Christian, Islamic, and Hindu civilizations. His broadmindedness went hand in hand with generosity toward family and friends. Narendra's mother by contrast was a paragon of traditional Hindu womanhood. Deeply pious, she would sing the young Naren devotional songs, tell him tales from India's great epics the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and comfort him with the repetition of the divine name of Shiva.

This curious couple raised a most curious and adventurous boy who was fond of animals, often lead other children in games, and would, unbeknownst to his parents, give away household items to wandering monks. He had a conventional Hindu piety but also

Parliament of the World's Religions (1893)

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The Presidency College in Calcutta (photo c. 1850–80)

experienced vivid visions in meditation. Even in boyhood, he rejected religious bigotry and crass sectarianism. In his office, as was the orthodox Hindu custom at the time, Narendra's father kept separate tobacco pipes for clients of different castes and religions. The young Narendra smoked from them all, observing, "I cannot see what difference it makes."

Upon his entrance to the Presidency College of Calcutta in 1879, the young Narendra began a rigorous Western education and experienced a crisis of faith. The study of Western philosophy, history, and science consumed and fascinated him. This was a period of immense learning and growth, but also a crisis of identity. The social problems of India became more visible through Western-educated eyes. Narendra questioned Hindu ritualism, the place of women in society, child marriage, casteism, and a whole raft of superstition he would later come to call "Don't-touchism." He later came to understand that this Don't-touchism "is not Hinduism: it is in none of our books; it is an unorthodox superstition which has interfered with national efficiency all along the line." The damage to his conscience had, however, already been done. Narendra would oscillate between skepticism and liberal Hindu reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj until he found his guru.

Narendra the young skeptic knew that nothing less than the experience of God could resolve his crisis of faith. To prospective religious teachers, he would put the pointed question: "Sir, have you seen God?" Stunned interlocutors could give only hedging or equivocating answers. Such answers were of no use to Narendra, and everywhere he turned for a prospective teacher, that was all he found.

Then Naren remembered an offhand remark concerning the modern paucity of ecstatic trances. During a lecture on William Wordsworth's "The Excursion," his professor, the theologian William Hastie, shared, "I have known only one person who has realized that blessed state, and he is Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar." A relative also recommended, "If you really want to cultivate spirituality, then visit Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar." And so he did. Narendra asked once more his bold question, "Sir, have you seen God?" Ramakrishna answered without hedge or equivocation:

> Yes, I have seen God. I see Him as I see you here, only more clearly. God can be seen. One can talk to Him. But who cares for God? People shed torrents of tears for their wives, children, wealth, and

property, but who weeps for the vision of God? If one cries sincerely for God, one can surely see him.

Ramakrishna was a Hindu priest and mystic who was born in 1836. In 1855 he became a priest at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple in a small village outside of what was then Calcutta. There he cultivated a succession of spiritual practices drawing from diverse sects across Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, claiming that each led him to experiences of God-realization. He often entered states of Samadhi, total contemplation and absorption in the divine. During his life a group of devotees, including the young Narendra, would regularly meet to hear his teaching and form a spiritual community that would endure through Ramakrishna's passing away from throat cancer in 1886.

These teachings are most exhaustively documented in the Bengali language classic *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (The Nectar of Sri Ramakrishna's Words). Based on the journals of the householder devotee Mahendranath Gupta, this work was published in five installments from 1902 to 1932. Its most beloved English translation, titled *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, was made by Swami Nikhilananda and published in 1942.

Ramakrishna (1836–1886)

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What is the ground on which a harmony of religions can be based that does not devalue and dismiss religious difference? From where can a harmony emerge from a cacophony of conflicting claims of historical fact and metaphysical truth? One answer is found in the unique perspective of Ramakrishna's eclectic spiritual practice. In his book *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*, Ayon Maharaj (now Swami Medhananda) argues that

> Sri Ramakrishna champions the religious pluralist doctrine that there are infinite paths to the Infinite Reality.…Every religion is an effective means of attaining the common salvific goal of God-realization, the direct spiritual experience of God in any of His innumerable aspects or forms.

Vivekananda's definition of religion, as it appears in the preface to his commentary of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali *Raja Yoga*, is the definitive articulation of his guru's solution to the question of the harmony of religions:

> Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms are but secondary details.

The world's major religions all stress a goal of unity with the divine and the potential of men and women to realize that unity. What Vivekananda means by the control of nature, external and internal, is control of the senses and mind. He categorizes spiritual disciplines into the four broad categories of work, worship, psychic control (meditation), and philosophy. He lectured on each of these categories of spiritual disciplines, which were eventually published in volumes titled *Karma Yoga* (work), *Bhaki Yoga* (worship), *Raja Yoga* (meditation), and *Jnana Yoga* (philosophy). While Vivekananda viewed doctrines, rituals, scriptures, and worship as "secondary details," they were nevertheless not unreal or inconsequential ones.

> **VIVEKANANDA BELIEVED THE CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITION TO BE DISPOSED TO THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF WORK (KARMA).**

This way of thinking about the harmony of religions is a unique contribution by Ramakrishna and Vivekananda to the question, but ready resonances can be heard in the teaching about the nature of religion from other religious traditions. Paragraph 28 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is one such example:

> In many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behaviour: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a *religious being*:
>
> "From one ancestor (God) made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'in him we live and move and have our being.'" (Acts 17:26–28; NRSV)

The categories of work, worship, meditation, and philosophy are meant to provide conceptual tools for spiritual practitioners rather than rigid boundaries. One or more (or all) of these can resonate depending on an individual's disposition and temperament. What is true of individuals is also true of societies and religious traditions.

A CHRISTIAN SPIRIT OF SERVICE

Some months after Ramakrishna's passing in 1886, Narendra together with other disciples of Ramakrishna destined for monastic life gathered around a fire for meditation. Swami Nikhilananda recounts:

> Suddenly Naren opened his eyes and began, with apostolic fervour, to narrate to the brother disciples the life of Christ. He exhorted them to live like Christ, who had no place "to lay his head." Inflamed by a new passion, the youths, making God and the sacred fire their witness, vowed to become monks.

It was only after some of the new monks returned to their rooms that they realized it was Christmas Eve, "and all felt doubly blessed."

Thus, the harmony of religions was observed, in a natural and spontaneous way, from the very beginning of the Ramakrishna Order. It was an auspicious beginning to an order that would come to embrace a spirit of selfless service. Vivekananda believed the Christian religious tradition to be disposed especially by its own nature to the spiritual discipline of work (karma).

There is a lively debate today over whether the United States is or ever was a "Christian nation" and, if so, just what that means. Vivekananda's position on this question is unambiguous as revealed in a letter to a friend penned a little over a month after his arrival in the States in 1893. "I am here amongst the children of the Son of Mary, and the Lord Jesus will help me." Vivekananda experienced friendship and generosity as well as enmity and meanness from Christians in America. He encountered Americans of other faiths and no faith at all. But in America Vivekananda saw how a Christian spirit of service animated the commercial, civic, and social life of the nation.

Among Vivekananda's most powerful initial impressions of America was of its great prosperity. The hospitality extended by his American friends toward him was so lavish, it scandalized him. The contrast to the poverty in India so moved him that he implored God to show him how to help. Swami Nikhilananda recounts that this inspired him to "study American life in its various aspects, especially the secret of the country's high standard of living, and he communicated to his disciples in India his views on the promotion of her material welfare."

Vivekananda also saw the spiritual dangers of materialism, which he extolled his Christian audiences to always guard against: "If you can join these two, this wonderful prosperity with the ideal of Christ, it is well; but if you cannot, better go back to him and give up these vain pursuits. Better be ready to live in rags with Christ than to live in palaces without him."

The underlying principles of American civic life—freedom, equality, justice—impressed Vivekananda, and so did such institutional frameworks as the rule of law and republican government. In these he saw a spiritual foundation the contours of which are ably described by Swami Nikhilananda:

> Both the Holy Bible and the philosophy of Locke influenced the Bill of Rights and the American Constitution. Leaders imbued with the Christian ideal of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men penned the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, which clearly set forth its political philosophy, namely, the equality of men before God, the state, and society.

Vivekananda lamented the failure of India to ground a similar set of principles in Hinduism. "No religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism. Religion is not at fault, but it is the Pharisees and Sadducees."

No facet of American social life so impressed Vivekananda as the role of American women. As just one example, Mary Hale of Chicago had been among his earliest friends and benefactors. He noted early and with wonder the prominent role American women played in the country's philanthropic, educational, and cultural life: "Nowhere in the world are women like those of this country. How pure, independent, self-relying, and kind-hearted! It is the women who are the life and soul of this country. All learning and culture are centred in them."

> "'BETTER BE READY TO LIVE IN RAGS WITH CHRIST THAN TO LIVE IN PALACES WITHOUT HIM.'"

The contrasting degradation of women in India had contributed to Vivekananda's own earlier crisis of faith. Swami Nikhilananda relates that "he often thought that the misery of India was largely due to the ill-treatment the Hindus meted out to their womenfolk. Part of the money earned by his lectures was sent to a foundation for Hindu widows at Baranagore."

The social problems of India were not, in Swami Vivekananda's estimation, the consequence of Hinduism, but rather the result of its abuse. In a letter to Raja Ajit Singh Bahadur of Khetri, who had encouraged Vivekananda to attend the Parliament of the World's Religions and provided financial support, he wrote:

> The more, therefore, the Hindus study the past, the more glorious will be their future, and whoever tries to bring the past to the door of everyone is a great benefactor to his nation. The degeneration of India came not because the laws and customs of the ancients were bad, but because they were not allowed to be carried to their legitimate conclusions.

In this present vale of tears, even religion itself can tragically degenerate. Reform and renewal are the constant task of those who seek God and to do his work in the world. Vivekananda would return to India to restore its glorious Hindu past armed not only with knowledge of that past but with inspiration from late-19th-century America's Christian present.

THE VITALITY OF RELIGION NECESSARY FOR REFORM

When Vivekananda left India for America, he was an obscure wandering monk. On his return in 1897, he was the world's most famous and celebrated Hindu teacher. But what sort of teacher would he be, and how would his vision for national and social renewal be accomplished?

Shortly after his return, a Hindu pandit (wise man) attempted to draw him into sectarian religious controversies, and Vivekananda answered, "This incarnation of mine is to help put an end to useless and mischievous quarrels, which only distract the mind and make men weary of life, and even turn

them into sceptics and atheists." His program for national renewal would reject sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism while recognizing that the only path to a flourishing commercial, civic, and social life was through religious renewal. "If you succeed in the attempt to throw off your religion and take up either politics or society," said Vivekananda in a lecture entitled "My Plan of Campaign," "the result will be that you will become extinct. Social reform and politics have to be preached through the vitality of your religion."

To this end, Swami Vivekananda would found the Ramakrishna Mission less than six months after his return to India. Swami Nikhilananda describes the broad contours of the organization this way:

> Its methods of action were to be: (a) to train men so as to make them competent to teach such knowledge and sciences as are conducive to the material and spiritual welfare of the masses; (b) to promote and encourage arts and industries; (c) to introduce and spread among the people in general Vedantic and other ideas as elucidated in the life of Sri Ramakrishna.

The organization would stay aloof from party politics. As Swami Vivekananda had once written to a friend, "I do not believe in any politics. God and truth are the only politics in the world; everything else is trash."

Such a program is unremarkable to the ears of American Christians. By the late 19th century, ecumenical and parachurch organizations that worked toward the material and spiritual uplift of the masses, a vibrant cultural and economic life, and the spreading of religious teachings to the general public permeated national life. But for Indian Hindus, such organizations were unheard of. Even intimate associates of Vivekananda, some of them fellow devotees of Ramakrishna, believed such a program to be the product of his Western education and travels to America and Europe. To them such bodies were foreign novelties that could only serve to distract from the spiritual life.

To such aspersions, Vivekananda reacted with fury:

> What do you understand of religion? You are babies. You are only good at praying with folded hands: "O Lord! how beautiful is Your nose, how sweet are Your eyes," and all such nonsense; and you think your salvation is secured.…Study, public preaching, and doing humanitarian works are, according to you, Maya because Shri Ramakrishna did not do them himself!

Baranagar Ramakrishna Mission in India

Vivekananda would eventually win his brother disciples over to his way of seeing things, and not through outbursts of emotion and rough humor but patient and careful explanation of karma yoga, that selfless service rendered to others. Ramakrishna himself had taught infinite paths to Infinite Reality. Vivekananda believed that, in the modern world, action was required for not just material but also spiritual progress. The need was particularly great in India, where centuries of colonialism and religious decadence had rendered the masses, in his own estimation, degraded and inert.

His misguided brother monks who were skeptical of a revitalization of the commercial, civic, and social life of India through religious renewal were right about one thing: Vivekananda had seen such things work in a Christian America. Praise God that he did! There is a special Christian genius for organization, the spirit of which Vivekananda sought to assimilate into Hinduism to reinvigorate India when he saw that "the Christians are, even in the darkest days, even in the most superstitious Christian countries, always trying to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord, by trying to help others, building hospitals, and so on. So long as the Christians keep to that ideal, their religion lives." RL

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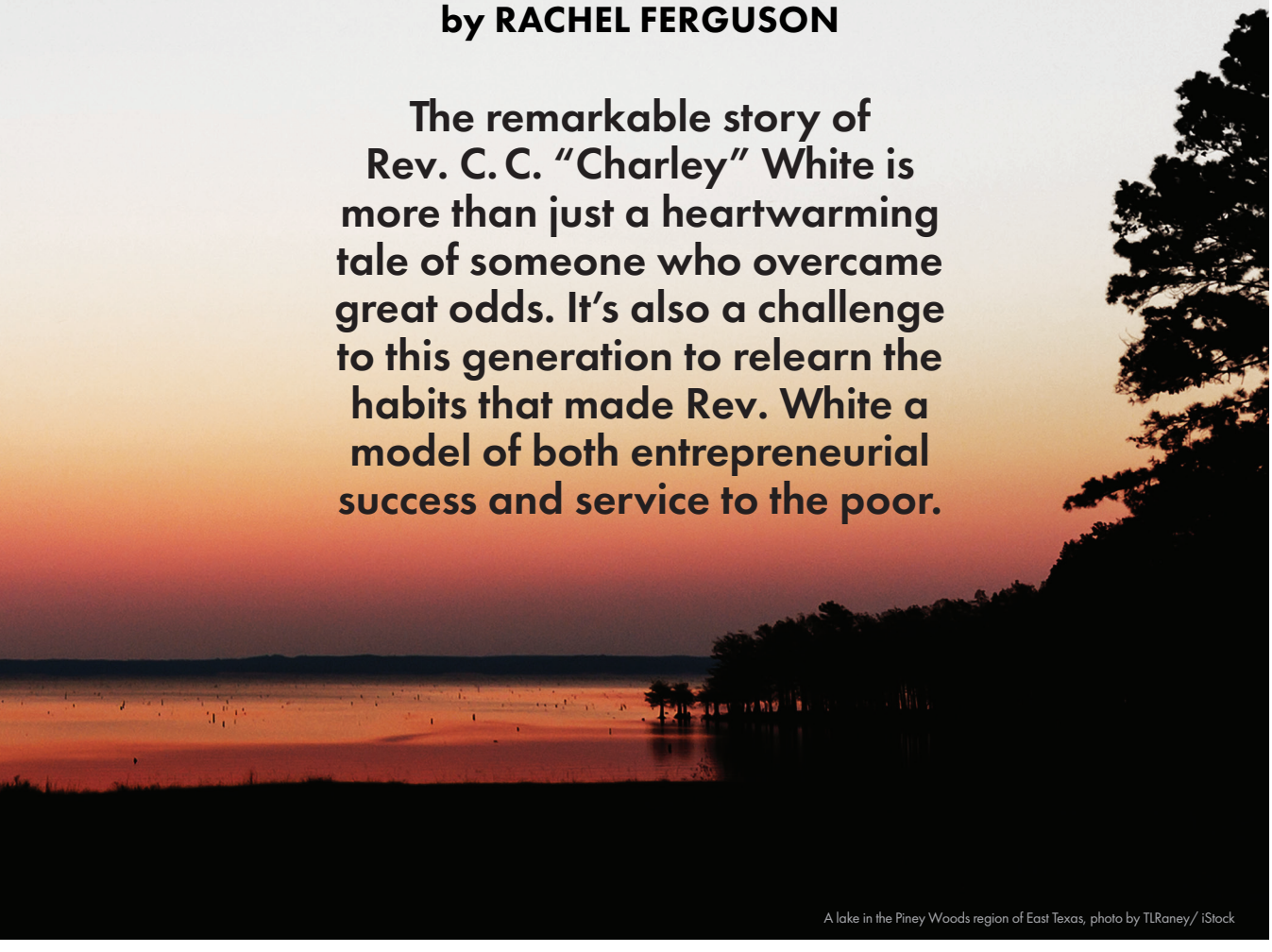
THE MAN WHO REBUILT GOD'S STOREHOUSE

by **RACHEL FERGUSON**

The remarkable story of Rev. C. C. "Charley" White is more than just a heartwarming tale of someone who overcame great odds. It's also a challenge to this generation to relearn the habits that made Rev. White a model of both entrepreneurial success and service to the poor.



A lake in the Piney Woods region of East Texas, photo by TLRaney/ iStock

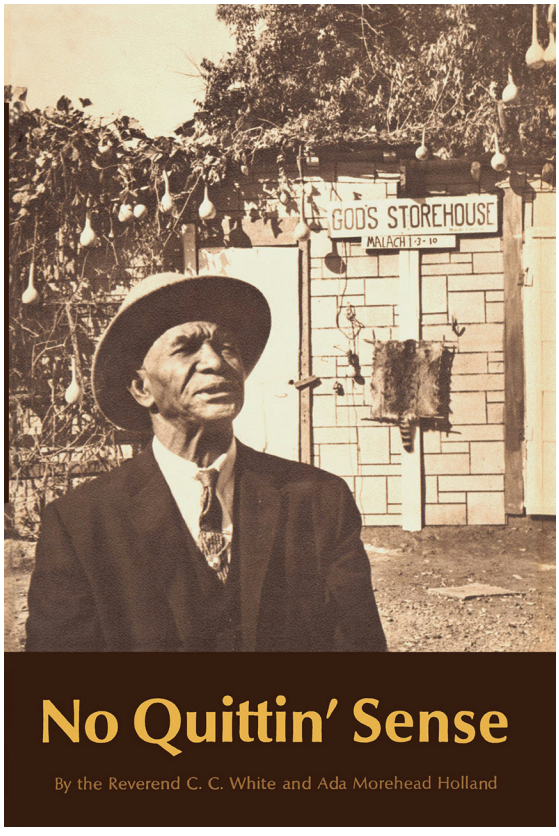
Most readers who know a thing or two about human nature find the prospect of neighborhood stabilization sensible and hopeful, but frustratingly abstract. What does it look like in actual practice? And how can we rework what we're doing now to take advantage of its insights? In *No Quittin' Sense*, Rev. C.C. "Charley" White tells the riveting story of his hardscrabble turn-of-the-20th-century childhood and God's call on him to transform his life of successful entrepreneurial endeavors into full-time ministry and service to the poor. An oral history in book form, *No Quittin' Sense* ought to be a classic. It paints a vivid, concrete picture of a community transformed by the God-given vision of one man. But it's also a picture of a moment in our history, a time when some things, like poverty and racism, were much, much worse; but other things, like family and community, were in far better shape among the poor. Much has changed, and it's up to us to grapple with how to combine the freedom and prosperity most of us enjoy today with a few of those "old-fashioned" ideas about marriage, church, and work ethic that would mean much better outcomes for the least among us.

MEET REV. C. C. "CHARLEY" WHITE

Two memories form the foundation of Charley White's childhood: a baptism and a beating. Abandoned by her philandering husband, his mother was busy rearing four children and was far too exhausted to get them all to church on Sundays. But she took them to a baptism at the river that Charley never forgot. He went home to preach to his stick men and baptize them in his little pail. Not much later, however, an angry drunk named Albert Jones got into a fight with another man in Charley's yard, and when Charley got in Jones' way, he lost his two front teeth to the man's senseless rage. So Charley grew up with a divided heart: leading his fellow children in imitation church services on Sunday afternoons while dreaming of the day he could learn to shoot a gun and finally make quick work of that scoundrel Albert Jones.

It's a poignant picture of human nature: one part inexorably drawn to the transcendent, another entirely carnal. These two mental tracks ran parallel in an environment of almost unbelievable poverty. Charley mentions breezily that he wore nothing but a long shirt till he was seven, when his mother

MANY OF OUR BEST thinkers on poverty alleviation—Marvin Olasky, Bob Lupton, Brian Fikkert, John Perkins, Bob Woodson—have described a form of charity that makes a strong distinction between emergency situations and chronic ones. They've used many terms for how to handle chronic poverty, but let's call it neighborhood stabilization. It's grounded in the hyper-local community, it's holistic, it's defined by a long-term commitment of love, and it commits to exchange rather than handouts, dignity and self-sufficiency rather than dependence. The idea is to create an environment of stability on an entire block that then radiates out to the blocks around it.



***No Quittin' Sense*, published in 1969**

made him some pants to go to school. All the children wrapped burlap around their socks for shoes. There were plenty of missed meals, and three years of school was all he was afforded till he had to go out into the fields for the sake of the family, a great loss to a curious and gregarious boy. Such was life for a poor, fatherless black family in East Texas in the 1890s.

CHARACTER AND ACTION

Rev. White's no-nonsense storytelling style leaves plenty of room for the reader to bring her own ruminations to his experiences. While White describes his childhood poverty in detail, he leaves little to no commentary on it. There's something similar going on in one of my family's favorite books, Corrie ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*. It may seem odd and out of place that Corrie spends several opening chapters simply describing her growing up years and her household: family devotions, her father's theological debates with his Jewish friends, her mother's generosity to the neighbors in need, her brother's ministry

Corrie ten Boom (1892–1983)

to the mentally disabled. After all, isn't this a book about the exciting and terrifying task of running the Haarlem underground during World War II? Or a book about surviving the camps? Well, yes. But remember what we ask ourselves whenever the subject of the Holocaust comes up. Why did so few resist? Why did so few help? How could these sophisticated "Christian" people participate in such a horrific system? It's Corrie's opening chapters that answer the question. The ten Booms helped their neighbors during the war because they'd always been helping their neighbors *before* the war. The ten Booms understood the evil of Hitler because they had soaked their own lives in the love and wisdom of God and immediately, even instinctively, recognized the Satanic rage in the Führer's voice over the radio. Their active love and care for the mentally disabled—Corrie's brother ran church services for them—made it impossible for them even to contemplate the eugenicist philosophy of the Nazis. When the war came to Holland, they didn't debate what to do—they just began, without hesitation. Corrie makes none of these connections explicitly, but they're crystal clear. One's life flows from the character one has cultivated.

Rev. White is about the same business, but his story is much different. In spite of being desperately poor, Mama was insulted when others acknowledged the fact. She bent over backward to get her children slates and chalk for school, and stayed up nights to sew them clothes so they'd be presentable. When Charley describes the "light and airy" feeling he got when things weren't "quite real," one understands what it is to be so incredibly grateful to be receiving one's first pair of pants. Why did Charley grow

up to be the hardworking entrepreneur, pastor, and community builder that he became? It wasn't all his mother's hard work; Charley's own sense of passion and drive contributed, too. But his mother's example, and the sheer necessity of his situation, infused into Charley's mind and body the deep habit of hard work. His reliability and trustworthiness in business would serve him well as he became a successful farmer, and the administrative abilities he developed translated in unexpected ways when he experienced the undeniable calling to open God's Storehouse.

One of the most striking things about Charley's life is his early attraction to preaching. After the baptism he witnessed, he began baptizing his metal dolls and stick figures. As he got older he began convening the children after Sunday school, and they would go to "Charley's Church." He would preach the sermon from that morning back to the other children, who would "yes" and "amen" him just as they observed in "big folks' church." God destined Charley to be a preacher from such a young age, it makes one think of Samuel or John the Baptist. But there was one great obstacle to be overcome before his destiny could be realized: his resentment against old Albert Jones.

Charley's story of facing up to his desire for revenge on Mr. Jones could serve as a template for the Christian struggle with sin. It's also a picture of certain struggles those in destabilized communities are more likely to face, even though sin has tainted all human relationships with betrayal and heartbreak. High levels of addiction and shaky family formation increase the likelihood that children grow up with genuine trauma and wounds they will have to overcome as adults. Charley was working hard to learn to read but had to quit school at the age of 10 to work and help support the family, a bitter disappointment to him. His best friend, Isabela, died from meningitis as a child, making him hate God for failing to answer his prayers. His experience as a teenager of finally meeting his father and discovering a cruel,

Piney Woods region of East Texas

Marianne Pfeil / iStock

alcoholic bigamist exemplifies these kinds of losses as well. It couldn't have helped the feelings of loss and anger to discover that his father had been living quite comfortably with his new wives and children while his first four children often went without food or proper clothes.

In neighborhood stabilization work, one often hears practitioners discuss the spiritual lessons they've learned from those they've been working to empower. Many of these neighbors have raised other people's children, forgiven terrible crimes against themselves and their families, and had little more than prayer to rely on in desperate, even violent circumstances. There's a rubber-meets-the-road immediacy to the spirituality one must cultivate in a destabilized community. As easy as it is to hate and condemn criminals from afar, wise neighborhood leaders know full well that one fork in their spiritual road and that they might have been that same angry, lost person. Some of them once were.

"WHITE'S TRADITION OF BUTCHERING MEAT TO GIVE OUT FROM GOD'S STOREHOUSE STARTED WITH A BIT OF REBELLION AGAINST FDR."

CHARLEY'S MEAN YEARS

After the childhood loss of Isabela, Charley was "no longer on good terms with God." When the kids were old enough, Mama sent them to church while she stayed home to rest. Charley began to skip services and spend time in the woods, killing insects and snakes to release his anger and bitterness at his old enemy, Albert Jones. As he grew, Charley's desire to own a gun would have struck no one as particularly unusual for the time and place, but he had one very particular reason in his own case: to kill Albert Jones.

Once an almost preternaturally generous and sweet child, Charley's increasing obsession led to self-hatred and meanness. As he grew into a man with a gun of his own, he even went to Albert Jones' old house looking for him and scared the new owners. He started to go out partying and drinking on the weekends. He recounts: "I didn't like the way I was living either. But didn't seem like I knowed anything to do about it. I was mean and hard to get along with. …I was in a bad humor most of the time." He goes on to describe the day at his boarding house that he kicked every man's plate of eggs off the table one by one because they weren't cooked right. He calls these his "mean years."

But Charley got back on good terms with the Lord. First, he married a nice girl, Lucille. (In one particularly disturbing episode, he describes how seeing the physical consequences of promiscuity among the boarding house men kept him away from that vice, at least.) After their daughter was born, he took a walk in the woods. He began to think of how excited Mama would have been—she'd passed away by then—and how lovely and gentle his wife was with their newborn. Suddenly, a shaft of morning sunlight came through the trees. He was struck with the idea that God was trying to tell him something, perhaps that something bad was going to happen to his child. For the first time in many years, he began to pray. He prayed that his child would be safe, but his sense of discomfort remained. Then he remembered Albert Jones. He told God that he forgave Albert Jones and wouldn't try to kill him. He expressed gratitude to God that he had never been able to find him in the years when he had been ready to do him harm. In his description of the walk home, one gets the impression that his soul had opened up to beauty again. He describes the birdsong, the dew on the leaves. He felt as happy as nature seemed to feel that morning, because he "wasn't mad at nobody" anymore.

CHARLEY AS ENTREPRENEUR

Charley never mentions particular plans to enter into business. He simply expresses a certain discomfort with how Mama had to live. He felt that it wasn't right somehow, and that he must do better for his family. When the opportunity to rent a small farm arose, he found a way to do it. For three years, all he could

Carmen K Sisson / iStock

afford to plow with was a tiny mule and a horse with one lame foot! If there was no farm work that day, he earned a dollar here and a dollar there from side work. Lucille traded housework for a rooster and chickens so they could have eggs and more chicks. As soon as they were settled on their new farm, Charley got a license to preach from the Baptists and started a church.

As Charley's reputation for hard work and virtuous living began to spread, he was able to get credit for groceries till his crop came in. When a neighboring farm became available, the owner offered to sell it to Charley. The $350 commitment was a risk, but Lucille was fearless. Charley notes how their incentives shifted after they became actual owners: "We never minded work. But looked like when we got some land that belonged to us, it just set us on fire." He describes how they built up their farm, carried on various side businesses, rented another farm and built it up, and traded up their sad little team for two strong horses.

But none of this seemed incompatible to them with a life of generosity. When they were first married, he'd always have Lucille cook extra for dinner so that the neighbor children, whose father was often ill, could have some. As a successful farmer, he lobbied the county to start an elementary school and offered his church building for the classrooms. When his brother took up with another woman for a year and a half, he moved his sister-in-law and her five children into his house. By this time, he and Lucille had five children themselves.

One day he took a risk. He bought a calf with a $5 check he knew he didn't have enough money to cover. The calf was too good a deal to pass up. So he took that calf and went straight to the bank to admit what he'd done to the bank president and ask him to let the check go through, as he could double his money right away by butchering it for meat. The

> "'WHEN GOD TELLS A MAN TO JUMP, IT'S THE MAN'S JOB TO JUMP.'"

bank president was so impressed with his business acumen that he offered him credit for any other great deals he might come across. He was thrilled, and within three months he had $300 in the bank. He then describes one of greatest strokes of "good luck" in his life, which came in the form of an excellent partner, Chuck Richards. They worked together for seven years, and even though Chuck was white, he never said "do this" or "do that" to Charley. He always said, "Let's do that" together, which meant a lot to Charley.

GOD'S STOREHOUSE

Come the 1920s, Charley, now Rev. White, converted from Baptist to Church of God in Christ, a group he referred to as the "sanctified" or "holiness" people. If one understands Pentecostals, it makes it a bit easier to grasp what happened when, at the height of his farming and business success, Charley simply stopped his car by some railroad tracks after being overcome by the overwhelming feeling that he should not cross the tracks. Something seemed to be saying the name of the little town he'd just passed through: "Jacksonville, Jacksonville, Jacksonville." As he stood there looking puzzled, a man approached him to see if he needed anything, and when Charley frankly admitted what he was experiencing, the man asked him about his profession. After finding out that he was a holiness preacher, the man—himself a Baptist!—encouraged him to come and start a church, as five or six others had tried and failed. You see, Jacksonville was "a tough place" full of pool halls, domino parlors, and red-light houses. Anybody who wanted to preach holiness there was going to have an uphill battle. But Charley didn't hesitate: he took the man's advice about a place to rent and turned the car around. It's a kind of obedience to God that may sound insane to some. But everything Charley had experienced up to that point had prepared him for the work he was going to do in Jacksonville. When his brother Frank expressed his dismay as to what this move would mean for his business prospects, Charley responded, "God's called me to Jacksonville, and I'm gonna go. When God tells a man to jump, it's the man's job to jump. It's God's job to make the hole for him to jump through, it ain't the man's job to worry about that."

Rev. White's church meetings carried on every evening till there was no more room to fit the attendees. But he had to support his family somehow, and these people didn't have the money to tithe—to give

> "'EVERY YEAR I HAD A CHRISTMAS TREE FOR THE CHILDREN, AND I TOLD THEM ABOUT JESUS' BIRTHDAY, AND ABOUT THE SANTA CLAUS LIE.'"

10% (roughly) of their income to the church. After having been a successful, land-owning farmer, he got a job as a cook, a donut-maker, and worker at a slaughterhouse. There's something special about a man who can take pride in his work no matter what it is. Charley had a vision, and he didn't care what it took to achieve it. What's more, the job at the slaughterhouse paid little but came with all the scrap meat he could carry. And so he carried that scrap meat back to the poor children of his town, who deemed him "the meat man."

It shouldn't be passed over that work in a destabilized neighborhood means some scary run-ins. His church had to put out drunks, men with revolvers, and abusive husbands. He was threatened personally with a gun, and the police told him to get out of town, too, because the houses of ill repute nearby were making complaints that his services were disturbing the peace. It's frustrating to be treated so badly by those one has come to serve.

But it also became clear over time that Rev. White's church was doing nothing but good. The abusive husband turned into the church's security guard. The owners of legitimate businesses went and complained to the police that they couldn't go to meetings as often as they'd like to because of the crime, and the police began to patrol more diligently.

Observing the ubiquitous poverty in the neighborhood, Rev. White began to plan for Christmas by speaking to the businesspeople in the area about donating presents. Then he sat the children down, preached to them the gospel, told them that God had told the businesspeople to buy these presents for them—and that Santa Claus was a lie. He goes on in

the book to say that "every year I had a Christmas Tree for the children, and I told them about Jesus' birthday, and about the Santa Claus lie."

White also appreciated President Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) because it was important to give men work. "That was better than a hand-out," he writes. Then again, Rev. White's tradition of butchering meat to give out from God's Storehouse started with a bit of rebellion against Roosevelt. He heard something he considered "plumb crazy," that government men were killing cows and taking the hides but throwing away the meat. He couldn't believe this, so he went to check it out for himself. Sure enough, the men explained to him that in order to keep prices high, they needed to throw away these cows. Rev. White explained to them that he was breaking his back to help starving people in Jacksonville. "Ain't you got no heart a-tall?" he cried. The men made a deal: if Charley would butcher some of the cows for his storehouse, and if he brought them the hides, they wouldn't say anything. He admits that "I never did understand exactly what was going on, but I knowed that we needed that meat, so I didn't try to pry into nothing."

As the role of the state increased in its attempts to address poverty, Rev. White became increasingly

A WPA road development project

A 1930s Works Progress Administration poster

worried. His new wife, Marthy (by this time, Lucille had passed away), was being reported by the doctors of the area for practicing midwifery. So Rev. White went straight to the judge and asked him what to do, since both he and his wife were sure that their reading abilities weren't developed enough for her to pass an examination. The judge gave them permission to continue working as long as they turned in the birth certificates properly. So every time there was a bureaucratic obstacle, the Whites' excellent reputation created an exception.

As Rev. White's work in the Jacksonville community grew, he built a dedicated church building (his congregation had been meeting in his front room). He created a ministry alliance with both white and black preachers, quite a feat in those days. He teamed up with the police to keep crime under control and help with juvenile delinquents. Because the police trusted him, he was able to contend with them for better treatment of black citizens. He started a blood bank at the hospital.

Everything he did in Jacksonville prepared the town to weather the hardest days of the civil rights movement incredibly well. The City Council agreed to all their requests for improvements in the black part of town, and even agreed to train up black police officers. Without even intending to, Rev. White's ministry alliance, his work with the police, and his relationships with all the business owners had created a sense of unity in Jacksonville. He then encouraged everyone in the Christian Citizens' Association—a charitable organization that met in his church—that if the City Council was going to be this reasonable, then the black population could be reasonable right back.

WE MUST RECAPTURE WHAT HAS BEEN LOST

Reading about Rev. White's life can be both inspiring and frustrating. On the one hand, God seemed to be with him in a special way that led him to do amazing things. These things made a huge difference in his community, where his grandson runs a barbecue restaurant to this very day. His book is a hidden gem of Americana, spiritual autobiography, and poverty alleviation insights (and winner of the Carr P. Collins Award for Best Nonfiction Book from the Texas Institute of Letters). But as poor as little Charley was growing up, he had gifts that many of our more affluent children do not. His maternal Indian grandmother taught his mom butchery and medicine, technical skills he then learned at a young age. In spite of his own broken home, most families in Charley's day were intact, and he expected from a young age to marry before having children. The strong habit of churchgoing and other forms of community association meant that people were connected and eager to help one another and the needy. Many of these expectations and traits have been lost in the destabilized neighborhoods of today. This cultural poverty—not mere material need—defines what it is to be poor today.

Moreover, Charley's motivation to take care of his wife and children drove both his determination to become a success and his reconciliation to God. This brings up an uncomfortable but unavoidable question in 2024: What will the motivation be for young men *today* who are no longer expected to marry or provide for offspring? We have decent data showing that marriage and family themselves don't just correlate with but actually cause increased income, better health outcomes, and higher reports of personal happiness. And some of the worst social outcomes correlate highly with fatherlessness. With the tradition of marriage almost completely lost in some neighborhoods, it simply isn't occurring to our young men or young women that they should make that commitment prior to having children.

> "WHAT WILL THE MOTIVATION BE FOR YOUNG MEN *TODAY* WHO ARE NO LONGER EXPECTED TO MARRY OR PROVIDE FOR OFFSPRING?"

Rev. White's spirit of service, his calm dedication, his no-nonsense attitude, and his trust in God already exist among many of our neighbors in struggling areas. We must support and empower these anchors of the neighborhood but also return to our heritage and reclaim our traditions. The church, the family, and pride in one's vocation were ubiquitous among poor Americans in very recent memory. We must fight the uphill battle against the perverse incentives of both the welfare state and toxic forms of charity.

Such efforts are popping up everywhere. The Georgia Center for Opportunity has created a website that calculates the benefits cliff—that point when the employed make too much money to remain eligible for public help—so that employers can offer alternative benefits and keep people working. True Charity offers trainings for nonprofits to help clients move from welfare to work, transform food pantries into food co-ops, and Christmas shoebox giveaways into a Christmas Discount Store. The Woodson Center helps those in Section 8 housing to take over the direction of the complex to create cooperative services within it.

But too many of us have been lulled to sleep by our public policy and charitable habits. Meanwhile, violence, illiteracy, drug addiction, and tragically unnecessary death plague our poorest towns. How much longer will we constrain our work within the strictures of the system—not just the state system but the philanthropic industrial complex as well? It's time to stop the car in front of the train tracks and not move another inch. It's time to get out of the car and ask God what he's calling us to do. If He says jump, it's our job to jump. RL

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IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

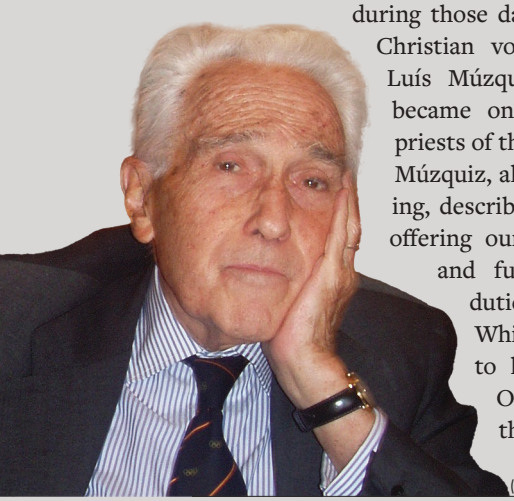
Rafael Termes: A Model of Business Ethics and Human Virtues

by ALEJANDRO A. CHAFUEN

RAFAEL TERMES (1918–2005) started his studies in the Jesuit School of the Fathers of Sarriá in Barcelona. Those were difficult times in Spain for Catholics. The Spanish Republic was established on April 14, 1931. Soon after, at the beginning of 1932, the Jesuits were expelled. Parents improvised by creating private educational alternatives. So did the Jesuits. Dressed as peasants, the Jesuits continued to teach their students.

Termes credits the educational method used in these private schools for how it helped build his character. Teachers ranked students in each class. A lower-ranked student, however, could challenge those above him in an educational contest and take their places. Termes praised the impact of this competitive environment: "Today in Spanish secondary education, under the pretext of not traumatizing the student or affecting their dignity, no one is corrected, encouraged, or rewarded." In addition to what one learned in class, "our wills were strengthened for the fight against life." He graduated from high school at 15.

He studied engineering at the university, and during those days Termes found his Christian vocation through José Luís Múzquiz (1912–1983), who became one of the first three priests of the Opus Dei prelature. Múzquiz, also studying engineering, described the importance of offering our daily work to God and fulfilling the ordinary duties of a Christian. While Múzquiz went on to help disseminate the Opus Dei apostolate throughout the United States, Termes had a prolific career as an intellectual entrepreneur, banker, mentor, and writer.



(Courtesy Alejandro A. Chafuen)

Termes was among the small team that founded IESE, the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de la Empresa, at the University of Navarra in Barcelona, which later became one of the top 10 business schools in the world. The bank he co-founded, Banco Popular Español, became highly profitable. Termes led the Private Bank Spanish Association for over a decade (1977–1990). He was certain that bankers could also become saints. This became an official reality when the Catholic Church declared Enrique Shaw (1921–1962), an Argentine banker, a Servant of God in 2001, a first step in his canonization cause.

Termes cultivated an independent and respectful stance with the clergy when discussing economic topics. One day he crossed paths with an acquaintance in front of the building of the Spanish Episcopal Conference. His acquaintance chided him: "Are you here to get directions on what to say and write?" Rafael answered, "No! I am here to explain to them how the economy works." During his visit to Guatemala to receive an honorary doctorate from the Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Termes was asked to debate Monsignor Gerardo Humberto Flores Reyes (1925–2022). Carroll Ríos de Rodríguez, trustee of the university and chairwoman of the Fe y Libertad think tank, recalls that "Termes was uncomfortable confronting an ecclesiastical authority but handled it with elegance."

I first met Rafael Termes over 30 years ago, after he wrote a generous introduction to my book on the origins of economics. In the late 1990s, the Acton Institute, publisher of this magazine, hosted an important program for Mexican bishops

near Cuernavaca, and we had the privilege of having Termes as one of the speakers. Termes wrote important books such as *El Poder Creador del Riesgo* (The Creative Power of Risk) and many relevant papers on ethics, economics, and business. His most significant publication, however, was his book *Antropología del Capitalismo* (Anthropology of Capitalism). The first version (1992) was based on his acceptance speech upon being inducted into the Royal Academy of Moral and Political Science. The expanded version, published in 2004, received the Premio Libre Empresa (Free Enterprise Award) from the Fundación Rafael del Pino.

In this book, Termes offers a detailed explanation of the history of economic thought, focusing on views about the human person. He devotes 20 pages to analyzing Adam Smith's moral philosophy and 40 to John Stuart Mill. He spent so much time on the latter because there are so many well-intentioned people who, like Mill, are liberal in ideas but socialists at heart: "liberal de mente, socialista de corazón."

In *Antropología del Capitalismo* Termes describes Jean-Jacques Rousseau as "a precursor of the perversion of democracy, evident in many situations that we can contemplate today, and characterized by the presence of unlimited democratic governments." On John Locke he writes that "his philosophical ideas fit perfectly with economic liberalism." Other authors frequently quoted included Aquinas, Hume, Turgot, Tocqueville, Hayek, Rothbard, Mises, and John Paul II.

Termes was an early critic of environmental doomsayers. He studied Bjorn Lomborg's "conversion" from left-wing environmentalist to rational analyst of ecological issues. He also defended globalism, which would bring together countries that respect freedom, private property, and the rule of law. He was convinced that the poorest African nations could prosper if they adopted a free economy and avoided corruption.

His conclusions are full of wisdom: "Rather than seeking the anthropology of capitalism, we must postulate an anthropology for capitalism. If we want capitalism to bear its best fruits from all points of view, we must not try to correct the system's functioning coercively but rather morally regenerate the environment in which it functions." He argued that we should "promote the improvement of the ethical-cultural system and the legal-institutional system to adapt them to an anthropology based on the nature and value of man, as a rational and free being, with its own purpose that is, at the same time, immanent and transcendent." For him, "the debate about capitalism from an anthropological point of view is just beginning. It may become the most exciting controversy of the coming time."

Rafael Termes valued freedom above all other human qualities "I have always said that if an economic system provided better material results in exchange for violating freedom, greater economic well-being would have to be given up to save freedom." He added:

> The goodness of a system, its moral value, is not measured by the results, as the supporters of consequentialism would like, but by the way of producing these results, which depends, fundamentally, on the way of understanding what man is and which translates into how, within the system in question, the people involved or affected by it act and are treated.

How can we work to achieve free and virtuous societies? Termes believed that we are all responsible and that "the only way capable of ensuring the integral development of man is self-control." Today many use the term "flourishing" rather than "integral development." The latter concept is more tied to a belief in true human nature than is the concept of flourishing. He understood self-control and self-government in light of a Stoic Christian viewpoint. Economic decisions should consider the impact of the choice on the flourishing of others and the person who makes the choice. Social harmony should also enter into our economic decisions.

Termes called for a person's deep commitment to each action. Rules are empty words when detached from that commitment. From an ethical point of view, behaving ethically because it improves the bottom line is insufficient. He defined ethics as the set of objective norms that helps people choose freely and responsibly, actions that help them reach their ultimate end.

In sum, Termes stressed that a good professional must practice human virtues in his work. He did just that at his bank, in the academy, and in his writings. RL

Alejandro A. Chafuen *is managing director, International, of the Acton Institute, chairman of the Chase Foundation of Virginia, and a member of the Mont Pelerin Society since 1980.*

Pilgrims Going to Church by George Henry Boughton (1867)

An Almost Christian Nation

Quarrels over the role of religion in American politics often refer to the early years of the republic and what is considered the more conspicuous role of Christianity in public affairs. A new book insists that what's old cannot simply be made new again.

by **SAMUEL GOLDMAN**

RELIGION IS THE SUBJECT of America's oldest culture war. Since the early days of the republic, Americans have argued bitterly, although mostly peacefully, about when, how, and even whether to honor God in public life.

Today we imagine this debate as a contest between advocates of strict separation of church and state and "Christian nationalists" who want to merge these institutions. In his valuable new study, *Religion & Republic,* Miles Smith contends that this was a false dichotomy for at least the first century of American history. A few Americans dreamed of a society in which religion would be a matter of private association. A larger but still relatively small number, concentrated in New England, thought the nation could be regarded as a covenantal community with a direct relationship to God. A plurality and perhaps majority, however, accepted and even celebrated the disestablishment of once-privileged churches. At the same time, they insisted that religious belief and practice were essential to civic health.

Smith proposes to call this third group "Christian institutionalists." Rather than the national government or specifically denominational structures, the institutions on which they concentrated included schools, charitable societies, and local jurisdictions. The premise that connected these groups was that belief in God, knowledge of the Bible, and respect for religious authorities should be encouraged in most areas of civic life. Except in cases of gross immorality, though, they could not be compelled by criminal law.

Recognizing that Americans held a range of

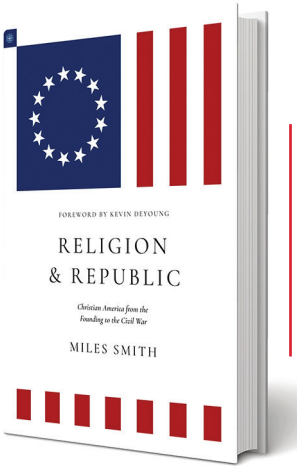
religious views, Christian institutionalists avoided doctrinal claims in their public activities. Still, they were overwhelmingly Protestant and unashamed in their belief that Protestantism was especially and perhaps uniquely suited to republican government. In the 20th century, Supreme Court justice David J. Brewer's assertion that the United States was a Christian nation became something of a rallying cry for religious and political conservatives. But Brewer's invocation of a generic Christianity is already a concession to increasing pluralism. Before the Civil War, Smith reports, Americans were more likely to see themselves as a specifically Protestant people.

Smith's account is partly aimed against secularists who treat Jefferson and Madison as avatars of the founding. Echoing an established body of scholarship, Smith contends that their theological skepticism and political secularism were far from representing the period. Episcopalians like John Jay and Calvinists like Roger Sherman were more typical of the founding generation.

The difference was not simply a matter of private belief. The process of disestablishment in Virginia was more radical than in other states. In fact, the Virginia Constitution prevented churches from incorporating until it was modified by the legislature in the 21st century. Smith admits that the religious trajectory of the republic shifted in 1800 after Jefferson entered office as president. But the older, institutionalist perspective did not disappear from civil society and even found new strongholds in the judiciary.

Smith's primary argument, though, is not with secularists but rather with their religious allies. Jefferson famously coined the phrase "wall of separation between Church & State" in a letter to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut. Without the support of a different group of Protestants, Jefferson's otherwise eccentric preferences would never have achieved their influence on American life. The biggest challenge to Christian America, in other words, was other Christians—not the skeptics or deists who feature prominently in today's polemics.

Smith's depiction of Baptists and others who emphasized internal belief and personal conduct is an intervention in today's politics of religion as much as it is a contribution to historiography. On the one hand, Smith worries about the tendency to confine holiness to the church while treating government and its works as if they were inherently profane—thus



Religion & Republic: Christian America from the Founding to the Civil War

By Miles Smith

(Davenant Press, 2024)

ceding power to un- or even anti-Christian actors. Although he does not say so explicitly, Smith hints that left-wing evangelicals are guilty of this self-marginalizing attitude.

On the other hand, Smith rejects the brand of religious activism that involves congregational leaders expressing views on every possible issue—and appealing to national politicians to enforce those views. Confusing churches with political parties, it ends up discrediting their leaders and diluting their influence. If the former approach is not political enough, in other words, the latter is too political. Smith hints that this defect continues to undermine religious conservatism.

The appeal of Christian institutionalism, for Smith, is that it concentrates on the intermediate tier of political life and a broad but limited set of issues. Christian activism has been most effective, he argues, when it's concentrated at the state and local level and on matters, such as education, with an unavoidable formative dimension. Neither withdrawing nor attempting to dominate, he argues, institutional strategies respected the separation of church and state while understanding that most of life lies somewhere between these poles.

Smith warns that there's no way to simply recover conditions that prevailed in the 19th century. But he suggests it's a more promising model than the all-too-familiar dichotomy of secular society and a unitary "Christian nation."

There is much to admire in the religious settlement of the early republic. As Tocqueville observed, Americans of the period largely believed that religious and civil liberty were practically inseparable.

They were not pluralists by today's standards. But they were remarkably tolerant of sectarian differences that remained a cause of social conflict and even violence in Europe.

At times, though, Smith's depiction seems almost too idyllic. At a sufficient level of abstraction, most Americans probably did agree that the United States was in some sense a Christian nation, despite or because of its policy of national disestablishment. Beyond that consensus, however, they found plenty to fight about. Precisely because open secularists were few, debates over such matters as religious tests for office, Sabbath observance, and temperance laws were intra-Christian disputes.

The insufficiency of an abstract commitment to a pious republic was eventually demonstrated by the crisis over slavery. Americans "read the same Bible and pray to the same God," Lincoln noted, but that did not stop them from killing each other by the hundreds of thousands. The Civil War, as historian Mark Noll has argued, was not only a political cataclysm. It was a "theological crisis" that shattered the old vision of a pious republic.

The idealizing quality of Smith's account has something to do with his scholarly methods. Smith makes good use of the large but somewhat diffuse secondary literature on these matters. Where he adds primary sources, they are often sermons in honor of Independence Day or other ceremonial occasions. In the 19th century as today, this kind of set-piece oratory is likely to express a degree of pride in national history and ideals and to celebrate national consensus that may not be strictly justified by existing conditions. One wonders, though, whether Smith's sources might be expressing aspirations more than they are describing reality.

The authors of these documents had particular reasons for stressing their institutional strategy, moreover. Largely Episcopalians and Presbyterians, they represented or belonged to denominations that faced proportionally declining membership and (for Episcopalians) suspicion of lingering Anglophile sympathies. It is worth noting the incentives that might lead these divines and prominent laymen to rhetorically place their activities and institutions at the center of national life.

Finally, Smith's admiration for a more explicitly Christian—and specifically Protestant—phase of American history raises questions about religious minorities. Smith includes a chapter on relations with Indians, pointing out that missionary organizations tended to oppose removal policies, which were supported by the Jeffersonian coalition. He says less about the status of Catholics and Jews (and Mormons, whose distinctive understanding of the appropriate relationship between revealed and civil law made them especially problematic). Religious tests that prevented members of these groups from holding office in many states are the dark side of Protestant America—and help explain the appeal of a Jeffersonian understanding of religion as a private matter.

There is a demographic justification for this emphasis. We tend to forget that before roughly 1848, at least 90% of Americans were Protestants. In that respect, the United States really was a Christian nation in a way that it has ceased to be. When citizens of the early republic spoke about religious minorities, it was usually on the assumption that they would remain that way. Widespread tributes to religious liberty should not be mistaken for endorsements of a "diverse" society in the modern sense.

Yet increasing diversity in the later 19th century encouraged Protestants to shift their allegiance from Christian institutionalism toward strict separationism. Unable to sustain their hegemony on demographic or theological grounds, they argued that originally Protestant institutions were in fact religiously neutral, while rivals were defined by sectarian agendas. Many of the laws and precedents that inhibit government support for religious schools, for example, were promoted by elite Protestants who worried about a growing and increasingly assertive Catholic population. Christian institutionalism, it turned out, was a contingent strategy for securing influence as well as a principled position.

Yet the time when Protestants could hope to retain their influence by disclaiming religious motives is long gone. Beyond its exploration of the past, *Religion & Republic* offers Protestants—and indeed any religious citizens—an option for civic engagement that avoids the extremes of apolitical submission and full-spectrum aggression. America may never again be Christian in the sense understood in the early republic. But we can hope to have Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and other institutions that flourish in the wide open space between "church" and "state." RL

Samuel Goldman *is an associate professor of political science at George Washington University.*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The Devil's Music in the House of the Lord

Contemporary Christian Music has both fans and detractors, but a new book examining its roots and cultural/spiritual impact says more about the author's politics than it does about the power of praise choruses.

by **MARK HEMINGWAY**

IT WAS NOT my idea to review a book on the history of Christian rock music, but in a few respects I do have some bona fides. For a couple of decades now, I have been a confessional Lutheran, a member of a church body that boasts a rich historical musical tradition that includes the works of J.S. Bach, and I have even been at a Catholic church liturgy where, rather than Gregorian or polyphonic chant, they sang Luther's reformation anthem, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." My knowledge here isn't especially scholarly, but I do know a thing or two about traditional Christian music.

Additionally, I joined my first rock band when I was 15. This was in the early '90s, when I was in high school in the Pacific Northwest at the height of grunge, and I played in bands off and on for the next 15 years. My modest pinnacles of success include opening for a band that went on to sell 40 million records and being in another that had a top 10 hit in the Dominican Republic. I currently have something of an avocation as a music critic, so I guess I also know something about rock music.

To the extent that this makes me qualified to opine on Leah Payne's *God Gave Rock & Roll to You: A History of Contemporary Christian Music*, my baseline professional assessment of the genre was that of beloved television sage Hank Hill: "You're not

making Christianity any better. You're just making rock and roll worse."

However, despite a passing familiarity with some of the bigger Christian Contemporary Music (CCM) acts of the past 40 years, I did not grow up with much exposure to the Christian rock scene. I was genuinely looking forward to learning more about it, as well as having my opinions challenged and horizons expanded. And in the former respect, *God Gave Rock & Roll to You* does the job. If you need a rote recounting of the rise of Christian pop music dating back to the late 19th century, including notable people and performers, chronologies, minor controversies, and the development of the businesses that sustain this niche marketplace, well, that's all here.

Beyond that, Payne, a professor of religious history at Portland Seminary, at least sets the expectations early on by informing readers she was the daughter of a Pentecostal pastor and was subjected to a decent amount of CCM in her youth. She then spends much of the book taking out her rejection of the culture she was raised in on the rest of us. And it's all done with a healthy dose of overtly liberal politics and academese:

> As I studied American religion, however, my perspective on CCM began to change. I began to regard Contemporary Christian Music performances as more than quirky evangelical entertainment. Instead, I came to see CCM concerts as sites where power is created and negotiated. At CCM performances, entertainers exerted influence over attendees by soliciting public conversions, stoking political action, and seeking donations for social causes. In these performances, bestselling CCM stars and their audiences also performed and enforced strict evangelical ideals about gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class.

Naturally, everything that follows reflects her feminist convictions and is unhelpfully racialized. (I am begging Payne to talk to one or two flesh-and-blood Hispanic Americans and ask them what they think of her use of the term "Latinx.") Payne treats traditional Christian views on womanhood as some sort of recent distortion rather than rooted in the Bible, blaming "new Calvinists" such as John Piper for making "male headship and female submission a central tenet of the evangelical faith." She also seems to think there's an obvious throughline between the fact that the KKK used to

"WHILE PAYNE MAY CLAIM TO BE PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY, IT SEEMS QUITE OBVIOUS AT TIMES THAT SHE'S NOT STEEPED IN MUSIC HISTORY BEYOND HER SUBJECT."

hand out religious songbooks and that 60 years later "CCM rarely broke the so-called sonic color line, which segregated most popular music in the United States and racially coded it as Black or white." The far simpler explanation is that, in the 1980s, when CCM came into its own commercially, the United States was still 80 percent white, and the brand of evangelicalism that gave rise to CCM was rooted in white culture, the same way rap emerged in the 1980s rooted in black culture.

That said, it's worth noting the historical fact that gospel music was popular in the Jim Crow south; one might want to ask what *that* means. But it's quite another thing to engage in inflammatory speculation that "white Southern Gospel quartets expressed a desire for what they saw as a simpler (antebellum) era. An era in which religion was not tainted by the urbanizing, technology-driven modern world, or by the confusing new social order that Black citizenship might bring."

Indeed, while Payne may claim to be professor of religious history, it seems quite obvious at times that she has large gaps in her knowledge of music history. On this point, Elvis is barely mentioned in the book, only popping up a few times in the second chapter. "Elvis 'the Pelvis' Presley credited his dancing and his vocal inflections to the 'spiritual quartets' and Pentecostal congregations that raised him," she notes.

That's understating things quite a bit. Peter Guralnick's seminal Elvis biography, *Last Train to*

Memphis, makes it quite clear that Elvis was obsessed with the southern gospel quartets of his era, and early on his goal was to join such a quartet. (Elvis still went on to record several spirituals over the course of his career.) At the same time, Elvis was obviously into the emerging blues, R&B, and rock music that was heavily associated with black performers and personally held very progressive views on race. If there was a tension between southern gospel music being threatened "by the confusing new social order that Black citizenship might bring" and embracing black culture, Elvis Presley, the man perhaps most responsible for defining pop music as we know it, sure didn't think there was.

Indeed, the book generally gives short shrift to the numerous other big-name stars who found room for gospel music within their broader mainstream careers—Johnny Cash and Dolly Parton, for example, are barely mentioned. The most astonishing omission is there's virtually no discussion of U2, except for two paragraphs near the end about how Bono courted evangelical leaders to help convince George W. Bush to address the AIDS crisis in Africa.

The revelation in the 1980s that Bono and two others in U2 were part of a Christian community and at one point considered giving up music out of commitment to their faith sent shockwaves through the music press and churches alike. To this day, the musical aesthetic of nearly every evangelical praise band, with the swelling synth pads and dotted eighth-note guitar lines, heavily borrows from U2. There's no rock band more influential on CCM and they're virtually absent from the book? I suspect that the discussion of these broader influences is limited so as not to undermine Payne's contention that CCM is the primary product of a backward evangelical subculture. Acknowledging more mainstream and more politically diverse influences would complicate things quite a bit.

Bono with President George W. Bush in 2006

Further, while Payne does a good job covering the breadth of the artists within the Christian rock and CCM scenes, there's little reflection on the artistic, rather than ethnic and gender, diversity within the movement. For example, early '70s Christian rock pioneer Larry Norman had a shockingly blunt lyrical approach, as evidenced by his song "Why Don't You Look into Jesus?" which was recorded by Janis Joplin:

> Gonorrhea on Valentine's Day,
> And You're still looking for the perfect lay
> You think rock and roll will set you free
> Honey, you'll be deaf before you're thirty-three
> Shooting junk till you're half insane
> Broken needle in your purple vein
> Why don't you look into Jesus,
> He's got the answer

Payne notes that Norman "scandalized" listeners but hardly says anything else about him, even though Norman was one of the most influential and unorthodox figures in Christian rock. There is some good discussion, however, of the tensions created when '90s Christian acts, such as Jars of Clay and Sixpence None the Richer, crossed over into the mainstream alternative charts, as well as the anti-authoritarian attitudes of Christian punk bands on the seminal Tooth and Nail record label.

Much of this book is dedicated to portraying CCM as an industry wholly concocted by James Dobson and Billy Graham to brainwash kids into becoming conformist Republicans, yet these threads are picked up and discarded before they can introduce too much in the way of nuance and complexity. I can only conclude Payne has written a book on Christian rock far more interested in talking about evangelicals than the particulars of the music they produce.

And on that point, I'm sorry to report that Payne's understanding of Christianity—something she ostensibly does know something about—doesn't come off as any more nuanced. I am not simpatico with evangelicals' approach to engaging politics and

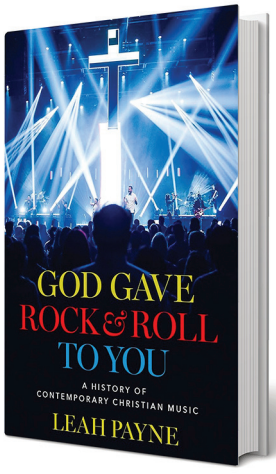
the culture, and heaven knows that if I walk into a church and see a drum riser where an altar should be, *I am in the wrong place*. As such, I'm superficially inclined to agree with a number of Payne's critiques, albeit for reasons actually rooted in my Christianity, not politics of any kind.

There's something to Payne's point that "the story of CCM is the story of how white evangelicals looked to the marketplace for signs of God's work in the world." Measuring your faith in terms of commercial success and cultural influence is a form of prosperity gospel, and one certainly sees that among evangelicals in CCM who aren't well grounded in Christian concepts such as vocation. But such theological precepts, once again, are often thrown out there by the author but never explored.

What we're left with is a bunch of anecdotes about how the pressures of fame led many CCM stars to fail to live up to the strict moral standards expected of them. But the implicit questions readers are left with about these failures are largely focused on matters of hypocrisy and whether, say, evangelicals should rethink their attitudes about premarital sex. While there are criticisms of evangelical culture to be had here, biblical Christians would instead focus on forgiveness and our shared sinful nature, a perspective largely absent from *God Gave Rock & Roll to You*.

Similarly, I would also agree with Payne that there has frequently been a problem with civil religion in CCM. But it's pretty clear that when she recites the litany of times CCM superstar Michael W. Smith has sung at a Republican convention or the work that CCM stars have done opposing abortion, her objection isn't the mixing of religion and electoral politics per se but having political beliefs Payne herself rejects.

The last part of the book is when Payne finally lays her cards on the table with an ear-shattering crescendo of *But Trump!*, blaming evangelicals for enabling him. "Scholars showed that Trump's triumph among white evangelicals—a reported 81 percent voted for him—was the logical outcome of generations of evangelicals' embrace of militant masculinity, racism, and economic inequality," she writes. I was too busy rolling my eyes to bother with the footnote on that allegedly empirical assertion smearing tens of millions of Americans, but suffice to say, I'm quite certain that "Scholars showed" is doing the devil's work in that sentence. Music is almost incidental at this point, but Payne actually remonstrates a former worship leader of the popular Bethel megachurch for criticizing Black Lives Matter riots in Portland by blaming the city's problems on "far-right activists" doing "crowd control." A person who openly identifies as Antifa recently came close to winning a mayoral election in that city, but whatever.



God Gave Rock & Roll to You: A History of Contemporary Christian Music

By Leah Payne

(Oxford University Press, 2024)

While I myself might be inclined toward conservatism, I'm quite comfortable existing in progressive spaces and I don't honestly care about Payne's politics beyond the fact that they get in the way of the truth. I also wish Payne didn't mirror the evangelicals she's critiquing by routinely evaluating the worth of Christianity on a left-right political continuum. (I suspect that D.G. Hart's insights into how Lutherans and confessional Protestants approach matters of civil religion in his books *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* and *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* would, well, rock Payne's narrow approach to these issues.)

As it is, I hate to tell fans of Kiss and CCM alike that *God Gave Rock & Roll to You* is mostly a waste of a good title. Payne hasn't made our understanding of Christian rock any better, but she has made our politics worse. RL

***Mark Hemingway** is a senior writer at* RealClearInvestigations *and the books editor at* The Federalist. *He has previously worked at the* Weekly Standard, National Review, *and* Market News International, *where he covered the Federal Reserve. He has written for outlets as diverse as the* Wall Street Journal *and MTV.com.*

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Christians Caught Between Two Kingdoms

Doing "kingdom work" means different things to different Christians. But what if there isn't just one kingdom, but two?

by JOHN G. GROVE

IN TODAY'S INTELLECTUAL climate, it is refreshing to find a book on the relationship between Christianity and politics that is neither a reactionary daydream nor a breathless polemic against anyone who thinks there could be Christian influences on political culture. Many of the bestselling books run to extremes—looking for a "Christian prince" who will wield political power to re-Christianize America, or defining "Christian nationalism" so broadly as to indict as a fascist anyone who thinks their "Christian values" should inform their policy preferences.

N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird's *Jesus and the Powers* avoids these extremes. Wright, previously the bishop of Durham, is probably the most famous living Anglican theologian. Bird, deputy principal and lecturer in theology at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia, is also a widely published and influential Anglican biblical scholar. Together, they trace out a Christian political outlook that neither erects a wall of separation nor tethers the faith to the exercise of political power. It is nothing if not a moderate book. No sooner do the authors present a line of argument than they qualify it, as if to say, "Don't take this too far."

There is value in such moderation, especially in our age of extremes. If nothing else, the book admirably demonstrates that there are no simple, one-size-fits-all answers to the question of appropriate ways for

> **THE AUTHORS TEND TO TREAT THE CHURCH'S CHARGE AS A CONTINUATION OF THE CHARGE TO MANKIND TO 'TAKE DOMINION' OF CREATION.**

Christians to engage in politics and social activism. But without those simple answers, we must at least have some reliable method to help us make our way through the confused landscape and keep us from conflating Christian truth with political preferences. Although the authors are aware of the danger of such confusion, the framework they employ—"building for the kingdom"—is not particularly helpful and may actually encourage some of the more extreme approaches they eschew.

Wright and Bird use a common evangelical trope to structure their message: "building for the kingdom":

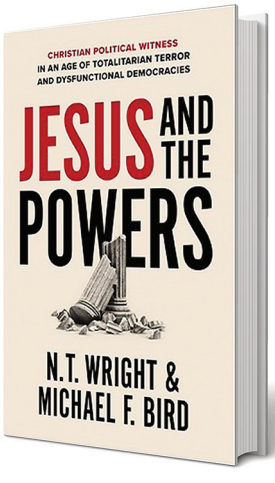
> The Church's message and mission rest on the notion that God is King, God has appointed Jesus as the King of kings and Lord of lords, and the Church's vocation is to build *for* the kingdom.

The kingdom, they stress, is here and now. In keeping with some of Wright's previous writings, much of their argumentation is aimed against the tendency to focus exclusively on "getting to heaven," seeing the Christian life in this world as but a temporary holding pattern. Accordingly, "building for the kingdom" means working to transform the present world in ways that prepare it for its final fulfillment at the end of time.

In Richard Niebuhr's categories, the authors fall firmly into "Christ the transformer of culture," emphasizing the many ways the rise of Christianity reshaped ethical values as well as cultural and political expectations. They clearly stipulate that they are *not* teaching that Christians here and now will simply *create*, by their own work, the kingdom of God. God alone will bring the fullness of the kingdom, they argue, but we are enlisted to participate in his work, preparing the wider world for the end of time by bringing its powers, institutions, and practices more in line with the teachings of Christ. In eight somewhat meandering chapters, the authors use this paradigm to range across biblical exegesis, church history, vocational guidance, and contemporary political commentary.

Importantly, "the kingdom" they speak of is most definitely singular. The authors reject any dualist, "two-kingdoms" approach that would distinguish between God's rule over the fallen world on the one hand and his rule over the Church on the other. Rather, the authors tend to treat the Church's charge as a continuation of the general charge to mankind to "take dominion" of creation, or, as they say, to get "the creation project back on track" after the Fall. This entails reforming the "powers" of the earth—which were established by God for good but continually set themselves against him—to conform to God's expectations.

The Church's work, therefore, is mostly discussed in terms of its *external* activities and engagement with the rest of the world—about what it must do in response to something or someone else. They speak, for instance, of "where the Church sits between presidents and principalities," of the "missional vocation and kingdom witness of the Church," and of "the Church calling the powers to account." There is not much, however, about the *internal* activity of the Church.



Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies

By N.T. Wright & Michael F. Bird

(Zondervan, 2024)

Although they call for robust political engagement in the world, they are also—in keeping with their moderation—clear about the dangers such activity poses, imploring Christians not to seek political power for its own sake, to use political power to establish "Christian hegemony," or to succumb to the temptation of utopianism. While the Christian's work is meant to usher in God's kingdom, he must be moderate and prudential, recognizing that he will not establish that kingdom in its fullness.

The authors do not seek to lay out a comprehensive, detailed vision of what Christian political engagement should aim for. Yet, given the delicate balance they seek to establish, their description of Christian politics is unhelpfully vague.

They believe the Church's core purpose demands that it "get involved" in political debates. Rather than compartmentalize their faith, Christians must—in a phrase that exemplifies their vagueness—"do God" in public. On the flip side, they lament the use of Christianity to promote "unchristian policies" on "immigration, income inequality, healthcare, and a myriad of other issues." But *how* exactly the Christian is meant to approach these issues is left ambiguous. With rigid civil enforcement of the Ten Commandments? (It certainly doesn't seem to be this.) Governance modeled on the Sermon on the Mount? A generic sense of loving one's neighbor? Or just through visible Christian "witness" and persuasion? They do not wrestle with the details and difficulties of these different possibilities. Rather, most of their analysis of political issues is presented in contemporary centrist, terminology: fighting "oppression," standing up for "people on the margins," rejecting "identity politics," supporting "liberal democracy" and "confident pluralism," and "being vigilant against free market fundamentalism." They offer practical arguments for some of these commitments but no method for determining "Christian" and "unchristian" positions.

The authors are similarly vague about the criteria for *resisting* government. They stake out a characteristic middle ground on interpreting Romans 13—holding that there is some obligation to obey civil authorities (they find the American Revolution to be unjustified—perhaps unsurprisingly for an Englishman and an Australian), but that such obligation runs out under certain circumstances. But here again, they tend to rely on modern categories and terminology, saying that we must only resist


Hleb Usovich / iStock

government to "uphold civil rights" or fight against "violent authoritarians." When they do offer general rules, they raise more questions: "The government's authority is…conditional upon its performance to meet God's standards of righteousness and to win the consensus of the people in how they wish to be governed" and "Only good government can claim the mantle of a divinely appointed authority."

Given the authors' discussion elsewhere, the reader can presume that "God's standards of righteousness" here does not entail "be ye perfect" but some other, lower standard. Without making some dualist distinction between God's "standards" for civil government and his "standards" for Christians and the Church, however, it is difficult to know what exactly their criterion of good government is, aside from presentist preferences.

Their "building for the kingdom" paradigm thus reopens and leaves unresolved age-old difficulties with the idea of the gospel—and the ethical response that it calls forth—serving as the basis of civil authority. "Do not resist evil" will not function as a rule of civil government. Two-kingdom doctrines were meant to provide an answer to such difficulties, by simultaneously affirming the *importance* of civil and social questions while separating them from the highest spiritual fulfillment. The thief on the cross asked for the unreserved forgiveness of his sins from Christ, even as he recognized that the civil authorities punished him "justly." The authors break down that division, arguing that our social and political activism should indeed aim to "Christianize" political

and social life—and yet they still hope to maintain a moderate, non-utopian approach to politics.

The flip side of a "Christianized" politics is usually a politicized Church. This is also something the authors clearly do not want. They caution that political engagement should not be undertaken in a way that loses sight of the spiritual. Yet their model tends (unintentionally) to lose the radicalness of the gospel and the separateness of the Church.

A Church focused on directing world affairs and winning the political and social battles of the day is, at the very least, at risk of losing what sets it apart from all the rest of the world. When Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount to "seek [not 'build'] ye first the kingdom of God," he does not give instructions for transforming empires through public activism. Quite the opposite—he says to be like the lily of the field and the bird of the air, ridding oneself of the conceit that our own activism and planning will determine our fate.

Insofar as the Church's primary work comes to be seen as tied up with the "issues of the day," it becomes banal and commonplace—yet another player of the game that has "something to say." It is difficult *not* to lose sight of the spirituality of the Church or the radical message of the gospel if one sees the expansion of God's kingdom coinciding with correct policies and social attitudes—however important those may be. While the Church may have an *external* mission, it also has an *internal* one, which St. Paul says is "folly" to the wider world.

All this circles back around to the authors' most important theological premise: that the building of the kingdom of God is the active transformation of the institutions of this world, brought about in part through human activity aimed at getting the world "back on track." Insofar as one accepts that premise, Wright and Bird's analysis can at least hold some water.

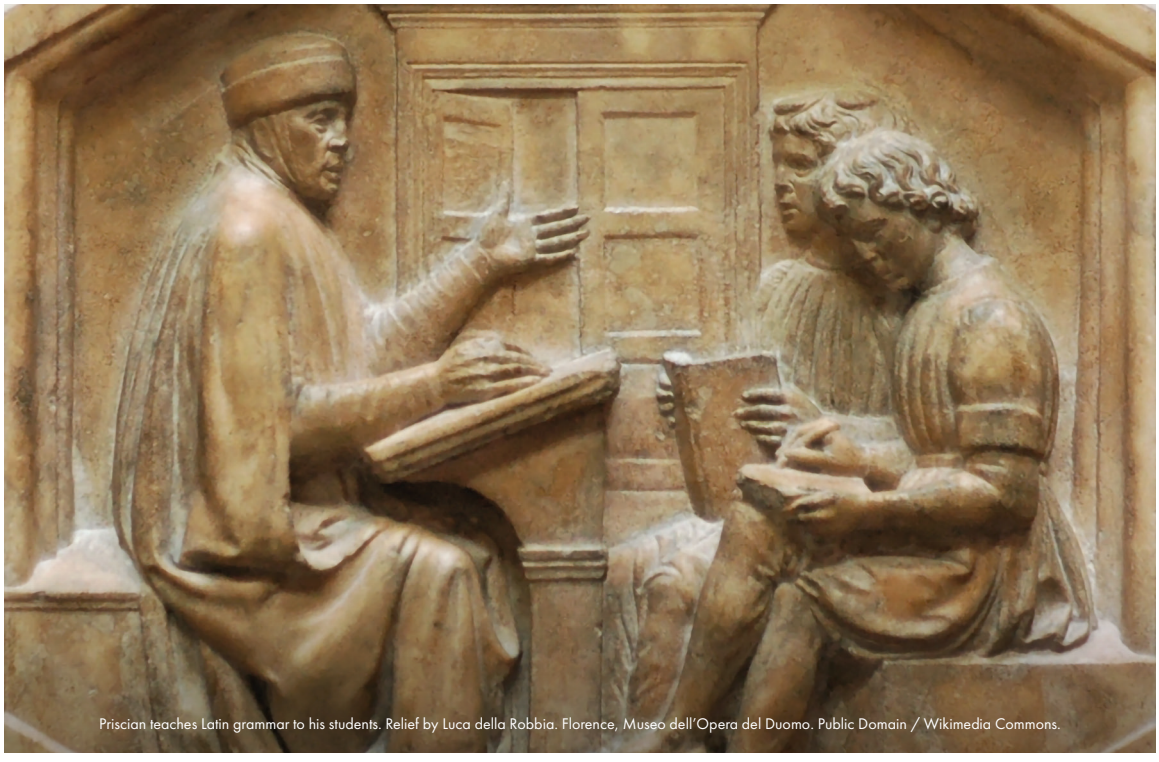
But if one starts with a different premise, namely, that the Church is not the *builder* of the kingdom of God but simply *is* the kingdom of God, their framework for political engagement goes out the window entirely. If the Church of all believers *is* the very kingdom, its central "building project" is itself—conducting its *internal* affairs well by dispensing God's gifts to its members and bringing more people into its realm. That doesn't mean that the Christian is forbidden from engaging in politics or social life, but it would require an entirely different starting point than that offered by Wright and Bird. Nor does it mean the wider world isn't God's realm, too—only that there is a fundamental difference in how he relates to it.

The authors are wrong to suggest that this insistence on the separateness and spirituality of the Church amounts to hiding in the catacombs or just waiting passively until a rapture, when we can "get to heaven." A dualist understanding of God's kingdoms can still recognize that both realms are here and now—that we live with different forms of authority, and hold different expectations, for both the old and the new creations.

One ingredient of the "Christian nationalist" stew is an extremely high expectation about what can be accomplished through planned political and social action. Politics, in this view, doesn't require accommodation to and mitigation of present realities so much as the gumption and strength of will to transform the corrupt world. Wright and Bird are very critical of these "authoritarian" tendencies. But despite their hedging, moderation, and centrist political preferences, they are pointing to a conception of politics not altogether different. It is much easier said than done to engage in political life with the expectation of ushering in God's kingdom *without* succumbing to a sense that one's own will and exertions are what drive history. And that should remind us that, though Christian nationalism today is considered a far-right phenomenon, history has shown that enlightened, progressive liberal democracy is quite capable of bearing its standard, too. RL

> "IF THE CHURCH OF ALL BELIEVERS *IS* THE VERY KINGDOM, ITS CENTRAL 'BUILDING PROJECT' IS ITSELF."

***John G. Grove** is the editor of* Law & Liberty.



Priscian teaches Latin grammar to his students. Relief by Luca della Robbia. Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons.

Natural Law Unexplained

An evangelical scholar and fellow with the Ethics and Public Policy Center has written an explainer for why Protestants should embrace natural law. All that is needed now is an explainer for his book.

by R. V. YOUNG

ANDREW T. WALKER'S *Faithful Reason: Natural Law Ethics for God's Glory and Our Good* sets out to expound natural law—historically associated with Roman Catholicism—for Protestants, especially his fellow evangelicals, who have often regarded it with indifference if not outright suspicion. This is a project dear to my heart: at a time when Christianity is assailed by an increasingly belligerent anti-Christian culture in which the common morality of centuries of Western civilization is the object of malicious disdain, it is only sensible for Christians of all confessions to unite in opposition. Natural law provides a common ground upon which they can stand to resist the moral decay in evidence all around us. A historically informed account of the development of natural law and its continuing relevance, indeed, indispensability to the right ordering of society and to the understanding Christians have of their own moral vision is a work well worth the effort. Regrettably, this book does not succeed in achieving this goal.

Professor Walker's argument is repetitious and not coherently organized, and he offers no sense of the unfolding of the concept of natural law in history and furnishes very little sense of how it has been attacked and defended over the centuries since the Enlightenment. Within each chapter, the paragraphs seem almost random in their ordering, and the sentence-to-sentence arrangement within the paragraphs is arbitrary. Finally, at the most basic level, the writing is beset with errors in diction, syntax, and grammar. The book comes with many highly laudatory dust-cover "blurbs" by distinguished authors;

I can only wonder whether they actually read the manuscript. Indeed, I am at a loss to conceive how this book got past a competent copy editor and into print. These I realize are grave assertions, so I must try to justify them in the brief space of a review.

First, consider the turgid, obscure style of the following paragraph:

> To understand what Scripture says about abortion, we must begin from the most important starting point, that God is the Creator of life (Gen. 1:26–28). Life is thus a creation ordinance instituted by God. There is no exception clause to where the Bible demarcates dignity inhering within persons in greater or lesser degree. God's call for human existence to perpetuate itself implies multiplication, meaning that the human species is not a dispensable feature of society, but intrinsic to its operation and fulfillment. Society requires populations brought into successive existence through generational succession. Hence, the Genesis command to be "fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion" is undone by abortion (Gen. 1:28). Abortion is a lethal inversion of the creational mandate. If Scripture speaks categorically about life in the category of fruitfulness, abortion thwarts one of the primordial foundations to existence. Abortion, scripturally speaking, is an affront to God since it gives the individual, and the culture around the individual, the false impression that the decision whether to give life or end life, begins and ends with them. That is false. Life belongs to God at all stages of life, from conception to natural death.

This is a very long quotation, but it is necessary to make the point that it is many times longer than it need be. The second sentence, for example, could be eliminated with no loss of meaning. The third sentence could be beneficially rewritten thus: "Because God created man in His own image, all men have equal dignity." The alternative sentence I have suggested—without giving it much thought—is about a third shorter and adds the crucial point that human beings have dignity because they are images of their creator. After this point, the paragraph descends into chaos. Does the reader need to be informed, at such length, that human beings are an essential component of human society? And does society actually require successive "populations," or rather a population successively renewed by procreation? And does

"AGREEMENT OF SUBJECT AND VERB AND AGREEMENT BETWEEN PRONOUNS AND THEIR ANTECEDENTS ARE A SEVERE CHALLENGE FOR PROFESSOR WALKER."

Scripture really speak *categorically* about the *category* of *fruitfulness*? And of what is fruitfulness a category anyway? Is it necessary to assert that a "false impression" is, in fact, false?

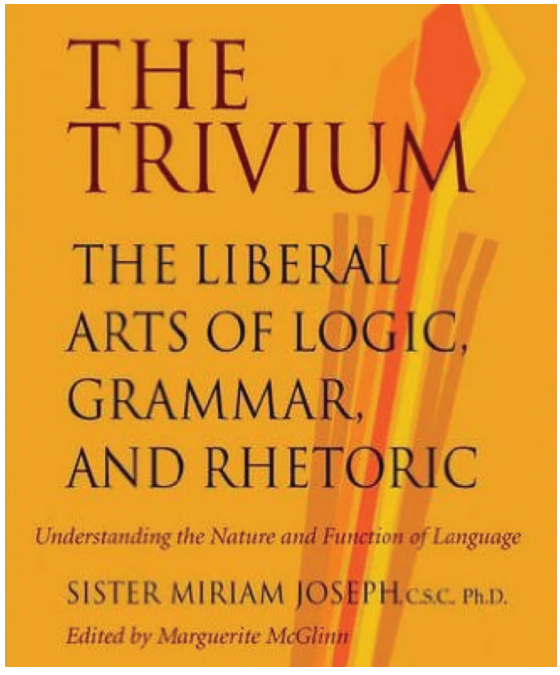
This paragraph is not an unusual lapse in an otherwise lucid exposition; opening the book randomly will provide similar examples of stylistic ineptitude on almost every one of the 393 pages of text. There are numerous errors in diction: "Holocaust defenders would not want *their* own children subjected to tortuous murder." Surely, the author means *torturous*. Professor Walker evidently thinks that "fulsomely" is a synonym for "fully" and does not grasp its pejorative overtones: "Doing so more fulsomely locates natural

A group of pro-lifers outside an abortion clinic in 1986

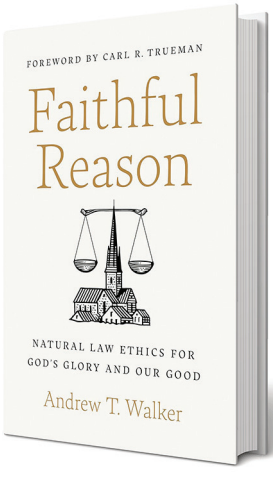
Nancy Wong, CC BY-SA 4.0 / Wikimedia Commons

law to [in?] its true foundation in Jesus Christ." He also thinks that "exacting" means the same thing as "exact," as in "Scripture brings clarifying authority to areas where the natural law does not provide exacting detail." And then there is this: "It [natural law] is a metaphysical system, even if its proponents are demure in saying so in full." *Demure*? Not exactly the *mot juste*. Apparently, Professor Walker means to say "reluctant" or "hesitant." Here is a proper usage of this word by Milton, invoking "divinest Melancholy": "Come pensive Nun, devout and pure, / Sober, stedfast, and demure" (*Il Penseroso*, 31–32). Professor Walker also has problems with the idiomatic use of prepositions: "Sexual intercourse is to occur only among a man and woman united in marriage." "Among"? Surely the intended term is "between."

Agreement of subject and verb and, especially, agreement between pronouns and their antecedents are a severe challenge for Professor Walker. To be sure, feminist and transgender ideology has made this fraught territory for many current writers, but it is difficult to see why a man committed to natural law ethics would allow himself to be thus beguiled. Typically, Professor Walker will twist his syntax into bizarre shapes to avoid using *he/his/him* generically: "In this sense, it is not that the individual has disconnected themselves from a God-ordained order, but that individuals are considered as unwitting participants within a created order that they claim not to know or deceive themselves into denying." A few pages before, however, he does not scruple to deploy feminine pronouns generically: "Consider an artist. Before the artist goes about painting *her* portrait, *she* envisions in *her* own mind what form the artwork will take" (emphasis added). So far as I recall, this is a *hapax legomenon*, but on what basis are feminine pronouns even once arbitrarily conscripted for generic use? Finally, the kind of subject-verb-agreement errors one associates with undergraduate writing crop up with dismaying frequency: "A conjugal definition of marriage as described here understands that the *union* [emphasis added] of husband and wife *form* [emphasis added] a *comprehensive* union." Finally, it is simply impossible to disentangle this sentence: "Offspring of a husband and wife are in a unique position to give their children the full gamut of their origin—their ethnicity, their ancestry, and the knowledge of their genetic makeup (were genetic disorders a known concern)." But the "children" *are* the "offspring." And the "full gamut" cliché only adds to the absurdity when the basis of the metaphor is considered.



***The Trivium* by Sister Miriam Joseph**



Faithful Reason: Natural Law Ethics for God's Glory and Our Good

By Andrew T. Walker

(B & H Academic, 2024)

Doubtless some readers will call these objections "trivial." Precisely. They are all associated with the *trivium*: the arts of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, traditional foundation of liberal education. To anyone unacquainted with the concept, I recommend Dorothy Sayers' once famous essay "The Lost Tools of Learning," which is easily available online. For a more comprehensive account, there is Sr. Miriam Joseph's *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and*

“IT MAY BE POSSIBLE TO RECONCILE THE DOCTRINE OF SOLA SCRIPTURA WITH NATURAL LAW, BUT THE QUESTION CANNOT BE RESOLVED BY A VERBAL QUIP.”

Rhetoric (1937; rev. and ed. Marguerite McGlinn, 2002). More than 75 years ago, Sayers and Sr. Miriam were already alarmed about the decline in the teaching of the structure and operation of language, the logical development of ideas, and the expression of thinking in clear idiomatic prose. Since the middle of the last century, the trivium has not only been neglected, but progressive educators—that is, almost all educators—have made internecine war upon the very idea of classical learning. One result is books by men and women with doctoral degrees and positions in institutions of higher learning who are evidently incapable of gathering evidence relevant to their thesis, ordering it into logical discourse, and expressing it with minimal clarity, much less with eloquence. I hardly need mention the chaotic effusions of most of our politicians, celebrities, and—of recent note, as I write—students at elite colleges and universities.

In closing, I must stress that my concerns are by no means merely matters of style: Professor Walker’s book also fails as scholarly argument. He cites an abundance of sources, ancient, medieval, and modern, by way of quotation and paraphrase; and, although they are scrupulously documented, they appear randomly and without any sense of how they are relevant to each other or the specific phase of the argument the author then has in hand. Knotty problems in natural law, especially as they are undertaken by Protestant thinkers, are simply waved away:

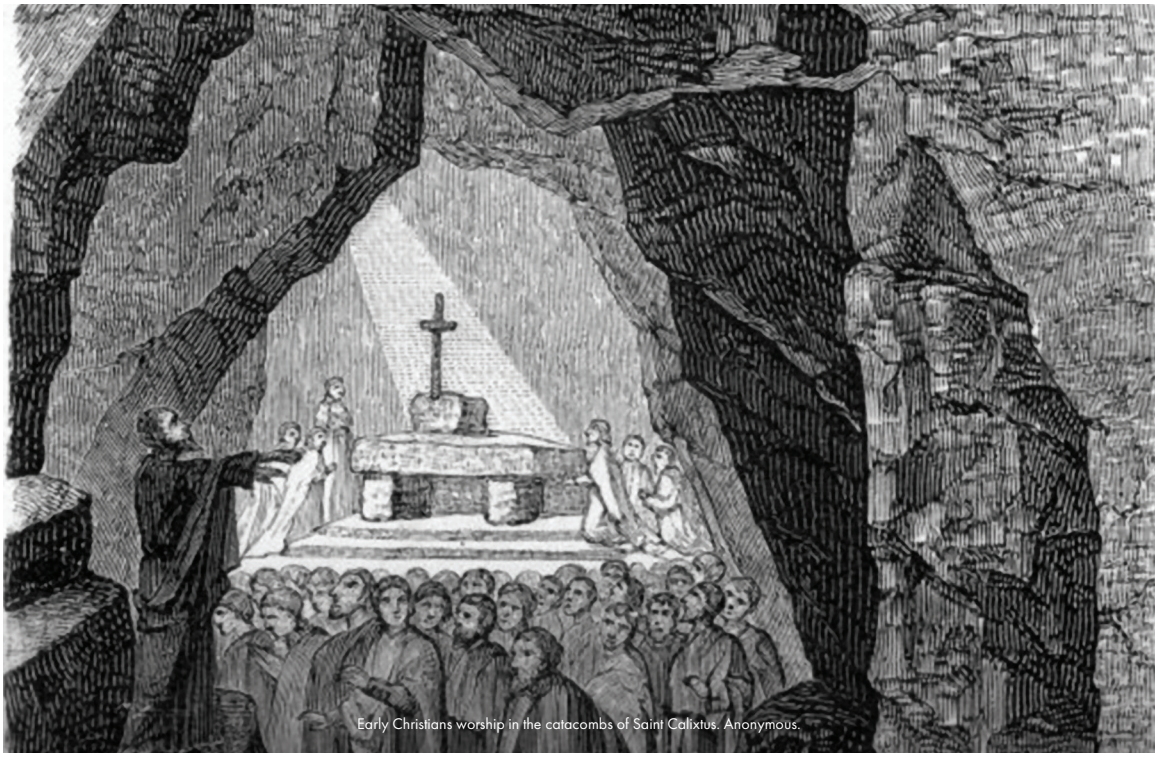
> We are, after all, Protestants who believe in sola Scriptura. But *sola* Scriptura is not *solo* Scriptura. It has never been the position of Christian ethics that authority is found only within Scripture, but that Scripture is our ultimate authority.

In point of fact, *sola Scriptura* means, precisely, *only* [*by* or *with*] *Scripture*. Now it may be possible to reconcile the doctrine of sola Scriptura with natural law, but the question cannot be resolved by a verbal quip.

Toward the very end of the book, Professor Walker is still flogging his very uncooperative discursive mule. The Christian who scorns natural law arguments, he maintains, “assumes the Bible is simply self-interpreting. As a divinely inspired document, the Bible is inspired but its inspiration requires understanding through interpretive investigation made available by cognition’s inquiry and insights.” Otherwise, he continues, we have no way to refute the claims of the “LGBT revisionist.” Professor Walker then concludes the paragraph thus: “The Bible is self-interpreting, but it also rests upon the nature of our cognitive abilities to interpret it. Human reason vis-à-vis nature is inevitably brought into the interpretive exercise. Christians cannot implicitly accept the fact-value and is-ought fallacy by denying that nature has any self-evident claims about itself.” I have quoted about half of a long paragraph, which ends essentially where it began, with no clear explanation of whether the Bible is or is not “self-interpreting,” what that term means in practice, and how it can be reconciled with the requirement that we use our reason to interpret inspired Scripture, and exactly how all this relates to natural law.

Such avoidance of real argument is typical of this author. Citing numerous authorities who in varying degrees and in differing ways approve of natural law or simply denying the difficulty of reconciling natural law with classic Protestant dogma does not advance our understanding of the pertinence of Christian morality to the ethical dilemmas of contemporary society. This is a troubling book, less because of its own deficiencies than because it is a symptom of a widespread decline of the level of discourse in our culture. RL

R.V. Young *is professor emeritus of English at NC State University and the former editor of the* John Donne Journal *and* Modern Age. *He is currently a senior editor at* Touchstone *magazine, and his most recent book is* Shakespeare and the Idea of Western Civilization.



Early Christians worship in the catacombs of Saint Calixtus. Anonymous.

Early-Church Christians in a Late-Church World

Fight or flight? Christians looking to the early church may find another way of engaging and surviving in a culture gone mad.

by **BRIAN A. SMITH**

AMID THE RISE OF the nones and the implosion of church attendance, concerned Christians have offered a myriad of explanations and recommendations for what must be done to repair the wreckage of our culture. They may exhort us to wage cultural war against the apparent dying of the light, embark on various plans of cultural care that might draw in the lost, or retreat from the public square altogether for the purpose of spiritual fortification. But all such suggestions share a common sense that the reputation of Christianity in the U.S.A. is in a bad state.

Studies may (or may not) show that men think about the Roman Empire once a day, but the resonances between the Roman world and ours at least appear to grow more profound. We seem to live in "dread latter days" akin to those Walker Percy described in *Love in the Ruins*, where everything is falling apart. Corruption in high places and loss of public confidence in the laws and traditions of our polity abound. So, too, does a public anti-theology that demands entrance into every public space: How else to explain the "progressive" insistence that every public library in America be a place where transgenderism is celebrated; that elusive if not nonsensical concepts like equity supplant the long traditions and customs that gave us a tolerably clear notion of justice; or the complete rejection of conscience as previous generations understood it? A repaganizing

of our public culture proceeds, with its own distinctive public cults and idols. Roman history may not be repeating, but we can at least read the rhymes.

Rome was a place, as Ferdinand Mount notes, where you "could believe in anything or nothing" if it did not disrespect the civic region. Christian belief was decidedly in conflict with the dominant Roman culture because of its insistence on one God and his law. It is easy to overestimate these comparisons to Rome, but Christians anxious about our faith's loss of status have generally *not* looked to the early church for inspiration for how we might cope with—or even thrive under—these circumstances.

In *Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World like the Early Church*, church historian Stephen O. Presley aims to remedy this oversight. He does so in recognition that the situation appears quite dire:

> We are no longer living in a modern world where Christianity is intellectually suspect but morally acceptable. We are in a postmodern world where Christianity is rejected as morally bankrupt (and most of the time still intellectually suspect)…. While many moral expressions are applauded in the public square, traditional Christian morality is not often discussed in polite company.

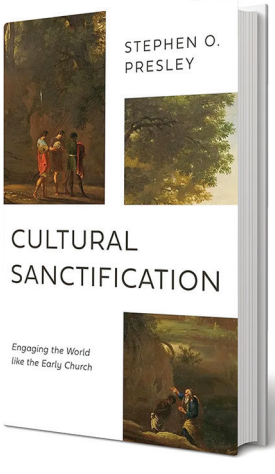
Presley looks to the early church because these conditions bear some resemblance to that of the Christians living in the late Roman Empire, a time when the church grew even amid persecution, scorn, and dismissal by most Romans. The early church offers distinctive lessons for the present, he argues, and as an example of how to embark upon the book's eponymous "cultural sanctification." Christians should neither assimilate to the cultures in which they live nor exile themselves from public life. Instead, we should pursue a manner of engaging with culture that "neither repeats Benedict nor crowns Charlemagne."

Presley develops his account through thematic chapters that address major areas of life in the early church and our own time. The first of these concerns identity, which especially in this era of identitarian idolatry seems apt: the dominant culture tends to insist that identity is the master category through which we engage with others. To begin with, this denies that the world (or for that matter the bodies) we inhabit have any authority or reality. What remains is the limitlessly creative—and

"THE EARLY CHURCH WAS QUICK TO SHOW HOSPITALITY TO NEWCOMERS BUT VERY SLOW TO ADMIT THEM INTO THE BODY OF CHRIST."

destructive—sense of self-invented identity. Against this confusion, Presley reminds Christians that they are called "to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24) and that believers have good reason to realize their identity in Christ rather than in culture.

The early church was quick to show hospitality to and teach newcomers, but very slow to admit them into the body of Christ. The church prayed for the conversion of their neighbors but was focused on the patient cultivation of those "who were willing to join their community and conform their lives after the teachings of the church." Focused on teaching what they called "the rule of faith," which offered "an essential summary of the church's main theological commitments and presaged the creeds that would develop later," the early church was defined



Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World like the Early Church

By Stephen O. Presley

(Eerdmans, 2024)

A 2017 display at a public library in Pinellas Park, Florida

Joseph in Egypt, painting by Jean-Adrien Guignet (1848)

by the long, challenging work of catechesis. The rule served as the church confessional standard to which members must adhere, but also gave God's people a basis on which to order their lives, "so that whether surrounded by ancient stoics or modern secularists, this rule orders reality."

Without this fuller sort of conversion the early church sought, Presley thinks any attempt by Christians to sanctify our culture will fail: "We are often concerned with *how* to respond to culture without considering the very basis upon which that response must proceed." This leads to outreach efforts and other forms of programming that place the seeker at the center of many churches' efforts at evangelism. The difficulty here is that these efforts do not begin with doctrine but with various experiences that mimic secular culture rather than stand apart from it through being distinctively Christian.

> "CHRISTIANS SHOULD STAND APART FROM SECULAR CITIZENS IN THEIR BELIEF IN PROVIDENCE."

The modern church, Presley argues, has placed far too much emphasis on the moment of conversion and the practice of revival. He argues that the model of revivals, especially in their most recent versions, fail to grasp that, for most people in the U.S. and other western countries, "revivalism assumes that the reigning cultural structures are Christian, and that a dead Christendom can be brought back to life." Today no church can assume that new believers have any knowledge of scripture or doctrine—and speedy growth is likely to result in new Christians that are very ill-equipped to answer challenges to their faith.

Throughout this discussion, Presley implies that efforts to restore the public forms of Christianity without conveying the substance of the faith are doomed to failure. Sudden revivals, too, are unlikely to return us to a Christian public culture. Christendom, he emphasizes, was created not simply by persuading the Roman elite to embrace Christian observance but by building a body of believers deeply committed to the faith: "There is no *Christian* cultural sanctification, either in the ancient world or today, without *Christian* confession."

Cultural Sanctification is not a work of political theology, and Presley does not develop comprehensive notions about how Christians ought to engage in political life today. Instead, he asks variations on this question: What would it be like if Christians today were known for the same sort of citizenship as members of the early church were? He tells us that three assumptions formed the core of the early church's approach to politics: "a firm conviction in divine transcendence and providence, a belief that

God granted political authority to certain earthly rulers, and an active citizenship that proceeded from a political dualism."

Christians should certainly stand apart from secular citizens in their belief in providence. This should give us confidence that, even if our own circumstances are painful or difficult, we need not fear the ultimate outcome of history. Presley emphasizes what this meant for the early church in terms of its relations to power: "When Joseph or Daniel found themselves in a foreign land ruled by a pagan king, they did not sit around complaining; they lived virtuously and worked within the structures of the civil authority to become leaders worthy of respect." Moreover, "to the early church, the state was essential to the work of God and the unfolding of God's redemption. The church was not rebellious or cynical toward the state and agreed with its pagan neighbors that those who rebel against the king or dissolve public order should be justly punished." Governments are instituted for our good. The goal is to balance judgment against the state's excesses while respecting the necessity and goodness of political power.

The principal lessons Presley thinks we can learn from the early church have to do with respecting civil authority. He suspects that Christians have too generally lapsed into dishonorable forms of critique, that they too begrudgingly pay their taxes and frequently adopt an unbiblical view of the state as an evil to be rejected. Here, too, the early church can guide us: it eschewed any effort to reject secular political authority—rendering unto Caesar—or to "meld religion and the state as theonomy or integralism."

Presley says little more on this point, but his rejection of attempting to foster state religion follows naturally from his conviction that we lack the early church's deep adherence to the faith's central truths. He also points to the key role that natural law might play across religious and cultural lines. By rooting public appeals to cultural reform in the natural law, others can be persuaded to adopt laws and policies that correspond to Christian moral teaching even if they themselves are not believers. This is a view that has the advantage of starting from the real fact of diversity and treating fellow citizens as equals.

The book concludes with a thoughtful meditation on Christian hope. Here one of the strongest comparisons between the Roman world and our own becomes clear: Romans' hopes rested entirely in the politics and history of the city, and our modern world likewise "ties all its hopes to redistributions of power and new political configurations. While these acts encourage justice here and now, the church knows they are not enough." Moreover, the early church shows that the powerful witness of placing the love of God first leads naturally to a love of our fellow man. Christian belief also ought to chasten dramatically our expectations for political life in this fallen world. It also checks our desires to glory in secular accomplishment, as well as dreams for political change. Nations will rise and fall in God's goodly providence, and our faith will see us through.

> "AS CITIZENS IN A REPUBLIC—EVEN A DECADENT ONE—WE HAVE POWER THAT THE EARLY CHRISTIANS DID NOT."

Nevertheless, Presley emphasizes that we should not despair of our world. We must not forget the differences between our world and the Roman one. As citizens in a republic—even a decadent one—we have power that the early Christians did not to promote public virtue and decency. Yet Presley offers a warning in this regard: "In our intellectual arguments, we must walk this line between rhetoric and virtue and make persuasive arguments, but never in ways that undermine our call to *embody* virtue."

This is perhaps the greatest danger for politically active Christians at this moment. In the name of "fighting back" or "winning so that we have a church," it is too easy for Christians to mistake secular aims for sacred ones, and to embrace vicious means in the hopes of securing our political future. We would do well to heed the author. RL

Brian A. Smith *is senior program manager at Liberty Fund and the author of* Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer.

Conversion of Saint Augustine by Fra Angelico (1430). Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons.

A *Confessions* for the 21st Century

A new translation of Augustine's spiritual biography makes the ancient new again and reveals why it has aged so well.

by **JOSH HERRING**

IN *TRUTH AND METHOD*, German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer introduces a theory of horizons to explain the way translation mediates distance in time. The author writes his work from a given moment in time; he sees the world a certain way. He publishes his book, and if he writes well his work survives and moves forward in time. The reader encounters that work from a far later moment in time. The distance that meaning must travel, Gadamer argues, is why the great books require constant retranslation. The measure of a new translation, if Gadamer is right, lies in the translator's ability to mediate the distance between horizons of past and present. Anthony Esolen's new translation of St. Augustine's *Confessions* accomplishes the task. Esolen's facility with language is such that reading his translation moved this reviewer from meditation to worship.

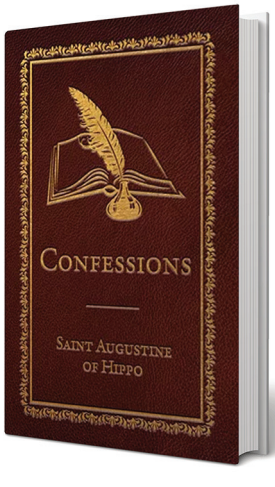
Augustine's *Confessions* is timeless: his movement to Christianity through initial intellectual curiosity, conviction of sin, love of his own sin, and final encounter with the living God hits the reader with a sense of historical continuity. His story reminds the reader that the struggles of the 21st century—religious, sexual, and philosophical confusion—are nothing new. These have been part of the Christian experience from the earliest days. The *Confessions* tells the story of one man's journey to faith, but in doing so speaks beyond the author's moment in time to ours. In that movement from past to present, transcending a particular culture, the *Confessions* rises to greatness.

Within the book's pages, Augustine takes up ideas of philosophical theology: mind, space, time, good, evil, matter, hermeneutics. So many modern

problems are addressed: Does the text have one meaning or many? What is the relationship between time and space? How does one define evil? Why does it exist in this world? Does it, in fact, exist? For Augustine, coming to faith meant learning that Christianity answers these questions. And yet, intellectual profundity alone remained insufficient; Augustine's life changed as he wrestled with sin, recognizing his inability to defeat it and need to submit to God through the Word.

Augustine's consciousness of sin permeates the *Confessions*: "And now behold, let my heart tell you what it was seeking, that I should be so free with my evil, that there should be no cause of my malice but the malice itself. It was foul, and I loved it; I loved to go down to the lost, I loved my failing, not the thing for which I was at fault, but the failing itself." Augustine's honest self-evaluation takes the reader into his evil heart and his love of wrongdoing while always balancing such a view with his need to love the good.

In addition to a theological journey, the *Confessions* also functions as a window into what historian Peter Brown termed "Late Antiquity," roughly the third through fifth centuries AD. Augustine's world was a single civilization stretching across the Mediterranean. It was an intellectually diverse world: the Manichaeans, the Platonists, and the Christians all contended that their explanations of reality were absolutely correct, with varying degrees of exclusivity found in each claim. Julian the Apostate had attempted to bring back paganism but failed; Christianity was on the rise but not yet ubiquitous. In Augustine's youth, Rome seemed unshakable. By his later years, the Roman world showed signs of imminent collapse. During such a time, Augustine



Confessions

By Saint Augustine of Hippo, translated by Anthony Esolen

(TAN Books, 2023)

> "AUGUSTINE'S STORY REMINDS THE READER THAT THE STRUGGLES OF THE 21ST CENTURY—RELIGIOUS, SEXUAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONFUSION—ARE NOTHING NEW."

grew to intellectual maturity. The *Confessions* does not show him primarily as an aged bishop writing something on the order of *The City of God*; rather, reading the *Confessions* is to encounter Augustine as a bright young man with a passion for two subjects: philosophy and women.

His philosophical inclinations set up a need for intellectual answers: the dualistic theory of Manichaeism, with its endless struggle between light and dark, was at first enticing, then rejected. Augustine broke with Manichaeism when a famous teacher, Faustus, failed to answer his questions: "I put to him the questions that moved me, and I discovered right away that the man was not skilled in liberal learning, except for grammar, and that in the usual way." Plato's theory of ideas and dialectic became formative and set the bar high for a Christian preacher to meet Augustine's expectations of intellectual complexity. Ambrose of Milan satisfied Augustine's need for that complexity; he demonstrated the importance of religious leaders' ability to speak well and to answer difficult questions. Ambrose's articulation of the Trinity solved Augustine's philosophical need for truth. He knew there could be only one God; Plato had convinced him of that. Now he could see that Christians did not, in fact, worship three gods. Christianity could grapple with the highest truths, and this mattered for Augustine.

Augustine's sexual passions are cataloged throughout the *Confessions*. The pornification of late modernity is rightly of much concern, but Augustine

Tenth scene detail from *The Life of St. Augustine* by Benozzo

reminds contemporary readers that the ancient world was also highly sexualized. While the contemporary teenager has much to struggle with (porn addiction enabled by smartphone technology, for example), Augustine lived in a world of publicly approved and inexpensive public prostitution. He writes, "And what was it that delighted me, but to love and be loved…so that I could not tell the difference between the clear skies of genuine love and the fog of lust." His descriptions of being a 16-year-old, "when the delirium of licentious craving had gotten the scepter over me, and I gave myself up to it utterly," underscore this reality. These descriptions offer instances where Esolen's attention to poetic imagery is especially helpful; lust as a "fog" contrasted with the "clear skies" of "genuine love" are beautiful metaphors that crystallize the feeling of lusty teenage years without elevating that feeling as something good. The image of lust having "the scepter over" Augustine conveys a clear sense of lust as a slave master that does not have Augustine's good in mind.

Augustine settled down with an unnamed concubine, eventually conceiving a child with her (his son, Adeodatus). Lust became his besetting sin: "I was not yet in love, yet I loved to be in love." As Augustine grappled with the growing intellectual agreement with Christian teaching, he resisted conversion because he knew God demanded not just his intellectual assent but also obedience to a sexual code of ethics. He writes that "I loved the blessed life, and I was afraid to find it in its proper place, and so I fled from it even while I sought it. I thought I would be the most miserable of men if I were deprived of a woman's arms." The *Confessions* reminds the Church that remaining consistent in teaching a biblical sexuality and the joy found in right alignment with God's revealed will is itself a testimony to the grace of the living God. Our moment requires teaching the reality of sin; so too did Augustine's.

Augustine was one of the first Christian thinkers to consider the problem of evil and to develop a clear answer. His articulation was not the modern one; a modern religious skeptic may well ask, "If God is all-powerful, why is there evil in the world?" Augustine's question was more basic: What, precisely, is evil? Is it a substance? If so, why would God make it? Across several books, Augustine develops a complex answer: God is the source of all being, and as such is good. Evil is not a substance but rather a failure to be one. Evil is a distance from God.

> It follows that whatever exists is good. Then evil, whose source I was always searching for, is not a substantial thing, because if it were, it would be good. For a substantial being is either incorruptible, a great good indeed, or it is corruptible, in which case it must be good, because otherwise there would be nothing to corrupt. Thus did I see, and it was manifestly clear, that you made all things good, nor are there any substantial beings that you have not made. And because you did not make all things equal, it follows that each individual thing is good, and that all things taken together are very good, because our God made all things very good indeed.

Evil, Augustine argues, *is not*; evil is a failure to *be* what one truly is. Augustine's *Confessions* looks forward to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Though Heidegger and Augustine developed different answers, they asked the same essential question: What does it mean to *be*? For Augustine, it means to receive being from God himself, in whom we "live and move and have our being." A failure to do so diminishes us; such diminishment Augustine calls evil.

In addition to deep meditation on the nature of evil, Augustine dedicates a book to the nature of the mind itself. He predates Descartes and Hume by over a thousand years, exploring the relationship between the external world perceived by the senses and the infinite complexity of the mind that perceives it. Esolen explains in a note that this portion of book

10 is "a remarkable meditation upon, and analysis of, the human mind; I know of none more acute and incisive, either from the ancient world or from our own time." In this meditation, Augustine develops a robust vision of memory, concluding that "great is the power of memory, this thing that makes us tremble, my God, a boundless multiplicity, profound as the sea. And this is my mind, and I am it." The mind is of potentially indefinite extension, able to comprehend the potentially infinite memory housing the individual's experience.

So finally, in what way does Esolen succeed as translator where others perhaps failed? The freshness of Esolen's translation helps the reader engage with Augustine's thought in a way previous translations do not. For example, here are the opening two sentences from book 1 in Edward Bouverie Pusey's popular 19th-century edition: "Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and thy wisdom infinite. And Thee would man praise; man, but a particle of thy creation; man that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness, that 'Thou resisteth the proud'; yet would man praise thee; he but a particle of Thy creation." The archaic language initially throws off the contemporary reader, as does the sentence order locating the predicate first followed by the subject. Consider also Maria Boulding's 2002 translation, which offers the same passage but in updated language: "Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we who carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. Yet these humans, due part of your creation as they are, still do long to praise you." "Thee" and "thou" have been replaced with "you," "man" has been swapped for the more universal "human," and Pusey's complex sentence has been broken into two shorter sentences.

Now Esolen: "You are great, O Lord, and to be praised indeed; great is your power, and your wisdom is beyond reckoning. And man, a mere part of your creation, desires to praise you, man, who bears his mortality with him, and the testimony of his sin, and testimony that you resist the proud; and still this man, this part of your creation, longs to praise you." Esolen puts the sentence order in typical English pattern, with subject leading to predicate, but restores the complex sentence. His use of punctuation to link the ideas builds pictures of God's greatness, man's smallness, and man's longing to worship. Esolen's poetic ear and eye for fidelity to Augustine's theological imagination resonate throughout his translation, helping the modern reader enter imaginatively into Augustine's theological journey.

> "ESOLEN'S TRANSLATION HELPS THE READER ENGAGE WITH AUGUSTINE'S THOUGHT IN A WAY PREVIOUS TRANSLATIONS DO NOT."

Augustine's life reminds the reader that the story of salvation is both unique for each person and universal. Everyone comes to faith in a unique set of circumstances and applies the teachings of the gospel in a specific context. And yet for each Christian there is the mix of intellectual cognition of the faith, recognition of sin as a ravaging force that cannot be overcome by willpower, the need to submit to divine command as the only hope of happiness—all combined with some sense of real divine encounter. Augustine highlights the continuity of the Christian experience: while bringing the reader into his unique moment in time, he reveals the universality of the gospel. Anthony Esolen brings Augustine's voice into the 21st century and helps the Church of today enter imaginatively into Augustine's spirit of worship as he perceived the complexity of God. RL

Josh Herring *is professor of classical education and humanities at Thales College in Wake Forest, N.C., where he teaches liberal arts courses and directs the Certificate in Classical Education Philosophy program. He also hosts* The Optimistic Curmudgeon *podcast and tweets @TheOptimisticC3.*

CONVERSATION STARTERS
with Fr. Robert A. Sirico

REV. ROBERT A. SIRICO is president emeritus and the co-founder of the Acton Institute. His writings on religious, political, economic, and social matters are published in a variety of journals, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, the *London Financial Times*, and *National Review*. Fr. Sirico is often called upon by members of the broadcast media for statements regarding economics, civil rights, and issues of religious concern, and has provided commentary for CNN, ABC, the BBC, NPR, and CBS's *60 Minutes*, among others.

Q **The Acton Institute, publisher of this magazine, has a mission "to promote a free and virtuous society characterized by individual liberty and sustained by religious principles." What was the spark that motivated you and Acton's current president, Kris Mauren, to say back in 1990: "We need to do this, and we need to do this now"?**

I suppose it was what we saw around us at the time, especially within the moral debates of the free economy and moral and social responsibility. Almost all arguments about things like markets and profits have a moral component. What was frustrating then, as it remains to this day, is that people see the importance of moral and social obligations but fail to see that human freedom is a necessary prerequisite to achieve both the moral and practical goals people desire. That is why Kris came up with the descriptor of the Acton Institute's mission as the connection of good intentions to sound economics.

Q **When people think about the church and economics, they usually assume charity, welfare, redistribution—not entrepreneurship and free markets. In an article for *Jacobin* magazine, Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart recently made the case that "the New Testament, alarmingly enough, condemns personal wealth not merely as a moral danger, but as an intrinsic evil." In your book *The Economics of the Parables*, however, you argue that "the creation of wealth requires a society that rewards rather than penalizes productivity" and that "wealth has potential." In the 34 years that Acton has been around, is reorienting people's thinking about money and their faith still a hill to climb?**

I think Dr. Hart's argument was well placed in a magazine named after the Jacobins—given the ruthlessness of the Jacobins' efforts along the lines of Robespierre at the time of the (ferociously anti-religious) French Revolution. I say this because the choice is essentially between human freedom and coercion.

Human creativity and productivity (which might also be described as "profit-making") are not only natural impulses but also, as we see from the creation account in Genesis, calls from God to tend and till the Garden in which God has placed humanity. The results of that productivity can be good or bad depending on the way it is engaged or the use to

which the profits are put, but there is no theological or biblical reason to assert that wealth *per se* is evil, which is why virtually no theologians agree with Dr. Hart's simplistic position.

I make the point in my book on the Parables that when Jesus calls the rich young ruler in Luke's Gospel to give to the poor (Jesus never says give everything to the poor), he first tells him to "go and *sell*" what he has. If the Lord had a disdain for wealth or profit-making, he would not have sent the man to the market to sell things. He would have just told him to immediately give it away. The introduction of selling into the command indicates a link between profitability and service: if the man makes more on the sales of his possessions, he can do more good with the proceeds.

Q **You talk often of making connections. Acton University, the FAVs, and the Collins Center for Abrahamic Heritage obviously do that to an extraordinary degree. In your experience, when people from different countries, religions, socio-political backgrounds come together to discuss significant issues, do you find they have more in common than even they would have guessed, especially in these incredibly divisive times?**

The setting or context is important to make that happen. By this I mean that we don't seek to gather diverse people together and then tell them their diversity doesn't matter. Sometimes the differing beliefs that people hold are even more important than the reason we gather. For me as a Christian, I would have to say that my belief in the Trinity is of a higher order than economic questions, even if my Jewish or Muslim interlocutors are not Trinitarians. But that need not stop us in a common pursuit of what economic arrangements are best suited to ameliorate poverty. So, if we are honest and clear about our goals, I think it can be a very enriching, informative, and productive encounter.

Q **At Acton University 2024, you interviewed UFC fighter Renato Moicano and you both agreed that most MMA fans seem to have conservative instincts—perhaps it's an attraction to competition and struggle. And yet Moicano noted that, as much as he likes free markets and liberty, "religion is the most important thing." That doesn't seem to be the case for a growing number of Americans who are looking for meaning in politics—and yes, even sports fandom. What advice would you offer to, say, your fellow clergy to help them in re-evangelizing the culture?**

I must say that my conversation with Mr. Moicano was one of the more interesting interviews I have conducted. I know next to nothing about the whole world of MMA, but I have always been a very curious person, so it was a great opportunity.

I think curiosity and a certain open-mindedness are first steps in re-evangelizing a culture drifting so far from God. My approach with people, whether it is a pastoral encounter or a broader cultural engagement like my interview with Mr. Moicano, is to *listen* first. That is the only way you can find some common reference point from which the conversation can be deepened. Evangelists and missionaries do this all the time when they learn the language of the people they wish to witness to.

I see that this is precisely what St. Paul does in his sermon at the Areopagus in Athens. We read that the apostle toured the pagan holy sites and discerned the intentions of the people to seek some knowledge of God, and so we detect that he obviously had done some preparation, as is evident when, in the course of his remarks, he makes reference to one of their poets and even quotes the poet to them, linking it to his own message of the one, true God. If you read the entire episode in Acts 17, you can feel Paul's openness to these people and an interest in their beliefs and how even those pagan beliefs might provide the seeds of Christian belief if teased out and cultivated. He is not defensive; he is loving and confident.

To be clear, I am not advocating what all too many contemporary religious evangelists do, which is to water down the demands of the gospel or to conform the gospel to something it is not. As someone once remarked, "We cannot be so open-minded that our brains fall out." No, we seek to propose the gospel, not impose it.

Q **Your brother, Tony Sirico, who passed away two years ago, was an actor who over several decades worked with A-list directors and was perhaps best known**

as Paulie Walnuts on *The Sopranos*. A man who was famous as "the bad guy" and the Catholic priest—it's almost something out of a Jimmy Cagney movie. Did you two get a kick out of this, and did you ever talk about how your lives played out? What influence do you think you had on each other?

My brother Gennaro (we used to call him Junior, as my father's name was also Gennaro) was about 10 years my senior, so we really grew up separately. I was the youngest, and in very many ways, as you might imagine, different from him. Yet we lived in the same household and regularly stayed in touch even once we had grown up.

It was Junior (or Tony) who drew the connection between the similar trajectory of our lives and the James Cagney movie *Angels with Dirty Faces*. We both laughed at that, and he remarked that it was funny how life sometimes imitates art.

For a long time, before our respective lives took shape, I think we saw each other as very exotic creatures—we were very different. He largely grew up on the streets of Brooklyn, and I was more bookish and interested in religion. Yet we were deeply connected. My brother was very traditional and an intense believer in family, but for some time it seemed to me that he expected I treat him as my older brother (which, of course he was) and not just a brother. I wasn't completely aware of that expectation until my own maturation. By that time, both of us were beginning to come into our own, so to speak. He began to make connections in film and television, and I was ordained a priest and soon after founded the Acton Institute. Pretty soon I began to appear more on TV and in print, and people would call his attention to this. I guess that made him think I wasn't a kid any longer. He even became a donor to the Institute. Of course, I watched all his movies (some cringe-worthy), and he would inevitably call me after seeing an article or an interview on TV. I was invited to numerous *Sopranos* events, including filming and correspondence with David Chase about his handling of Catholicism. He ended up asking me to appear on the show, which I declined.

In the end, my brother and I grew very fond of one another, and I was privileged to hear his last confession and celebrate his funeral Mass.

Q **Fun Questions: (a) What book(s) have you read at least three times, and why?**

I do not tend to reread many books, even ones I find valuable (other than plays or poetry, particularly Shakespeare and Robert Browning), but when I discover a valuable book, I tend to come back to it time and again to reread points made, phrases employed, or chapters or characters in order to study them at greater depth. Among these I would include Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm* (lessons on balance and the importance of both the charismatic and institutional elements of faith); Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (for its portrayal of the subtlety and patience of God's beckoning of people); Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (so much to be learned about love and perseverance, the brilliance of simplicity, the potential for conversation about economics, and the bread strike is well described, as is the extreme reaction to a pandemic); Ludwig von Mises' *Socialism* (probably the best takedown of social conceit in history); anything by John Henry Newman (for style and depth).

Q **(b) 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 am not given to blowing up buildings, but if you mean departments of government, I would immediately and without a second thought close: the IRS, the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, and phase out a few more…to begin.

Q **(c) What's your favorite B&W film, and why?**

Would the *Wizard of Oz* count (as it began in black and white and went to color once Dorothy landed over the rainbow)?—to remember there was once innocence and fantasy in the world; *The Longest Day*, because it reminds us of bravery and the cost of freedom; *Angels with Dirty Faces*, because it reminds me of my relationship with my brother.

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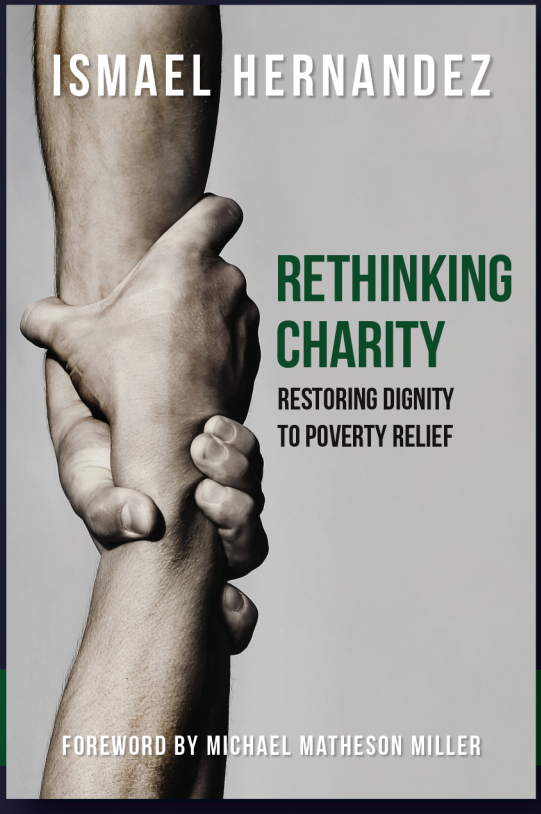

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